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## ABSTRACT

In this project, I used the knowledge of forensic science and criminalistics that I have learned while at the Pennsylvania State University to write a crime novel that involves the following case: in 2018, a college student was shot twice and left for dead in the middle of campus on a Friday night. A bold robbery occurred at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Forensic science and police resources came up empty-handed, and both cases went cold quickly. They were left unsolved for decades.

Fifty years later, technology and science have opened up new opportunities for exploring cold cases. At the FBI's Historical Crimes Division, Agent Idris Hart opens up the cold case of Marjorie Horner, murdered on her college campus in 2018, and is quickly drawn into a twisted web of stalking, robbery, and murder. Using virtual reality and faithful forensic science, Agent Hart strives to discover the truth behind Marjorie's murder—and realizes there might be more to her story than what meets the eye.

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## REFLECTING: AN INTRODUCTION

Since elementary school, I've been an avid writer. My mom still has an anthology, nicely pressed in a yellow folder, full of short stories written by my third-grade self. Though I look back and sometimes am forced to laugh ruefully at the undeveloped writing style, I know that folder was the first step I took in my love of writing, which followed me all through middle school, high school, and into college. It was the deciding factor in why I chose to write a crime novel for my honors thesis project.

This romance with language, however, was first and foremost inspired by a fierce passion for books. I used to devour books of all kinds. I loved fantasy, science fiction, and historical fiction novels, and visited the library whenever I got the chance. Young adult novels like *Chasing Vermeer* by Blue Balliot, *The Accidental Detectives* by Sigmund Brouwer, and the *Amelia Peabody Mysteries* by Elizabeth Peterson gave me a love for a good mystery, and books such as the *Inkheart* series by Cornelia Funke or *The Enchanted Forest Chronicles* by Patricia C. Wrede were just fuel for the fire. Something about immersing yourself in a good story captured my attention and kept drawing me back. From this early stage of reading I gained skills that made a valuable starting place for my writing journey, as well as instilling in me a taste for good writing and fiction.

Of course, no account of my inspiration would be complete unless I mentioned J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, which I have read eleven times, at the start of every school year and a few times in between, for good measure. These four books have been my favorites since I first began reading *The Hobbit* over and over again as a fifth grader, until my

mom relented and gave me my battered and much-loved copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* for my thirteenth birthday. To be able to create so vivid and thorough of a fantasy world, whose history you could study almost as much as you would American history through books such as *The Silmarillion* and *The Lays of Beleriand*, well, that did and always will inspire me. Not to mention the likeableness, emotion, and excellence of his characters. Being based in Scandinavian legend doesn't take away from some of his creations or ideas—instead, it shows how you can draw upon subjects you are knowledgeable about and use them in your own works, something which you'll see is an integral part of my own writing. I admire Tolkien's work so much that in 2014, while interviewing for the Schreyer Honors College, I requested if my interviewer and I could meet in *The Eagle and Child*, a pub where Tolkien and his close friends were known to meet during their time at Oxford. My interviewer was happy to oblige, and I'd like to think Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were rooting for me during my interview. All of this reading and learning early on in my life contributed to the growth of my writing and the development of my style as I approached this project.

Since starting work on my thesis, I've drawn upon a number of different literary sources and classes to inspire my writing and furnish me with the techniques I've used throughout the process. Because I'm working on a crime novel that is short and fast-paced, one of the key sources of inspiration I've found is contemporary crime thrillers like those written by James Patterson, Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, or Kathy Reichs. Two particular favorites of mine in this genre of crime fiction are: *Spider Bones*, by Kathy Reichs (one of her Temperance Brennan novels), and *Relic*, by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child. *Spider Bones* is a good example of the type of inspiration I really drew on, as it follows Brennan's work identifying the remains of a victim who was connected with the Vietnam War and the Joint POW/MIA

Accounting Command (now the DPAA). The novel relies heavily on forensic techniques but still manages to work in suspense and action alongside the fascinating science of DNA analysis. *Relic* is just a good read—scary, suspenseful, with some detective work mixed in, about a monster killer in the American Museum of Natural History—which I’ve read a twice and enjoyed it anew both times. Although it might seem a little strange to go to “mass market fiction” for inspiration, since a lot of people may not consider these novels for anything other than mild entertainment during an airport layover, I found that they provided an idea of what kinds of things are needed in a crime novel for mass appeal. What is the pacing like, or the amount of description necessary to bring an action scene to life in a novel? These authors publish basically a book a year, and although some of their popularity is due to the author’s own fame regardless of the quality of the writing, many of their novels just have a way of grabbing the reader’s attention and getting them excited about fighting crime through science and detective work.

That was what I wanted to do with my creative thesis project: bring to life some of the forensic science techniques that I have learned while completing my degree here at Penn State by incorporating them into a crime novel. I wanted it to have that speedy, action-filled quality, and so I drew upon books that I knew were good examples of those qualities, even if they aren’t the most eloquent literature out there. I found certain TV shows also useful on this front; my advisor suggested *Black Mirror*, which highlights different futuristic and unbelievable technology and how it might be used for good or for ill, and I found a lot of inspiration in shows like *CSI: Las Vegas* and *Castle*, both of which are fun and long-running crime shows that gave a good basis for what an audience wants out of a fictional crime novel.

A quality novel can’t be all fast-paced action with no substance, however, and so I knew that I was going to need to draw inspiration and techniques from other, more intellectual sources

that I read in different classes and on my own to ground my novel in some solid English writing skills. Here, classic science fiction novels like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells, *A Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson were important both because they take the science of the day and turn it into a fascinating story, but also because they have persisted in such a lasting fashion. Say “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” to someone and they most likely will know immediately the basic story you are referring to.

What gives that enduring quality to a novel or short story? I’m not sure I still have an answer for that question, but reading these classic novels developed in me an appreciation for elaborate, reflective story-telling that takes the time to create characters with intentional motivations and explain the current scientific processes behind the events of the story. For example, in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, audiences have no doubt as to who the main character, Edward Prendick, is and what he thinks as he experiences the shocking world of the mad vivisectionist Dr. Moreau. Wells does not leave those inner thought processes or details out as he tells the story, which may feel outdated in today’s literary theme of action and more action but has its benefits in developing a full story as well, in my opinion. In my own work, I found that creating a character like Special Agent Idris Hart or Marjorie Horner, the victim, required some thought as to what their history is and what would connect the reader to their story best. Understanding this and coming up with creative ways to get this backstory across to the readers to make the desired connection was a big part in the development of my novel and seeing how some of the “science fiction greats,” i.e. H.G. Wells and company, did it was valuable while writing my thesis.

Another key source of inspiration was a creative writing class I took junior year in college. Although it focused more on short story writing and construction, the class taught me

valuable lessons about structuring a story and, most importantly, how to end one. Previous stories that I had been working on as part of my writing hobby never seemed to wrap up and land well—they just continued on and lingered for dozens of pages, never really developing into a full beginning, middle, and end of a complete story. This was actually one of my private misgivings, both going into the class and this project—would I actually be able to write a full, finished story? One of the books we used as a resource in class, however, *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott had excellent advice for writing that helped me immensely as I started to learn how to shape my ideas into functional stories. During this course, we kept notebooks where we jotted down random ideas or experiences we thought we might be able to use in our writing, as well as completed several 10-15-page pieces and a number of other “flash fictions.” This forced me to use some of the skills I had read about—how to end a story, how to get detail across without simply telling it, and how to show emotion in characters without using too many adverbs. This class was practical inspiration: it gave me the tools I needed to build off of all the reading I’d done and actually sit down and write a full novel for my thesis project.

Probably the most important influence on this project, however, is my study of forensic biology at my time at Penn State. Forensic science is the application of science to the law—it answers the questions “when?” and “what?” and “how?” about a crime scene (though never “why”). Through my studies, I learned and performed a number of the techniques described in my novel during specific scenes where forensic evidence was analyzed surrounding the murder of Marjorie Horner. I’ve read textbooks and scientific journal articles that taught me about the theory behind these techniques and attended webinars that talked about the future of forensic science that inspired the idea for Vera, the virtual reality technology used by the FBI in the novel.

Interestingly, although my degree's primary focus is forensic biology and DNA analysis, I ended up not using much DNA evidence in the story. At the time when I was developing the outline and framework for the story, I hadn't done much hands-on DNA analysis yet, and so wasn't sure how much I could realistically work it in. I chose instead to focus on trace evidence like paint, soil, and fibers, which I had done work with in our trace evidence analysis lab. I wanted the forensic side of the story to be as accurate as possible, to reflect everything I've been learning. My experiences in class and lab—where oftentimes we simulate the casework and documentation that we would be doing in a functioning crime lab—inspired much of the forensic-related scenes in my novel. For example, a key scene is Idris' observation of the crime scene investigation team is in 2018 as they processed the scene of Marjorie's death. During the time I was writing the story, I was taking Penn State's "FRNSC 415: Laboratory in Criminal Investigation" class. The events of the scene processing, including the procedures and (loosely) the characters, were based off of experiences that I had while taking the class and processing mock crime scenes. It was a fantastic experience, getting to work something I'm deeply passionate about into my novel and give it a creative, but accurate, spin.

I also read books in my field as well that helped inspire some of my writing. *The Poisoner's Handbook*, by Deborah Blum, is a favorite of mine in this category. It covers the history of forensic science and autopsy in New York City in the 1920s during the height of Prohibition and the flourishing of the mob. I actually wrote one of my application essays for Schreyer on this book; it's neat to see it come full circle and appear as one of the key sources of inspiration for my final honors thesis project. I enjoy her story-telling style, as well as the facts she incorporates into the book. For this novel specifically, I've read chapters of textbooks and handbooks on paint analysis, fiber microscopy, and typical soils seen in Pennsylvania and how to

characterize them. Although these aren't typically page-turners, they provided me with solid facts that I could use to base my novel in, since that was a primary goal of the project. I wanted to add in as much realism and science as I could in a creative work, and I used much of the forensic science that I've learned throughout my novel.

The goal behind writing this crime novel for my thesis project was to synthesize the wide array of disciplines I've studied and enjoyed while earning my degree here at Penn State, and I think that my final product achieved this. I've drawn on contemporary crime thrillers, classic science fiction, textbooks, real-world experience and lessons, and my own personal taste in books to develop a novel that reflects the value of forensic science to the criminal justice system and the creativity of being allowed to imagine the future of forensic science where it might be in 50 years. Writing it has been a fun and challenging process, and I hope you enjoy the novel!

## Chapter 1

13APR2018, 0200hrs

*The embers flickered in the stormy night air as the boy took a drag of the cigarette. He blew out a long stream of smoke that disappeared almost immediately as it left his lips, dispersed by the wind that was whistling around the corner of the building where he had sheltered to take his smoke break. The trees rattled and creaked in the darkness, silhouetted above him by the streetlights that lined the sidewalk leading up to the student union building—whose bathrooms he was supposed to be cleaning. But the need for a smoke had lured him out into the night despite the storm that was building there. He took another drag, feeling himself nearing the end of the cigarette, and then he noticed the shoes.*

*They were protruding from behind the dumpster across the street from him. Unease crept up his spine as he leaned forward, peering into the shadows behind the dumpster. He dropped his cigarette and ground his heel over it, then took a step or two towards where the shoes were. The angle—that was what unnerved him. Shoes simply left behind didn't stand at that angle, toes angled up towards the black sky above. As he neared the edge of the sidewalk and stepped out into the street, he could see the treads of the shoes—tennis shoes, with a symbol, a Nike swoosh, along the bottom—thrown into sharp relief by the closest streetlight. His stomach heaved, and he heard his breath grow hoarse.*

*The body of the girl was twisted strangely. Her arm was flung outwards, her hand breaking the shadow of the dumpster. The blood on her skin was dark against the paleness of her*

*palm. She had a heavy head of hair, and it covered her face, which was turned away from him. The boy's fingers hovered over his phone—911 was already punched in, all he had to do was call—unable to make himself move as he stared in shock. With a silent rush, the wind blew through the street, chasing leaves and wrappers up the sidewalk and tossing the ends of the girl's hair. The movement broke the boy's indecision and he moved to call. As the line rang, thunder rolled. The streetlight flickered, and he gripped his phone tighter.*

*“This is Penn State Emergency Services, what is your emergency?”*

*“H-Hi. I'm at the HUB, and I think—I think a girl's been hurt. She's not moving, she's behind a dumpster.”*

*“Did you—” the operator's voice garbled for a moment as with a pop! The lights up and down the street went out. He stared into the complete darkness towards where the girl's body lay—he swore he could hear movement. He could picture her staggering towards him, head lolling, and palms bloody—*

*“Hello? Sir are you still there?”*

*“Yes!” He yelped into the phone. “The power went out.”*

*“Yes, it's down all over town. It will be back in a moment. Where are you? Can you describe the situation?”*

*“Um—I'm on the side of the HUB by the Panda Express, outside the door by the dumpster. There was a girl out here, lying on the ground, I haven't touched her but she hasn't moved—but the power's out and I can't see her anymore.”*

*“Is she in the way of the road?”*

*“No, no she was behind the dumpster.”*

*“Okay, please stay where you are, University Police and EMS are on their way and they’ll bring a light if by chance the power doesn’t return. They should be there soon.”*

*“I—okay, I will.”*

*“Thank you.”*

*With a click, the woman hung up, and the boy was left alone in the darkness. A crackle above him heralded the return of the lights, and he snapped his head from looking above him to where the girl’s body lay. She was still there, and he felt his heart sink further. He didn’t move until he saw the lights of the ambulance, and he ran up the street waving his arms, leaving the body behind.*

## Chapter 2

15MAR2068, 1500hrs

*Loss of a valued student ... shook the campus to the core ... there were a few suspects, but none were ever confirmed—*

“Stop!” A frustrated smack on the table relayed Idris’ irritation as the page she was reading flickered. Sighing, she tapped at the touchpad several times in quick succession until the screen—a scan of a handwritten page—reappeared. It had been giving her trouble for weeks, and she was fairly certain it wasn’t long for this world. This fact tasted rather ironic, since the screen had been installed hardly more than a month prior. The department was suffering under budget cuts—though when was it ever not—and she suspected that the Senate committee charged with determining the budget allocations for law enforcement labored under the delusion that because it had granted the FBI money to purchase Vera from Microsoft, they were set. But Vera was hardly good for all of the limitless of aspects of solving crimes. She was just one piece of the puzzle.

“Screen giving you issues again?” Jeremy’s voice sounded from the doorway, and Idris jumped, smacking her knuckles against the sharp edge of the desk.

“Essh! Don’t do that.” She glared at Jeremy, sucking on wounded knuckles.

“What, ask you how your day is going?” Jeremy took on an injured air. His tone earned him a second glare from Idris. He’d been pulling that crap for a while, ever since they’d gone out on a date and things hadn’t worked out. Idris suspected it might have gone better if she hadn’t

left him during the appetizers—but Vera had finished priming her simulation for their identification of the Zodiac Killer, and her boss had wanted her in immediately. She'd gotten a promotion out of that solve, and she knew that probably had hurt his pride further. However, she wasn't interested in repairing hurt feelings. She didn't have time for all of that. Not currently, anyway.

“Scare me! But yes, the screen is being a pain, and I don't know what to do. The guys down in Tech Maintenance said to pray it doesn't die, because they don't have a wireless replacement for it if it does and won't get in a new shipment for a few months.”

“Maybe you could buy yourself a new screen?”

“Really? Do I look like I could afford a piece like this?” A quick glance at her red blazer—hardly a fashion week piece—and her three-inches-beyond-the-point-of-split-ends hair reassured her of one thing: she couldn't afford a brand-new screen without some serious penny-pinching. Besides, that shouldn't have to be her call.

“I don't know, it was just a suggestion.”

“Yeah, a bad one.” The circ—short for “circular communications device”—on her wrist gave a small chirp, and Idris ran a finger along the face, skimming the notification. Circs were one of the best communication devices on the market, beating out phones for the ninth year running. “Looks like Gun got my Vera sim ready to go. See you later, Jeremy.” Snatching her tablet off the corner of her desk, she ducked under Jeremy's arm, palmed the locking mechanism for her door, and left him looking rather frustrated as she hurried down the long hallway.

There wasn't much to see in the little wing of the FBI Headquarters in Quantico, VA that headed the Historical Crimes Divisions. It had been added almost two decades before, when the division was first formed; a looped hallway like a strange hairpin off the main building dedicated

to working solely on unsolved cold cases from the past decades. Tiny, glass-walled cubicles like Idris' lined the left and right sides of the 240-meter-long hallway (the measurement of which she only knew exactly because she had measured it out in a fit of pique once after sprinting up and down it all day between her office and Vera during a case), leading up to Vera's atrium at the end of the hallway. In between office doors were maps and several clocks that monitored different time zones, both historically and present-day. Idris had been told that her office was considered somewhat prime real estate by her fellow HCD agents on the floor. It was at the very end of the hallway, nearest to the main HQ building and right across from the head of the department, Joe Frink's, office. Idris wasn't sure she agreed with that particular assessment. She was farthest from Vera and often had to deal with inquisitive political guests of Director Frink, who came to poke around and see what "all the money" they were spending on the HCD was going to. These visits were disruptive and irritating, and Idris would have gladly swapped offices with someone closer to Vera, if Frink would approve the switch. Which he wouldn't. For some reason, he seemed to consider her best suited to dealing with the politicians, despite her annoyance with them. As she neared the end of the hallway, Idris put thoughts of her obnoxious screen and overly-interested visitors aside and focused on her upcoming Vera simulation.

Vera stood for Virtual Reality Actualizer. It used data—historical and present—to create life-like simulations of environments and experiences for users to go through. Microsoft had introduced its first variation in 2030 for extreme video gamers, intending it to be the "next big step" in virtual reality gaming, a leap beyond the experiences users had with the 3D tech of the present and a safer alternative to playing the 3D sims while under the influence of hallucinogenic injections, which had been gaining popularity at the time. Idris had gone to scenes where people had died from that prior to joining the HCD; she understood the drive for companies to find

something that would appeal to that market that wouldn't leave gamers hurling themselves into their televisions to retrieve guns that were dropped by opponents during a game. Somewhere along the way, however, the purpose had shifted gears, and been redesigned for individuals working to preserve historical sites for museums. A sort of "living monument" experience for the public, stitched together from thousands of photographs and individual instructions entered in by the archaeologists-turned-VR techs. In 2045 the FBI had approached Microsoft with an idea—well, even less than an idea. A question: could Microsoft create a VR system using public information gathered from phones, satellite, CCTV, the internet—anything law enforcement had access to about an individual's daily life—and recreate a simulation of a day in the person's life that was accurate enough to be used in court? When the Houston Terror Attacks of 2055 occurred nearly a decade later, with the public more willing than ever to support legislation providing law enforcement with whatever it took to keep them safe, Microsoft had risen to the challenge at last and Vera had been born in her current form in 2065. There were two Vera systems functioning in the FBI currently: one used for high-profile crimes that were considered a current threat to national security—which she had heard was a hard sell to Congress, even with the shift in public mindset—and one used in the Historical Crimes Division for solving cold cases from as far back as they were able to obtain usable data points. Idris had heard rumors that the Director of the FBI was trying to squeeze another out of the Senate for other current, non-national security-level crimes, but hadn't heard whether anything had come of it. If her work screens were any indication, she doubted he'd have much success.

Dodging a pack of suits that emerged from one of the conference rooms as she passed, Idris heard her circ chirp again and picked up her pace, heading straight for Luke Gunderson's office. Luke Gunderson—Gun—was one of their four Vera techs. The techs were in charge of

ensuring that Vera contained enough information to properly run a simulation, as well as general maintenance and keeping the system in prime condition. Personally, Idris preferred Gun's simulations. They always seemed a little more developed, a little more believable—sometimes she even found herself forgetting that she wasn't truly experiencing a crime scene for real. She wasn't sure how he did it, but she always tried to schedule her sims for days when Gun was working.

He's also pretty easy on the eyes, she thought as she stopped outside his telephone box-like office and could see him bent over his keyboard. Five-o'clock shadow hinted at a long night previously, and as she watched, he unconsciously ran his fingers through thick reddish-blond hair, leaving it more rumpled than before. Gun was also the only one who made it into work every day in a pair of jeans and a gray t-shirt. Apparently, he was mimicking some crazy rich and smart tech guy from the 20-tens—a Mark Zuck-something, she couldn't remember the name—and that was his answer anytime Frink tried to press him on wearing something a little more respectable. She thought it was funny.

“Hey Gun. Got me set up for Case 240?” Gun never closed his door, preferring the background soundtrack of department life to Vera's constant white noise. Idris imagined the light was better too; his telephone box had tinted windows that blocked out the light from the glass ceiling above.

“Yep. Just clock in and we'll be good to go. It was easier this time to calibrate Vera; 2018 was pretty high-tech compared to 1985.”

“No kidding.” Idris placed both palms on the log screen positioned outside Gun's office. A green line measured her vitals and fingerprints, then the log chirped in a fashion annoyingly

similar to her circ and vibrated slightly beneath her hands to indicate that she could move her hands. A stiff female voice emanated from the log.

*“Idris Hart, Special Agent, HCD. Assigned Case 240, investigating the death of Marjorie Horner, April 13, 2018, unsolved.”*

“Correct. Entering Vera at 1300 hrs.” Idris watched as her words appeared on the screen. When the full line of text appeared, Gun keyed something in from inside his office and the door to Vera’s chamber slid open with a hiss. It sounded like something straight out of a science fiction film; Idris always expected Darth Vader to emerge, cape billowing, the way he did in the original trilogy films she’d used to watch with her dad before he’d passed away. *A New Hope* had always been their favorite. With a mock-salute, she entered into the circular chamber.

The walls were seamless black, and a metal chair sat on a raised platform in the center of the room. To Idris, it looked like a 1950s hair salon chair, with its attached round headpiece that lowered over your head during the simulation, and it was always cold. She’d jokingly made requests to replace it with a La-Z-Boy chair, which for some reason were always ignored by Frink, though she’d definitely seen him emerge from Vera looking stiff and uncomfortable after a rare session in Vera. Gun had followed her into the chamber and helped her adjust the shoulder harnesses and strap her wrists in place. Since Vera was still to be considered one of the ultimate 4D and virtual reality experiences in existence, the harness was a required safety feature for each simulation, although they rarely reached any level of intensity that merited the straps.

Focusing on his tablet, Gun changed a few settings, then lowered the helmet-like sim processor over her head. He attached a few electrodes and plugged in Idris’ wrist circ to record the simulation as she viewed it. Idris snickered as he lowered the little glasses-shaped piece of plastic down from the processor with a grin. They’d been added as a joke by the Microsoft

folks—a throwback to when goggles were needed for VR experiences. She closed her eyes when he tapped the needle on the syringe containing the sedative injected before each simulation and bit back a comment about feeling like she was on death row. The sedative was meant to fully relax the body so that a user could experience the simulation more intensely, without the little parts of your brain that were attached to reality insisting that it wasn't really real. But it was a shade of orange that reminded Idris of traffic cones and orange sherbet, and frankly, how being injected with Kool-Aid was supposed to induce calm, she wasn't sure. Idris took a deep breath as he injected the sedative. Gun always complained it took her the longest to settle down enough for Vera to register a calm state and begin rolling the simulation, and she was trying to be better about it. She leaned her head back and stared up into the darkness as Gun left, the doors sliding shut and leaving the chamber completely without light. Her mind began to drift as she breathed in deeply Vera's cold, recycled oxygen, and as she felt her heartbeat begin to slow, the sim began.

### Chapter 3

**13APR2018, 0700hrs**

“Dispatch, how far away did you say the crime scene unit was?” A voice from ahead. A comfortable temperature—not the sterile chill of Vera’s chamber—and a light flashing; Idris opened her eyes to a gray early morning on a narrow street between tall university buildings. She could still feel the cold seat below her but in the sim, she was standing on concrete, wearing her blazer and suit. As she focused her attention on her surroundings, her awareness of the seat and her own reality faded into the background. An ambulance was parked a few meters ahead of her and to the left, its sirens—mercifully—silent. A stretcher lay forgotten by the open back door, which swung back and forth ever so slightly. Movement caught Idris’ eye, and she turned slightly to see a man in a police uniform walking the perimeter of the scene, stretching the characteristic yellow police tape between a tree and a cone on the far side of the ambulance. Two EMS personnel stood beside a dumpster looking grim, with another police officer beside them. She was on her phone—the speaker Idris had first heard talking to dispatch.

A third EMT was crouched beside a hunched over on the curb, hiding their head in their knees. Idris could see the EMT’s speaking in a low voice and noted the oxygen on the ground beside her. Whoever she was speaking to wasn’t responding, however, and Idris took a few steps towards them, curious.

“Honey, can’t you sit up for me? I promise a few deep breaths will make a world of difference.” The EMT was cajoling a boy, she could see now, and Idris recalled from the case

notes that another student had been the one to discover the body. He'd been out sneaking a smoke break behind the building when he'd seen the victim and called the campus emergency line. The boy mumbled something, and the EMT leaned in, then shook her head and patted him lightly on the shoulder. She stood and joined her fellow EMTs by the dumpster and Idris followed, grateful that Vera could not replicate scents. She hated the smell of trash. The faces of the four adults were grim; one of the EMTs was shifting from foot to foot nervously, and the other looked as though she might cry as she looked down at the still form on the ground.

She seemed so young, Idris realized, looking at the dead girl's body. She knew the details from her previous research: Marjorie Horner, age 20, student at the Pennsylvania State University studying Art History and English. She'd been found dead on the night of April 13, 2018, shortly after one a.m., by another student. But still, no matter the background knowledge she knew, or how long ago the crime had taken place, Idris found she was never quite prepared to see the victim in person. *I'm sorry. Sorry this happened to you. I'm doing what I can to make it right.* She thought at the girl. Idris knew it was pointless to apologize to a victim who'd been dead for decades, but she always did. She'd been in the habit since reading case studies at university. It gave her a moment of humanity, a recognition that this was another human who had died in a terrible way and deserved a moment of respect. She couldn't linger on it any longer and hope to do her job well, however, so she took her moment and then turned her attention to closely observing the scene.

The victim's body was lying on her back, twisted as though she'd fallen backwards and failed to catch herself as she landed. Her feet were angled up towards the sky, the Nike swooshes on the soles visible beneath the mud encrusted and overflowing out of the treads. Her right hand was out flung, and there was drying blood on her palm and smeared just below the inside of her

wrist. It was fairly clear where the cause of death was—though Idris would have to double check the medical examiner’s report to be sure—there were two bullet wounds in her chest, their location highlighted by dark stains on her white t-shirt that spread out from two small holes in the fabric. A few droplets of blood had stained her blue running shorts, the rusty red crusts visible against the dark nylon fabric. There were scuffs of mud up along the sides of her shoes and in the treads. Idris made a note to watch and ensure that samples were taken of the mud; soil analysis, though vital to many crime scenes, wasn’t always appreciated in 2018. It wouldn’t hurt to have a fresh look at the evidence once she got out of the sim either, if it remained in good condition still.

The victim’s hair, a crazy curly mass of orange-brown that contrasted strangely with her soft brown skin, was tossed around her head wildly, obscuring her face, and a few of the ends nearest her chest were matted with blood. Idris knelt beside her, looking for small pieces of trace evidence that she needed to keep an eye out for as the crime scene processing took place. There were a few colored fibers trapped in the matted, sticky ends of her hair, and it looked as though there could be a fingerprint on the face of her heart-shaped necklace. As Idris moved to push herself up off the ground, she noticed a glint from beneath the dumpster. A cartridge case had rolled underneath, and Idris groaned and said a prayer that the crime scene personnel had found it during their investigation. A cartridge case like that would have been valuable evidence, if it was found, and if it hadn’t been back then she’d never find it now. A sudden yell startled her, and she nearly toppled over; looking up, Idris saw that the EMS personnel had all turned and were looking at the boy, who had gotten up off the curb and was trying to run away. He’d run square into the officer setting up the perimeter, who had caught him and was trying to calm him down. With a quiet exclamation, the EMT who’d been trying to talk to him scooped up the

oxygen mask off of the sidewalk and—with the help of the officer—managed to get the boy breathing into the mask. They led him to the ambulance and sat him down, and Idris stood up, more feeling sorry for the boy than anything. She probably wouldn't have handled finding a body well while in undergrad, either. The others near the body pulled a wide blue tarp over her, hiding the twisted limbs from the gathering crowd of onlookers.

A whine indicated the arrival of the crime scene unit; a clock tower somewhere on campus chimed eight times. It'd been several hours since the discovery of the body, and Idris wondered how far away the CSI unit has had to come from. She imagined at this point in time—prior to the Ristenbatt Codes of 2032, which required all functioning police departments to have at least one scientifically trained crime scene processing team as a part of their personnel—the local police department wouldn't have had a CSI team of their own.

The team piled out of the van; a group of six people, already zipped into full-coverage, billowy white tyvex suits. Two or three had hoods already pulled up over their heads; they opened up the back of the van and pulled out a folding table and a series of kits and camera bags. The driver remained seated with the door open, furiously filling out a form. Two the team members exchanged greetings and words with the EMTs and police officers present, and Idris moved closer to the van, so she could hear better as the driver hopped out and called the team together.

“Alright everybody. We're at The Student Union Building West Side, University Park, PA 16802, for your notes. It's o-eight hundred hours. The university wants this area opened up as quickly as possible, so we've got around three hours or so; let's try to finish up in two hours, and then we can grab food on the way home. We're going to line search first as usual then assign jobs, so everybody grab a couple markers and let's run the line.” There were a few noises of

assent, and all six team members picked up several yellow evidence markers off of the table and spread out in a line across the taped-off area; two were on the outside of the tape, checking the perimeter. Idris was impressed; she knew many crime scene teams under time constraints skipped a dedicated search to get straight to processing the scene. There were definite benefits however—as evidenced ten minutes later, when one of the team members who had dropped to his hands and knees beside the dumpster shouted that he’d found a cartridge case. He high-fived his line neighbor and dropped an evidence marker; Idris breathed a sigh of relief. There wasn’t much other evidence; the fibers and soil were marked by the body, and an extra marker had been set down next to a partial shoeprint that Idris hadn’t seen included in the case files. After the search, the leader—Idris finally caught a glimpse of the back of her tyvex, where “Howells” was printed in block letters—called her people back on the outside of the tape by their van.

“The body needs to be our priority right now; it’s been here a while and I’m sure the local medical examiner’s office will be itching to pick it up. Page, Chamberson, Bailey—I want you on body processing. Photos, logs, collect the trace off the body, pockets, sketches—the works, please. You’ve got an hour, then I’m calling the ME and reassigning you to the rest of the scene. Riley, you’re on establishing scene photos, and Laurence, you’re on overall sketches. Try to get as accurate measurements as you can without the laser measures, I know the tape measures aren’t your favorite. I’ll be monitoring the scene entry log and admin paperwork, let me know if you catch anything that needs to be documented. Any questions, thoughts?” Nobody spoke; it was obvious the team was used to this assignment process and trusted her judgment. The time restrictions were an interesting addition Idris hadn’t seen in the field much, but she knew a lot of CSI teams that had struggled with time management that would have benefitted from parameters like that.

Idris walked between teams listening to their quiet conversation and watching their work. It was this team whose notes she was reading back in her office, 50 years in the future. The notes had been good quality—there were always things you wished you had been able to add after the fact, but these had been well done and detailed. Their work was reflected by the end product, too; there were a few flippant comments, and some laughter and wry remarks, but overall the team was professional and thorough. Their team leader must have been experienced, and watching her, Idris grew more confident of that assessment. Howells met with each EMT and responding officer to get their statement and record their information; she walked around the scene and took initial case notes and tried to talk to the boy who had found the body as well, though she didn't get much out of him. Each time someone had to enter or exit the taped-off area, she wrote down the time and name of the individual in the scene log, checking her wristwatch religiously and calling out times for other members of her team.

The team assigned to processing the body were remarkably efficient; Bailey set up the tripod and took establishing photographs of Marjorie's limp body with a Nikon DSLR camera, starting out a few yards away from her and then walking in with the camera even before she removed the tarp that covered her. Idris shook her head; it had been a long time since they'd pulled a DSLR out on scene. The 3D imaging tech developed since 2018 made even the best quality cameras redundant, creating real-life scans of a crime scene with accurate measurements. Page kept a running photo log as Bailey took the photos, and Chamberson was busily sketching a quick layout of the body and taking notes on where they found different pieces of trace evidence, measuring from different fixed objects across the scene. The team was careful not to move or disturb the body in any way; even as Bailey leaned over her to set up the camera for close-ups of the trace evidence, they left any moving of the body for the medical examiner's team. After a

series of photos with each—the soil, fibers, location of the necklace, and wounds on her chest—Bailey waved Page in for collection. Carefully, she collected the trace with a pair of forceps and placed each in individual manila envelopes. The envelopes were sealed with tape, and each edge was marked with her initials and date. Chamberson paused from sketching to jot down the time in her notes as each item was collected. The whole process took about fifteen minutes to collect all the evidence they could without moving Marjorie, and as Page signed the bottom of her sketch with a flourish, Chamberson waved over Howells.

“We’re good here, if you want to call the ME.”

“Great! You guys are done early. Page, Chamberson, if you want to jump on evidence collection and helping Laurence with measuring the perimeter, we should be in a good place. Bailey, want to hang around and get a few shots of her back when the ME gets here?”

“Sure thing, Supreme Leader.”

Howells shot Bailey a look, to which Bailey replied with a grin as Howells pulled out her phone. She flipped to a request form in the back of the stack of papers on her clipboard and punched in a number, and waited, tapping her thumb against the edge of her clipboard and rolling her eyes at Bailey’s grin.

“Hello, this is Sharon Howells, City of Philadelphia Crime Scene Unit Team Leader. We responded to a criminalistics request at Penn State University, and we’re ready for the deceased to be picked up, if you’re able?” There was a pause. She resumed tapping. “Excellent. The address is the Student Union Building, University Park ... yes, exactly. We’ll see you shortly, then.” She hung up and balanced her phone on her clipboard as she wrote something down in her log.

“The ME will send a team; they aren’t far away so it shouldn’t be long if you want to just hang out.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The two women exchanged a few words more, then fell into silence watching the others work. The line of gawkers had dwindled; Idris had noticed a distinct ebb and flow that had to be from class changes; nobody was skipping class to watch the proceedings. The sun had fully risen, and the day was going to be a nice one; the sky was blue, and the clouds were drifting across the sky in thick piles. It looked like Riley had finished establishing photos of the scene and had moved on to photographing the evidence they had marked during the first search; he was bending over his tripod and adjusting the legs, stopping to look through the camera every so often to align the frame properly over the footwear impressions. Chamberson and Laurence were stretching a tape measure across one of the tape lines that blocked off the street; Laurence waved off a student who had gotten too close, and Chamberson repeated the measurement for her. Page was filling out a form back by the van, a stack of sealed manila coin envelopes and brown paper bags next to her on the folding table. A light breeze carried the sound of voices towards them; Idris could see another wave of students coming, coffee cups in hand, earbuds in ears, and backpacks slung over bent shoulders. Even the professors craned their necks as they walked by, trying to hide their suspicious interest.

A honking horn heralded the arrival of the ME’s van; Idris could see an annoyed-looking man behind the wheel, gesturing in frustration at the students who darted in every which way as they approached. He parked right outside the tape line—pushing it in ever-so-slightly, which caused Howells to curl her lip in annoyance. He and two others jumped out, in half-zipped tyvek suits and sunglasses. Two of them slid open the side door and hauled out a black body bag; the

driver ducked under the tape line and was met by Howells, who had walked up while he was parking.

“Sir, do you mind covering up all the way? This is an active crime scene,” Howells’ voice was firm but polite, and with Bailey behind her—who was no pixie—she gave off an air of command that forestalled any unpleasantries from the newcomer. He grunted and zipped up the rest of his suit and covered his curly hair with the hood, then shook her gloved hand.

“Aaron Miller, Centre County Medical Examiner’s Office. You Howells?”

“Yes. Can I get the rest of your team to suit up properly, and then their names please for our response log?”

“Sure. That’s Justin Ferry and Ian Janis. Hey! Ferry, Janis! Cover it up!” His shout startled the few students still watching, and Howells rolled her eyes as she wrote their names down in the log.

Suited up, the two hauled in the body bag and followed Howells and Bailey over to Marjorie’s body. Ferry performed a routine series of checks for signs of life; he gripped her wrist for her pulse, lifted an eyelid, leaned over her mouth to listen for a breath. There was nothing, of course; Marjorie was truly dead.

“Can we get a few shots of her back?” Bailey lifted her camera tellingly.

“Sure. Come on, Ferry.” Janis and Ferry rolled Marjorie over, and Bailey snapped a few photos, focusing mainly on her back, where there was a conspicuous absence of exit wounds.

“Thanks.”

“Anything in the pockets?” A quick rifle.

“Nope. Anything else you needed?”

“Would it be possible to remove her necklace? We noticed a print on the front and it will be preserved better if we package it up now.”

“Sure. Got a bag?”

“Yes, here,” Bailey offered an open coin envelope she’d kept, and Janis unclasped the necklace from around Marjorie’s neck and dropped it in the envelope.

“That all?” Howells glanced at Bailey, who nodded.

“No thank you, that was all. You can take the body now.”

The two dragged the body bag beside Marjorie’s body and unzipped it, opening the flap to reveal a gaping black interior. Idris tried not to wince as they gripped her wrists and ankles and roughly hoisted Marjorie’s body into the bag. They zipped it up, then proceeded to drag it back to their van, leaving Idris raising her eyebrows. The crime scene unit team may have been remarkably thorough, but it didn’t look like the local ME met the same standards. She had reviewed the autopsy report and hadn’t found any particularly jarring issues, so clearly the local pathologist or coroner wasn’t as unprofessional as this team. Howells’ expression indicated she also wasn’t impressed with their work; she reassigned Bailey to helping Riley finish up his evidence photos—a mostly-finished job already, so more wrap-up work than anything else—and escorted them out of the scene, documenting the time they left. The scene felt empty after Marjorie’s body was gone; there were a few leftover splashes of blood on the ground where she had been laying, but as Page packaged up the cartridge case retrieved from beneath the dumpster, the scene looked less and less like that of a homicide.

The team started packing up their kit, and Idris slowly became aware of a persistent ticking sound that grew louder and louder in the back of her mind. She glanced around, wondering where it was coming from, then suddenly, the scene went black.

## Chapter 4

**15MAR2068, 1600hrs**

The ticking was slowly overtaken by a light hum. Idris became aware of a sore back and stiff shoulders; she moved to stretch and realized she couldn't. Breath shortening, she tried to move her wrists and her body, but her upper torso was pinned—and her wrists—suddenly, a door slid open with a hiss to reveal a faceless silhouette and it hit her. Vera. She was in Vera, and everything was fine.

“How was it? Anything take you out of the sim, anything I can fix?” Gun always sounded so worried when she came out. He prided himself on his ability to run Vera with perfection, and so always checked with her to see what he could do better, though often it was perfect.

“No, it was good. I got some good stuff, I think I'm ready to have the lab run a few of the old things again. There was this cartridge case I was so worried they'd miss, and they found it...anyways. It was excellent Gun, you did good with this one.”

“It was easy. 2018's a far cry from 1985.” The doors slid shut behind him, and he didn't blink; Idris tried not to hyperventilate, still feeling the adrenaline from waking up.

“I bet. Can you help me unstrap?”

“Oh. Right—” Gun set down his tablet and began undoing the straps that had given her such a scare when she'd come to, all the while making small talk. Idris liked this part—Gun had an interesting sense of humor and it helped calm her down after waking up in Vera. She always had trouble getting her heart rate to settle down after coming out of a simulation, which she

would never admit to any healthcare professional, of course. She knew that she just had trouble shifting from the past back to the present; she became so immersed in following the case that coming back so abruptly to reality was a trick. But Gun's easy conversation helped her focus back on 2068, and, as she'd said—he was cute.

“What evidence are you going to ask for review on?” She blinked up at Gun and stretched her shoulders, which he'd just released, and pulled off the electrodes attached to her temples. She could feel the tension in them and knew she'd need an extra hour of stretching somewhere in the near future.

“There was a cartridge case underneath the dumpster that they found and collected and a possible print on her necklace; I'm going to run that print through IAFIS 7.0 and hope for the best. But they picked up some fiber trace and a soil sample too that I want to get the folks in the lab to run.”

“Why the soil?”

“Soil is useful to analyze regardless; it might give me an idea of where she'd been before the time of her death, to help establish a timeline. The mud on her shoes and legs looked different than what the soil around the area where she died. Could be it's from somewhere else on campus, but maybe it's somewhere more unique too. Plus, odds are they didn't do much of an analysis on it back when they first collected it. Soil was one of those types of evidence that people didn't like to waste time on, even though it was fairly easy and could give some useful information in some cases.”

“Oh okay, cool. Well, it looks like you're about good to go, just log in your hours and don't forget your Vera file.”

“My favorite.” Idris pulled a face, then glanced at her wrist where her circ usually sat. “What time is it, anyways?”

“Sixteen hundred hours.” The doors to the chamber slid open again, and together they moved into the bright light of the glass-ceilinged atrium. The angled light gave Vera’s blued steel chamber a warmer shine, and Idris patted the wall of the chamber as she left. She placed her hands once more on the log screen and reported her hours in the simulation. A vibration and a beep indicated the end of the process, and she collected her circ from Gun, who had been finalizing the recording taken during the sim.

“Thanks, Gun. This one was really good.”

“Of course. Hey Idris—” He paused awkwardly. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“No, no, it’s nothing. Don’t forget your Vera file, and let me know asap when you want your next sim.”

“Okay. See you round, Gun.” Idris accepted her circ from him, then left the atrium, confusion palpable.

Idris readjusted her circ on her wrist as she made her way back to the office. It was much quitter now; many of her coworkers in HCD kept different schedules than the typical nine to five work day, preferring to come in early and run sims before the workday fully began. Idris generally preferred to do the same; it gave her a chance to write up her report on what she’d observed in the sim and confer with the lab for the rest of the day, but this one had come up quickly and she’d wanted the head start on it. Reaching her office, she closed the door behind her—half hoping it would convince anyone looking for her that she’d gone home for the evening—and woke up her computer station. It sputtered to life with a handful of staticky

crackles and an irritating and constant ticking, but finally it was readable, back on the case notes pages she'd been studying before the sim was ready. It was only a few pages into the full case file; just describing the first few steps addressing the crime scene. The details were clearer now, having seen the actual scene. Flipping the page, she squinted at the birds-eye sketch of the scene. She was pretty sure it was the same one Laurence had been working on while she'd watched; there were a few telltale smudges on the drawing that indicated a leftie, as Laurence had been. Idris was actually quite impressed with the sketch; it captured the general layout of the crime scene well and was largely legible, apart from the smudges. She'd seen much worse since coming to the HCD. Frankly, she'd seen worse while in the field. Just because the agency had gone paperless and introduced tablet sketchpads didn't make up for questionable handwriting.

Dozens of pages further and Idris found what she was looking for; the evidence analysis reports. There was a page of two for each type of evidence the crime scene team had recovered at the scene. It looked as though the evidence had been sent to a private lab in Philadelphia for analysis. Idris didn't recognize the name, though that didn't surprise her. Not all of the private labs that had processed evidence lasted long. She drew the pen out of the side of her tablet and pulled up her personal case note file. As much as she complained to Frink about deciphering the handwriting in the case notes assigned to her, she much preferred handwriting her own notes on her tablet before typing them up for her official report. She read the lines aloud as she jotted down the bits she wanted to save.

*“Item 09-01. Paint trace. Components indicate ... wait. Paint? Where did that come from?”* Idris zoomed in on the file with two fingers. *“The ME found it under her right-hand fingernails. Okay ... and it was high-end artist paint. Interesting.”* The analyst was clear in the report, however. After using gas chromatograph to run the sample, the paint discovered under the

victim's fingernails was determined to have been made with chemicals typically seen in relatively modern oil paints.

*“Check ... nearby museums ... question mark?”* Marjorie was an art major, after all, it was possible she'd come into contact with a painting at some point and transferred the paint then.

Idris set her pen down and scrolled back to the analysis reports. The fibers had been identified as polyester based on the high concentration of delusterants—titanium dioxide crystals used to brighten fibers used in clothing and other fibers—and the optical properties of the fibers. They were what the analyst described as an “uncomfortable shade of bright red,” which made Idris snort. She would've gotten flack in the academy if she'd used that description for a red item. It was pretty subjective. They had been collected from Marjorie's hair at the crime scene, matted in dirt and her own blood, which indicated that their transfer had occurred at the time of her murder.

*“Check if investigators ... sampled vic's own clothes outside of what she was wearing ... for fiber origins.”*

A flick of the page brought her to the evidence report she really wanted to see: the cartridge casing. The casing was stamped “9mm FC Luger,” with a squarish firing pin impression over the primer cup at the base of the cartridge. No match had been reported in their most current version of IBIS, the Integrated Bullet Identification System. It appeared to match another set of casings from a set found at a robbery two months prior to Marjorie's death, but there was no identification beyond that. Whoever had shot Marjorie had used a gun that had seen action before.

Interesting as that was, the fingerprint they'd lifted from her necklace had even more potential, and its examination had been detailed after the information about the cartridge. It was a

good quality print, level two detail—implying that it could be individualized if directly matched to a known print. The crime scene team had packaged the print at the scene directly as she'd seen, rather than dusting and lifting it there, and it had been taken back to the lab for enhanced development, which had all been done sufficiently. But the fingerprint comparison had come up bust; the print hadn't matched Marjorie but hadn't popped up any matches in the 2018 version of the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, IAFIS. A large annotated photo of the print was included, but it had provided no other information at the time. It also appeared that the footwear impression that had been photographed had been disregarded, as she saw no report regarding it.

IAFIS had been improved vastly since 2018, however, and that would be Idris' next step. Direct access to the system had been given to the FBI, so that rather than having to go through a lab she could enter prints on her own. They'd have to be verified by a qualified examiner afterwards, but she could get the process started now.

“Alright, here we go,” she muttered, pulling up the mobile IAFIS 7.0 app on her screen beside the case file scans. An alert beeped on her circ, but she ignored it and set up the program for a new search. IAFIS 7 could access her sister databases—anything local or state, as well as databases covering other forms of evidence such as cartridge cases or DNA—to analyze and search for potential connections between crimes, so when she uploaded the best photographs included in the file, she included both the purple-dyed print that was pressed beautifully across the flat heart-shaped necklace pendant, as well as 9 mm cartridge case. Entering her password, she tapped the button to start the search right as her screen flickered in and out again.

“Don't start,” she warned the computer, as her circ chirped more urgently at her. It was well past five o'clock, she realized; out the window the sun was resting even lower on the

horizon, hidden from view by a tall line of city buildings. A third chirp forced her to open the message her circ was so adamantly reminding her of, and she groaned. She was supposed to attend a dinner at seven for the office; Frink wanted her to go and babble about how useful Vera was to the newly-elected members of the Senate, so they would consider granting the FBI—and the HCD, by turn—a larger budget. Sometimes she wondered if her promotion after the Zodiac Case solve was worth it.

“Hey Bette, do I have time to make it home and back before dinner?” The face of her circ assistant, a ruddy-cheeked older woman with what Idris always had always assumed were worry lines carved into her bluish holographic face, appeared.

“It is six-fifteen. If you use the Blue or Yellow Line you will arrive home at six-twenty-five with plenty of time to change, as long as you call a car to return you to *Le Corsair* for the evening.”

“I’m taking Blue. Yellow’s smelled off the last couple of days and I don’t like it.”

“That will suit, Idris Hart.” Bette’s face was absorbed into Idris’ circ, and she closed out the case files, after sending them to her secure personal tablet. Frink hated that she did that, but she’d had Gun check and re-check the security of her tablet and he’d seen no reason that anyone would be able to access encrypted files on her tablet without her biometrics, and she liked to read the case files before bed, so she did it anyways. Grabbing up her coat, she locked her office with her thumbprint and headed for the basement of the FBI building. They had their own magnetic rail line stop beneath the building, which made getting in and out of the office remarkably easy, though Idris could only imagine how much the security personnel probably hated it. As Bette had predicted, she made it home—just a three-stop trip—by 6:25 and sighed when she looked at the

dress code on the invitation that Frink had sent to her circ, which she'd set to display across the screen on her fridge door. Black tie was getting old with how many of these she'd attended.

## Chapter 5

**15MAR2068, 0046hrs**

A navy sheath dress with silver filigree shoulders, two glasses of expensive champagne, and four newly-elected Senators who made her want to take a shower later, Idris was seated at the bar in *Le Corsair*, a Michelin-star staffed restaurant lounge with uncomfortably dim lighting, with a cherry Cosmo and cheeks that were sore from keeping her smile fixed in place all night. The clock had chimed midnight a little over forty-five minutes before and the lounge was beginning to slowly empty out, but she had made the mistake of making eye contact with Frink as he was talking up the only Senator she hadn't spoken with yet and knew she had to wait it out till he was ready to bring him over to her. She was faintly surprised it had taken this long; Frink was no sweet-talker and she knew he was relatively uncomfortable in situations like these, though as director he had more practice and hid it well.

"Bette, call a car for me. Tell them to show up to the door in thirty-five minutes." She whispered at her circ, and saw the light blink a pleasant green color in affirmation.

"Special Agent Hart?" A shadow fell over her and she straightened up with a smile, slipping off her bar stool to stand on feet sore from her pretty silver heels.

"That's me," she said, looking up at the tall man in front of her. He had an uncle-ish sort of look about him, balding, in his 50s with a growing paunch, but with a wide smile stretched across his face.

“Senator Eric Hart. I was just elected for the great state for Virginia.” Frink’s Senator put out a hand for her to shake. She with his name and introduction she knew exactly why Frink had wanted her to stay; Virginia so far had been vocal with other plans for the upcoming budget that didn’t include the FBI.

“Please, you can call me Idris. Although—Hart? I don’t suppose you’re from the Maine area, are you? We might be long-lost relatives.”

“No, unluckily. Or perhaps it’s more like luckily, for me.” His insinuating smile seemed playful, so Idris kept her smile and laughed noncommittally. Frink appeared, another two glasses of champagne in hand.

“Idris, I was just talking to Senator Hart here about your recent work in Vera, why don’t you fill him in? I’m sure you could give him a much better glimpse into our on-the-ground work in the Historical Crimes Division than I can.” He offered one of the glasses to Hart.

“No drink for Idris, Director? Surely you’re more of a gentleman than that.”

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you. Director Frink knows I’m not much of a champagne girl,” Idris jumped in, lifting her own glass off the bar.

“I see. Well, in that case.” He accepted the glass and took a deep drink. “So, Idris, what can you tell me about your work with Vera? Was it worth every penny? I know that’s everyone’s question, since they approved the funding for the program a few years back.”

“Vera has been instrumental in solving a number of our cases—we couldn’t solve some of the cold cases we’ve touched without it. Without it we could never have cracked the Zodiac Killer case. Being able to follow his victims allowed us to look for patterns and individuals who were around them near the time of their deaths, and we were able to identify the man behind the murders from that.”

“The man? Who was it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t say, Senator. We haven’t released the details to the public yet. It’s still going through the Historical Courts.”

“Ah, of course. What are you currently working on? Something equally big?”

“Two unanswerable questions at once! I can’t discuss an ongoing case, I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure it won’t hurt to give Senator Hart a few details of your work. You went through a simulation in Vera just today, didn’t you Idris?” Frink shot her a glare and she changed tack, though she really wanted to glare back at him.

“Oh well, I suppose I could let you in on a little bit of it, since I’m sure you wouldn’t share with the media, right Senator?” She gave him a winning smile.

“Of course not. Is it a good one? Dark, grisly?” His eagerness to hear gory details of a murder investigation didn’t impress Idris, nor did she believe his promise not to share anything she said with the media. Cursing Frink in her head, she chose her next words carefully.

“Well, I don’t know that it’s any worse than any other case I’ve worked on, and I’ve only just started, so I’m afraid there’s not much to tell at this point. A young woman was found dead on a college campus in 2018, shot twice in the chest. I went in today and reviewed the crime scene processing team after they had first found the body. They did really impressive work; they found a cartridge case at the scene, and necklace with a great quality fingerprint on it. I’m hoping that will help speed up the identification process. I’ve already submitted the print to IAFIS 7.”

“What was the simulation like?”

“Beautiful. Luke Gunderson, one of our Vera techs, works magic with the program, I swear. Sometimes I forget I’m even in a simulation, they feel so real. It lets me focus on the details I need to solve a case.”

“Sounds like it was money well spent. Is the simulation you ran today the only one you’ll need for this investigation?”

“Depends on where it goes, I suppose, but it’s unlikely. I typically review three to four Vera simulations over the course of an investigation, but as I said, it’s hard to tell at this point. I don’t know much about the circumstances surrounding her murder; I might need to go back to get a better perspective.”

“Could you go back a few weeks before her death? Maybe you’ll see her killer stalking her!”

“Maybe. If it was that kind of case.” Idris bit her tongue, so she didn’t shut him down. That was everyone’s assumption, that you could go back and see the killer’s face as they committed the crime. But Vera’s programming was much more demanding than that. You might see a killer, but not their face, the murder might occur outside of sight of any cameras or location-tracking technology, it may have occurred in the 1970s before the advent of technology that permeated everyday life now—it just depended. Vera took data from outside sources to produce the simulation, and if the information was lacking, she would blank it out or request for the tech to enter additional known information. So, if the identity of the suspect was unknown and there was nothing for Vera to use to identify a particular individual, then sometimes you got a whole lot of nothing. That was part of Vera’s contract with the FBI, allowing them to use evidence gathered with it in court. There were no simulation fill-ins for unknown circumstances.

“Of course. I suppose he might not have been stalking her previously.”

“Exactly.” A commotion off behind Hart drew his attention, and Idris made a face at Frink as the clock in the lobby chimed quarter to two o’clock and the tiny notification light her circ began to blink rapidly blue.

“Well, if you will excuse me, Director, Idris, I believe those are my colleagues summoning me. I wish you all the best on your work. And yes, Frink, I will remember the FBI’s need for money, never you worry. Goodnight.” He swooped in and kissed Idris on the cheek, deposited his champagne glass on the bar, then disappeared into the dimness. Idris rubbed her cheek in disgust and rolled her eyes.

“Good job there, Hart.” Frink leaned against the bar and sighed in relief.

“Thanks Frink. I suppose he wasn’t as bad as some of the ones you’ve sent my way.”

“You’re a good partner out here, you know. I’m glad I can count on you.”

“Aww, now you’re going to make me cry. Nobody else for me to bat my eyelashes at tonight?”

“No. Go home, Hart.” He lifted his champagne glass, still half-full. “I think I’ll just finish this and do the same; one thing for these parties, you can’t scoff at the liquor quality.”

“Definitely not.” Idris tossed back the last of her own drink and set her own glass down on the bar. “Night, Frink. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Idris.”

Idris hobbled out to where the car she’d called was waiting. After making her apologies—she was over half an hour late—she leaned back in the smooth leather seat and thought about the Senator’s comments. She was naturally inclined to dislike politicians, a trait she’d inherited from her mother, a well-known cyber activist, but Senator Hart wasn’t as far off as she’d originally thought; she didn’t know much about the circumstances surrounding Marjorie’s death, which was going to be a must-have if the case ended up going to the Historical Courts.

Because suspects who were identified through the HCD were often old or deceased, it fell to a special branch of the justice system to deal with her cases, and they often required extra case knowledge that she wouldn't be able to obtain without Vera in order to help them make their decision on how to legally proceed with the case.

“Hey Bette. Send this message to Gun: “Going to need to take a look at Marjorie Horner, two weeks prior to death. Would appreciate getting into the sim late tomorrow if possible. Hart.””

“Message sent, Idris Hart.”

“Thanks.” Idris knew Gun often came into work painfully early; he had mentioned something about noisy next-door construction and enjoying watching the sunrise from the Vera atrium during one of their small talk conversations while he was releasing her from the chair. Settling back into the seat once more, she reveled in the silence until she was dropped off at her apartment, then fell into bed until Bette woke her at seven the next morning.

—

“Incoming call. Luke Gunderson. Incoming call. Luke Gunderson. Incoming—”

“Accept, accept the call, Bette!” Idris snatched up her circ from the desk where she'd left it while she was working as Gun's head appeared, formed of blue and white dots that shifted as he smiled.

“Late night, Special Agent?”

“Yeah. Frink has me going to fundraising dinners every night now, it feels like.”

“Don't envy you that. Well, I got your request, and since I seem to wake up right as you're headed off to sleep, I got your sim programmed.”

“You did? That's great! Thanks Gun. When can I run it?”

“I’ve got a gap in Vera’s schedule from now till 4; if you hurry you should be able to run through it—or at least most of it. I penciled you into the schedule, so at least it shouldn’t look like you’re totally jumping protocol.” Idris half-wincing. Department protocol dictated that technically you were supposed to reserve your Vera simulation times rigorously, though few agents did it as thoroughly as was intended.

“Thanks again, Gun. I’ll be down in half a minute.”

“Make it a quick half a minute. See you, Hart.” Gun’s head disappeared, and Idris keyed in a command on her circ.

“Bette, make sure I’m marked as unavailable for about three hours. Just inform any callers that I’m working and can’t take calls.”

“Of course, Idris Hart.”

“Thanks.” Idris left her circ on her desk, and scooped up her notes tablet, head buried in the details once more as she hurried down the hallway and nearly taking out several colleagues as she went. Gun was waiting for her this time, and she ran through the log protocols quickly and was soon strapped into the sim chair, the electrode gel chilling her temples. Gun flicked the needle with the sedative as he spoke.

“So, this sim is a little different. I did the best I could, but there are some definite dark patches that I can’t piece together. I couldn’t even get location data. Best I can figure is she left her phone somewhere, maybe by mistake. You’ll see when you get in there; it might be a bit frustrating. Since it’s a multi-day sim as well, I cut through the boring bits where she was asleep, stuff like that. Vera didn’t raise any flags for any overnight sections.”

“Thanks for the heads up, and for saving me that. I’m ready.” Idris leaned her head back as Gun lowered the simulation headset over her eyes.

## Chapter 6

**01APR2018, 2352hrs**

“Happy Birthday! Happy Birthday, Sara!” Idris opened her eyes to a celebratory scene; a group of college students, mostly girls, were gathered around a cake and a lone girl in a pink clingy dress. The candles were lightly smoking; she must have just blown them out, and her laughing smile was being filmed by a boy in the corner. Idris spotted Marjorie in the main group. She was wearing a relatively modest, low-cut blue top and ripped up black jeans, and her unusual auburn hair tumbled about her bare shoulders in glossy curls. Idris watched her with a touch of ruefulness for a moment; she looked so alive in this instant, so different than her body would in a few short weeks.

“Marj, pass me the cups! So, who’s going down in pong tonight before we go out?” Marjorie was laughing as she threw a stack of solo cups at the speaker, another boy in shorts and a football jersey. A glance at the brightly colored banners hung on the wall and the bouncing silver helium balloons told Idris what she already expected; it was the girl in the pink dress’ 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, a momentous occasion for any college student, no matter the decade. They were obviously all enjoying themselves; she saw no sign of anything that might hint at the future to come. Idris knew from her file that Marjorie was single, but the boys mostly treated her in a friendly manner, apart from the boy she beat in beer pong a few hours or so in. He was mad—and had had several drinks too many already—but his friends bundled him off so quickly he barely had time to say anything really rude. After a while they went to the bar; the sim followed

Marjorie as she danced on the crowded checkerboard dance floor, sat on the bench seat and ate fries with her friends and watched the birthday girl get serenaded to by two frat boys in cowboy hats. Then, surrounded by a group of laughing, inebriated friends, she made her way home in the early morning. The sim went black for a moment with a clatter like an old film reel running out, and Idris waited in the dark, peaceful for the moment.

## Chapter 7

**07APR2018, 0900hrs**

Idris was grateful that Vera used dream-like time dilation during simulations that meant that even though she felt like she was spending days watching Marjorie go about her life with hardly an incident, she knew somewhere in the back of her mind that only a few hours of her time were being traded for this glimpse into the life of a girl 50 years previously. She'd always had trouble understanding how it worked—it tapped into the part of the brain that messed with the perception of time in dreams and used that to create the dilation effect. But regardless, it meant this trip wasn't a total waste, even as several days passed and nothing more dramatic happened than Marjorie being reprimanded by a professor for having her phone out during class.

She had been preparing for a trip she was taking as part of one of her courses; a weekend trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, apparently to inspire her final project for the class. Idris had to admit she had never been much of an art person, and found it challenging to stay focused in the sim and not drift off when she was sitting through the fourth day of art history lectures. They were finally leaving, however, and Idris watched Marjorie sling her suitcase into the trunk of her classmate's CRV and groaned as the sim began to blur around the edges as it moved with the car, and her senses were flooded with hits of the 2000s. That was a music era no one wants to return to anymore, that was for certain.

Three hours into the four and a half-hour-trip, the three girls pulled over at a rest stop. Idris couldn't see the sign, so she wasn't sure where they were, and as they wandered about the

uninspired turnpike stop, stretching their legs, she wondered again—very briefly—if this was worth her while. It seemed that so far, very little had happened leading up to her death. Maybe Marjorie was an innocent, random victim, rather than a target. She wondered if perhaps she should have waited and done more research before agreeing to this long waste of time. As Idris looked for the mental “shut down” button that would allow her to come out of the sim, yelling reached her ears. While she’d been deliberating, Marjorie had left her friends and was examining mugs in the gift shop, and as Idris watched, the shouts caught her attention and she left the mug on the shelf and cautiously moved to investigate.

The scene that met her eyes—and Idris’, as she followed Marjorie—was chaotic; a crowd of people had gathered as one of Marjorie’s friends confronted a man carrying a sign with a rather ugly symbol on it. She was growing more and more animated, waving the other girl—Sara, the birthday girl of a week ago—in for a close up on her phone, which she was using to film the encounter. The man was large and grizzled, wearing a battered t-shirt and a dirty black baseball cap, and the expression on his face as he listened to the petite young woman in front of him made Idris wish she could leap forward with her badge and intervene.

“Emma! Sara!” The girl barely glanced back at Marjorie but continued her hot accusations. The man waved the sign in her face with an ugly leer and shouted something that Vera chose to blank out: a disorienting second of silence occurred around Idris. She shook her head to clear it as Marjorie ventured closer to the argument. Vera was programmed with a high degree of flexibility when it came to swearing and vulgarity in simulations, but since many of the sims were recorded some ... less acceptable things were removed from the record for the sake of the court. Regardless, Idris got the gist.

“Don’t you realize that these are people you’re being so disgusting to? They deserve to live just the same as everyone else! What gives you the right to—to carry around a sign like this?” Emma reached out and grabbed the edge of the sign, trying to wrench it away from the man. With a snarl he let go, she staggered back, almost dropping her prize, and he lurched forward off his seat. Sara looked up from behind the camera, obviously torn between her recording and helping her friend, who had regained her balance and now stood a few steps away from the man. Emma angrily threw the sign back at him and he surged forward, threatening.

“I’ll teach a little bitch like you not to stick her nose where it doesn’t belong!”

“Emma, no!” Marjorie appeared behind her friend and yanked her out of reach of the man’s meaty hands. “Sara, the car! Now!” Marjorie refused to let go of her friend’s wrist as she dragged her through the glass doors. Sara followed, her voice breaking in pants as she continued to narrate the film, swinging it behind her every so often to catch their pursuer, who had shoved his way through the crowd furiously and followed them.

“Marj, look—”

“Get in the car, Emma. Now. I don’t know what you were thinking, *look* at him!”

Marjorie looked beyond the car from where she had been about to get into the driver’s seat as the expletives behind them grew louder. Sara dove into the backseat, finally turning off her camera.

Emma hesitated. Marjorie turned the key. “Get in the car!”

“Hurry!” Sara mouthed through the window. This time, Emma did so, jumping into the passenger side as Marjorie slid into the driver’s seat, locked the doors, and gunned out of the parking spot as the man reached their car. He managed to slap her hood as she pulled out, and shook his sign after them, shouting.

“You haven’t heard the end of this, bitch!”

Idris felt her own heart pounding and her muscles stiffen as the edges of the sim started to blur again and Marjorie accelerated back onto the highway. It seemed she'd found an unusual and alarming occurrence in Marjorie's life prior to her death. Had the man hunted them down and killed Marjorie, mistaking her for one of her two friends?

"Did you get all of that, Sara?" Emma took the phone handed to her and played the video. A loud replay filled the car, and Vera went silent. Marjorie listened, her lips tightening till her frustration was visible.

"That was—"

"Excellent?"

"Really dumb. That guy could've seriously hurt you both, and you provoked him!"

"I know, I know. But I saw that sign and—ugh." Emma shuddered. "I knew we had to get it for the blog. A clip like that will drive the views through the roof, and people will finally listen to us, to what we have to say."

"Don't you think there might be backlash or something? You provoked him first. Plus, we're on a trip for class. I'm sure this'll go over really well with the administration, if it gets picked up by the major news."

"Good! I hope it does. I'm tired of these issues being dismissed. Post it, Sara. Unedited, all of it."

"Are you sure, I could trim—"

"All of it. I want people to see that we're willing to stand up to those who hold views that disparage those less fortunate than themselves. And, in case this does go big...I don't want any footage of us 'running away' surfacing to distract people from the real message."

"Okay, here goes!"

The car settled into an uneasy silence, music long forgotten and broken only by Sara's soft murmuring as she posted the video. Idris closed her eyes and tried to relax and create a mental to-do list for when she finished the sim. She would need to look up the video Sara had posted, see if she could follow the blow back from the clip, and determine whether or not she could find the man's identity or not. If Marjorie's murder was related to the confrontation, Idris was fairly confident she could solve the case. She had his face, after all.

But something about that sat uneasily with her; Marjorie had barely been involved in the incident, why would she have been the victim in the end? Had it just been a case of mistaken identity—had the man recognized her from the group but not realized she'd been the one pulling her friends away, or had he just not cared? Idris was glad that the United States had gotten past this era of confrontational discourse in politics. 2068 was more intense in some ways, since the issues they grappled with were far larger and more threatening than anything that 2018 could have imagined, but the angry partisan lines that were cracking across the country had been shifting and lessening for decades now, as had the culture of what was acceptable to the public. Protesting and loud rhetoric were, for the moment, unacceptable to the current generation of voters. There would be an election upcoming in 2070, however, and one could never tell.

An hour of stony silence later, they arrived in New York City. Their hotel had parking; they pulled in, met up with the rest of their class, then immediately headed out to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Idris watched with interest for the first few minutes of Marjorie's exploration—the Met looked far different in 2018 than it did in 2068—but her interest subsided slowly into bored watchfulness as Marjorie and other members of her class who joined her wandered about the museum for several hours. The night was much the same; they went out for dinner as a group, saw the Statue of Liberty by night, then Idris' surroundings faded in and out.

## Chapter 8

**08APR2018, 0900hrs**

When the nightly blackout ended for Idris, Marjorie was eating breakfast at their hotel. Sara was beside her, absorbed in something on her phone, and there was another girl there that Idris didn't recognize. Turning, she could see Emma at the buffet line, but there was no empty chair at their table, and Idris suspected that their friendship might have been strained by the incident. She made a mental note to do some digging into this Emma's past; it was possible she had something to do with Marjorie's death, rather than the man from the incident.

"Sara! What happened yesterday? Whoa!" The girl at their table had also pulled out her phone and was watching wide-eyed something that Idris suspected was the clip of their confrontation.

"Oh, Sue, it was terrible." Sara launched off on a description of what had happened—somewhat superfluously, since Sue was watching the clip and its narration already—and Marjorie looked more and more unhappy until Sara reached the part where she'd dragged Emma away and Sue looked up and said:

"What as up with that, Marj? You don't agree with that awful man, do you?"

Marjorie looked furious.

"No, I don't. I knew this would be people's reactions—I don't agree with him, I think what he said was vile and totally false and unfair. But he was going to hurt Emma and Sara if it had gone any further, and I didn't think a school trip was the best time to get beaten to a pulp in

the name of a cause, and frankly, I didn't know where the nearest hospital was, nor what would happen if the police showed up and two out-of-state girls were picking a fight with a local biker, and I honestly don't think confronting someone like that and shouting is going to change either his mind or anyone else's!"

She bolted to her feet and stormed out into the lobby, her bag swinging, oblivious to the stares of Sue, Sara, and others. Emma, Idris noted, was the only one who didn't watch the girl storm out, keeping her eyes on her breakfast instead. The sim shifted to follow Marjorie, who sent off a rapid message on her phone, waited for a response, then shoved her way through the swinging doors and out into the crowded sidewalk. Idris ducked and wove behind her—trying to avoid people, who somehow seemed to feel as solid as real-life if you ran into them—and quickly realized that Marjorie was headed for the Met ahead of her classmates. Idris could tell she was cooling down as she walked, and by the time she reached the sweeping staircase that led to the front doors she looked largely more relaxed, and she settled with her sketchbook in front of "A Woman seated beside a vase of flowers" by Edgar Degas—and still attributed to him, Idris noticed—and hardly moved or responded to anyone for the rest of the day.

Hours of careful observation later, Marjorie folded up her sketchbook with countless notes, sketches, and designs for her own project inside and left the museum. She was standing on a middle step outside the museum, scrolling through notifications on her phone, when a man brushed past her with such force she stumbled sideways.

"Hey!" Her purse was gone. "Hey, stop! That's mine—thief!"

She pursued the figure around the corner, and then suddenly—nothing. Idris was trapped in blackness that only meant one thing; Vera had nothing to work with. It wasn't often that it happened, but sometimes criminals were careful or clever and there was no CCTV, no cameras,

nothing that gave away their image. She was informed by Vera where she was—which basically came as a sensation of knowing, because Vera was using the phone's GPS to detect where they were—which was somewhere on the side of the Met, but there was nothing to see. Idris could hear shouts, presumably picked up by Marjorie's phone. Rough, unintelligible voices, a strangled yelp from a female voice, then the sound of a truck pulling away with a guttural whine, and finally, silence filled by the white noise of the city. Idris stared into the black. Had she just heard her victim get kidnapped?

With dizzying speed, however, the simulation reappeared, and Marjorie stood at the base of the grand staircase looking shell-shocked. Her phone was in hand, but she hadn't recovered her bag or sketchbook. She sat down on the bottom step, arms around her knees and make-up running slightly, until a teaching assistant Idris recognized from before found her and bundled her off to the hotel.

## Chapter 9

**09APR2018, 1400hrs**

Marjorie seemed fine on the way home, to Idris' eyes. The account she'd given to the professor and the police had been straightforward; the mugger had grabbed her bag and run around the side of the museum, where she'd seen his face as his mask had slipped. He had jumped into the back of a black, nondescript van and it had accelerated out of the parking garage entrance where it had been idling, but not before she'd caught a glimpse of another masked man in the driver's seat. She hadn't gotten her bag back, which meant her sketchbook was gone, but her professor had given her an extension on the notes and she was unhurt, so it had seemed like an altogether unfortunate, but unremarkable event.

Even so, Idris made a note to investigate other reported robberies in the area. It seemed an odd coincidence that her victim had been robbed just before her death, but Idris still prioritized the incident with the man at the rest stop above this one. Marjorie had switched cars—she rode back with the teaching assistant who had found her on the steps, and four other students, rather than Emily and Sara. The trip back was uneventful, and as they rolled back onto campus, Idris realized that it was probably the last time that Marjorie would have left campus, and her heart sank a little. The next few days would pass by her quickly.

## Chapter 10

10APR2018, 1000hrs

*FAMOUS PAINTING STOLEN IN BROAD DAYLIGHT! CLASSIC DECADE GONE FOR GOOD! POLICE OPERATIVES BAFFLED AT LOSS FROM THE MET.* All the headlines decried the same crime the next morning, and Idris could hear the case being discussed by what seemed like every student in every art class Marjorie attended the next day. A painting by Decade, an up-and-coming artist from the Bronx, had been stolen from the Met, right from the gallery where it had been displayed for many years. Several others had been stolen as well but had been recovered shortly after. No one seemed sure why those particular paintings had been taken—there were a number of theories—especially since they were all essentially in the center of their respective galleries, but *The Millionaire*, as the painting was called, was certainly gone, and police had nowhere to start. Idris' favorite comment was that of a blond-haired boy seated beside Marjorie who muttered as he scrolled through his CNN app:

"Sheesh, that would've been right as we were there for the project trip! Wonder if that's who stole your bag, Marj?"

Marjorie blew off the comment—and rightly so, Idris reasoned. It would've been far too unlucky of a consequence, really. The class passed without much of note, and Idris followed Marjorie as she left the building. The late afternoon sun played across the street, casting

eastward-reaching shadows that striped the tree-lined walkway. The campus was a beautiful place, and Idris allowed her mind to wander for a moment, enjoying the sunshine of the past. Suddenly, Marjorie stopped dead. She was staring at—at something. It looked to Idris like she was simply staring down the street in surprise, and Idris growled as she looked back and forth between the empty shadows at which Marjorie stared and the girl herself. Her face was strained, frustrated; she seemed to be trying to recognize someone or make out their face, it seemed, then it changed suddenly to shock, and confusion, and—fear. she continued to watch the shadows for several more minutes, though her tension decreased slightly, and she shouldered her bag resolutely and hurried on, and didn't leave her apartment for the rest of the night.

## Chapter 11

**11APR2018, 1102hrs**

Marjorie didn't leave the apartment that day, which was strange. She usually had three classes and a shift at the art museum for her final project, but instead she stayed inside her bedroom, door locked, working furiously on her laptop. She rarely ventured outside the bedroom, either, and seemed nervous when she made runs to the bathroom on the other side of the apartment. The text from her computer scrolled across Idris' vision—another perk of Vera's access to technology—she was searching helplines for people who'd seen crimes, local police numbers, blog posts about personal encounters with thieves. Most chilling was a half-finished email to her mother—

Dear Mom,

I saw something on our trip this weekend that I think put me in a lot of danger. I don't know what to do, it seems like there's a man following me, and I think it's the same man who—

Idris still wasn't certain the cause of her unease, however. Whoever it was Marjorie seemed to think was following her was smart and had stayed out of direct line of sight of any traffic or store surveillance cameras, leaving Vera only able to reproduce Marjorie's response to

what amounted to, from Idris' point of view, shadows. Idris was on full alert though, watching every shadow and reading every line of text. These were the last few days of Marjorie's life, and if she was going to find anything useful, it would certainly be here.

Idris was frustrated by the lack of information, however. From what she had seen so far over the past few weeks in Marjorie's life, only two things stood out as potential leads: the incident with the man and the sign at the gas station, or the mugging outside the Met. Instinctively, based on past training and considering the current decade Marjorie had lived in, Idris would have chosen the gas station incident as the main lead to follow up on. Marjorie hadn't experience much backlash for her part in the confrontation since returning to school, but it hadn't been more than a couple days since it had happened yet. But something stopped Idris from being fully certain.

Marjorie's internet traffic as the day wore on followed the case of the art theft at the Met almost obsessively, and anytime an article hinted at an identity of the thieves, she opened, only to appear disappointed when no new information was presented. Apparently, the police didn't have much to go on in their investigation, and Marjorie wanted more information.

Around five o'clock, Marjorie paused in her searching and ventured into the kitchen to microwave a frozen dinner. Leaning on the sink and looking out the window as she waited, she suddenly dropped to a crouch, her eyes wide. Idris caught the barest glimpse of people walking by outside the window before Marjorie fled back into the bedroom and her view switched, leaving the microwave beeping forlornly after her. She dropped down at her desk and began to sketch furiously on a sheet of paper where she'd been making notes; Idris could see a face appear and felt her heart began to beat faster. This was the person who Marjorie believed had been following her! The fellow was sallow-faced, although rather handsome in a dark and brooding

fashion, He looked nothing like the man who Emily had confronted at the gas station, and like no one Idris had seen before in two weeks of watching Marjorie's life. So, who was he?

## **Chapter 12**

**12APR2018, 1005hrs**

Marjorie slept with the lights on. She seemed to be in a different mindset when she woke, however, and packed her bag and went to class, hand gripping her phone tightly and glancing over her shoulder as she went. Idris watched her, wondering why she hadn't tried to get help at all. She hadn't told her friends, she hadn't finished her email to her mother, she hadn't called the police. It seemed like odd behavior, considering how afraid she seemed. The day passed relatively normally, till about four in the afternoon. Marjorie set her phone in her room to charge and left; Vera was now limited to whatever cameras and non-personal devices caught a glimpse of the targeted individual in order to create the simulation, and the three-dimensional image jumped from scene to scene, with increasing periods of blackness between them. Idris caught a faint hum from the outside machinery of Vera through the sim; she was working hard to create this one.

Flash. Marjorie was on the sidewalk in the center of campus, walking at a fast clip.

Flash. She was in a small convenience store, checking out. The cashier placed her few items in a plastic bag.

Flash. She was back on a different sidewalk, near the library, her attention fixed on something moving down the street, so much so that people were forced to part around her as they passed. This image was uncommonly good; a glance behind her told Idris that she was standing in full view of a building security camera. A van passed, and her head turned slowly to follow it. She began to follow; the van was moving slowly enough in traffic that it was easy for her to follow.

Nothing. Idris stood in the darkness, frustration growing. What was Marjorie doing? This was a key investigative period, why had it gone dark? Or, if there was nothing that could be done about it, why was she sitting through it?

Flash. Marjorie was emerging from a neighborhood just across the street from the north side of campus. The CCTVs caught her in full view; her hair was a wild mess and sweat glistened off her forehead. She was clutching a long cylindrical object in her right hand. Her breaths came in ragged heaves, catching in her throat. The expression of relief as she broke through the tree line and kept running towards the heart of campus made Idris' heart ache. She knew what was coming.

Marjorie had reached the shadows behind the student union building when the muted gunshot went off. Idris couldn't take her eyes off Marjorie, who didn't move. One hand slowly went to her chest and came away red, then she seemed to stagger. A few stumbling steps positioned her beside the dumpster where the crime scene unit would find her a few hours later, and she lay there, her breathing still coming in gasps. The cylindrical object she'd been holding rolled away from her.

There was no one on the sidewalks. Idris assumed it was because of the concert mentioned earlier but it seemed odd to her that there were so few students out and about on a

Friday, and fairly early in the evening, too. The clocks began chiming; Idris counted eight tolls and her stomach sank. The sim had been blank for longer than she'd realized. The wind blew gustily throughout the campus, heralding the arrival of a storm. The trees swayed, and the lights flickered for just a moment—enough to give pause, and for Idris' attention to be drawn to the man emerging into the sight line of the camera and the surrounding areas carefully. He was concealing something in his jacket, and he remained in the shadow of the buildings while he searched for his victim.

Marjorie's bag had dropped in the middle of the street when she'd first stumbled, and the sketchbook beside it had fallen open. Idris watched the shadows, bracing herself for the second shot; when he emerged, she could hardly believe it. His face was invisible in the combination of growing darkness and a heavy hood he'd pulled into place. The man ignored the bag in the street momentarily and walked to where Marjorie lay, one hand out flung in the direction she'd come from. Her white shirt was stained through with blood, dark and glossy. The figure stood over her for a moment, then removed the black handgun he'd been concealing in his jacket and in his hand and fired directly down into her chest. The cartridge case landed with a clink that was unheeded by the shooter. Idris knew it was over after that; there had only been evidence of two shots.

Sure enough, the figure tucked the gun into the waistband of his pants; briefly she saw white skin and made a note of that—and he crouched and patted down Marjorie. It looked for a moment as though he lifted something that was at her neck, then he left her body and retrieved the cylinder she'd been carrying, and then moved to her bag. Idris saw one faint, partial footprint in blood after he moved away from the scene; apparently the disregarded footwear impression had been his. He toed the bag, shuffling its contents, then crouched again and rifled through the

bag, then slung it over his shoulder. He paused over the sketchbook, then stooped and picked it up; Idris could see the sketch of Marjorie's stalker flopping open with the page as he lifted it. The figure himself was still unidentifiable, frustratingly so, and Idris wondered if he was indeed the man from the sketch as he vanished back into the shadows and the simulation came to a jarring halt.

## Chapter 13

**16MAR2068, 1400hrs**

Cold, metallic air. A stiff back and sore tailbone, hard metal beneath her legs. Idris' eyes—her actual, living, moving eyes, not those of her simulation consciousness—snapped open, and she could feel her heart banging in her chest as her reality crashed back around her senses.

“Easy in there, easy. I'll come let you out in a second. Give yourself a chance to equilibrate.” Gun's voice emitted from some unseen speaker in poor quality. Idris chose a spot on the featureless black wall opposite her and focused on her breathing. In, out. In, out. After a few moments, the doors slid open with their hydraulic hiss and Gun was silhouetted against the light outside. He was tapping away at a tablet one-handed while he came and didn't talk much while releasing Idris from the restraints. Idris, whose mind was full of the sim and what she needed to write in her case notes, still noticed his silence with a hint of remorse—she really did like it when he talked to her while she settled down after a sim. She watched his face as he concentrated on two things at once and couldn't help but smile—it was obviously frustrating to him, to be so divided in attention, but it was kind of cute, the way his nose crinkled, and his eyes darted back and forth between the two tasks. He glanced up once to see her smile and met it uncertainly, and then Idris was free. He pulled a chip from his tablet and handed it to her.

“This will kickstart and save the recording on your circ; we'll put it in now and you can bring it back to me when you run your next sim. Now, I don't want to hurry you off or anything, but I've got my next sim to run in about ten minutes and I really need to set it up—”

“Don’t worry about it, Gun. You managed to fit me in last minute, don’t feel bad rushing me out. You did good with this one, too. Thank you!” Idris took the chip and gave him a salute as she started down the hallway, already cataloguing what she needed to do next. Her case notes needed updating, she needed to check on the forensic analyses her team was running, and hopefully Frink hadn’t called her while she was in the sim.

Despite her growing to-do list, Idris slowed her pace as she walked down the hall towards her office. It seemed like days since she’d run the opposite way, trying to make her slot in Vera. In a way, it sort of had been days, she reflected. It was never easy to go back and watch somebody breathe their last, knowing there wasn’t anything you could do to stop it. And this sim had been particularly long; she didn’t typically need to go back for one continuous sim covering several weeks the way she just had. It would take time to recover, but it would push her on. Give her drive to solve the case and figure out what had happened to Marjorie fifty years before.

She settled into her office with her notes and woke up her circ so she could connect Gun’s chip—and suddenly was awash in notification lights and sounds. Green ... blue ... orange ... yellow ... onto six different-colored lights, each one signaling a different type of message or sender. Clearly her absence had not gone unnoticed. She pushed away from her desk, trying to position herself out of view of the window in the door.

“Okay Bette, give me the run down,” she said, keying in the command as well.

“Hello Idris Hart, you have four new messages, two new emails, and one incoming report from IAFIS. Would you like to address these?”

“Yes. Start with the IAFIS report, please.”

“Okay. Report from IAFIS 7.0, to Special Agent Idris Hart, Historical Crimes Division. ‘Current backlog of comparisons requires the input of a permissions code to analyze your request. Please input code and refile your sample.’”

“Damn, I was hoping I wouldn’t need to use a code if I didn’t want it to take days.” Idris glanced at the window in the door, then made her decision and rolled her chair back up to her desk, searching for her “jump” code. Because they were dealing with old cases that didn’t necessarily dictate urgency by typical standards, Special Agents in the HCD were given three codes for IAFIS 7.0/IBIN 6.8, allowing them to “jump” the backlog line and get their prints and firearms evidence analyzed immediately. The codes renewed each month, giving each agent three opportunities to move ahead. You had to choose carefully which case you used the jumps on—Idris and her colleagues certainly worked on more than three cases a month, and so some cases had to wait in line. It was nearing the middle of the month and Idris had only used one of her jumps so far, but that was about to change. Collecting the photos and file information from her tablet again, she punched in the fourteen-character alpha numeric code and resubmitted the unknown print from the necklace, and the cartridge image itself. Watching the screen flash green, she nodded with satisfaction.

“Alright Bette, emails, go.”

“First unread email is from ericHart@ussenate.net—”

“Yeah skip that. It’s going to be fluff.”

“Very well. Second unread email is from hcdlabs@fbi.net, message is as follows:

‘Special Agent Hart:

After reviewing the case file and performing the analysis you requested, I would like to inform you that the soil sample you sent has been analyzed. The formal report is en route shortly.

In addition, my colleagues and I have received and are performing further testing on your paint, fiber, and cartridge items. These reports will be coming shortly, as I obtain the rest of the conclusions.

If you have any questions or would like to review the evidence yourself, please don't hesitate to visit the lab.

Sincerely,

Erin Hodgins

Criminalist IV, FBI"

"Excellent! I'll have to do that soon. Play the rest of the messages, please?"

"Very well. Message one, from Gunderson at 12:07pm:

'Hart —come in ASAP, I put the last touches on your sim, so you can run it today.'

"Yep, got that. Thanks Bette."

"You are welcome."

"Yeah. Second message?"

"Second message. From Director Frink at 1400hrs:

'Hart, please respond to Senator Hart's email. It won't kill you.'

"It might. Next?"

"Third message. From Director Frink, at 1459 hours:

'Hart, your absence has been noticed, hopefully you're making headway on your case.

Please remember that there are procedures for running a simulation through Vera, and by skipping them you eliminate some safety measures we use to ensure no agent undergoes excessive stress due to Vera's capacities. It will be hard to make a good argument to the Senate if you pass out from exhaustion from using Vera."

“So nice of him to worry. Next.”

“Fourth message, from Lab at 1602hrs:

‘Please come and examine evidence. Erin.’”

“Well, guess that gives me what I should next. Thanks Bette. Wait to file those until I can deal with the first couple from Frink.”

“Very well, Idris Hart.”

Idris spent a few more minutes organizing her new case notes, including her observations from her experience in the sim. So far, she had two avenues of investigation: the aftermath of the confrontation, and the museum mugging. Given the victim’s unusual preoccupation with the details of the theft in the museum in the hours prior to her death, Idris thought she’d start there after looking at the evidence.

“Hey Bette. Can you dial me up on my office station anything to do with the theft at the Met in 2018? Newspapers, talk show circles, official reports and case files?”

“Yes, Idris Hart. Accessing now.”

“Thanks,” Idris replied absently, rereading the message from Dr. Erin Hodgins.

The walk down to the forensics labs was a short one through a maze-like hive of offices, down two flights of secure-access stairs and one very dark, generally very empty service tunnel, but Idris always was fascinated by the strange mixture of intense diligence and low-key passivity that characterized the lab as you walked through. She had once been interested in forensic science herself, before being swept away by the opportunities offered by the FBI Academy, and so she had a general knowledge of the science and thought process behind the work. Even so, it never failed to interest her as she walked by one glass cubicle where a lab technician was carefully measuring reagents for a chemical test, another where a criminalist sat, thoroughly

absorbed in writing his or her report, and yet another where the tech was leaning back in their chair, flipping a pen and waiting for their tests to run. Generally, it wasn't even laziness on their part—the instruments could only run so many samples as a time, and there were strict protocols in place to prevent contamination, as well.

The lab was set up in a sort of hexagonal ring of offices, breakrooms, and instrumentation stations in the basement, all lit by bright, white lights. Each side of the hexagon was a separate section for analysis—trace, DNA, firearms, chemicals, biologicals, and one for administrative personnel. Each section was sealed off from the others by airlock-style doors to aid in fire control and contamination prevention. Glass walls, which were often covered in jotted formulas and projected protocol lists, separated different offices from one another, with clear warnings and descriptions posted outside each one that detailed the required personal protective equipment and contamination prevention procedures. Inside the glass, you could see different instruments and technicians at work, and countless temporary evidence storage lockers and freezers. Much of the analyses were done using instrumentation that were highly sensitive and powerful, but Idris knew that many of the machines were old and quickly growing outdated. If Frink was going to squeeze money for the FBI from the Senate, the lab needed it more than any other section currently.

As Idris neared the section for trace, she stopped to pick up a lab coat and a pair of gloves. Her reflection in the glass wall told her the coat hung off in strange angles and she wouldn't be winning any beauty contests in the thick-lined safety glasses she had to wear as well, but even as she noticed it, a message board to her left flashed a warning poster that read “Carol didn't wear PPE ... now she doesn't need to” and showed an obviously blind woman with

a cane, the remnants of a lab accident behind her. Idris gulped. She checked her circ again, trying to ignore the poster and figure out which lab Erin was in today.

Erin Hodgins, was one of the best for trace evidence analysis. It took a broad knowledge of general science and microscopy and a shocking attention to detail to do what Erin did all day, and she had that and a love for her job to top it off. Trace evidence was a strange amalgam of analyses—it covered everything from the microscopic examinations of bullets and cartridge cases, to separating and identifying different soil components. Paint, hair, unknown fibers, mysterious powders, glass chips; if it wasn't DNA or drug-related, it probably fell under trace. Which is what made it perfect for her case, Idris thought, glad she'd managed to make it onto Erin's caseload. With the odd paint trace, fibers, and cartridge found at the scene, trace was the right lab for her evidence.

“Hey Bette, call Erin. Or better yet, ping her implant and let her know I'm coming.”

“Yes, Idris Hart.” A few seconds. “Dr. Erin Hodgins is in Lab 37B, four doors down on your left. She has received your message.”

“Thanks.” The short walk to 37B went past four thick, glass paneled doors, each with bolded names and safety precautions blinking across screens embedded in the doors. Inside 37B she could see Erin, blonde hair knotted up tightly on her head, bending over the microscope. The flickering electronic door label read: “Firearms Examination.” She knocked lightly, and Erin glanced up and smiled, then moved to enter a code into a keypad by the door. There was a soft hiss as the doors unlocked, and Idris entered, buttoning up her coat. Erin pushed her safety glasses up onto her head.

“Thank you for that, you don't know how many agents I get down here complaining they have to wear the coat at all, then not closing it, then refusing to wear hair nets when required...”

Erin shook her head. Her own lab coat was stained with something blue, the printed name above the left pocket was faded, and her pinstriped workpants looked a little worse for wear, but she still had that easy grace of someone who knew what she was doing and was confident that she did, too. “Good afternoon, Agent Hart. Thanks for answering my message.”

“I realize it’s not really a speedy response ... I was taking a spin through Vera, so all my circs were off.”

“No problem. Gave me time to do pretty much all of your case; since it was just doing a preliminary sort of run through then comparing to the original lab reports, it didn’t take as long. So, you’re still in historical?”

“Wouldn’t leave it for the world, now.”

“Excellent. You do good work up there; obviously I don’t know much about the cases except what evidence comes across my bench, but I’ve seen plenty of families walk out of here at rest about a family mystery, and that seems to me to be just as important.”

“Thanks, Erin.”

“True. Now, to the evidence. Your stuff was pretty straight forward, although unusual. I had Marcus run your soil over in 37F, he’s got a good eye for those samples and I wanted to see if I could test my IBIS creds out.”

“You ran my cartridge case?”

“Yep. They just approved me for the system, finally. Still can’t add anything—have to finish my cert for that—but now I can send in requests, and as long as I don’t overuse it I’ve got a quick access set up, too.”

“So, you got a result back already?”

“Should be coming in soon, I’d guess.”

“Great! Give me a sec? I submitted one with my IAFIS request earlier, so I want to retract it. Hey Bette,” Idris tapped her circ. “Check status on my IBIS 7.0 Request?”

“Your request is still processing, Idris Hart.”

“Good. Please remove the request, but not the one from IAFIS 7.0.”

“Yes, Idris Hart.”

“Great. Now, what are we looking at first?”

“I thought it’d be best to have a look at your soil trace, then move to your fibers, paint, and hope IBIS has gotten its act together by then?”

“Seems like a good plan to me. So, you said Marcus ran my soil?”

“Yes. He’s been getting experience with soil recently with that playground stalker the Currents have been dealing with, so I figured I’d give him a break and let him look at some old stuff. That’s his hobby, you know, examining historical soil samples.”

“What a hobby,” Idris muttered, following Erin out of the lab and further down the hall. They were about a quarter of the way down the side of the criminalistics lab that dealt with trace. Opposite lab 37F was a break room, where Idris could see two women sipping coffee and discussing something that was displayed on a tablet propped up on the table by an empty fruit bowl. Erin keyed in another code, and entered, greeting the lanky man within cheerfully.

Marcus’s short brown hair was tousled unconsciously, as if he often ran his fingers through it while thinking, and his watery blue eyes were hidden behind thin glasses. A quirky accessory nowadays; very few people opted to wear glasses when the skill and efficiency of optic surgery was excellent. There was nothing quirky about his voice as he greeted her, however, and he grew even more confident as he handed her his full report on his tablet and summarized it.

“See, there are a number of things to look for that are typical of soils near human habitation; paint, metal fragments, bits of cement, these cool little glass spheres they throw down in paint to boost its reflective powers. These are easy enough to find from soils near houses or roads, especially nowadays. There’s hardly any soil left that isn’t near or affected by some kind of human habitation. *But* in 2018, there were stretches of state forest that weren’t touched by too much, except for the iron mining and some road construction. Obviously even at that point one hundred percent “natural soil” was pretty much a pipe dream, but it was much better than today, even with the Back to Nature legislative package New Congress is working on to promote recreating some of the national parks and things we lost in between then and now. Anyway, the bedrock of a lot of these places was limestone and shale, and the hardwood forests created an interesting base as well—”

“Hey, hey Marcus? I don’t have a lot of time, I’m sorry. Odds are Director Frink is going to ping me any second for something, so we need to get moving.”

“Right! Yes, of course, I just find it awesome the differences between ... right.” Marcus coughed. “Our sample. I found numerous indications of anthropogenic materials; your sample is from an area that’s relatively well-populated but still quite natural, I would say. In the light mineral samples there was quite a bit of quartz—but there’s always a lot of that, and in the heavy mineral sample there was limestone and a number of other interesting but not particularly relevant minerals. There was a large amount of plant material and insect remains, charcoal, and a few bits of gravel, indicating that there is likely at least some kind of trail nearby but most likely not a road, since there’s no sign of the reflective spheres I mentioned, nor asphalt or the like.”

“So ...”

“So ... if you can find a location during your investigation that is in a relatively populated area with some greenery nearby, I’d say you were probably getting close. I’d need a sample to get you closer, of course, though it’ll probably be difficult to compare between modern-day and the 2018 sample and a 100% confirmation isn’t likely in this business, anyways.” Immediately, Idris’ mind flickered to the blanked-out space in Vera the day before Marjorie’s death. Was the location Marcus described where she’d gone before her death in the time Idris was missing?

“Thank you, Marcus. I think I have a few ideas I need to investigate now. You’ll send up your full report?”

“Of course. It’ll be awaiting your return. Send me more historical samples, Agent Hart, they make interesting studies.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

“Good work, Marcus. Don’t forget in between your excitement you still do have to run the Playground Stalker sample 45, it’s been sitting in the liquid nitrogen for half an hour now, and those tubes aren’t that durable, the whole bottom will break off.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t forget about something like that.”

Marcus waved them out of the lab, his attention back on whatever sample he’d been cataloguing before. Erin led the way back out into the hallway.

“Interesting character, isn’t he? Sharp, though. Good enough to have gone for my job, if he wasn’t applying to PhD programs. So—soil, check. Now for fibers? I did the rest of these myself, so we’ll just have to pop between labs to see them if you want to look at the evidence itself.”

“Sounds good.” Personally, Idris had always liked looking down the microscope when she came down here. Generally, most agents didn’t bother, but to Idris it helped her visualize what exactly was going on...sort of, at least. There was also a reason she’d switched to agency work.

The screen on the fiber labs door was dark when they reached it, and Erin sighed and tapped at it a little angrily.

“These seemed like a cool idea when they put them in, but half the time they don’t display what they’re supposed to,” she said. “And Tech Maintenance doesn’t have any solutions for us since they can’t replace them.”

“Does Tech Maintenance ever have any solutions?” muttered Idris, thinking of her own tech problems with her screens.

“Eh.” Erin gave up on the screen, which gave a feeble flicker and briefly showed a screen reading “37J TRACE EVIDENCE: Fibers Identification” then blacked out again and keyed her keypad it. The locking mechanism for this door was less of a pressurized hiss and more of a torturous groaning, and Erin watched with concern as the door opened a fraction of an inch in a full minute.

“One day I’m going to be down here and need to get to evidence and I won’t be able to get in,” she said, shaking her head. “*Then* they’ll fix this stupid thing.” Idris didn’t have time to reply as Erin gave the door a sharp push to force it open the rest of the way herself and entered the lab. It was fairly larger than Marcus’; there were four large microscopes on the bench against the back wall, and a few other instruments Idris didn’t recognize. The lights came on of their own accord, illuminating a series of projected illustrations of fiber cross-sections and photographs of what Idris assumed were fibers under a microscope, although she wasn’t entirely

sure, the images were so unusual. Set into the wall between the four microscopes were three black tubes that emerged from the floor and ran about halfway up the wall, where they bent away from the wall and stuck out a few inches, covered by a flat 12x12 panel bolted down. Beside them, a complex array of scanners and keyboard tech was set into the wall. Erin placed her thumb on a print reader on the far left of the computing station in the wall and began typing, talking as she did so.

“Ironically, this is one of the few labs in our section that this system works,” she explained as she hit what Idris assumed to be an enter key and then turned to her. “It’s a pressurized delivery system. You enter what evidence you want, and it sends it up from storage in a padded, secure message tube. They put in more effort to get it working right over in the DNA section, but you can’t really blame them for that, the fridges alone for evidence storage would take up their whole lab. I typically keep the more fragile things in our lockers here, as well as things for the labs where the system doesn’t work.”

With a muted *thunk*, something hit behind the metal panel. Idris interestedly noted the thick bolts surrounding the panel door, scratched along the edges but still shiny. Erin entered another code and the bolts pulled in and released the door. She lifted the hatch and pulled out a small, transparent, plexiglass ball full of foam and sealed around the circumference with bright orange evidence tape. A note in the keypad, this time typed, and the door sealed shut once more.

“Have to fill out chain of custody right there before the door closes; it’s actually a pretty nifty system, keeps people from forgetting and then getting destroyed in court,” commented Erin. She carried the ball over to the bench along the wall and set her tablet beside it. Idris stood beside her and paged through her own tablet and notes as Erin opened her case notes, jotted down the time and date and her initials, then briefly described what they were doing. Then she

turned her attention to the ball, cutting the tape and then twisting it open. Inside was a smaller envelope, which she quickly opened and noted on her tablet. Then she powered on the nearest microscope, checked something down the oculars, slipped a glass microscope slide that had been inside the envelope onto the stage, and turned to Idris.

“Right! Sorry about all that. I did this one early this morning, so I had to package it all up again; the other two I haven’t finished writing up, so we won’t have to deal with all of this, and they’re in labs that don’t have functioning transport tubes, so the retrieval is a little different. So, this is a polarizing light microscope. We use it for most of what we do in trace, and it has an exceptionally good record with fiber analysis. I won’t run through everything we look at to analyze your sample, but here’s the fiber sample itself, first.”

Idris bent over and peered into the microscope. It took her a moment to adjust her eyes and the focus, then she saw them, beside a few small air bubbles in the mounting solution; a few short, red fibers on several longer, darker ones, the color more difficult to distinguish. The shorter ones were remarkably eye-catching—suddenly she understood why the original files described them as “uncomfortably bright;” they really were bright as a maraschino cherry with the light behind them. They were peppered with tiny black flecks, as well, though that didn’t diminish their color. Squinting at the longer and darker ones, Idris suspected that they were most likely a deep blue; she was pretty sure she could blue along the edges of the fibers from the backlighting.

“As you can tell, there’s two types of fiber there; optical properties and the heavy presence of delusterants—those black spots you see all up and down the length—identified the red ones as polyester. That matched pretty clearly with the original case files I accessed after I performed my own analysis. Interestingly, the dark blue ones there were not noted in the original

files. Don't know why that would be, maybe they thought they were cross-contamination? That was pretty standard back in the day, they hated testing things they thought weren't actually relevant to the scene, which is fair but in this case, how would you even know?"

"Maybe they thought they were uniform fibers."

"Maybe. They could be; they're nylon. Nothing particularly special. If you can find a garment or get a good image off of Vera of an item of clothing the suspect was wearing, I can compare the two. It won't be as good as having the full wardrobe of the suspect to compare it to, but it will at least be a start."

"Will do. Do you think the red and the blue are from two parts of the same garment?"

"It doesn't seem likely ... except—here." Erin motioned Idris to move over and then took over the microscope, shifting the slide and changing magnifications. Idris couldn't help but admire her confidence with the instrument; she knew the woman was one of the best, and her manner alone demonstrated that. Erin popped out of her seat and gestured for Idris to take her seat again. She did, and once more looked down the microscope. This time, the view was focused on one small fiber in the corner of the mounting solution puddle. It was a strange mix of colors; the blue bled down into the red twice in a banded pattern.

"This one is polyester, too. There's two or three in the collection that appear similar. I would say these, and the red ones likely came from the same source. Again, find me more information about the suspect's closet and I can tell you more. If you by chance see anything in the case relating to an item that has similar colorings, be sure you mark it down."

"Absolutely. I didn't see the victim in any garments that looked similar to this; she as just in a white t-shirt and shorts when she died. It was tough in Vera to make out any details of the suspect's clothing, I'll have a closer look now that I have something to look for." Erin nodded,

and Idris made notes in her case file as the other woman turned off the microscope and resealed the evidence ball. The process of returning the evidence was quicker than retrieving it, and Erin finished a few seconds before Idris, who scribbled down the last few lines, winced at how poor her handwriting had gotten and how much Frink would complain if he saw it, then gave Erin a thumbs up.

“Where to next?”

“Well, we’ve done soil and fibers; let’s do the paint. I haven’t gotten a ping about the IBIS 7 yet, so we’ll assume it’s probably still working.”

“That works for me. I haven’t heard anything about my IAFIS 7 request, either. The backlogs are getting heavy again.”

“Are they ever not?”

Idris made a sympathetic face, then followed Erin out of the lab, waking up her circ as she did. No news updates, and there were two messages from Frink, which she directed Bette to respond to with her standard “I’m out of the office on the case, I’ll get back to you as soon as possible,” and a missed call from her mother.

This gave Idris a moment of pause; typically, her mother didn’t call her, preferring to drop in in person at unpredictable and unfortunate times. Idris had numerous uncomfortable memories since her college days of interrupted dates, hijacked nights alone, and embarrassing showers. It didn’t help that her mother, who, although she professed to loathe the technological capabilities of their day and age, was an elite computer scientist and had taught Bette to recognize her and let her into Idris’ place any time she wanted. She was a “cyber activist,” and so disdained much of Idris’ chosen profession, especially the lack of relevance she saw in the Historical Crimes Division. Idris knew she’d inherited much of her inquisitive and questioning

mind from her but felt as though she'd long since given up trying to please her mother, and so wasn't terribly concerned about the call as she and Erin reached another glass paneled door labeled "Trace: PAINT AND UNKNOWNNS" and Erin entered the code to open the door, preventing her from pursuing the call any further. She put it out of her mind, though she marked it "unseen" on her circ so that she could come back to it.

There were two other scientists in this lab, each absorbed in their own work. One, a red-headed girl, glanced up and greeted Erin as they entered, and the other didn't glance up at all; Idris noted a faint blue glow emanating from the inner part of his ear and realized he probably had music playing from his implants. Ear implants were all the rage these days, and many departments within the FBI were beginning to require agents—and, it seemed, forensic scientists—to get them for faster, more secure communication. Idris so far had resisted, telling Frink it was better to be able to remove her circ when she went into Vera for fewer disruptions of the sims, but she had a feeling that argument wouldn't last too much longer.

Erin led the way through three rows of benchtops over to an open bench space, the black surface smudgy and stained with a ring of something crystalline. Erin shook her head and pressed a finger by her ear, gesturing to Idris to pause for a moment. After a brief second, she spoke.

"Interdepartmental Memo, to Trace Evidence Dept heads. Message: Please remind lab employees that clean workspaces prevent contamination, and that spills, residues, loose trace, etcetera must be removed once an individual has completed their analysis. We all share the benches, folks, so leave 'em the way you want to find 'em!" She grinned and pressed lightly against her ear once more. There was a blue flash, then she turned to Idris. "I have to give that reminder once a month; they ought to be getting used to it by now. Here, let's use this bench, it's

closer to the locker anyway.” She moved further into the lab, towards a cleaner bench directly in front of the row of floor to ceiling blue storage lockers. Motioning Idris to wait, she paced her palm on a scanner beside the furthest right locker. It beeped at her for about 30 seconds, while she tapped her foot and used her other hand to listen to something from her implants. With a whine, the locker storage door popped open, nearly hitting Idris in the face. She leapt back, and Erin grimaced.

“Sorry about that. Here we go!” She pulled out glass cylinder, sealed like the other had been with bright orange evidence tape, from among a neat row of about 20 or 30 other cylinders of different widths and heights. She set it down on the bench behind her, closed the locker door, and proceeded to open it, jotting down things in her notes as she did.

“What are you writing there?” Asked Idris, both curious and trying to fill the silence.

“Chain of custody. Anytime I or anyone else interacts with the evidence in some way, it needs to be documented in the case notes so that we’re able to give a full account of who has had the evidence at all times when we get to court.”

“To prevent tampering, that kind of thing?”

“Exactly. Wouldn’t want anyone contaminating or changing the evidence in between analysis. Now...here we go. Paint trace, voila.” Erin pulled out a slide with impossibly small paint chips mounted on it. “So, I sent this off for further chemical analysis, which should be coming back soon. The initial microscopic analysis of the paint reveals it to be blue, and a rather unusual shade of it, too. It’s not too old, I would say, I’ve seen similar traces on other cases, and most of those paintings aren’t much more than fifty years old. I would say your girl was in contact with a contemporary painting, made with high-end oil paints.”

“Interesting. I’m still not sure where that happened, but I saw it in the report.”

As Erin packed up the evidence once more, Idris couldn't help but feel her brow furrow. The evidence collected didn't point her much in either direction, towards the museum mugging or the rest stop incident. Was it possible that her case was connected with neither event? It didn't seem like it; not with how scared the Marjorie had been in the last few days leading up to her death. But a bit of paint wasn't enough to convince her that the incident at the museum was connected, and she was disappointed there hadn't been anything more concrete collected at the scene. Semi-natural soil, red and blue polyester fibers, and blue artist's paint. What did it add up to? One dead girl, it seemed.

Suddenly, her circ let out a piercing chirrup, and Bette's voice emanated from her wrist.

"Urgent: Incoming message, IAFIS 7.0. Print match found. Urgent: Incoming message, IAFIS 7.0. Print match found. Urgent—"

"Yes, *yes*, Bette! I got it, thank you."

"Protocol dictates that you at least open this message immediately, Agent Hart."

"Go on, open it! We can go back to my lab and wait for a few minutes to see if the IBIS network was able to match anything, as well. I want to show you the old case files, just you have an idea of how close our analysis is." Erin waved her on, and Idris nodded, entering in the password that allowed Bette to access the closely-guarded IAFIS 7.0 network as she proceeded down the hallway once more.

The screen Bette projected was one Idris was intimately familiar with; she had been a part of the design team that had created part of the program's interface several years prior—or, more accurately, she'd been on the team of guinea pig agents who'd had to use all the design team's beta designs for several months while they'd adjusted for difficulties. The new interface was markedly different than several of the betas tried, and personally Idris preferred it to the

others, though she knew a few of her colleagues disagreed. IAFIS 7.0 was the updated version of the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, the FBI-run database that stored the fingerprints of individuals convicted of felonies, those individuals who died as the result of a felony, military justice concerns, and several other categories, including FBI personnel. It would provide you with several matches that had an 85% or higher likelihood of matching, and in order to use it in court, the match had to be verified by a licensed examiner. Idris personally found that ironic, considering how much they depended on automated and technological evidence and systems everywhere else in the criminal justice system, but wasn't about to complain too much.

On the left side of the screen was the submitted print and details about the case and sister searches that Idris had entered in herself the night previous; on the right were listed four potential matches, each with a case number identifier and the PIN of the lab personnel who had entered the print, as well as the date on entry. No more was given unless the print was requested, as a privacy safeguard. Beside each print was a link that allowed you to request the print for verification.

Idris could feel Erin looking over her shoulder, so she angled slightly so that the woman could see the projected screen. She whistled slightly.

“I haven't seen the updated version; I've been too busy with the departmental transfer. Seems cleaner than I remember.”

“It is; used to be all the different pages, and requesting the prints was difficult, and everything. Now it's much simpler; and they gave HCD agents direct access, since so often all we have is photographs of our fingerprint evidence anyways.”

“I noticed that you didn't request a re-processing of the fingerprint that was entered as evidence for this case, I wondered about that.”

“The original team actually did an excellent job with the enhancement, see?” Idris used two fingers to expand the photo of her entry. The purple-dye lines were clear and vivid, and the photograph was perfect. Erin whistled again.

“That is a good job. Better than some I’ve seen now with some of the fancier proprietary enhancers.”

“That’s what I figured. Now, for a match ...” Idris shook her head. “I get why they give us several options, but I wish it was as easy as popping it into the database and getting a direct match with a name and criminal record attached.”

Erin paused, as they’d reached the door to her lab, which double as her office, and laughed as she placed her palm on the reader.

“Wouldn’t that be nice?”

They entered the tight, rectangular room and Erin pushed things off of the lab bench that took up the main portion of the center of the room, making space for Idris. The walls were lined with metal shelves that were stacked with a few boxes of paper case files, and many more racks of case files on a variety of electronic storage devices from the past decades. On a few here and there were specimens or the glass cylinders with evidence tape around them, and one full shelf was home to a glass terrarium containing four small tortoises under a series of high-tech heating lamps. Behind the main lab bench was an L-shaped desk with several screens on it, and in the space left over was a rolled-up projector screen and two folding chairs. There were also several stools tucked under the lab bench, and two of these Erin pulled out after she’d cleared off the surface and gestured for Idris to sit on one.

“Thanks.” Idris sat and set up her tablet to stand on its own, then cast her circ screen—still showing the IAFIS results—onto the tablet. Erin sat behind her at her desk, checking

something on her systems. Idris tried to turn her attention to the results, having to tear her eyes away from one of the tortoises, who had clambered up onto a little rocky outcropping in the terrarium and was eating a piece of wilting lettuce, seemingly ignorant that his shell was painted with a beautiful rendition of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*.

"He was evidence in a case," said Erin, glancing over her shoulder and following Idris' gaze. "They all were. Two different cases, actually, that's why only two of the them are painted. Some crazy artist lady, ended up being murdered by her son-in-law ... I took them into the vet, but she said the paint was permanent, and not hurting them, so he's just a beautiful little artsy tortoise, I guess."

"How did you end up with all of the turtles?"

"There were two painted fellows were on the woman's nightstand when she was stabbed and ended up with blood spatter on their shells—which came off easily enough in the DNA lab, unlike the paint. Seemed like no one wanted them after that, so I just set them up here until someone came to claim them, and no one has."

"What about the other two?"

"Oh, Shaffer and Edmund Locard? They're technically mine, I suppose; my old unit shut down a pet store that was laundering money and drugs through their pet shipments, and these little fellows were the last two left when they finally raided the place. I'd told them about moving here and taking in Vinny and Claude—the little painted guys—so they packaged them up and sent them to me when the case was closed."

"Wow." Idris left the stool for a moment and moved closer; Vinny was still preoccupied with his lettuce leaf and the others didn't seem overly concerned by her presence, either. The other painted tortoise had a lovely little rendition of Monet's *Water Lilies and Japanese Bridge*

across his back. Idris shook her head, smiling, and returned to her screen. Erin joined her, pulling off her latex gloves.

“Nothing from IBIS yet. Must be a busy morning.”

“Okay. Well, here’s the four that IAFIS sent back. Usually I look through each of them for the key details that IAFIS marked on the questioned print from the scene; see if the system made a mistake in matching something. Generally, it does make one or two mistakes.”

“Sounds good. Does the newer version take care of any of the mistakes you more commonly see?”

“Not really. It gets such a huge overload of things to examine that it has difficulty running a more complicated algorithm. That’s why the verification is required by the court.”

“Of course.”

Idris opened the first of the suggested prints and spotted a difference right away; she had a knack for fingerprint analysis, grown through years of obsessing over fingerprints while she was in school, before joining the Academy. Erin spotted the next one, but the third looked likely—it was listed already as a 97% match—and she requested it for further verification. The fourth also seemed likely, and she requested it as well. It had been entered several years after the date of Marjorie’s death, which raised a flag for Idris. There was no print match when they ran it through shortly after her death, so anything that had come in afterwards was a good place to start.

As they waited for the files to be delivered electronically to Idris’ tablet, Erin made them a cup of coffee with the little espresso machine she revealed to be hidden behind two of the paper case notes boxes. They reviewed the old case file, which Erin had already done after she’d performed her initial analysis and Idris had glanced over briefly, but not in the context of

checking their work, and Idris told her about the case, and how Vera's sim had gone black shortly before Marjorie had died, leaving Idris with more questions than answers, and how the girl had been so afraid when she'd returned home, but hadn't done anything to get help.

"I don't really understand it. Shouldn't she have at least talked to her parents? Her friends? She had half an email to her mom typed up already, and almost called 911 several times. I don't understand why she didn't go through with it. She just stayed at home looking up this theft at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that had happened recently, and then went to class as though she hadn't seen someone stalking her."

"Maybe she felt she didn't have enough to go to the police with? One sketch isn't going to convince most of the officers I've worked with, even in a college town where they know they need to be open to thin leads."

"That's all I've been able to come up with, too. Unless it's somehow related to the incident at the rest stop that I told you about and she was afraid of getting in trouble for the encounter. But I don't understand why she wouldn't have at least warned her friends if that was the case; they were certainly more involved in the confrontation than she was. That's the scenario that would have more sense to me; they're involved in the incident, the man figures out where they went to school, recognizes Marjorie, follows her for a few days and she sees him, then he kills her."

"Why her and not one of the others, though? I thought you said Marjorie diffused the situation?"

"I thought she did. But maybe she was the only one he could find, or maybe he thought he'd send them a message killing her specifically. Maybe he mistook her for one of the other girls."

“Maybe,” Erin sounded thoughtful. “What’s stopping you from running with that one?”

“Two things. Her reaction to seeing the man—she didn’t contact the other two girls to warn them, she acted very scared and alone. And she drew a sketch of the man she saw following her. I didn’t get the best look at it, but I’m fairly certain it wasn’t the guy from the rest stop. So, it seems like it was more likely something else.”

“I see. You said it seems like the other likely theory—barring the potential for something totally unrelated and out of the blue to have occurred—is that it’s somehow connected to her being mugged outside of the Met?”

“Yes. That makes a lot less sense to me, except that she reported having seen the man’s face to the police after the incident. But if he was just a street mugger taking advantage of a tourist, who cares? Before she died Marjorie was looking up a theft at the Met of some priceless painting that happened essentially at the same time she was there. It’s like she thought the two were connected. It doesn’t seem to me as though that’s strong evidence. It’s more like she was grabbing at straws, to think that the guy who mugged her was somehow connected to the theft.”

“No, no you’re right ... I wonder if you could figure out what the painting that was stolen was?”

“Why?”

“If they’ve recovered it we could match the paint; otherwise we could look it up and get an estimate for what type of paint it might contain. Maybe she came into contact with the painting itself somewhere?”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps she saw it somewhere and then realized it had been stolen.”

“Maybe... I don't know, Erin, I haven't done much research on that case yet, but it was a flatline already when she was looking at it.”

“True. Well, it's a thought nevertheless. If we could get the identity of your rest stop guy that would be a huge help as well.”

“Yes, that's not a bad idea—” There were two irate little *pings!* from Idris' tablet, and she broke off in mid-sentence to look at her circ.

“My IAFIS request came back with preliminary files! That was quicker than I was expecting,” she commented as she opened the verification files from IAFIS, pulling them up side by side so that they could compare them. Normally, you couldn't see the police reports or name of individuals that were connected with the print; once you had a match you had to request the information from the respective police agency. But it looked like both of her cases were internal FBI cases, so the rules were different. One of her prints, filed in 2025, belonged to a woman named Eleanor Watkins. She had been convicted of identity theft, posing as a man's widow and stealing thousands of dollars from him.

“Doesn't really fit what you'd expect,” hazarded Erin, who finished reading Watkins' file before Idris.

“No, not exactly. Who was the second match?”

“A deceased individual! Killed in a drive-by shooting in Philadelphia, so they printed him as procedure. One Theo Jenson. No criminal record, but it says he was a suspect in a number of cases that were never closed.” Idris scanned the report as well, and by the end was almost unsurprised the man had been killed in a drive-by shooting. He'd been suspected in dozens of thefts, from outright armed robbery to several quieter—but more expensive—burglaries. He still

wasn't quite what Idris expected, although to her eyes he looked more like what she remembered Marjorie's sketch to be than her other current suspect.

Both women were silent a moment, and in the gap Erin's computer made a cheerful jangling noise.

"That should be the IBIS report, fingers crossed," said Erin, getting up. She made a triumphant noise and turned her screen outwards towards Idris. "Looks like the markings on our cartridge case matched those on several from another robbery a few years prior ... and all of them are confirmed matches with one handgun, 9mm Ruger SR9c. The firearm was found in the possession of one—no way. One *Theo Jenson, who was pronounced dead at the scene of a drive-by shooting by the Philadelphia Coroner's Office on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019*. Theo Jenson again? What are the odds?"

"Not high. What do we know? Idris closed out the IAFIS file on the woman, so that Jenson's filled the screen, and held her tablet up to Erin's computer. The mug shots were the same, although the IAFIS file included one image of his body at the scene of the shooting. A Ruger was beside the body in the photo. "The fingerprint on the necklace that our victim was wearing matches potentially Theo Jenson. The cartridge case found near her body also matches a gun used at least once by Jenson, shortly before his death—and," she read out a line from the IBIS report that she suddenly spotted. "As the other cartridges were obtained at the scene of an armed robbery for which the main suspect is Jenson, it appears that this firearm was used by him in multiple crimes."

"So, you've got his gun, and his fingerprint...guess you've got something to work on, now, Agent!"

“No kidding. I wonder what his connection to Marjorie is, though. These two pieces of evidence place him in some kind of contact with her, but don’t necessarily mean he killed her. He could have tried to rob her at some point before I watched the sim, and he could easily have lent or sold the gun prior to getting it back.”

“There are lots of potential theories, it’s true. Well, I’m sure you have plenty to do, I won’t keep you here anymore. Let me know if more evidence turns up for you; I can’t promise it’ll all get done as quickly as this round did, but we’ll certainly do our best.”

“Erin, thank you so much. I’m glad you could walk me through it as well. Bye little guys!” Idris gave a little wave at the tortoises, still phlegmatically going about their business, and smiled at Erin. “Thanks again. See you later.”

“Bye!”

Idris left Erin’s office and made her way back through the labs towards the elevator, stopping to discard her gloves and lab coat on the way. Shivering slightly in the cold, recycled air of the lab while she waited for the elevator, she mulled over the evidence. Artists’ paint...a suspected thief, his fingerprints and his gun...and a stolen painting? Had Marjorie seen something she shouldn’t have? Did Jenson sell his gun to someone else? How would his print have gotten on her necklace then, though? Was it a separate incident altogether, or did he kill her? Lost in thought, she made her way back to her office and unlocked it.

“Hart!” She yelped and hit her elbow on the door as she turned, almost dropping her tablet. Frink had stuck his head out his office door, his expression peeved.

“Yes sir?”

“How’s the case coming?”

“Good, sir. I may just have made some kind of progress. Not sure what kind, but I’ve got an overlapping IBIS and IAFIS 7 report to go on.”

“Interesting! I’ve had cases like those, yes ...” Frink’s manner seemed off.

“Something on your mind, sir?”

“Yes. Your mother called me.”

“What?”

“Yes, you heard me. Your mother called me and treated me to a long tirade about how if you don’t answer your phone while you’re working you could be in any kind of danger and did I know where you were and I’m an irresponsible, cowardly leader ... next time, please, Hart, answer the damn phone. I don’t know how she got my office line—”

“I do,” Idris muttered darkly.

“—but I would rather not be placed in a situation like that again.”

“Yes sir. I’d apologize, sir, but I was reviewing the evidence with Dr. Hodgins and I wasn’t able to take calls. I don’t know what she’s on about.”

“I understand that. Just ... just call her as soon as you can. I’ve seen what happens to men’s careers if they end up on the wrong end of your mother’s blog, Hart, and I’d rather it not happen to me.”

“Understood.”

“Now go on, get cracking on whatever’s come up—I could see when you walked in that’s all you were thinking of.”

“Thank you, sir, and—well, good luck trying to change your office line number,” she said with a rueful nod towards the “help” page he had open on his screen. He shrugged, and she returned to her own office. It was much the same as she’d left it, but Bette had pulled up dozens

of articles and files about the theft at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on her desktop screen. Idris set her tablet down, pulled the door closed behind her, then sighed and dropped into her desk chair.

“Alright, Bette. Open that call from Mom and call her back.”

“Calling Sabrina Hart.”

Idris left her chair and started pacing as it rung. It was strange that she was calling, Idris thought; she really didn't do that, not since her father had been around. Idris' father had left when she was five, and reappeared and disappeared periodically throughout her childhood. Her mother had never let on how she felt about his reluctance to stay, but Idris knew from the broken plates thrown at the door and the angry rants that it frustrated her—or at least, it had. It'd been almost eight years since they'd last seen him, when he'd turned up for Idris' graduation from the FBI Academy with a pocketful of raw pearls and never-answered questions. They had received a letter shortly afterwards from someone they'd never even heard of, telling them that he'd died in Nepal trying to climb Mt. Everest alone. He was buried up there—Idris' mother had refused to go and arrange for his body to be returned. Idris and her father had had good memories when he was around, however, and Idris knew at some point she would go and make the arrangements herself. The time had never seemed right though; she knew it would upset her mother.

The line rang and rang, but no answer. Frustrated, Idris let it ring through, then told Bette to hang up and let her know immediately if her mother—or an unrecognized phone number, sometimes she called through those—rang her.

She dropped back down in her chair, obligingly scrolled through the rest of the messages on her circ—most of which were pointless, or at least didn't require her immediate attention—

and then turned her attention to the wealth of information Bette had retrieved for her from the databases about the Met case.

## Chapter 14

**16MARCH2068, 1700hrs**

Three hours later, Idris had a page full of notes and although she was now well-read on the facts of the robbery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she still wasn't sure what any of it had to do with her work on Marjorie's death.

It turned out four paintings, all by relatively lesser-known artists, had actually been stolen the afternoon of April 8, 2018. The cameras in the museum had all gone out for approximately twelve minutes, which apparently was enough time to remove four paintings from four very different galleries, take them from the museum, and flee the scene. Each painting in the Met was affixed with a small alarm and GPS tracker—the best 2018 had to offer—which was set to go off if the painting was moved beyond a set perimeter and kept there for set minutes. Three of the four paintings had been quickly recovered by investigators, at three different locations around what had been estimated was about the max amount of distance the thieves could have been able to travel in NYC traffic in the time it took to set off the alarm. All three showed some sign of tampering with the device; the detectives' best guess had been that the thieves had hoped to remove the alarms before reaching the ten-minute mark and had been unsuccessful, with the exception of the final—and of course, most valuable—painting. That one had never been found. There weren't many suspects once the investigation had gone through; one by one they were eliminated by some piece of evidence or lack thereof.

Theo Jenson had been considered as a suspect; as Idris had read earlier to Erin, his name was known to the police as a suspect for several armed robberies that they had never quite been able to pin on him. He'd worked supposedly mainly in the New York area, though obviously something had brought him to Philadelphia where he'd ultimately met his demise. In the Met burglary case, he'd been eliminated without much scrutiny; there'd been no sign of him in the area leading up to the burglary, and shortly after the theft had been discovered he was glimpsed on the PA turnpike by a man he'd robbed before, which had seemed to the police as a convincing reason not to pursue him. But being spotted in PA a few hours after a crime meant nothing in the grand scheme of things, not really. And luckily, she could solve that mystery in a way the investigators of 2018 could never have imagined.

“Hey Bette, ping Gun's circ for me, will you?”

“Yes, Agent Hart.” After half a ring, Gun picked up.

“Hey Agent. What can I do for you?”

“You pick up better than my own mother.”

“What?”

“Never mind. How's your schedule looking? Think you could look up a person's path in Vera for me? I don't really need a full sim, just a rough idea of where he was between April 8 and 13, 2018.”

“Still working on Case 240? Haven't cracked it by now?”

“Nope, not quite ... what do you think?”

“I should be able to. Give me an hour or so. I'm running Agent Bradley's sim right now, and it's a long one.”

“Brad's in there? Eeek. Maybe I should come down and bang on the door or something.”

“He’s in for an unpleasant enough time already; he went back to 1991, chasing a known perp.”

“Oof. Bad sim days. Lots of blackouts?”

“I did my best, but ...”

“Nah, let him suffer. Let me know when you can pull up some logs for me, okay? The name is Theo Jenson, and I need his movements all day April 8-13, 2018 specifically.”

“Sounds good. I should be able to help you out soon. Worse comes to worse, it’ll be tomorrow morning.”

“That’ll be just fine. See you then.”

“Bye. Wait! I almost forgot. I was running some of the excess data for your 2018 case, and I found some Fitbit data I thought you might find useful.”

“Fitbit data?”

“Yeah, they used to wear little things in 2018 that measured your steps and calories and stuff; like the new Health options for the implants.”

“Right. What’d you find?”

“Nothing yet. I had to run Agent Bradley’s simulation. I’ll let you know as soon as I find anything, though.”

“Thanks Gun, see you later!”

Idris sat for a moment, wheels turning as she watched the ticker ads that ran along the bottom of the last page she’d been reading. It had been sourced from the archives of a newspaper that was still running today and so had current ads along the bottom—including one for the unveiling of a special exhibit at the Met in honor of the 50-year anniversary of the theft. She shook herself and blinked, caught by the coincidence, then tapped it and read through the ad,

surprised at herself for not realizing that it was the exact anniversary of the theft in almost exactly a month. Quickly, she found herself sending a message to the curator of the exhibit, requesting an opportunity to meet with him and discuss the theft. Idris wasn't sure what was so compelling about the theft at the Met in relation to her case, except that her gut was telling her to at least follow it through and get as many details as she could. Between the paint, the mugging at the museum, and Jenson's similarity to Marjorie's sketch ... Idris couldn't shake the sense that somehow the two were tied together.

In the meantime, Bette had begun setting the notification lights to flash purple; Idris had set that a long time ago when she'd first started working as a way to get home earlier and "balance work/home life," but she also had gotten much better at ignoring it in the past few years. This time, however, she decided to stop when she was supposed to and go home. Staring at the Met case was creating these stupid fantasies of her solving the case and bringing home the missing painting; these were the kinds of things that could be a detrimental to the logic she needed to clearly follow the case. As cool as it would be to find the painting, it would be better to solve Marjorie's case. Struck by a thought, Idris set Bette to begin the shutdown sequences for all but one of her screens; that one she used to do a quick search for the family of Marjorie Horner.

The policies for contacting the family members of the deceased were strict when it came to the HCD; little to no contact was permitted without approval prior to solving the case and determining what the best course of legal action would be. Because of Vera, the solve rate for these cases was exceptionally high, but there were still so many cases left—Idris sometimes felt she could work for decades and never make a dent in the number of cold cases that were stored in the basement of FBI HQ, miles below her shoes. It was tough to leave families on tenterhooks

about their cases, especially since often the case was so connected into their family history that even when the generation who had experienced the crime had passed away the family still remembered it, but if families knew ahead of time it was easy for them to become emotional and for the department to be flooded with requests to open specific cases. It was already; Frink and the other Directors believed it would get worse. So, it had been determined that it was better to let families know once the case had been solved.

Additionally, in many cases, Idris knew, the legal action was complex as well due to statute of limitations, the perpetrator's current age—many had already passed away—and the fact that many were solved using evidence solely seen in Vera. Families didn't know this, or even if they did, finding out details about a deeply entrenched historical case often made them want to take action that wasn't permitted by the law. Idris was required to develop a plan of legal action with the HCD counsel once a case was solved, that she was then to present to the family with the details of the case. This usually helped smooth things out—that and a visit from Frink if the family really didn't want to cooperate. Sometimes they didn't care or didn't remember the victim and chose to do nothing. Those were the cases that Idris often followed through on her own, after hours.

The results turned up a surprising amount: Marjorie's sister, who had been a freshman in high school at the time of Marjorie's death, was still alive and had recently been re-elected to the Senate seat for New York. She'd been in the Senate for several terms already and had filed four different appeals requesting the HCD to be more public about its work and let the families know when their case was up on docket—perhaps out of a wish to know if her sister's case was ever going to be solved. Marjorie's parents had both passed away, which was only to be expected. But it seemed that there would be someone around to hear the news of Marjorie, if Idris could solve

the puzzle. *If* she didn't get distracted by the mysterious painting theft. Idris gave herself a shake. She'd ask Frink if she could look into the case more after she closed Marjorie's; she doubted he would deny her request if she put it down to taking a few days to clear out the mess of administrative forms that she knew was beginning to mount in her wake—mostly case closure forms, which came to her in the form of a clear, flexible screen folded and awaiting a few sentences and her signature. They sat, mostly unfolded, in a precarious pile on the corner of her desk, every once and a while giving off a forlorn beep, a pre-programmed location marker that undoubtedly annoyed whoever was sitting behind a desk waiting for the forms to be returned. But Idris rarely had the time nor the inclination to do them, and now it would take several hours at least to finish them all, let alone the other administrative odds and ends she knew were lurking, waiting for her.

Ignoring the stack of forms again and hoping that the message that just alerted her of its arrival by pinging her circ wasn't the monthly health checkup they were required to do, Idris gathered her tablet and scooped up her blazer from where she'd left it earlier in the day. A glass of wine and maybe something to read that wasn't a case file sounded like a fair night to her, and—if she was honest—she needed something to take her mind off the image of the Marjorie's eyes when she'd first felt the shot that would end her life.

## Chapter 15

**08APRIL2018, 1030hr**

*Marjorie fumed as she stomped out of the hotel's breakfast area. How dare anyone accuse her of being willing to support someone who said such terrible things about another person? It was enough to make her want to shout. There was no room for dissent among her fellow college students anymore, no opportunity to say something different, even if she had wanted to. Although she was proud of her friends for standing up to the man—who really had just been a big bully—she was furious that she wasn't allowed to potentially save their lives without being a supporter and worse.*

*Her phone buzzed in her hand, her professor's permission to head to the Met lighting up her screen. She hadn't really needed to ask, but she'd thought it was for the best, just in case. She pushed through the revolving glass doors and immediately dodged a tight formation of people in suits, plowing through the crowded New York City sidewalk with the air of those who had far more important things to do than rub shoulders with the regular folk of the world. The hard concrete felt rubbly beneath her boots, and—being a smaller woman—she navigated in and out of the crowds of tourists and into Central Park with ease. It had been a cold spring, with countless freezing snaps and brief snow flurries, so the park was still mostly dead. Trees stood tall and barren in their little fenced-in lots, the last dregs of the past year's leafy splendor rotting at their base. Tiny crocuses in purple and yellow, along with their fearless kin the snowdrops, pushed out of the gray soil in patches, undaunted by the threat of another snow or sudden warm*

*spell. The paths were clear of debris, blown into some hidden corner for the sake of the people who visited, and Balto's statue was gleaming in the thin sunlight as she passed.*

*Marjorie stopped to watch a man propose to a woman on a small bridge overlooking a leaf-choked pond; they held up foot traffic on the narrow wooden walk way, but nobody seemed to mind and they all applauded when she leapt into his arms, nodding, crying. She wondered what the significance of that spot was to them. Did he just think it was beautiful? Was that where they first met, or where he first kissed her? Had they just been out for a romantic walk when inspiration hit him? Marjorie's phone buzzed in her pocket again, but she ignored it, walking on till she reached the edge of the park and could see the great stone steps leading up to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was a grand museum, the huge exhibition banners snapping in the light breeze. This early in the day, when the museum had only just opened, there weren't very many people ascending the big steps just yet.*

*As she stepped out onto the crosswalk to leave the park, she had to wait for a black van to slide past her, moving at a crawl. The windows were heavily tinted, and there was a funny-shaped ding like a boomerang in the passenger door and the rear tire looked a little flat to her. Finally—finally—the van passed enough she could dash across the wide street, right as the light changed color. The museum was just opening for the morning; a flash of her student ID and pass gave her access to the grand entrance, its arched ceilings colored pale gold in the morning light. After their initial visit as a class the day before, she had a vague idea of where she wanted to go to find a source for her project, but she hadn't fully decided on a piece yet, so she wandered through the wings, stopping to let her imagination run wild at any painting that caught her eye. It was quiet, church-like inside, the blaring horns and busy street and colorful people outside muted by stone walls and double-paned, bullet-proof glass windows. It was a good atmosphere*

*for creativity, and Marjorie found it hard to settle on a subject—they were all so beautiful, so full of stories. When she finally chose a Degas painting she felt best suited her project, the conflicted start of her morning had been mostly put away from the forefront of her mind. There wasn't any use fretting over it, she told herself. She knew she'd done the right thing, and there would be people who would understand that. Besides, no one would bother her here, in the peaceful sanctity of the museum. Putting her earbuds in, she opened her sketchbook and started to draw.*

## Chapter 16

**17MARCH2068, 1330hrs**

Tablet in hand, Idris leaned against the cool glass window in the X Train car and stared out at the passing view with unseeing eyes. Lost in thought, she barely registered the tunnels, bathed in blue light, that ducked beneath the rougher edges of the city that the mayor had determined “unsuitable” for tourist eyes. Nor did she see the more favored districts that were visible from the train with their clean-lined apartment complexes, towering, twisting office buildings, chrome-lined night club doors and invitingly chic cafes that competed with huge electronic billboards that flashed the latest and greatest every few seconds. The city was bright and bustling, but Idris didn’t pause to appreciate it. She was thinking.

Gun hadn’t been able to put together Jenson’s sim for her; a project for a case that was actually on the roster had taken longer than he’d expected, and he hadn’t gotten to it. He’d apologetically called her at five am to inform her, sounding so exhausted Idris could hardly feel regret that he couldn’t finish her sim. She, despite her best intentions to sleep till Bette woke her at seven, had been awake, and therefore took his call as well as the message from the curator of the Met exhibit on her circ informing her that a meeting at two that afternoon would be excellent; he would be happy to walk her through the exhibit and the case details as best he knew them. So she’d spent the morning putting together notes on the evidence in Marjorie’s case, and now had a web of arrows and digital notes across the ITBoard she’d borrowed from the conference room. Jeremy had walked by again and commented on the complexity, but she’d blown him off again,

making a mental note to apologize later, and, piece by piece, put together a few potential timelines. This was what she was focusing on so intensely as she weathered the X Train ride, which varied in speed, turns, and crowdedness across the 75-minute journey. She could see through the blue-tinted windows as the north edge of Central Park appeared and breathed a sigh of relief. An hour from DC to New York City was a gift, she knew—and had only been possible at this speed by bullet train for a few years—but it wasn't always the smoothest of rides. The technological capability was there, but perhaps not the skill, she thought as it slammed to an abrupt halt and nearly threw her into the burly man carrying a half-eaten burger beside her. Squeezing out from between him and a woman with a lemon-colored suitcase, Idris positioned herself near the doors, ready to dart out as soon as she hit her stop. The train grew more and more crowded as it passed through the city, the passengers preferring its speed to the decrepit subway beneath the city. It only took a few minutes, but Idris was grateful to extricate herself from the increasingly claustrophobic smash inside the train.

The train stopped on the opposite side of Central Park from the Met, but Idris wasn't complaining as she took in the brisk March air. The park wasn't much changed from photographs Idris had seen from the files in the theft report. The trees were bare, the squirrels were plentiful, and Idris couldn't resist kicking through the leaves that had collected along the edges of the paths with a smile. Somehow the vibrations and buzz of the city seemed muted in Central Park, as though the grand old trees in the park spread a curtain of peacefulness around the protected area. She paused beneath one old tree, its bark scarred with a few hearts and initials and generations of squirrels scabbling up and down the trunk and wondered at how many lifetimes it had seen. It might have been planted when hansom cabs blocked cobbled streets and seen the lifespan of the car straight through from gas to electric, and now watched over the

magnetic rail lines and solar-powered vehicles. Who knew? Her circ gave a beep, calling her attention to the time, and she gave the tree a friendly pat and hurried through the rest of the park, across the street and up the grand marble staircase into the main atrium of the museum, crowded with guests. A holographic AI tour guide directed her towards an entrance marked “STAFF,” and she walked with purpose through the hallway till she found the door with the placard “M. Standish” and knocked. Her circ beeped twice as a voice called out from inside the office, and she silenced it with a swipe as she pushed the door open.

A man sat behind a black desk, bare except for a high-tech screen and a black and white checked napkin with a few crumbs in the creases. The walls almost looked like the evidence storage locker where Erin worked—the shelves lining the walls were loaded with boxes presumably of stored museum pieces, and many, many books. M. Standish was a short man with obvious male pattern baldness setting in and an apparent penchant for checkerboard patterns; his suit coat was a piebald pattern that played tricks on the eyes. He had a circ ring that was flashing with a green pulse when she entered.

“Miss Hart?”

“Agent Hart. Are you Dr. Standish? I’m with the FBI Historical Crimes Division, as I’m sure you remember from my note. You’re in charge of curating the museum exhibit opening soon about the theft at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018?”

“My mistake, Agent Hart. And yes, I am! ‘The Missing Million: A Theft at the Met.’ It opens April 6<sup>th</sup>, you know, and I’m very pleased with how it’s turning out.”

“Would you be willing to share with me some details of the circumstances surrounding the theft? I’m assuming you requested access to the official police report, et cetera?”

“Yes, I did—but surely you have access to such things? Why would you come to me? What interest is a long-gone painting to the FBI?”

“I’m afraid all I can say is that it’s a lead in my current cold case investigation. There may be no connection at all, but it’s certainly an intriguing mystery too. I was hoping to hear some details that you’ve collected that might be useful outside of what the police reports can offer.”

“Ah, well, I can do better than just talk, then, I can walk you through the exhibit! The last bits are still under construction, mind you, since there’s still a few weeks till the opening, but I’d be happy to give you a sneak peek. It is, as you said, an intriguing case, particularly because the stolen painting was never recovered. It simply vanished; never appeared in any black-market collections or auctions. It may have been destroyed, it may be moldering in a warehouse somewhere, maybe it was shipped to some collection abroad...we’ll never know, at this point. Would you be interested in taking a brief tour? I’m sure you’re a busy woman, Agent.”

“Yes! That would be fascinating.”

“Excellent! Well, follow me then.” Standish jumped up from behind his desk and grabbed a book with a clumsy sheaf of papers sticking out of the top and sides. Idris inwardly raised an eyebrow. You didn’t often see workplace environments with paperwork like that anymore, it was rather taboo. Though perhaps if one worked in a museum, a home for old things worth remembering, paper and actual books would be a staple.

She followed him back out into the hall, and they continued through a series of back hallways and doors that led them deep into the museum, skirting around popular exhibits where Idris could hear shrieking children and happy tourists through the false walls on which were hung priceless paintings. The entrance to the new exhibit was closed up, the sign above the

sweeping entrance turned off and the opening barred by heavy doors that slid open just enough for a person to enter through when Standish entered a code into a keypad inset into the wall.

Inside, the only light was from a series of skylights in the ceiling all down the length of the hall. Idris could see a long row on either side of interactive exhibits, blank touchscreens, and half-filled glass display cases. Here and there, a sheet was thrown over a smaller exhibition piece.

“Okay!” The doors slid shut as Standish entered a code into a second keypad, and the lights flicked on. “So, let’s start. The speedy version, I presume?”

“Yes please. But any relevant details to the theft itself would be good.”

“Right. Okay. So, the exhibit is designed so that visitors can enter from either direction and follow the story easily, either beginning with the theft or beginning with the origins of the painting. Here at this end of the exhibit, we talk more about the origins of the painting, that sort of thing.”

“What painting was stolen, specifically? I know there were several.”

“Yes. The main focus of the exhibit is on *The Millionaire*, by Decade, which was the painting that was never recovered. But three other paintings and, in fact, a statue, were also all stolen at the same time. These items were recovered shortly after the theft was discovered, barely damaged. The stature isn’t really discussed by most news articles from 2018; no one realized it was missing in the initial fervor. Each has its own section, there and there and here,” he added, gesturing on both sides of the exhibit towards several huddles of screens and displays. Idris nodded. “Moving past that, however, which is all very intriguing but doesn’t pertain exactly to the theft you’re most interested in, we start here. We have a timeline set up that will guide visitors through a day in the life of the paintings on one side, and then through the police’s

speculated timeline on the other. We'll go there—and—” He placed his palm on a scanner station and suddenly the section in front of them lit up, the screens exploding to life and automated voiceovers playing in a deafening cacophony all at once. Idris winced, her hand going to her service weapon, pushed a step back by the volume.

“Sorry, sorry!” Standish’s shout was barely audible, his hands covering his ears. He made a hasty swipe downwards at the screen, muting the noise, although the images on the screens were all still very much in motion. Idris quickly lifted her hand off her weapon, slightly embarrassed at her reaction. Standish shook himself, removing his hands from his ears gingerly.

“Sorry about that. I wanted to walk through the theft the way it’s laid out in the exhibit, but perhaps we’ll just skip that bit and I’ll take you through myself. It looks like they’re still working out a few kinks in here.”

“Fine by me.” Idris’ ears were still ringing. Standish led her over to the first stand, where an interactive screen was blinking intermittently below a revolving, 3D, illuminated model of the museum.

“The day started out normal; we had a few hundred thousand guests enter and exit between the hours of 0900 and 1600, two visiting student groups, one college, one elementary school, and a surprising lack of other, more typical incidents. We should’ve known it was too good to be true,” he added dramatically. Idris tried not to roll her eyes. Standish was clearly the perfect curator for the exhibit. He moved to the next row of revolving images.

“Each painting—marked out by a blue square on the blueprints here—was located in a different wing of the museum. None of them required extra care or protection, perhaps why they were chosen by the thieves. At exactly fourteen hundred hours, the cameras blacked out. They came back on, seemingly unaffected, exactly eighteen minutes later—eighteen minutes in which

the thieves had somehow managed to remove the paintings from their respective galleries. Or perhaps it took them a bit longer, we're not sure. After analyzing the footage which shows—look here, I'll show it to you—” Standish hit a green button on the dash board that lined the edge of the exhibit, beginning a series of four projections of security camera footage from different angles. “This is before the black out, and this—” he hit a blue button. “Is after.”

Idris spotted the difference immediately after one run through of the two clips, but she wasn't surprised that it had been difficult for the museum security guards of the day to do so. To her it was old school technique, which was her job to understand and recognize, but if she'd had a dozen cameras to keep an eye on, she probably wouldn't have paid it the attention that was required to see the difference, either. It was a gamble on the thieves' part, but not a very big one.

“Spot the difference?”

“Of course,” she said. “They put in a filler footage loop recorded from previously. If you aren't really paying attention, you see a family of three, the littlest one in the red hat, and that couple there ... and the little old ladies on an outing ... but what you're really seeing is a set of about five minutes' worth of footage from before, maybe even from another day, looped over and over again. But there's a slight lag when it loops over again. It's not the best quality loop; they must not have paid much for it, or they did it themselves. How long did it last?”

“Until one of the guards realized he'd been seeing the same little boy over and over again. Roughly an hour.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes. So, we're not entirely sure how long it took them to steal the paintings. By that point, however, a guard on his circuit had walked through one of the empty galleries, right about the same time that a woman had alerted security about another gap in the walls. The museum

was on lockdown in a matter of minutes—we estimate that the NYPD of the day was roaring around the block within ten, fifteen minutes. You pointed out astutely that the thieves didn't seem the most effective because of the low-quality footage, Detective, and after studying the case I have to agree with you. They pulled off one of the greatest heists in the history of museum thefts, stealing four paintings of immense value both monetarily and historically, yet only really came away with one painting. Whether because of the police pressure or some other factor, the thieves were unable to disable the GPS-based alarms in time on three out of the four, and so they discarded them. These are the alarms.” he moved to the second-to-last exhibit in the line, where three badly-damaged and one intact alarm were hung behind glass.

Idris recognized the type of alarm; it was a very early model of a system they used now to prevent theft in almost every shop. The device was anchored onto the back of the item and set to go off with a loud series of beeps after a customizable time away from the location you set as “home” for the item. They also broadcasted their GPS location to the home station. Idris knew the paintings had a 10-minute gap around them for which time the item could be beyond the borders of the “home” location before the alarm went off, and that the paintings had been found just outside of the expected distance one would expect someone to travel by vehicle in New York City.

“How would you get them off? It looks like they were just hacking at it with some sharp object,” she mused. Standish shrugged.

“It'd be almost impossible to do so, I'm told, but I'm not sure how. The paintings sustained a decent amount of damage to the frames and backings, although the thieves were clearly interested in preserving the art itself, presumably because they were going to sell it. Anyways, with the GPS signal going off and beaming us the location of the paintings, the police

were able to quickly retrieve them and return to the Museum, when they went to the location of *The Millionaire*, however, they found only a mangled alarm device and a single tire tread, later found to be of no value to the investigation. A nationwide search began, but as you know, no luck. We're still at a loss to explain it all." He gestured up to the end of the hall, where a projected image of *The Millionaire* that had to be twenty feet wide loomed above the exit. The painting itself was nice enough, showing a mostly dark scene of a man in a suit surrounded by stacks of money bending down to give a check to a little girl, her soft skin and raggedy pink dress a bright contrast to the shadows that surrounded the money. Idris wasn't sure what she thought of it, but it certainly wouldn't have been her pick if she was going to rob the Met. Personally, she wouldn't be able to resist Van Gogh ... she smiled and gave herself a shake, then a flash of movement caught her eye.

"What's this last footage?" She asked, approaching another looped and grainy security camera film reel. It showed the grand staircase outside, a few people walking up and down or sitting on the steps. A man, his face indistinct, appeared in the view, moving quickly. He crashed into a young woman standing on the middle landing—and suddenly took off, her bag in hand. She gave a yell, and with a frisson of surprise, Idris knew who it was. Marjorie ran out of view of the camera, and the footage stopped.

"This is potentially the only view we have of a man the police long suspected was one of the thieves. The police weren't sure what possessed him to steal this girl's bag—it seemed largely unrelated, some sort of random, opportunistic grab at the last second—and the girl was never found and if she reported the theft, the two incidents weren't linked in the reports I read. But, if you look closely, the barest details of the man's face are visible. Not enough to go on,

unfortunately. We included it mainly for interest; the police have long since deemed it not of any investigatory value, as I said.”

“So, the police have this footage?”

“I imagine it’s buried in an archive somewhere, but yes. I wouldn’t spend too much time on it, though. I’ve spent hours looking at it, and the man’s face is just the briefest, blurriest glimpse. You see the girl much more clearly, but who knows who she is. A random tourist, nothing more.”

“Yes, a random tourist ... well, thank you, Dr. Standish.”

“You’re very welcome. Was there anything else in the exhibit you would like to see? There are several other exhibit stations, but the bulk of the detail is here, where we went through.”

Idris’ circ took that moment to beep at her, and Standish’s did the same.

“No, I think that’s our cue, Doctor. Thank you for showing me the exhibit. Was there anything you discovered during your research that you chose not to include, but think may be of value if an investigation were to open around this case?”

“Hmm ... only that, if my opinion was asked, I think the thieves fled the state right away. The police did widen their search nationwide, but they remained fixed on New York, as you might expect from the NYPD with a case they can find nothing on. It seems to me, however, that the reason we couldn’t find any of them is because they each took off in a different direction, and reunited somewhere else—or didn’t, and that’s why the painting has never come to light. I don’t really know that, but it seemed likely given their almost impossible disappearing act.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind if the case ever becomes pertinent to our work.”

“Of course. Here, let me show you out of the exhibit.” Standish began shutting down the exhibit’s lights and interactive tech, and Idris skimmed through her messages. Gun’s sim ready for her whenever she came in, Senator Hart had sent in a bouquet of flowers for her and would she please come pick them up they smelled terrible and Frink hated them, and her mother had called. Again.

“Bette you were supposed to tell me if my mother called again,” whispered Idris. Bette’s blue face appeared in miniature form on the surface of her circ.

“You were in a meeting. I informed her of such. She left no message.”

“Interesting. Well, respond to Gun that I’ll be catching the next X train and that I’d like to go through Jenson’s sim as soon as I get back in. You can look up train schedules and be more specific. And tell Frink that he can toss out the flowers from Senator Hart, and why did he think I wanted them anyways? And why is he pursuing me—no, wait, don’t add that last part. That was just me thinking.”

“Very well, Idris Hart.”

“Pardon me, I couldn’t help but overhear you—but Senator Hart? He sent you flowers?”

“Yes. He did.” Idris hoped her expression would discourage him from asking anything more.

“You may want to be careful of him, Detective. Senator Hart is a part of the Senate Committee on Law Enforcement Spending, as I’m sure you’re aware. But he is the leader of a small group of Senators that are going after the Historical Crimes Division and trying to eliminate funding being funneled towards your department. His push is that cold cases are irrelevant and not worth the money it costs to solve them, and that the money given to you is poorly managed and would be better channeled towards “more relevant historical data.” I was

invited to a fundraiser of his last month; they were very pro-Museum funding at the cost of the Historical Crimes Division, although I have my suspicions as to where he would really like to place the money.”

“Well, now I’m even more glad I decided not to keep the flowers,” Idris replied. “I appreciate you telling me that. I met him at a benefit a few days ago and he, not surprisingly, said nothing of his plans.”

“I imagine not. Well, I didn’t vote for him. Shall we?” She took his proffered arm and he guided her through the now-dark exhibit, navigating deftly around the terminals and cases through the rest of the way. As he pushed open the door, Idris blinked a little and realized they were in the main atrium behind the entrance and ticketing counter. Standish tipped his head a little and wished her good day, then disappeared through a side door.

The warm sunlight fell through the glass ceiling in wide bands that stretched across the width of the atrium, broken up by families and school children sprinting through heedlessly. Idris paused for a moment in the center of one of the bands, feeling the warmth on her cheeks as she closed her eyes and listened to the laughter and chatter and hum of technology that filled the space. It was good to get out of the office from time to time, even if—

“Can I be of assistance, Ma’am?”

Idris didn’t jump—she was trained not to do that—but it was a near thing as she turned to see an android wearing the uniform of a Museum attendant at her shoulder. Different than the holographic assistants that gave directions at fixed points, these androids moved and guided tours throughout the museum.

“Can I be of assistance, Ma’am?”

“No, no thank you. I’m just leaving.”

“Very well. Please let me know if I can be of assistance in any way.”

“I will, thank you.”

The android turned and stalked away. Their walking movement was never quite natural, Idris thought; always a little bit stiffer than your average human. It helped you pick them out from a crowd if necessary, especially as they were being made to look more and more human as their tech developed. Shaking her head, she left the Met and made her way back to the X train station through Central Park.

The ride back started out equally crowded, but quickly thinned out as they moved outside the city, flying through the suburbs of Jersey in the blink of an eye. Idris found a seat and was scrolling through her circ in a mindless fashion when Bette’s face appeared over the article she was reading.

“Call Incoming: Sabrina Hart. Call Incoming: Sabrina Hart. Call—”

“Yes Bette, hold on, let me just put my ears in. Answer her and tell her to wait.”

“Answering now.”

Idris scrambled in her purse for her earbuds, understanding for a brief moment why everyone was going for implants these days. She jammed them into her ears and set the call to being visible on her circ screen instead of projected, just in time to cut off her mother mid-rant.

“Hello, Mother. I’m glad to finally catch you.”

“Catch me? I’m perfectly reachable. You’re the one who’s too busy to answer her own mother’s phone call. Looking at evidence, visiting crime scenes in your mind—”

“It’s not my mind—”

“Leaving your digital housekeeper to answer the phone for you, not deigning to pick up the phone yourself—”

“Mom! I’m sorry I missed your calls. I’m working on a case, and you know I’m not very easily distracted when I’m working.”

“Your director said as much.”

“Speaking of that, don’t call Director Frink. It’s not protocol, and how’d you even get into his office line?”

“The man has loopholes by the dozen in his circ security so that he can call his mistress. It wasn’t hard.”

“His—? Never mind. I know it won’t matter to you, but don’t call him again if you need me. I will answer you eventually if you call, Bette won’t let me forget. What was it you wanted to talk to me about? Is everything okay?”

“Of course, everything is fine,” she replied dismissively. “No, I wanted to ask about your meeting with Senator Hart. I heard from a reliable source that you met him the other night at a fundraiser, and I wanted to hear what you thought of him”

“That’s—” Idris shook her head in disbelief. “That’s why you called? You wanted my opinion on some up and coming I met at a fundraiser and sucked up to for a few minutes for Frink’s sake? What happened to being an apolitical agent?”

“Times have changed, which you would know if you lived in the present with me and fought for people who are being cheated now, instead of keeping your nose in the past, solving crimes that don’t matter.”

“Here we go. Mom, I can’t get into this with you all over again. I know you don’t approve of my work at HCD, but it matters to me.”

“Senator Hart has some interesting thoughts on the HCD.”

“I know he does, I just found out about them.”

“Perhaps you should meet with him, discuss them more.”

“No! I don’t really want to meet with a man who wants to defund my work.”

“But you could do so much—”

“Not thank you, Mom. I’m sorry that you don’t approve of me, but I’m not going to change my mind, and some senator sending me flowers isn’t going to change that.”

“Very well. But don’t be surprised if you end up on the wrong side of this.” Idris felt her stomach sink. She knew that tone.

“Mom? What do you mean? What are you planning?”

“Nothing. Nothing that’s any of my doing, at any rate.”

“Mom, don’t destroy all the work we’ve done for families through some false idea of what’s important. I’ve brought closure to good families that otherwise would have had no answers about their loved ones ever. Don’t jeopardize that, please.”

“Of course not. Goodbye, Idris.”

“Mom—mom? Mom, mom, wait, no—”

“Call ended. Would you like me to call her back, Idris Hart?” Bette’s cool voice sounded concerned, although Idris knew that was probably just her imagination.

“No, no, she wouldn’t answer anyways. Damn! She’s planning something, and it’s got to do with Senator Hart’s plans to vote to defund the HCD. And knowing her, it’ll have something to do with exposing corruption or worse in the department. And Frink has a mistress? What the hell? He always seemed like a stand-up guy.”

“Idris Hart?”

“Never mind, Bette. No further action necessary. I’ll talk to Frink when I get back to the office, maybe he’ll have some idea on what Mom may be targeting. And maybe he’ll patch up his security on his office line, the idiot.”

“Yes, Idris Hart.”

Idris sat in uneasy silence, watching the houses fly past. Her mother was an experienced hacktivist, skilled at getting into things people really didn’t want her getting in to and exposing them to the public. She did a lot of good as a whistleblower, but sometimes people got hurt in the process. She hated that the Historical Crimes Division worked solely in the past and was funded despite not having to prove any efficacy in her opinion, although Idris had sat in on one of the finance hearings with Frink and didn’t particularly agree with her. Her mother was set in her ways, though, and if she’d got it into her head that the HCD really was doing wrong beyond just annoying her personal beliefs, they were potentially in for a rough time. Combined with Senator Hart’s new push to defund the HCD, and Idris was surprised to realize she was actually worried. She needed to alert Frink as quickly as possible; her mother would know she’d tipped her off and would probably make her move quickly, although if she really was working with Senator Hart instead of just supporting his ideas, she’d be hampered by the slow-moving political machine. Idris drummed her fingers nervously on the armrest as the X train pulled into the station; her waiting car sped her to FBI Headquarters, and she took the four flights of stairs at a determined speed walk.

As she reached the top of the landing, her circ beeped, and she paused at the top of the gray staircase to read her message. It was from Gun; her sim was loaded and ready to go as soon as she got there. Bette had sent him the schedule for the train she was taking, apparently.

“Hey Bette,” Idris said as she waited for the pressure-sealed door to open. “Tell Gun I have to stop and talk to Frink first, but that I’ll be there in 15 minutes?”

“Yes, Idris Hart. Message sent.”

“Thanks.” The door unsealed with a whine and creaked open. The new security update for the seals apparently hadn’t been taken well by the doors, which were run by unique programming and pressurized for better security, supposedly. Idris didn’t wait for it to open fully—it would close of its own accord once it had completed the opening sequence—and squeezed through as soon as there was space enough for her and her tablet. She gave a cursory wave to her colleagues in the break room as she passed, then plowed straight into Frink’s office. Luckily no one was in there, not that Idris would have cared; Frink looked up from his phone in annoyance.

“Hold on, one second—Agent Hart, do you mind? I’m in the middle of a call here.”

“Sorry Director, this can’t wait.” Frink stared at her, calculating, and she sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the desk from him with an expectant look on her face.

“I’m sorry, something’s come up—yes, same time, of course, yes, I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Mistress again? They can be such needy things,” Idris kept her comment casual, but Frink still jumped.

“How—” he shook his head. “Your mother.”

“Frink, that’s how she called you here. She traced your unsecured line.”

“Who does she think she is? That’s out of line for anyone.”

“Try telling her that.”

“I might. What does it matter?”

“She finally reached me while I was on the train home. I’m not sure what she’s planning, but I’ve got word from a couple of places that Senator Hart is planning on pushing forward legislation that will cut our funding, probably to just about nothing is my guess. My mother ... well, she never really appreciated the work we do here, and somehow, she’s joined up with Hart. She hinted when she called that I’d better cozy up to Hart some more on my own time, otherwise I might get hit when everything goes down.”

“I bet that went over well.”

“If she’s involved, then that means there might be sort of corruption or malfunction or just straight up awkwardness going on behind the scenes here that she is going for, through the tech. She’s a cyber activist; you’ve probably heard her name come up before, so you know she’s good at what she does, and we’re in for a rough ride if you don’t prepare.”

“I don’t understand. Why would they go after us?”

“I don’t know. I doubt my mother is leading the charge, more likely they approached her and appealed for her to join in order to gain her skillset. My other source hinted that Hart wants the money to be funneled towards some pet project of his; the guy said he was wooing people who work in Museums and universities and promising them more funding, but he seemed doubtful of the truth of his pitch. All I know is you need to start cleaning right now, if you don’t want everyone to see whatever it is my mother thinks she’ll find.”

“Okay ... okay. I think I have an idea of where to start looking. I’ll do some digging myself, too, see if I can find out anything more to what you’re hearing. I’ve been out of the field too long, Idris, I missed his duplicity entirely.”

“Well, time to get back into practice, sir. Now, I’ve got to take a spin through Vera to start investigating a suspect, so I’ve got to run; Gun’s waiting for me.”

“Did you sign up ahead of time?” Idris paused on the threshold of his office with a rueful grin and shook her head.

“Better secure your phones lines, sir.” She saw his smile as she turned and darted out, letting the door fall behind her. It took her a minute to make it down the hall—there were a surprising number of agents about that she had to dodge on her way—and was glad when she saw Gun in his office, hunched over something on his console.

“Sorry, I’m sorry to make you wait Gun, I had something urgent to bring to Director Frink as soon as I got back.”

“Don’t worry Agent, there’s no one on the list for a few hours. Some people go home on a Friday afternoon.”

“You included?”

“Nah. Alright, you ready for this? It’s a weird one. Your guy was clearly up to something during the dates you sent me, it chops in and out and in and out, and half the time he’s dressed in black or standing next to black van when you do see him. I hope you get what you need out of this.”

“Me too. It’s more location than anything else ... I think I’ve got a lot of the hard evidence I need, but I can’t figure out how to place him at my scene, or why he would have been there.”

“Well, the locations are pretty clear, but I don’t want to spoil anything, so let’s get you set up.”

Idris ran the usual gauntlet of log-ins and clearances, trying to clear her mind of her mother’s phone call and her talk with Frink. She didn’t particularly want to get involved in all the politics of running a department, so she privately hoped that Frink didn’t bring anything back

to her. It was his business, and it only concerned her because she'd got the tip about it. She had plenty of cases to solve, and that was all she wanted to do, really. The doors hissed opened.

“So, you said you have evidence you're looking to corroborate? Like what?” Gun seemed genuinely interested as he settled her in the cold seat and prepared the simulation.

“I've got a fingerprint that matches the suspect, and a cartridge case that came from a gun involved in a shooting in Philadelphia shortly after, where my suspect was killed. And there's some sort of connection between what happened to Marjorie in New York and this Jenson character. I still don't know if it connects to a major theft at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that occurred the same time that Marjorie was there, but the more evidence I find the more likely it seems.”

“So, you're going to solve a high-profile theft along with your murder? Seems like you're on a roll here, Hart.”

“I wouldn't go quite that far. Who knows where that painting is by now. It's probably long since been in a private collection or worse.”

“Wouldn't it be something though, to find it?”

“For sure. But I think I'll stick to Marjorie's case for the moment.” Idris laughed and leaned back into the seat, the cold metal sending a shudder down her spine. Gun gave a friendly one-shouldered shrug and cinched the straps on her wrist. A few adjustments on his tablet, and the settings were ready; he set it down on the small operator table to the left of the chair and picked up the syringe, already filled, and tapped the needle to ready it.

“Good to start?”

“One can only hope,” she said, closing her eyes and pressing her head back against the thinly-padded headrest as he slid the needle into the vein on the back of her clenched hand. He lowered the headpiece and the little glasses and patted her arm.

“Relax, Idris. You know you’re safe,” Gun’s voice faded out of focus. She faintly heard the hiss of the doors, then everything around her was black, her mind wandering in a darkness that felt like she could swim through it easily. Idris didn’t hear the whir of Vera’s inner workings spinning to life as Gun began the simulation; she opened her eyes and suddenly she was somewhere else.

## Chapter 17

**08APRIL2018, 0800hrs**

“Look, in 24 hours it’ll all be over. Just take it easy, will you?” The drawling voice came from behind Idris; she turned and saw a man in his mid-50s, graying dark hair flopping lifelessly over a heavy brow, sprawled casually in a dusty red armchair beside a trestle table laid out with a huge variety of firearms. As he spoke, he was lovingly cleaning a black S&W M&P Shield M2.0 with a filthy scrap of flannel. The guns were clearly his—his wrinkles and nails were stained black with gun grease. The backdrop to this scene was an apartment wall with stained and peeling wallpaper, with one pigeon-poop spattered window overlooking a fire escape and a busy side street—and a camera from the building beside it, angled just enough to give a view to the inside of the apartment. Turning, Idris looked for who he was addressing. He was difficult to spot at first, because away from the window the apartment was depressingly gloomy, but she recognized his face: Theo Jenson, very much alive at this point and looking broodingly on edge, pacing between a TV cabinet with a crappy old TV sitting dustily inside and a badly-repaired kitchen table set. He was dressed in casual tourist gear, incongruous with the setting; an “I <3 New York” t-shirt and jeans, with a green baseball cap. He too was holding a gun, though she couldn’t make out the type; he gestured with it casually as he responded.

“Where is Naomi, Pieter? She was supposed to bring the van around ten minutes ago.”

“She’s probably doing an extra lap to be sure no one sees her. Naomi is overly careful like you, T.”

“Overly careful isn’t Naomi’s job. We’ll be late for the meet.”

“No, we won’t. We’re planning on leaving twenty minutes earlier than we need to to get there on time. Even with the traffic we’ll have no problem. Now will you sit down? Somebody’s more likely to get suspicious if you’re stomping around in here than if we just sit quietly and watch some tube.” Just as Pieter reached for the remote, there was a double tap at the door. Jenson threw up his gun and peered through the peephole, then slid back the lock and opened the door. A sleek-looking woman slid in. She too seemed incongruous in the setting, dressed as she was in a business casual skirt and silky blouse. Jenson stuck his gun in his jeans waistband and closed the door behind her, then greeted her with a kiss that made Pieter whistle in the background.

“You’re late,” he told her, giving her a pinch that made her giggle and Idris cringe.

“Just hit some traffic, baby, no big deal. She’s round the back and ready to go. Let’s go get rich.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Another make-out session ensued. Pieter snorted irately and turned to his gun collection, and Idris chose to watch him as he slid three into concealed holsters and hefted a Scorpion lovingly. The rest he threw a dirty towel over, then turned back to where Jenson and Naomi were still fully occupied.

“Alright, alright, break it up you two, you were the one so worried about being late, T.” Jenson removed his hand from Naomi’s skirt and gave Pieter a wicked grin as he opened the door and gave Naomi a spank to push her out the door.

“I thought we had plenty of time, Pieter.”

“Yeah, yeah. Move it. And give this to your lady.” Pieter handed over a tiny handgun, which Jenson pocketed. The three of them walked down a hall that was in equally terrible

disrepair and disappeared into the stairwell. Naomi eyed Jenson slyly as she bumped the bottom-floor door open with her hip suggestively; Pieter elbowed him, and they left the building without further incident. They climbed into a non-descript black van—painfully stereotypical, Idris thought privately—and spun out into the street, tires screeching.

Idris was grateful for the bird's eye view this time—she could hear the sounds Jenson's phone was picking up and it sounded like mostly kissing, with a few comments to Pieter who was driving in between. Jenson was definitely in New York City; she could see the Empire State Building as they travelled through downtown. New York City in 2018 was a busy, light-polluted metropolis that stretched for miles in a gritty expanse back and forth across the Hudson; enchanting as it might be to some, it definitely was an acquired taste. Her view pulled her down into another shady part of town and the van disappeared; the sim was static and a bit warped around the edges, suggesting that Vera didn't actually have any camera footage to use here. She was relying on Jenson's phone GPS and satellite photos of what the area looked like. The sim moved forward jerkily, and she could no longer see Jenson, Pieter, or Naomi. It froze outside of a dilapidated warehouse, and she could hear the sound of people talking. It was muffled, unclear, probably blocked by Jenson's pocket, she realized. There were snatches of words here and there that didn't make much sense on their own, but a few that seemed pertinent: "museum" and "locking system" and "only so much time." It seemed that this was the final meeting before the Metropolitan Museum theft, if that was indeed what Jenson was into. She knew it was dangerous to assume that, though—she was looking for evidence that tied him to either case and knew she could be making connections between comments that were about something completely different because of it.

It didn't take long before the sim moved again; this time she could hear a number of voices that sounded different as the van took off and she was returned to her bird's eye view. She held her breath as it slowed—sure enough, here they were at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She could hardly believe it, but it seemed like it was too good of coincidence to not be connected.

They drove painfully slowly past the front of the museum—Idris noticed from her height a girl waiting on the crosswalk that brought Marjorie to mind as her view followed the van. It drove around to the side of the museum and stopped.

## Chapter 18

**08APRIL2018, 1400hrs**

Idris couldn't believe it. The sim had been stuck here for what seemed like hours with nothing changing. Though she knew it wasn't really that long in her time, it felt like a huge waste of time. The sim had left her with a bird's eye view of the front of the Met after Jenson, Naomi, and several others in equally and unusually normal clothes had exited the van and headed into the museum. That had been it: Jenson had managed to stay out of the camera view for what felt like hours since. Which made sense; the thieves had hacked into the security lines, so there was no footage of Jenson as he moved around in the Met during that time. The only good thing about the time was that it fit the window of the theft perfectly, and now the oddly normal attire of the crew seemed to make sense. They had entered the museum like normal patrons, then went through with the theft. She wondered who the others were, and who she would have had to develop a sim for to watch the whole thing play out—obviously Jenson was not the one. He must have left his phone in the van, she reasoned.

Suddenly, with a nauseating, whip-lash-like sensation, Idris was jolted downwards to the front of the museum. As she watched, her feet now firmly planted on the concrete steps, Jenson jogged down from the front entrance by himself. He brushed past a young woman standing on the main landing, looking down at her phone—and in an instant, grabbed her bag and took off. She let out a yelp and chased after him. Idris followed too, running even though the sim would have changed her perspective regardless. Around the side of the museum and—and nothing. This

was the gap she'd experience in Marjorie's sim too, only this time Vera put in the location as the individuals disappeared. There was a struggle, the sound of someone falling—Marjorie gasped and then suddenly Idris was thrown back up into bird's eye view as the van took off around the corner and sped off on a hair-raising race through the city. The van squealed around corners and the driver—Idris wasn't sure if it was Pieter anymore—used his horn frequently and loudly. He was careful not appear as anything more than a late and frustrated delivery man, though; he didn't run any red lights or hop up on the sidewalks, which impressed her. Not everyone had that control. They roared back into the camera-less part of town and Idris resigned herself to the jerky sim movement, and a long wait as they pulled up in front of the same worn-out-looking warehouse. Hardly any time passed, however, before Jenson came storming out. She couldn't see him thanks to the lack of cameras, but she heard voices—namely, Naomi's voice, whining, Jenson's replies, which were half annoyed, half consoling, and a third voice, more ominous:

“Take care of the girl, and meet us back at the rendezvous by the 14<sup>th</sup>, T.” The van started up, and Idris was pulled back up into bird's eye view again. She had a feeling she knew where he was going this time as he took the road that led out of the city.

## Chapter 19

**09APRIL2018, 1500hrs**

The sprawling campus of the Pennsylvania State University was an artfully laid out gem of a college town in the middle of rolling hills and farmland. There were brick sidewalks and tree-lined drives, daffodils filling flowerbeds and buildings that kept the college charm while competing with the towering, glass and steel-coated laboratories that were being built new every few years. Idris had been here before, once in 2063, for a lecture series on historical criminology that she'd spoken at right before joining the HCD. The campus then had looked newer, shinier, some of its charm lost to modernity, but it was still a beautiful campus, just as it had been in 2018.

Not that she was seeing much of it now. Jenson had holed up in a crummy hotel off North Atherton Street for most of the day now, doing who knew what—his phone had been turned off shortly after he'd arrived in the hotel, and Idris was left with blank air space again. He was staying in Room 12 and hadn't stirred much beyond going to get Noodles & Co. earlier that day. Idris had had a lot of time to think while she waited. After seeing Jenson rob Marjorie twice now, Idris had a guess as to what happened. After the paintings had been removed from the Met, part of Jenson's job had been to exit through the front to avoid looking overly suspicious. He'd decided to steal Marjorie's bag, possibly as a last moment snatch and grab to boost his take. She had chased after him—and seen his face. Why that was enough to draw him back after her to

Penn State, Idris wasn't certain, and whether he for sure had killed her, well, she suspected she'd find that out soon enough.

## Chapter 20

**10APR2018, 1300hrs**

Jenson had been out all day, walking around campus and through the downtown areas of State College, looking every inch the unconcerned visitor in a pair of navy-blue workpants and a red and blue fleece pullover, which Idris had to assume was an act, although he played it remarkably well. He visited Penn State's Lion Shrine, ate at a cute little downtown bistro called the Corner Room, and made relatively frequent trips back to his hotel room for some reason. Idris was waiting for a particular moment on this day that was coming, and would confirm most of her suspicions, though it wouldn't prove that Jenson had killed Marjorie—there.

Leaving campus and crossing the street, Jenson paused to peruse some Penn State gear when he spotted Marjorie walking down the street towards him, heading home after a day of art history classes, earbuds in and about to turn the corner to reach her street. Jenson looked up just as she stopped at the crosswalk, and though he didn't move, Idris watched from his point of view as Marjorie's eyes widened and she tensed, then cut across the street and around the corner with a sudden urgency behind her steps. As soon as she disappeared, Jenson sprang into action and followed her, deftly weaving in and out of the groups of students and passerby that filled the streets. The few times Idris saw Marjorie glance behind her, he was out of view, so Marjorie never knew he followed her back to her apartment building and straight up to apartment 375, where he lingered in the hallway for a brief period, planting something—a bug, maybe, Idris couldn't get a good look at it—before retreating back to his own hotel, several blocks down. She

was left staring at the doorway in front, her mind racing. Marjorie had definitely recognized him, and he her, indicating that her theory was correct. Marjorie had indeed seen his face when she'd followed him around the side of the Met, and he'd been sent here at least in part to find her. Idris had a bad feeling she knew what was coming the next few days.

## Chapter 21

**11APRIL2018, 1800hrs**

The day had passed by purposelessly. Jenson had sat outside Marjorie's apartment building in a car that he'd rented that morning—a boring, non-descript blue Toyota he'd picked up at the airport that Idris made sure to note the plates and model of—and watched every student walking in and out all day. He only left at regular intervals to return to his hotel room for some unknown purpose; Vera still provided no insight there. Idris couldn't figure out what he was doing. Did he have hourly check-ins he was required to make? Was he calling the girl from the heist for hourly skype strip-tease sessions? Did he have something in his room that he was paranoid someone would enter and find: guns, passports, something of that sort? Not for the last time, Idris mentally decried the seedy motels of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that ensured that even modern tech struggled to provide information about what went on behind their walls.

But that was Jenson's day. Evidence of some form of pre-meditation; he was clearly watching for Marjorie, whether or not he was planning on killing her or not at this point. Marjorie, as Idris expected, didn't venture out of her apartment at all. She was inside desperately researching the theft at the Met that had taken place several days before and alternating between almost calling 911 and hiding. It was a strange day, and stranger still to watch; Idris could do nothing, even though she was most likely watching a killer stalk his victim. She tried not to let such things bother her for the most part—she knew she was doing good in the end, by solving the case for the family of the one was lost—but at times like this, where she was left on a

cracked sidewalk on a sunny day in April, watching her suspect sit in a car for hours at a time, it was tough to stay positive, let alone alert enough to spot her suspect's most minimal movements that added into her story. But not for nothing was Idris where she was; she cared too much about the victims of the past to let go. So when the sim faded to black, Idris barely needed to close her eyes and reset her mind for another day. She was ready.

## Chapter 22

**12APRIL2018, 1000hrs**

Jenson spotted Marjorie as soon as she left her apartment for class in the morning. He'd been waiting for her, blue Toyota parked behind a dumpster and baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, still wearing the same outfit as before as he left the vehicle and pursued after her on foot. He was good at what he did, Idris had to give him that. He slipped into crowded classrooms behind her, sat four tables over perusing a book he'd picked up from a table at random when she worked with some friends in the library or at lunch, and pretended to be looking at paintings on the first floor of the museum the whole time she was upstairs sketching. Marjorie didn't notice a thing; she had been nervous, Idris remembered, but had somehow talked herself out of remaining in hiding. And she never picked up on Jenson's casual, unobtrusive entrance into her world.

Jenson left her briefly for his usual check on whatever was in his hotel room at about two p.m.; this time he left the hotel room carrying something at his side that appeared to be a long tube. It looked almost like a poster container, something you'd get at an art fair when you received a painting—Idris raised her eyebrows. Surely not. Why would Jenson, who didn't seem to be anything particularly special in the hierarchy of thieves connected with the robbery at the Met, end up with the priceless, stolen painting in State College, Pennsylvania? It didn't make sense. So if it wasn't the painting, what was it? Idris watched carefully as Jenson climbed into the black van he'd arrived in and gently placed the tube on the floor under the passenger seat. He backed out of the parking lot—and suddenly the sim changed with dizzying speed and the world

around her remained blurry for a few moments, the machinery whining outside Idris' serum-induced haze. It was then she realized that, by a stroke of terrible luck, that Jenson likely didn't have his phone on him. Vera was reading it still at the hotel but had somehow caught view of the van—which she would have been able to link with Jenson for occasions like this—and was running facial recognition to attempt to place him in the van.

The machinery crackled, and then Idris was given a good view on Jenson in the van, driving past a convenience store that she recognized—and sure enough, there was Marjorie, exiting the store. Idris caught a glimpse of her behind the van as the sim blurred out once more, then returned her to the hotel to stare at the hotel door for a painful amount of time before the van reappeared in the parking lot. With all the cameras on the Penn State campus, somehow not one had given Vera enough information to place Jenson at her crime scene—not that she had really been expecting it to. She hadn't been able to see the perpetrator's face when Marjorie had died, after all. Vera wouldn't link Jenson to the scene without seeing his face.

Jenson left the van and disappeared around the corner without going into the hotel room—Vera picked him up with facial recognition at the airport, returning the Toyota he'd rented—then he returned to the hotel, entered the room, then left carrying a duffel bag. He threw it into the van and then left, heading out of town. The sim faded to black around Idris as he left the outskirts of town.

## Chapter 23

**17MAR2068, 1900hrs**

“Hey, you okay? You’re not looking so great there, Hart.” Gun’s voice was loud to Idris’ ears, and she ducked away from it, trying to cover her ears, but unable to move her hands. She strained to move as he spoke again—his voice less painful to her, but still unpleasant.

“Idris, Idris wait, let me get the straps.”

“I—I feel wrong,” she muttered, as he fumbled with the straps around her wrists, which were why, of course, she couldn’t move her hands, she realized. Her throat was dry, and her head was pounding, and if there was a name for the twenty-pound weight that was sitting in her stomach while her heart tried to beat its way out of her chest, she couldn’t think of it at the moment. One hand freed, she placed an automatic two fingers over her pulse at her neck; her heart was going a million miles a minute, it seemed.

“Breathe in and out slowly, hey—hey! Do you hear me? Breathe in and out. Otherwise I’ll have to call an ambulance.”

“No! Don’t do that, I’ll be okay.” Idris leaned over and breathed deeply as he released her other hand. The metallic scent of Vera’s chamber filled her nose; relatively unpleasant, but familiar, at least.

“Was it bad? I thought the sim didn’t catch whoever it was at the scene, you shouldn’t have seen her die again, right?”

“No, it’s not that ... it was as expected. But the sim was a bit, ah, jumpy this time, and coming back didn’t go as smoothly as I expected. I think I’ll be okay in a few, I just feel like my whole system is in panic mode.”

“Well, I’m not going to be allowed to schedule unregistered simulations if you’re having adverse reactions to any part of them, so maybe you should take a breather for a couple days. Work on the evidence you have and let yourself settle. You’ve done three in the past couple of days, your heart may just need a little bit of recovery time. You’ve always had the hardest time coming back from inside the sims, Agent.”

“Yeah...yeah, I think you may be right. Lucky, I don’t think I’ll be needing to run any more sims for a while.”

“Lucky’s one word for it. Go home right away, Hart, don’t linger around here like you usually do. Otherwise I might have to stick you in a car myself.”

“Yes, sir. Just...give me a few seconds here.”

“Of course. I’ll go and load the sim so you can check it out later.”

Gun left the chamber, and Idris took another deep breath. She could feel the side effects of the panic attack subsiding, but her whole body just seemed to ache now, and her stomach hurt. This was part of why Vera’s simulations were both removed from the general market, and under regulated use for FBI agents at HCD. It could easily overstimulate. She’d heard of agents having worse reactions than she had. All the agents skipped the regulations whenever they felt like it, but she had to admit that there probably was some merit to the cautions that went with the control of Vera for the HCD.

It seemed that she wasn’t likely to need another sim, however. She had physical evidence that connected Marjorie and Jenson through the fingerprint and cartridge case, and the fibers; the

red and blue polyester likely would match the sweatshirt Jenson had been wearing during the day. Now she had a simulation through Vera showing Jenson and Marjorie crossing paths multiple times, including the day of the murder. There were a few more loose ends to tie up, but in the pit of her stomach—beneath the ache—she felt the finality that came with the close of each case. It looked like she had her killer.

## Chapter 24

**10APR2018, 0900hrs**

*Marjorie slammed the door to her apartment shut and locked it, her breath coming in gasps. It couldn't possibly have been him, could it? Footsteps down the hall; she turned and peered through the peephole in the dented apartment door. A man in a red pullover walked past, his pace unusually slow, appearing to scan the numbers of the apartments as he passed. Her breath caught. It was him. The man from New York, who had stolen her purse. She'd seen his face when she'd followed him back behind the Met, before he leapt into a van and drove off, but she figured he was long gone and telling the police wouldn't make much of a difference in getting her purse back. But now he was here, and probably not so he could return her bag, she thought, watching him pass by the door a second time, from the opposite direction. She didn't understand. What was he doing here? How could he have found her—why did he follow her? She left her post and dropped down onto the scuffed leather couch in the living room, staring at the floor. Her confusion must have been obvious, because her roommate asked her what was wrong when she emerged from the bathroom, toweling off her hair.*

*“Nothing, it's fine. Just thinking,” Marjorie replied. The truth would have been too hard to explain.*

*“Did you hear about the burglary at the Metropolitan Museum of Art a couple days ago? Crazy to think you guys were visiting so close to when it happened! They only made off with one painting though, so it's not that crazy of a heist I guess,” mused her roommate. Marjorie felt her*

*stomach sink. It was crazy that they'd been there, so close. But what if—she cast a glance at the door as she gave a positive, non-committal answer to her roommate, who disappeared back into the bathroom. What if the man she'd seen hadn't just been a purse thief? What if he'd been connected to something bigger, like the theft? Then what? It still didn't really make sense to her. Why was he here, and apparently following her?*

*Marjorie stood up and picked up a pencil and a pad on her way to her bedroom; she spent the next hour or so furiously sketching, trying to capture the man's face as best she remembered it. He was sort of handsome, in a hollowed-out way, she thought, holding up her piece to view it with a critical eye. She tucked the sketchbook away in her backpack, deciding that the better option currently was to do a bit of work then go to bed; perhaps it would make more sense in the morning and she'd realize that she hadn't really seen the purse thief following her home today.*

## Chapter 25

**11APRIL2018, 0800hrs**

*Marjorie couldn't convince herself to leave her apartment the next day. She'd spent a restless night, tossing and turning in the middle of dreams of theft and angry shouting. When she woke up, even the sun streaming through the window couldn't brighten her up. There was a lurking, ominous feeling in the pit of her stomach, like something was terribly wrong. And multiple casual glances out the window in the kitchen of the apartment showed an odd blue Toyota idling in front of the complex. Something was wrong, she knew.*

*So she decided to stay home from her classes. She tried to sleep more, but when that was unsuccessful, she wrote emails to her professors apologizing for her absence, then worked on her museum-based project for a while. On a whim, she looked up the burglary at the Met; it felt more and more real as she read it—it really had happened just as she was in the museum, or perhaps as she had been leaving. She read article after article, looking for some glimpse of the faces of those the police thought were responsible. She almost dialed 911 several times, before chastising herself. The police in New York City weren't going to be interested in the fact that she recognized a man she thought might have stolen her bag around the same time and area as the much bigger and more important case. There was no reason to think he was anything other than a random purse thief, unconnected in any way to the Met. But then, asked a small voice, why was he here? Marjorie's gaze landed on the window, and she stood and looked outside. The blue Toyota was still there. The driver got out briefly and stretched, although she was several floors*

*up, a sinking feeling in her stomach confirmed what she already suspected—it was the purse thief, the dark hair and slim build confirmed it. She rushed back to her desk and was half way through an email to her mom when she paused again. It really was stupid to make such an assumption and to be so scared of a car and a man. The odds were high that he wasn't even who she thought he was. Why involve her mother, who was going to be so nervous anyway once she heard about the purse snatching? She didn't want to cause any unnecessary issues; things weren't going perfectly well at home, so why make it worse? Besides—now the blue Toyota was gone, she thought as she looked back outside the window. So perhaps the whole thing had been in her imagination anyways.*

## Chapter 26

**12APR2018, 1500hrs**

*It really was the man who'd stolen her purse, Marjorie thought as she watched the black van slowly turn up Burrows and narrowly avoid two students who tried to zip across the crosswalk at the last possible moment. She was lucky the busy student population made it impossible for the driver to move faster than a crawl; she'd been following the van for about fifteen minutes now as he drove through town and up into campus. She had stopped in the local convenience store on her way home from drawing in the Palmer Art Museum to pick up a few things for dinner, but her plans had quickly changed when she'd happened to glance outside and seen the van—driven by the man who'd been following her—stop at the intersection right outside. It was her turn to do the following. So she'd left her things behind on the counter, and followed at what seemed to her like a relatively safe distance as the van traveled towards the north side of campus.*

*Things got trickier as the man pulled into a parking space at the entrance to a park just off the north side of campus. It was growing dark and harder to see as Marjorie watched from around the edge of a thick set of bushes as the man pulled a long tube out from the passenger side of the van and headed off in the direction of the running trails that started just off the edge of the parking lot. She shouldered her bag a little more securely, counted to fifteen, then headed in the same direction. She knew from running here herself that the trails weren't particularly*

*long or secluded, so she couldn't fathom what he was doing. It didn't look like he was just out for some exercise.*

*After almost twenty minutes, she caught a glimpse of his reflective jacket disappearing off the trail to the left a ways ahead of her; the spot where he had left the trail and gone down the embankment was muddy, and she could feel her legs getting splashed and scratched up as she followed. A part of her argued that this wasn't the safest of ideas—she was following a man who had been potentially stalking her into a secluded place in the growing dark; it even occurred to her that he may have seen her following and led her here on purpose. But as she ducked through the first round of brambles, she saw the cylinder he'd been carrying tucked into the crook of a branch right at eye level in front of her. She scrambled down the last few paces and glanced from side to side; wherever her pursuer had gone to, he wasn't within eyeshot any longer. She quickly snatched up the tube and pried off the lid, driven by some unknown urge to see what was inside. The compartment hissed ever so slightly as she opened it. Inside was just—canvas? She tipped the cylinder over and eased the roll of canvas out, unrolling the first few inches carefully.*

*It was the painting from the Met, right there in her hands. How many times had she seen this painting in the headlines over the last few days? She'd studied every brushstroke, pondered every color choice, and here it was, the canvas softer in reality than she'd expected, yielding to her fingertips as she traced the shapes at the edge of the painting. Adrenaline pumped in her veins, setting her heart to pounding in her ears. A heavy footstep, undisguised, sounded to her left, and she gasped and dropped the tube. She fumbled for it for a moment as the footsteps grew louder, then took off, leaving the tube behind and trying not to grip the painting too tightly in her slick palms as she fought her way back up the slope and onto the trail. Marjorie took off running, grateful she knew the path well in the darkness that had now fully settled on the trail. A gunshot*

*went off behind her; she gasped and pushed her legs harder, trying to make it back to the center of campus, where surely there would be more people who could help her. She could hear fast, pounding feet behind her as she broke out of the trailhead, and somehow the concrete of the sidewalks made it worse.*

*There was no one around. As soon as she made it onto campus, she looked for someone, anyone who might help her, but the campus was dead. She didn't have time to ponder why—she just kept running, certain that on a campus as large as Penn State's she was certain to find help somewhere. She didn't bother trying to hide; the thief's footsteps behind her assured her that there was no time. As she neared the Hub, the student union building, the lack of people started to sink in. It wasn't that late, although darkness had fallen as she'd found the painting and fled the thief. Where were the other students? She could see only a few figures on the edge of the wide lawn that led up to the Hub, and she drew a gasping breath to yell for them when she heard the shot behind her—then stars flashed before her eyes and she staggered, the painting falling from her hand and rolling a few feet from her. Her side was pulsing in pain, and heat flooded through her, and—was this blood from her side? Had she been shot? She took a few stumbling steps forward, trying to reach the painting that had rolled away towards the dumpsters behind the Hub, and fell hard, unable to go any further. Her pursuer appeared after a few moments, and she was too weak to even try and move when the second shot rang out.*

## Chapter 27

**18MAR2068, 0900hrs**

*Tap. Tap. Tap.* Idris' pen beat out a steady rhythm beside her tablet as she stared at the board that took up much of her office space and blocked her view of the city outside. Normally she enjoyed her view, but today she wanted no distractions. Still tired and feeling wrung out from her Vera backlash, Idris wanted to minimize any distractions as she tied up loose ends of the case. She'd told Bette to shoot unimportant calls immediately to message and turned the windows in her office opaque to offer better privacy. It was just her and the board now. Two photographs of Marjorie were front and center of the board: in one, she happily sat on the back of the Nittany Lion Shrine, a new college student without a care in the world. In the second, her eyes were closed and her skin bluish: the autopsy table did no wonders for anyone. Lines stretched out to different pieces of evidence and clips of Vera simulation footage that made up the case, from the initial crime scene processing to Jenson's days in State College, PA. Prominently, the cartridge case that had been linked to the gun that had killed Jenson, the fingerprint that matched him, the soil, fiber, and paint analysis reports, and a picture of the painting stolen from the Met beside a still of Marjorie and the thief—now confirmed to be Jenson thanks to the simulation—all took up the edges of the board. After staring and thinking for several hours—she'd come in early even though Gun had warned her not to—Idris was confident in her conclusions: Jenson had stolen the paintings from the Metropolitan Museum of Art on April 8, 2018 as part of a skilled group of thieves. He had come into contact with

Marjorie, a visiting college art student, outside of the Met and stolen her purse. Marjorie had followed him, and perhaps seen his face—something had happened that caused him to go to State College on the orders of someone in the heist. Idris assumed he had discovered where Marjorie went to school from the contents of her bag. Once there, he followed her for several days, then gone to do something and was followed by Marjorie. They somehow came into contact with one another during this time, and she had fled from him to the center of campus, where he'd shot and killed her. He had left State College after that, and then three months later had been shot with his own gun in Philadelphia, though the two cases were never connected.

Idris knew she had enough to present in the case file for the Historical Crimes Court; between Vera and the physical evidence she had, her case was solid. But it frustrated her that she was unable to place Jenson and Marjorie at the same place in the two-hour window where she lost both of them. They disappeared off the northern end of campus, then returned for the end of the story in the center of campus. If she had been arguing the case in a regular court, Idris would have been hard pressed to defend her assumption that the two actually came into contact with each other and that Marjorie was fleeing Jenson on April 12. The evidential connection between them was strong, but it was still a hole in her story. And where was the missing painting from the Met? It had never been recovered, as Standish had told her at the Museum, and though there was no reason to assume it could ever be found now that Jenson was dead, it still bothered her.

Idris finished typing the last sentence of her report, open on her tablet, and double tapped the screen. The images and clips on the board digitally folded into one and disappeared, the link to the folder appearing beside the title of her case file. Picking up her pen, she signed the bottom of the report and double tapped it; it disappeared into her case folder as well. It was, by all

accounts, ready to send to the HCC now. But she hesitated, and suddenly Bette's voice emanated loudly:

“Voice message overridden. Call from Senator Hart. Call from Senator Hart.”

“Answer, Bette.” Idris felt irritation prick her skin. She hadn't liked the man *before* she'd learned he was potentially working with her mother to defund her department.

“Senator Hart. I'm very busy right now, could I possibly return your call later?”

“Now, now, Idris, don't try to get rid of me so easily. I wanted to hear how your case was coming along, and invite you to a fundraising dinner I'm attending tonight. I think you'd find it very interesting, and I know some of my donors would love to hear about your work with the Zodiac Killer.”

“Trying to find extra funding so you don't feel so bad?”

“I beg your pardon?” Bile burned in the back of her throat, and she knew she was tired, but Idris didn't want to let the man go without a piece of her mind.

“It's pretty low of you to invite me to dinner when you're planning on pushing forward a bill to slash funding for the HCD. We do good work here, Senator Hart, and if you can't see that beyond some vision of your own, I don't believe I would benefit from meeting you donor friends.”

“Do good work? Your department is a waste of space and valuable resources. That simulator could be used to find terrorists *now*; instead it sits around being used to solve college student murders from the teens. And not just finding terrorists but so much more—trust me Idris, defunding your department is really the least of my goals.”

“And you need my mother to help set it all in motion?”

“I’ll admit I didn’t know Sabrina Hart was your mother when I contacted her. But it made it all easier when she clued me in. I don’t know what you did to piss off your mother, honey, but I’ve been all the better for it.”

“Leave my mother and I’s relationship out of it. Better yet, go find some other cause to fight for, rather than ending good police work for families.”

“There’s nothing either of us could do to stop things, even if we wanted to. The bill—alongside your mother’s information—goes up to the House tomorrow. It will be over by Friday.”

“You—”

“You certain you don’t want to attend the fundraising dinner? If you’re so dedicated to solving old cases, surely you can raise enough money to keep going with some good old-fashioned police work.”

“No thank you. Goodbye.” Bette had hung up before Idris slammed a finger into the ‘hang-up’ icon, and she diverted the force into slapping her desk in frustration. She hoped Frink had gotten into whatever it was her mother had found in the HCD files.

“Okay Bette,” she said, thinking to call Frink before submitting her file on Marjorie and tell him about Hart’s plans.

“Incoming call, Gunderson. Incoming call, Gunderson—”

“Answer, Bette.”

“Hey, Hart. Man, that’s some block you’ve got on your circ line there, I had to call three times before your assistant put me through.”

“Bette is good about things like that,” replied Idris. “I’ve been wrapping up case file stuff all morning. What’s going on?”

“I found something for your case that I think will help you out—I was running over some of the Vera footage, cleaning out the sim drives, and I noticed your man Jenson had on a Fitbit. Remember I said I found some of that data, but it wasn’t useful at first? It was an older model, so Vera wasn’t set to search for data from it, but it turns out it does have a GPS. The signal isn’t strong, but it places him before the time of your victim’s death—right in the north of campus, like you said.”

“Thanks Gun. It’s good to have an extra confirmation that he was in State College; sometimes the jury has a hard time understanding how Vera works.”

“No, but—this gives his exact location. Before and after the crime. Maybe he hid evidence? There’s no 100% Vera footage, after all connecting the two. What if there’s something there?”

“What are you getting at? It’s been fifty years, nothing’s going to be there anymore Gun.”

“It’s a pretty unchanged area, I checked out the current topography and campus maps. The GPS marker was along this running trail that hasn’t changed much as far as I can tell.”

“And?” Idris raised an eyebrow skeptically.

“And let’s go check it out! It’ll take us 55 minutes if we catch the next train. We can go and have a look, and you’ll be back before the end of the day to submit your file.”

“Gun, I really don’t think there will be anything there—”

“Idris, I normally don’t get out into the field, but I’ve been following this case as you’ve run the sims and I really think it’d be worth it. What if the stolen painting is out there?”

“Now wait, I really don’t think that that’s possible. The stolen painting is probably moldering away in some private collection somewhere. What makes you think that it would be there after fifty years?”

“Well—”

“And even if it was, there’s no way it is in a condition that could be restored.”

“Idris. Agent. Humor me on this? I have a feeling, and I never get feelings about these things.” Idris stared at him. She hadn’t gone out into the field for an HCD case for several years; there wasn’t typically a point to it after fifty or sixty years. In this case it didn’t seem worth it, but Gun was so determined, and hadn’t she just been thinking that she was frustrated by the holes in her case? “Come on, some fresh air will be good for you after using Vera so much.”

“I suppose a bit of fresh air could be good for me,” she said, smiling.

“Good, because we’ve got about fifteen minutes to catch the train I was talking about.”

“Gun!” Idris dropped her tablet into her bag and snatched up her coat. “Bette, lock my doors, and sent Frink a message reminding him about the whole Senator Hart thing. You know how to word it.”

“Yes, Agent Hart.”

“We can make the connection from downstairs if we’re fast. Come on.”

## Chapter 28

**18MAR2068, 1100hrs**

The campus layout was much the same as it had been in the simulation, Idris thought, watching the picturesque campus roll by the car window. The brick was mostly replaced with gleaming steel and glass, and there were definitely more buildings than there had been in 2018, but it still retained a charm that appealed to Idris. If she'd been a student looking for a college, she would have chosen Penn State after a visit or two.

She and Gun had made the train they wanted, and he'd called a car before they'd made it to the station. The driver looked a little puzzled when they gave him the GPS location, but he'd taken it in style and told them it was only a short drive to the place the coordinates indicated. Passing out of campus, Idris thought she recognized several of the buildings from the most recent sim; hadn't Marjorie passed by those residence halls as she fled from Jenson? She felt her heart sink slightly; it seemed so pointless that Marjorie had died. A young woman who'd done nothing wrong—Idris felt the loss sharply. She wondered if Gun felt the same way, since he'd been watching the simulations as well.

The northern side of campus wasn't as new as the area around the train station; the houses were a little more beaten down, the yards a little more unkempt than the carefully tended campus across the street. There was no sign of any non-residential building that might have a camera attached, although Idris was sure that many of the houses probably had modern security systems that would be useful to Vera that were hidden from the average passerby. The driver

turned further into the neighborhood and away from campus; shortly he pulled up at the edge of a park.

“The location you gave me is in there somewhere,” he said, gestured towards an opening in the surrounding brush that was marked by a wooden sign with yellow painted letters. “I can’t go in there. I can wait, if you want?”

“That would be great. I don’t think this will take too long,” replied Idris, beating Gun to a response.

“It might take longer than you think,” said Gun as they left the car.

“I’m not holding my breath. I don’t know what this place looked like in 2018, but there’s no reason for anything to be left behind, Gun.”

“You never know. It doesn’t look like it’s been touched for fifty years,” he touched the peeling paint on the sign, then examined his circ. “The furthest point that the Fitbit signal went was about half a mile that way. Maybe we should start there and work back to here?”

Idris nodded her agreement, and he led the way onto a gravel running trail. They passed a few runners, outfitted in high tech running gear—Idris couldn’t help comparing the difference. If something happened to one of those runners, their watches and phones and circs would mark exactly where they’d been at all times. It wouldn’t necessarily solve the case, but it certainly made it easier. Gun didn’t say anything as they walked, and Idris’ gaze fell towards her feet and the edges of the trail, scanning for something—she didn’t know what—anything. As much as she protested to Gun, she didn’t want the trip to be for nothing. Some piece to solve the question of what had happened between Marjorie and the thief who had killed her. He’d been ordered to, but what had driven him to chase her down through the center of campus from this location to shoot

her? Surely it would have been easier to wait for a different moment where she'd been more vulnerable.

"This is it, sort of," said Gun, pausing at an unremarkable patch of brush at the edge of the trail.

"Sort of?"

"It's in there, about 25 feet in. He must have left the trail for some reason."

"Well, we've come this far." Idris' circ pinged, and she glanced down. The FBI fingerprint examiner had confirmed the match between Jenson's known print and the one from Marjorie's scene; he had definitely touched her necklace. It fit with what she'd seen in the sim, not that she was particularly surprised.

Idris made a hole in the brush and scrambled down the short slope, pausing to wait for Gun in a clearing behind the initial growth of brush. He looked out of place in his gray t-shirt and loafers in the middle of the undergrowth, but his eyes were bright as he studied his circ, turning slowly to get the best signal.

"He stood right in this area," he said. "This was the furthest back in this direction he went."

"Do we have anything that ties Marjorie to this spot?"

"Not really, other than the Vera footage of her heading in this direction. As far as I can tell, she didn't have anything on her that would pin her to this location."

"Right. Well, let's have a look. I don't know what for, but ... I don't know, Gun."

"I'll start over there," he moved towards the back of the clearing.

"Here, just in case," she threw him a pair of blue latex gloves. "Try not to handle anything you find too much." Idris remained where she was for a moment, scanning the clearing

and surrounding areas. It certainly looked unpromising. It was just the side of a running trail; there was a few bits of trash, a rusty-looking cylinder, and plenty of leaf litter and sticks with a few rocks thrown in. She shuffled her shoe through the leaves a bit, then paused. Hadn't she seen—she turned back towards the cylinder. Her suspect—Jenson—had picked up a long cylinder similar to this that Marjorie had dropped after the first shot had been fired. It had rolled away from her, and he'd gone out of his way to pick it up before disappearing. Slipping on a second pair of gloves she'd brought in her coat pocket, she crouched and picked up the tube. It looked as though it had been buried and perhaps slowly uncovered over time; it was rusty and encrusted with debris and soil. The outside might have once been covered in some kind of colored material, but there were only a few shreds of what it once was hanging off the side. The disintegrating remains of a strap were attached to one end of a rusted buckle.

There was a seam about two inches down from one end, almost completely hidden by the dirt. Idris gingerly took hold of the end and twisted. Nothing. It was stuck fast; she gripped it hard and twisted and felt it give, just a bit. Dirt crumbled off in her hand, and she mentally apologized to Marcus for losing his soil samples if this turned out to indeed be the cylinder she'd seen at the scene. More force did the trick; the top twisted and came off in her hand with a pressurized hiss that stopped Gun's shuffling through the leaves on the opposite side of the clearing.

Inside the cylinder, there was a rolled-up canvas; it was stiff in her hands as she gently slid it out of the tube. Wrapped around the bottom quarter was a sheet of paper; Idris slid it off and unrolled it carefully and suddenly was looking at her best evidence yet. Jenson's face stared up at her from a fading pencil sketch in her hands. It was the one done by Marjorie after she'd seen him following her in State College—Idris hadn't seen Jenson's face yet when she'd seen

Marjorie make the sketch, but now there was no doubt. He'd taken her bag after her death, and her sketchbook had been inside. Why he'd chosen to keep the sketch when the rest of the bag's contents were disposed of, Idris couldn't fathom, but here it was.

Between the sketch and the larger canvas—which she had a suspicion about—was an envelope, bent into a curve from its years in the tube. It wasn't sealed; she carefully opened it and pulled out a scrap of paper with a list of names and “Interested Buyers” across the top. Handing both items to Gun, who had joined her when she'd begun removing the contents from the tube, she gently unrolled the first few inches of the canvas.

It was no surprise when she saw the edge of a familiar painting under her fingertips. *The Millionaire* was recognizable—fifty years away from a museum didn't seem to have harmed it.

“Idris, is that—”

“It is.”

“The painting stolen from the Met.”

“Yes. Jenson must have brought it back here to hide it, and never retrieved it. He died a few months after Marjorie's murder—he must have tried to hide it and get away from the other thieves so that he could sell it and take the profit for his own.”

“I just—” Gun shook his head, running a finger along the edge of the painting. “I can't believe it.”

“I know. That guy I met at the Met who is curating the exhibit about the theft is going to flip.”

“What is the sketch? That's Jenson, right?”

“It is. Marjorie drew it.”

“So, there’s your proof. He has a sketch from your victim buried with the stolen painting that we know he had.”

“A sketch from my victim that was stolen at the time of her death. Even more convincing.”

“Satisfying.” He stood up and brushed off his jeans and offered her a hand. “Shall we?”

Idris let the canvas naturally roll up and tucked the sketch and envelope back in around it as she slid it back into the tube.

“To think it’s still so well preserved, after fifty years. That case must be designed for protecting old documents or something,” she said as she took his hand and let him help her up. She carefully cradled the tube in her arms as they made their way back up onto the trail.

“Bette, send a message to Frink. Tell him I found the stolen painting and will be updating my report on Marjorie’s case before I submit it. And send a message to Standish. He should probably delay the opening of his exhibit for a while.”

“Very well, Agent. You have three new messages from Director Frink. It seems that he has determined your mother found nothing of security concern, only information regarding his affair. He is certain that it will be uncomfortable when they come forward with it, but not convinced that it is as damning as Senator Hart made it sound.”

“Frink’s having an affair?”

“Shh. Thank you, Bette. Include in that list of messages one to my mother, telling her to call, please.”

“Very well.”

“Frink?”

“I guess so. And he’s been using office lines to do it. My mother was hired to find dirt on our division to divert funding for Senator Hart’s personal plans. I tried to get Frink ahead of the game so he wasn’t caught off guard.”

“Wow.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m just glad it doesn’t sound like there’s much to use. We’re having enough trouble with the budget we have.”

“You’re telling me. You should see some of the hotfixes I’ve run on Vera, just to keep her fully up to date.” Idris fell into stride beside Gun as he went off, talking about the intricacies of the tech involved in keeping Vera running. She was struck again by how handsome he was when he got caught up in what he was doing; and when he opened the car door for her, she smiled to herself and thought that maybe it was finally time to pay attention to those alarms she’d set on her circ for to encourage a good work-life balance.

The driver was clearly puzzled; Gun made sure to tip him well for waiting, but he kept glancing in the rearview mirror as they drove back to the train station. As they got out of the car, he blurted out:

“You guys into geocaching or something?” Idris just smiled and shut the car door.

## Chapter 29

**23MAR2068, 0900hrs**

Idris straightened her tablet and pens on the table in front of her as she and Frink waited in the conference room for Senator Horner to arrive. There were a lot of memories in this room—it was technically a conference room, but they typically referred to it as the “condolence room;” this was where they met with the families of the victims whose cases they solved. She and Frink were waiting for Marjorie’s sister, to share with her the findings regarding her sister’s murder fifty years before.

Idris and Gun had returned to the FBI and submitted the cylinder case and its contents as evidence right away. She had gotten several enthusiastic emails from Marcus as she finished writing up her report; the soil on the case showed very similar composition from the samples taken from Marjorie’s shoes and legs and was “likely to have come from the same area.” Erin as well had analyzed a small amount of paint found at the bottom of the case to compare to the trace found under Marjorie’s nails, and had reported similar findings. Standish had swept in the day before to retrieve the painting from the evidence room, both fuming and ecstatic that she had solved the case and returned the missing painting that was the sole focus of his exhibition. The opening date for the exhibit remained the same, but the public had been informed that there would be a major update in the works that would be open in several months, he’d told her, as they updated the exhibition and waited for the FBI to mark the case as available for the public. Idris had been told in no uncertain terms that she would be attending that opening.

“Senator Horner, Director, Agent.” Frink’s assistant held the door open as a woman entered. She was primly dressed in a neat suit and followed by several secretaries of her own—she didn’t look like a woman to cross. Not a single graying hair was out of place, and even the lines around her eyes seemed uniform, as though they followed the law to the letter as well. She sat on the edge of the chair offered to her and fixed Idris with a piercing stare.

“You finally got to my sister’s case?” She asked, her voice measured.

“Yes, Senator. Marjorie Horner’s case came up on my docket on the fifteenth of March, 2068. I have been investigating it in the days since, and I submitted my official report to Director Frink on the 21 of March. He reviewed it, and now we would like to share it with you.”

“It’s been fifty years, almost to the date. Why now?”

“I’m sorry, Senator. We have a great many cold cases on file, and it will be the work of many agents to go through them all. The cases are assigned randomly as the system determines.”

“I see. Well, let me see the file.”

Heart beating, Idris passed the tablet she’d brought with the case file on it to the Senator. No one spoke as she read through each page. The minutes dragged on, but Idris didn’t move—she knew that this time was needed for the senator to fully take in what she was reading. A fifty year mystery—two of them, in fact—had been solved. When she’d finally finished, she stared at the last page for another long minute before looking up. Her steely gaze was watery, and she nodded to Idris.

“You did good work, Agent—?”

“Agent Hart, Ma’am.”

“Hart? Any relation to the Senator?”

“No,” Idris bit off. Senator Horner raised an eyebrow. “No, Ma’am, there’s no relation, for which I’m rather grateful.”

“I’m not surprised. His push to defund your agency caused quite a stir, although not, I think, as big of one as he’d hoped.” Idris grimaced, but nodded in agreement. Her shrewd assessment of what had happened was accurate. Senator Hart had stood up in the Senate and put forward a bill to defund the HCD, citing “inappropriate behavior” on behalf of its leadership and general ineffectiveness all around. There had been somewhat of a stir, but overall the bill had stalled without the immediate upswelling of support that Idris suspected he’d expected. She’d still received no call from her mother, either; Idris had a feeling she was waiting to find out the final outcome before she’d call to gloat or fume. The bill was on the floor being debated still.

“If there’s any counseling or resources we can provide you, Senator, to help you find closure with this information, we have several trustworthy places we can direct you too. We have been in contact with the court of historical crimes and are working with them to legally resolve the case, however, as you read, the suspect is deceased, which complicates the matter.” Frink always sounded stiff when he offered counseling, Idris thought. He was always uncomfortable, sitting in on these meetings.

“No, thank you. I will not need counseling. Thank you, for finding the man who killed my sister. Even if he is dead, it’s good to finally know what happened to her. I’ve wondered for so long ...” she stopped herself, her thoughtful voice reverting back to a business-like tone. “I don’t think your agency is useless, Agent Hart, and I will be sure to share my opinion with my fellow senators on the floor as necessary. I still believe that your agency needs to change its secrecy policies, but you certainly are not ineffective and a waste of resources.”

“Thank, Senator Horner. Your support is invaluable to us,” Frink looked relieved.

“Your sister seemed like an admirable young woman, Senator, I’m sorry for her passing.”

Idris tried to convey for a moment how she had felt while investigating Marjorie’s death. She wasn’t sure it got across, but Senator Horner smiled for a brief instant and nodded.

“She was. Thank you again, for your hard work.” She stood and placed a hand on the tablet as everyone stood around her. “May I keep a copy of the file?”

“It will be cleared from the FBI cold case docket in a week or so, and you will receive a hard copy and a digital one as soon as that happens.”

“Very well. Thank you for your time.” She shook hands with Frink and Idris, giving Idris another small nod as she did so.

“I wish you well, Senator,” said Idris as the woman left the room, followed closely by her secretaries. She let out a sigh as the door closed behind her. “She took it well.”

“She’s been in the Senate for many years. If she couldn’t handle shocking news, she wouldn’t have lasted this long,” replied Frink, gathering up his things. “I wanted to thank you, Idris. You did good work on this case, linking it to the theft at the Met and following the evidence all the way through to finding the painting.”

“Gun was a big part of that,” she reminded him. They had their first date tonight, and she had a feeling Gun was going to tease her about her reluctance to go look for evidence when he’d suggested it. He’d already alluded to it briefly in passing. She smiled just thinking about it.

“He was. I’m glad I hired him. Well, back to work.”

“Indeed.”

Frink held the door open for her as they left the conference room together. Idris filed the tablet she’d given to Senator Horner away on its respective shelf, then sat down at her computer

and stared at the blank screen. Her gaze fell on the pile of unfilled forms and she shook her head ruefully. Grabbing a pen, she pulled one down and read the top line:

*“22 February 1991. Three colleagues out for a run found the bodies of a couple under an overpass in Flint, Michigan ... I remember that case.”* She signed it, then groaned, looking at the rest of the stack.

“Remind me not to let these pile up again, Bette?”

“Yes, Idris Hart.”

## Chapter 30

**15AUG2068, 2100hrs**

The opening night gala for the exhibition at the Met was in full swing as Idris slipped away from the dance floor and buffet tables towards the end of the exhibition hall. The smell of fresh paint still lingered in the air; they had only finished the renovation work on the updated section several days prior to the grand opening. *The Millionaire*, fully restored and safely protected behind glass and the best security the Met could provide, held the place of pride in the center of the new exhibition, but that wasn't what Idris had slipped away to see.

Behind the painting, in the corner of the exhibit, a photograph was positioned in the center of the display. Marjorie smiled out from the photo, perched alongside the Nittany Lion shrine in the bright sunlight. Surrounding her photo were details about the case and the work that Idris had done, but she didn't need to read that. She'd been interviewed about it enough for a lifetime over the past few hours at the gala. She had just wanted to spend a moment to say goodbye to the girl whose case she'd solved. She'd apologized for what had happened to her before, but it was over now, and Marjorie—and her sister, who had indeed come through for them in the Senate and helped end the bill to defund the HCD—could be at peace at last. *Goodbye, Marjorie*, she thought.

A beep from her circ broke her reverie, and she looked down. A new case had been added to her docket. She was reading the first few lines of the file when Gun appeared beside her.

“Sneaking away from the party so soon?” he asked, taking her hand. She smiled at him and indicated Marjorie’s photo.

“I like to say goodbye, before I move on.”

“Move on?”

“Of course,” she said, and lifted her arm, where her circ displayed her new case file.

“There’s always more work to do!”

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2. Blum, Deborah. *The Poisoner's Handbook*. 2010. New York: Penguin Group, 2011.
3. Brouwer, Sigmund. *The Accidental Detectives, Vol. 1-4*. 1990. New York: Victor Books, 2002.
4. Funke, Cornelia. *Inkheart*. 2003. New York: Scholastic, 2005.
5. Peters, Elizabeth. *Amelia Peabody Mysteries*. 2010. New York: Mysterious Press, 2010.
6. Reichs, Kathy. *Spider Bones*. 2010. New York: Scribner, 2010.
7. Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. 1886. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 2008.
8. Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. 1937. London: Allen and Unwin (UK), 1991.
9. Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Lord of the Rings*. 1954. London: Allen and Unwin (UK), 2004.
10. Wells, H. G. *The Island of Dr Moreau*. 1896. London: Heineman, 1996.
11. Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1890. Philadelphia: Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, 2010.
12. Wrede, Patricia C. *Enchanted Forest Chronicles*. 1985. San Diego: Magic Carpet Books, 2003.

13. Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. 1994. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.
14. Inman, Keith, and Rudin, Norah. *Practices and Principles of Criminology*. 2000. Boca Raton: CRC Press. 2001.

## ACADEMIC VITA

### PERSONAL INFORMATION

- Nationality: American
- Marital Status: Single
- Date of birth: November 17, 1996
- Major academic course highlights: Organic Chemistry Lab (CHEM 213W), Firearms Examination (FRNSC 497), A Scientific Approach to CSI (FRNSC 410), Criminal Biological Evidence (FRNSC 413), Criminalistics: Trace and Impression Evidence (FRNSC 411), Courtroom Proceedings and Testimony (FRNSC 400), Molecular Biology of the Gene (BMB 400), Laboratory in Proteins, Nucleic Acids, and Molecular Cloning (BMB 442), Laboratory in Crime Scene Investigation (FRNSC 415), and Forensic Molecular Biology (FRNSC 421W)

### EDUCATION

#### **Aug. 2015 – May 2019, The Pennsylvania State University (PA)**

- Candidate for Bachelor of Science in Forensic Science, Biology Option (B.S.)
- Candidate for minors in History and English
- Member of the Schreyer Honors College, Candidate for Honors in English

#### **Aug. 2011-May 2015, Brussels American High School, High School Diploma**

### EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

#### **Dec 2018-May 2019, Teaching Assistant for MICRB 410, Principles of Immunology**

*Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology,  
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA*

- Worked with a team of teaching assistants to answer questions and guided students through homework questions, exam reviews, and weekly office hour/help sessions.
- Attended lectures to support my professor in the classroom by answering questions and proctoring exams.

- Assisted professor with grading exams and homework assignments, and other classroom-related tasks.

**August 20, 2018-May 2019, Course Assistant for FRNSC 411,  
Trace and Impression Analysis**

*Forensic Science Program, BMB Department, Penn State University*

- Prepared laboratory exercises for students. These included preparing and teaching labs on footwear impressions, fingerprint analysis, cartridge case comparison microscopy, microchemical techniques, glass identification, fiber and hair analysis and comparison, soil analysis, and optical properties of glass and minerals.
- Cooperated with a team of six other course assistants to assist our professor with grading, preparing homework assignments, and other classroom-related tasks.
- Answered questions and guided students through the trace evidence laboratory exercises discussed above

**May 2017-August 2017, Summer Undergraduate Research Assistant**

*Grozinger Lab, Entomology Department, Penn State University*

- Field season assistant, focusing on obtaining data for Tyler Jones' Horizontal Hive Study through maintaining and observing honeybee hives and sample collection
- Obtained field ecology experience, scientific sample collection, data entry, and field research methods

**January 2017-December 2017, Office Staff**

*Office of Veterans' Programs, Penn State University*

- Created and maintained spreadsheets for vital office documentation.
- Served as first point of contact to assist veterans, dependents, and reservists with appropriate documentation to receive and maintain Department of Veterans education benefits.
- Triaged visitors of the Veterans' Programs Office and directed them to appropriate resources.

## **AWARDS & HONORS**

- 2015-Present, Schreyer Academic Excellence Scholarship
- Dean's List, 2015 and 2016, 2018

## TRAININGS & PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- *Law Enforcement Training Session*, hosted by the New York Microscopical Society (NYMS), Instructor Peter Diaczuk—November 2018

## COMPETENCIES & INTERESTS

### Lab Skills:

- Familiar with MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Publisher, Outlook, and Canva Designs.
- Familiar with Leucomalachite Green, Hexagon OBTI, Acid Phosphatase, Kernetrot Picroindigocarmine, p30, and Takayama blood tests.
- Familiar with microscopic analysis of hair, fiber, soil, glass, and pattern evidence.
- Familiar with the use of comparison microscope analysis and polarizing light microscope analysis.
- Familiar with molecular biology laboratory techniques such as molecular cloning, gel electrophoresis, and preparing for PCR.
- Familiar with protein molecular biology laboratory techniques such as SDS-PAGE, ion-exchange chromatography, and centrifugation.
- Familiar with organic and chelex DNA extraction techniques, as well as qPCR, RT-PCR, 3130xl capillary electrophoresis for DNA sample analysis
- Familiar with profile interpretation for mixture, Y STR, and STR CODIS results, as well as determining the statistical weight of those interpretations.

### Personal Skills:

*I am a highly organized, Schreyer Honors scholar with experience in office, lab, and classroom environments.*

- Proficient in MS Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Publisher, Outlook, and Canva Designs.
- Organization
- Leadership
- Technical Writing
- Communication, written and oral
- Problem Solving
- Attention to Detail, Observation
- Lab Safety Proficiency
- Interpersonal Skills

**PERSONAL INTERESTS, PROJECTS, & CAMPUS INVOLVEMENT:**

In my spare time, I enjoy reading, music, and outdoorsy-type activities.

I am writing a crime novel for my Schreyer thesis project.

I was the President of Penn State's Chapter of the International Justice Mission, and an active member of Penn State Cru.