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Blood saturated every square inch of the carpeting in the mansion's master bedroom, from one distant gilded wall to the others. Unless you slept there, you would have had no idea the original color of the carpet was soft beige. The once white satin sheets on the king-size bed were also blood soaked, with the only difference being, they had a glossier sheen to them than the carpet. The only objects left without any color in the scene were the drained, frozen-in-death, blanched bodies lying on the bed. Their expressions indicate they did not experience their death. Too serene, not chiseled, and contorted from being mercilessly murdered.

From the tall master bedroom doors, I study the crime scene. In all of my crime fighting years, I have investigated a variety of murders. I've witnessed firsthand what human can do to other human beings. After the first, you begin to develop a kind of numbness to it, you disconnect. You stop thinking about the person who once was alive. Instead, you become curious in a weird way, trying to find the answer, the reason for it. This one doesn't have the usual elements attached to it like passion, pain or anger. It has something else, something that raises it to another level. It is psychological, deliberate, staged, perverted in a way.

The spiny fingers of adrenaline slither up, gripping my neck and shoulders. This one is for the record books. It will become one of my middle-of-the-night-screamers. It will jolt me out of a sweat-soaked sleep. Alcohol won't be able to suppress, or diminish it. I feel uneasy about the killer, or killers—who I will find at the end of a trail.

My investigative team looks over my shoulders. Each is as repulsed as I am. We're all quiet as if we are in a church, or holy place. I mentally preserve the state of the crime scene trying to retain as much information as possible from this vantage point before we go inside. No one has entered the bedroom since the call first came in, not even the housekeeper who first saw the victims from the cracked open bedroom doors. When we do go in, the evidence should be undisturbed. I visually search the room for footprints in the blood left by the killer, or killers, but there are none. There aren't any visible fingerprints. The room is so completely covered in blood, the suggestion is made that the horrific scene was "painted."

To the right, what appears to be a priceless Renoir, Van Gogh, or some other noted artist's work has been slashed and tossed onto a satin-covered settee. The frame alone cost my year's salary. I surmise it used to hang above the excessively ornate headboard, where the brackets are torn loose. The slash across the painting, once analyzed by the techs, will confirm the type of knife used. In all likelihood, the serrated blade with the Asian-markings carved into the handle, standing erect out of the male victim's chest, a direct hit on the man's heart, will probably contain canvas fibers. The freaky part, freakier than the rest of the scene, the one that will give me nightmares for the rest of my life, is the word written in blood on the wall where the expensive artwork used to hang. We all read the capital letters on the wall, but no one says the word aloud. My pained flashback must have drained the color in my face, but I snap back instantly the moment Detective Dominguez's hand slaps the back of my shoulder. He was a junior detective, but was familiar with Lori's case. He understands what's going in my head. Boston. Five

years ago. This time, I'm standing in Atlanta, Georgia. I have a punched-in-the-stomach look. The name painted on the wall is the same—*JAKE*.

My first call is to Mika. I tell her about the double homicide at the mansion and that my name is back on the wall again. She is as stunned and confused about it as I am. While I try to digest this mess, Mika says she can't come to the scene, but she would meet with me later. Next, I make a call the office to tell the CID secretary to postpone my interview with Lori, and that I will call her when I'm leaving. While listening to her reply, I watch the yellow tape twist as an officer begins to demarcate and secure the area.

Those of us going in, and any others subsequently, will sign in with the log officer. I have already directed an exterior search of the house. I want to know how the perps got in and out. Two detectives, with several uniforms, will also be looking outside for tire tracks and footprints. If any are found impression casts will be made.

After reviewing the crime scene from the doorway, I explain to my investigators how I want the scene covered. It's nothing they don't already know, but it's required. I'm sure as hell going to do it by the book, so there is little chance of the perpetrators walking free at trial because of our mistakes. The victims were two high-profile socialites so the mayor, the chief of detectives, the Fulton County prosecutor, and the media will expect more of me.

The first forty-eight hours of any crime scene are critical. It's when most usable forensic evidence is gathered. I'm told from the doorway, the CST's have arrived and are on their way up to the bedroom. They will do a more thorough, detailed gathering of forensic evidence after we've been through the bedroom. The coroner's black sedan is minutes away.

Fulton County is fortunate to have the latest equipment such as ACE-V fingerprint capability, and infrared RAMAN Spectroscopic Imaging, along with the standard ink, print cards, lifting tape and dusting powders. Fingerprint detection has come a long way over my time in homicide. The only exception is when we come across someone who doesn't have fingerprints. I only saw it once. It's a genetic trait called the "Naegeli Syndrome," or dermatopathia pigmentosa reticularis. The entomologist will check the insect larvae deposited in the victims' eyes to approximate the time of death. Insects move fast, even when bodies are found inside. The victims will also be checked for human, or animal bite marks. They too will be casted regardless of the fact they are often considered inconclusive in court. I don't see any visible GSW, but if any shells are found ballistics will handle them. Their results though are only judgment calls at best and another issue for the lawyers.

The CST's will use tweezers, cotton swabs, lint rollers, and good old-fashioned magnifying glasses to collect trace evidence samples including paint, fibers, chemicals, fingernails, hair samples, and biological evidence, DNA. They will use chromatography to separate complex mixtures; a serology kit, hemasticks, to collect samples from blood splatters, and help to identify chemical substances in body fluids. Looking at the scene, the CST's won't need to use Luminol, an exposing reagent used to find blood previously cleaned. What they will need to do, is tell me where all the blood came from.

The toxicology report will come later. We are also fortunate in Atlanta the Coroner's office is capable of doing high-tech virtual autopsies, which will further support and confirm my own observations about how the victims died. We're lucky to get to the scene early. Within three days, the enzymes that digest food in the body start to digest the body

itself—evidence tampering. All The gory details will be included in the evidence report and the murder book.

I send the photographer in first. She is the best at what she does. I have worked with her for years. She will capture the scene from every possible angle starting with the Panoscan, which will do a 360-degree digital photo of the room. We will refer to the all-encompassing photo, when our minds are saturated with other details days from now. While her Nikon camera flashes, we put on protective masks and latex gloves. We all have a pocketful of paper and plastic evidence bags, and make sure our flashlights beam. When we go in, we will work methodically from the perimeter and move toward the victims, careful to contaminate as little of the scene as possible. One after another, my investigators will follow my path and when we are equally spaced, we will move toward the victims noting every detail along the way on sketchpads. I watch my photographer carefully backtrack out of the bedroom. She is sure she has all she needs.

“I got a clear shot of the name.”

She looks painfully into my eyes. My eyebrows do a quick bump. Because I have the penmanship of an M.D., I start my digital recorder. The notes I make will help me later to fill out reports. It occurs to me, I have been doing this a very long time, two weeks shy of twenty-five years as an Atlanta homicide detective. I step into the room. Dominguez draws the bedroom shades open revealing pewter clouds, and a thick mist providing a haunting backdrop to this already creepy murder scene. I won't rush to it, but I want a close-up look at that serrated knife. For as long as I can, I will avoid looking at the name smeared in blood on the wall. After the preliminary investigation, I will turn my thoughts to motive, a reason why this happened.

Passion? Anger? Hate? Revenge? Provoked? A contract kill?

* * *

Jared had been analyzing what he had done when the voice told him to sleep. He fell into a deep sleep. The voice told him once he awoke, his life would be changed forever. The voice also told him to be on high alert when he woke. Sirens shattered his deep sleep. The sirens were rapidly approaching the affluent neighborhood, turning toward the house on the mile-long driveway. It was minutes before they reached the house. The sirens finally stopped, but the light bars continue to announce there is a crime scene.

Jared tossed the down covers, stood, and walked over to the mirror above the sink in the bathroom. He practiced his shocked and heartbroken expression just like the voice told him to. He shouted a command from the bathroom, and his computer awoke. Then Jared commanded his computer to infiltrate the security cameras as he approached his desk. He saw the private security personnel running, terrified staff, crying maids, and the arrival of the police. He waited, timed, and then began his choreographed, overanxious run through the mansion to the foyer where all the activity was centered. The first person he came across was the distraught butler, Jameson. The old man's wrinkled hands were shaking. His patented butler composure, normally plastered to his wrinkled face, had been replaced by grief. He was on his way to Jared's room to tell him the bad news. When he saw Jared, the old man began to cry.

“What's going on? Why are the police here?”

Jared played his role and emoted a controlled, concerned panic.

“It's your parents, Jared. They're...oh my God, they're dead. I'm so sorry, son, so sorry.”

Jared broke loose of the old man and bolted for the foyer. When he arrived, he was grasped by a police officer that asked him for identification. Jared told him who he was between shortened breaths. Jameson, close behind, verified his identity. The officer took him to the living room, sat him down, and directed Jared to remain there until a detective came to speak with him. As Jared took a seat on the sofa, the officer asked if he could get him anything. His throat was parched, so he asked for some water. Jameson went for it. He couldn't sit still, and constantly asked to talk with someone in charge. The officer reassured him someone would speak to him soon. Jared believed his performance, up to that very moment, was dead on.

You're doing great, Jared.

He studied the officers and investigative personnel closely from the sofa, as they invaded his space. The camera inside his powerful mind was capturing every nuance of their behavior, and every syllable they spoke verbatim. He stored the data and planned to download it for careful examination later. All of it would be kept for his future use, for the planning of crimes to come. The fact that he had murdered his parents less than eight hours before never entered into his thoughts. Then Jared saw Jake Roberts descend from the stairs that led to the master bedroom. He watched intensely as Roberts walked through the foyer, and into the living room where he waited. He kept his mouth closed, but his mind screamed aloud.

No fucking way.

It all came back like a cannonball shot through his cranium, the day his stepsister Constance was gunned down in a firefight with the cops. Other detectives had interviewed the family then. Jared, though just a young boy, was included. The cops interrogated the family for hours on end about his stepsister's friends, why she stayed out all hours of the night, and why the family thought she might do such a thing. Two uniforms were responding to a report of domestic violence in a dilapidated house, beneath an overpass in a long forgotten neighborhood, when they were surprised by heavy weapons fire. One officer took a bullet to the forehead and was killed instantly. His partner took a shoulder hit, but was returning fire from behind his patrol car door. Normally, wandering indigent souls cowered behind dumpsters, and overturned shopping carts. The street was covered in garbage and graffiti. Roberts, and his partner Harmon Blackwell, racing to respond to another shooting nearby, diverted immediately to aid the officers on the scene. They arrived during the chaos of the firefight. A figure between two pillars on the front porch, illuminated by street lamps and the patrol cars headlights, dressed in black fatigues and wearing a ski mask, was firing an AK-47.

Jared's older sister had been providing cover fire for her boyfriend, the pretend badass, who was in a cowardly retreat. Roberts was the detective who shot and killed her. The ambulances and other emergency personnel arrived minutes later. Her boyfriend, and his small band of revolutionaries, disappeared out the back door, into the night, and were never apprehended in the U.S. About six months later, on the south side of the Texas-Mexico border, Constance's B.F. was captured, tried and convicted of multiple homicides, kidnappings, drug and weapons charges. He and his band of evildoers confessed to killing four tourists in Cuernavaca, their beheaded bodies found suspended from a bridge.

Jared could not believe the irony of Roberts' showing up to investigate the unfortunate demise of his parents. He wondered what his big sister Constance would have

thought about that. He wondered what the possibilities of his having any of her murderous DNA. He wondered how long it would take Roberts to put it all together, and what his reaction would be when he figured it all out. Roberts walked straight to the officer who stood over Jared. They talked briefly with Roberts looking directly at the officer. Finally, Roberts turned to Jared, who had the look of a wounded animal on his face. After Roberts identified himself and badged Jared, he made the official notification of the death of his parents. He followed with his official condolences, and took a seat next to Jared, whose eyes welled up with convincing grieving tears. Roberts gave him time to regain his composure. Jared struggled to get the answers out to the questions the detective asked.

“I woke up to the sirens. My room is way in the back of the house. I was asleep, sound asleep. I took an Ambien. I don’t sleep well. I do a great deal of research and my head’s always filled with equations. The Ambien knocks me down solid. I never heard a thing until the sirens.”

He drank some water.

“What happened to my parents? How did they...? Who did this? Can I go up and see them? Who would do such a thing?”

“What time was that? When you took the Ambien?”

Jared tries to draw his thoughts together.

“I just shut down my computer, and it was around 11:15, maybe 11:30. I was going to watch HBO, but the Ambien kicked in.”

He takes another drink of water.

“I’m researching a new biofuel and—”

He pauses, and draws a deep breath, eyebrows close in together, and he blinks faster.

“When did this happen?”

“The medical examiner is upstairs now. His best guess appears to be around 1:00, maybe 1:30 in the morning. The M.E. and CST’s will have more for us when they finish up. I cannot let you up there, I’m sure you understand.”

I study Jared’s reactions. I make a mental note to have someone verify he has a legitimate prescription for the Ambien.

“I will need for you to go down to the morgue later, to do a positive identification.”

“Yes, sir. Can’t I do it here?” Jared says.

He stares hard at me. I assume it’s because he’s in shock. The forensics techs interrupt while I’m talking with the son. I excuse myself, and walk over to hear that certain items have been classified and bagged, catalogued according to standard procedure. I’m told that a single, blood-saturated paint roller at the end of a long pole was found under the bed. The techs didn’t find any prints during their sweep other than the victims, family members, or the staff. The serrated knife has been confirmed to be from Richard Hamilton’s personal collection in the den.

I’m also told that the sexual assault kit revealed semen was collected from Contessa Hamilton’s vagina, perhaps indicating Richard, at least before he was assaulted and murdered, had sex with his wife. Frank, a tech I have worked with before, then gives the distressing report that Mrs. Hamilton was also sodomized.

There are no witnesses to the late night murders. The staff had all retired to their quarters. Two investigators, who had interviewed them, got nothing useful. No one heard any approaching, or departing vehicles, odd for a crime of this magnitude, especially if

there was more than one perpetrator. Part of my team is reviewing the mansion's security DVDs. The only security personnel in the mansion at the time weren't in the office watching the security cameras. He was in a young housekeeper's bedroom watching her ride him ferociously. He was sufficiently remorseful, forthcoming, and apologetic. I assume his days in security are over.

There is no indication the victims fought back. It's suggests they could have been drugged, and then killed. I'll have to wait for the toxicology report. The serrated knife appears to match the slash to the artwork and to the slashes across their throats, one reason no one heard any screams. Whoever did this then spent time *painting* everything with the blood.

Who uses a roller to paint with blood?

Whoever did it has to be really fucked up in the head, cold-blooded. If they were angry, I suspect they would have wanted their victims to see it coming, so they would be terrorized before they died. The coroner pronounced the victims dead at the scene. The EMT's who have been waiting patiently, and who never had the slightest hope of reviving the victims during a run to the ER, were dismissed. They packed up their gear and headed out to the ambulances.

The son seems confused, traumatized and distraught to me, sincere in his grief. He's quirky, by my standards weird. He wears Brooke's Brothers slacks, Hilfiger polo shirt, and deck shoes. He doesn't give me the impression he could have done this. A street kid like me always found rich kids weren't normal, they were from another universe, but I've never seen a science-head geek lose it either. Still, the statistic pops into my head that eleven percent of the murders committed in the U. S. are committed by someone close to, or intimate with the victims. My gut concurs, so before I leave I'll tell Dominguez to dig deeper, see if there is any bad blood here, at least enough to step in.

"Again, I'm sorry for your loss, Jared. I want you to know we will find who did this horrific thing and he, she, or they, will be prosecuted and punished. Do you have any idea who could have done this? Enemies of your parents?"

He gives me a blank-eyed look.

"No, sir."

"Is there someone who can help you through this, someone we can contact for you? A relative? Friend? Someone in the staff you are close to?"

You mean like a dead relative, sister-killer? Are you too stupid to remember? You must really suck at this.

"Sir, we are...were...a close family. There will be many friends and relatives when they find out what happened. I'll be okay."

Again, he has that emotionless stare, which I am going to write off to shock.

"I'm going to have one of my people, a trauma specialist, talk with you. She will stay with you until you feel comfortable and safe, or until someone, family or friends arrive. I'm also going to have a team of officers provide security for you. Whoever did this is still out there."

I watch his eyes.

"Also, the officers will try to keep the media away. The full support of the Atlanta Police Department will be here for you. This is my number, day or night. Anything, no matter how big or small, call me, okay?"

Holy shit, Roberts' cell phone number.

“My father was a very powerful man, detective. I’m sure he had his enemies. I don’t know anyone who could have the heart to do this. While I know many of the people who come through the house by name, my contact with them, or knowledge of them, is limited, largely because of my self-imposed exile in my studies.”

His head drops and he searches the floor.

“All I ever see is their smiles, and shake their hands, whenever there is a social event, otherwise, no. Dad is usually away on business. There are times, weeks, when I don’t see him, but when we do get together we have...had a great time. Braves baseball, and all that. My mother is...was your typical socialite, and forever attending to some charity function, or event. We did have dinner out last week at Morton’s in Buckhead to catch up on one another’s lives. I’m afraid I spend much more time with my computer up in my room.”

Jared freezes, goes silent for a moment. He’s looking ill.

“I think it’s just now beginning to really sink in, what happened here,” Jared says.

He taps his forehead, backhands the tears beginning to fall.

Excellent, Jared.

“Again, if you need me for anything, or if you think of anything helpful, call me.”

The trauma specialist arrives just as I am

about to leave. I make the introductions and more reassurances.

“Now, I am going to take another look upstairs before I go.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

The therapist began asking Jared some gentle questions, giving basic information and options he has available to him. He half heard what she was saying, but was distracted for the most part by all the things going on around him. He continued to study their movements and behavior. You could read all the Crime Scene for Dummies you wanted, but firsthand experience was always the best. Each officer, at some point, offered Jared respectful condolences. The therapist followed Jared around like a new puppy.

What amazed Jared the most was that he wasn’t even considered a suspect in the murders. To them, he was just another spoiled, society brat, with no prior arrest record, who never had a known conflict with the law, not even a traffic ticket. Roberts was so zoned in on the crime scene, he didn’t remember the family. Maybe, Jared thought, they see so many crime scenes they learn to suppress them so deeply they disappear from the memory. He was certain, Roberts would figure it out, but by then Jared planned to have had his killing fantasies nearly fulfilled, and he would be well shielded from capture and prosecution. He would merely be an upstanding pillar of society. He also knew how to cover his tracks, as he did with his other criminal enterprises. He had always done his homework. He watched closely as Roberts left out the front door.

* * *

After I finish taking a second look in the bloodied bedroom, and talk with Dominguez, I leave my capable investigative team to do the rest and I bail out for the office. That, of course, means struggling through the media on my way out. I feel like a cue ball scattering the solids and stripes across the green tabletop. I direct them to the Public Information Officer who I briefed outside the bedroom. Another 24-hour news cycle was starting. The first hour would include most of the information, and then the next twenty-three hours would repeat it until the public had it memorized for water cooler conversations, and Happy Hours. A roped-off area blocked the news reporters from the

Police Public Relations Officer standing at a podium stacked three-levels deep with microphones.

Guerilla reporters also carried hand-held digital recorders, mini-cams, or iPhones linked directly to their editors. They waited until the officer finished her briefing before they shouted questions over one another. Each tidbit of the crime scene was preserved on the record, so they could feed the public's morbid curiosity and frenzy for death.

Killers are media attractive and gain celebrity status. The public believes it is entitled to every detail. How many victims? How did they die? Give us every sordid detail. Often, they confuse reality blood spilling with movie blood spilling. The very first film ever made was Thomas Edison's confession of a serial killer named H. H. Holmes. The Old West's number one entertainment was public hangings.

Third-party "experts" pontificate and hypothesize. People read true crime magazines, and murder mysteries are number one on the New York Times bestseller lists. An entire subculture buys and sells the writings, paintings, poems, and personal possessions of murderers. The media disgusts me, but they're no surprise.

* * *

You were magnificent, Jared.

He didn't know what to say to the voice.

He knew he couldn't answer it. His next move was incomprehensible. Jared walked away from the trauma therapist who trailed him invoking his name. He went out through the front doors and watched Jake pushing through the reporters. He saw the rush of reporters to his own feet. It was the second adrenaline rush he had in the past eight hours.

Every dog has its day, Jared.

* * *

I push my way to my car, quickly slam the car door, and stare from behind the wheel. I see Jared Hamilton walk out of the ostentatious entranceway, and stand at the top of the granite stairs. He's staring back at me. The media dogs rush to him. He seems very comfortable in their presence. I assume he's used to it because of the Hamilton family's power and wealth. I watch as the therapist tries to bring him back into the house, away from the media, so she can counsel him, but he resists.

* * *

Ride the wave, Jared.

Jared wasted no time when he finished with the media. He dodged the officers and headed straight for the safety of his room. The detectives continued their work until they thought they had enough to complete their reports back in CID.

What a fucking rush.

From that point on, Jared realized it was going to be a challenge to sneak out of the mansion with the cops still hanging around, but the game changer came when he ran the equation in his head. Those very cops would be his alibi. While they gave him space to mourn and become a recluse in the turret, he would sneak off and murder the others on his list and on his timeline. He had to kill again. He was so jacked up.

What Jared didn't tell the cops about, that even the staff was unaware of, were the hidden passageways his father had installed when the mansion was constructed, so he could transit the house, completely concealed. His mother, Contessa, never knew they were there. Jared thought maybe, Whitney had used them for her trysts. Dad made all

kinds of deals, good deals, on private club golf courses, but great deals were made on satin sheets.

Jared, as a boy, observed dad pass through a portal once. When dad was out of town, Jared found the clandestine entrance and took a tour. He never revealed the discovery to anyone, but did use them to watch his mother undress many times. With a few sidesteps, he could clandestinely transit the entire house from his turret cave. The cops, if they found out, probably would have found bloody footprints there. Later, Jared planned to bleach them away.

After Jared made his way back to his room, he began analyzing why he was so distant, emotionally and psychologically, about murdering the two people who had given him life. They were like mannequins to him with blank faces, no pulsing blood, no brainwaves, and absolutely no heartbeats. Still, he felt nothing at all for them. He didn't hate his parents, but he didn't love them either. He never understood—love. It wasn't an equation, a theorem, a puzzle, or a theory he could manipulate. The idea of love and affection, compassion, didn't compute inside of his powerful intellect, and he felt nothing in his cold heart. Love was a meaningless, useless human idea that in reality changed nothing. The entire universe he believed lacked love. Those thoughts were quickly consumed by his intense desire to kill again.

* * *

Days later, after the positive identification and autopsies were completed, mom and dad were released to Jared for the funeral. He got off during the ceremony in a bizarre way. While standing over the expensive coffins, staring at mom and pop's lifeless carcasses, he thought it would be interesting to attend the funerals of everyone he killed. He would stand over them and see if they would wake and tell everyone he committed the dirty deed. His fun ended when the parade of mourners had all wandered off to the rest of their lives, after the free food and drinks, and the sad, soulful melancholy they expressed for someone they didn't care about, and were probably happy they were gone.

After the service, and after everyone was gone, when the staff faded away into the hidden crevices of the mansion, Jared walked into his deceased dad's study, and closed the double, ceiling-tall doors behind him. He took a seat in the leather chair behind dad's solid oak desk. He propped both feet up on the immaculately arranged desk.

He stared at the photograph in the silver frame, the one where his mom was squeezing him against her cheek. He noted how blaring the space was where the serrated knife once hung alongside other classic, collector murdering weapons. When he looked up at the array of animal heads protruding from above the endless bookshelves, he almost burst out laughing when he pictured his parents stuffed and mounted alongside the rest.

When, Jared?

“Soon, my impatient voice, soon,” he said

He interlaced his fingers.

“More importantly—who?”