

Ransom X

by

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Prologue

A group of men took their positions around a young woman. They wore colored costumes all shades of the rainbow. From afar with bright stage lights burning around them, this pinwheel effect made it look like the set of a children's show. Up close, however, it was pornography. Not the polite kind that connoisseurs of Playboy imagined the Hooters' girls engaging in on their off days. It was the kind that made them flinch, quickly look away, and then more often than not, look back again.

On the woman's face was a mask that looked like a boxer's training helmet. She was on all fours on top of a wooden crate, wrapped in a skimpy leatherette costume that suggested the sluttiest side of biker chic along with the sensibility of washable attire. This business was not the place for any natural materials or fibers.

A single wall-mounted speaker in the room crackled into life through a charge of static and feedback. The intercom cast out a voice with a sadistic quality, stripping words down into metallic fragments. If the voice had either warmth or breath when it left the lips of the person speaking into the microphone, it was long gone by the time it entered the room through the frayed mesh speaker cover. It sent chills down the girl's spine as she looked at the one-way glass separating her from the speaker in the control booth. She had come to think of the "Controller" as the local representative of Hell on earth.

"We're live in ten seconds." It didn't sound like a threat, but the men dressed in the costumes reacted as if it were.

They scurried into position around the girl, her eyes darting everywhere looking for a seam in reality where she might escape; it was impossible, like trying to focus on individual raindrops, never quite settling on one before the opportunity vanished. The men all wore vinyl coverings, painted onto their fat or slender, squat or tall bodies sinking into the folds or pulling over the muscles like a second skin. The purple one spoke to her in a growl.

"This is something in the business we call *sky diving*." They pulled her into a position where her legs and arms were spread out like a skydiver's, her stomach resting on the crate. "It's supposed to be a real trip, but real pleasurable for the men." A grin widened across his violet face. "Isn't that always the way it is?"

As soon as the intercourse started, he kicked the crate out from under her and she hung suspended, she was now 'sky diving'.

The yellow one spoke, "I actually heard from a girl that this wasn't that bad."

Green responded, "I don't care what your mother told you."

Their laughter filled the room. The girl's eyes began to water. The true professionals in the industry learned how to relieve the strain by shifting some of their weight onto the stomach of the man angled beneath, but this girl was no professional.

In fact, up until two weeks ago, she hadn't even seen images like the one she was currently caught up in, except on a television screen at a frat party in college. She was way out of place, out of her depth back then; how far and foreign from any depth did she feel now. She was an unwilling participant, having been abducted ten days before, as she was returning home from a rally. She had been protesting the unethical treatment of animals. The irony was not lost on this sharp graduate student. She tried to find further meaning in what was happening to her, but her mind quickly slipped back into the body's hell. The laughter all around her made her retreat further inside where her boiling anger was a ruby contrast to the fading white pale of her skin.

A barked command from the speaker, and the levity turned off, a tap gone suddenly dry as the metallic voice re-entered the room.

"Shut your fucking mouths - everyone who can. The audience doesn't want to see your mouths moving."

The controller knew what the audience wanted. He was the one behind the glass, the mastermind of a sustainable, profitable abduction scheme of which the financial rewards were approaching the point of unbelievable. He was also almost completely anonymous, or so he believed, as he sat behind a bank of monitors skimming the camera angles along the girl's body. He watched all of the monitors at once. He somehow always knew what men wanted to see, his lean fingers punched the keys on a control panel, switching between cameras and broadcasting the images to his waiting customers.

He glanced at an open web page where the action in front of him came streaming across the net on a ten second delay. This was not a simple abduction; it was a marketing enterprise. The tender was sex, fear and pain - who could possibly get enough? A glint in the eye of the controller hinted at an internal deception - he was careful

not to let himself identify which of the elements of his sex show he most preferred. The acid in his throat threatened to come up into his mouth when he spoke to the “actors” in the room. He kept them moving, just like the cameras. The audience loved change.

The broadcast he was producing was on transmit only and to protected sources, making the direct risk of discovery slight. He’d considered the statistical probability of getting caught and his estimates fed his arrogance. He wasn’t a kidnapper. The controller didn’t demand ransom for the girl’s return; there was no drop, and nothing to be traced back to them.

The ransom came from the accounts of the perverts of the world. Nobody ever went broke marketing to that segment of society. The controller punched up another website that marketed his video feed: live in progress for ten dollars or DVD compilation of 24 hours for fifteen. The webmaster had gone so far as to post the police report of the abduction alongside the target goal or ransom at which the girl would be released. A graphic indicated the ransom progress, and right now, she was at 65 percent. She’d started out strong, and sales from her hometown drove her into the territory of twenty percent after a few days, but business had slacked off recently.

The man in the booth knew why; the girl was angry, always requiring forced situations. There was only so much market for that. People wanted to see her change.

He zoomed the camera shot in on her eyes. She hadn’t changed since she’d walked in that room for the first time. Anger, unfiltered by the mask of civility, burned in her eyes. He was as tired of her anger as the customers were, but instead of being frustrated, he practically quivered with anticipation. If she did not meet her ransom, she would be his. He would give her every chance, put her in every position to make the required amount of money, but he secretly wanted her to fail.

Two hours later, the girl stood in the room apparently alone, when an arm reached into the pool of light and slipped under her shoulder. She looked at him and threw her arms around him. “Blue.”

Blue was not involved in the sex acts. For whatever reason, he was charged with taking care of the girls. He quieted her gently, adding, “You’re way behind dear, we need to do everything we can, there’s only two days left.” He saw her eyes sink inward, there was little left for her to give. He quickly corrected his course, “But we’ll do it. We’ll get you out early I predict.”

“Really?” She brightened, “Where am I?”

“Close.” A noise in the control room and she pulled closer to Blue, expecting the controller’s voice would uncoil and strike out at her like a snake. She kept her distance from the box speaker carving an arc shuffling toward the door.

“Does he ever come out?”

Blue looked at the mirrored glass with an odd look, “you don’t want him to.”

She stood between him and the mirror cutting off his reflection and replacing his face with hers inches in front of him. “Thank you – for taking care of me.” She looked for a moment every bit as beautiful and innocent as the girl next door, provided that one lives in a neighborhood where there is a girl next door who has the time and resources to be wholesome and idealistic. They took a few halting steps for the door, then her body shook with a new thought. “Will I ever meet him?” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and let the stray strands fall into her eyes.

Blue clicked his teeth like he was urging on a horse and smiled.

As it turned out, she was fifteen percent below target on the last day of her captivity, and she did get to meet the man in the control room.

Her body was found two days later after an anonymous tip. Her eyes remained fixed on an imaginary point far beyond where they could have seen, features etched in disbelief. Still beautiful, but angry no longer.

Chapter 1 - The Key

A sudden urgency pulsed through Legacy's body; it was like someone had called his number and he had been waiting for a long time. He wasn't in a waiting room; the stark but serviceable area around him was his basement office at the FBI building in Alexandria, Virginia. It was 4:30 and almost time to leave. The sharp feeling reasserted itself, confirming that there was something that needed his attention. He clicked his knuckles together in an act of concentration he'd used longer than he could remember. His fists came together and his muscular forearms began a contest. The stress on the joints in his hands was audible. His eyes searched over the desk. He hadn't followed up on the one case that was farthest from the trash.

The brass nameplate on the door said Martin Legacy, Special Services, FBI. But that did very little to describe the man who had occupied the basement room for just over five years.

A better indicator of his personality might be the music that perpetually played in the background: a dissonant ringing that churned on for hours until unexpectedly it would erupt into a beautifully crafted and complex melody before falling apart again. The hallways around his office were famous for complaints of just having to pass his doorway and hear the racket – the workers couldn't believe that anyone would choose to be around that cacophony, day in and day out.

The tapes were from a collection of unedited studio recordings with savant musicians. It was something that one might find playing briefly in a psychology conference. The patients playing the music had a condition that pushed them so far into their own minds that they communicated solely through music and organized their thoughts into tones, melodies and cadence. Legacy claimed that the noise did two things: it helped him think, and it kept others away. The flat, expressionless way he would relate these two results gave nothing away as to which he valued more.

Legacy scanned his broad mahogany desk searching for the item that he'd been waiting for months. An old paracentric key was the only tangible connection between living criminal and victims long dead.

A case as cold as the late autumn breeze that blew down the streets of northern Virginia had one last gasp of air because of Legacy. The crime had been committed over twelve years ago. At that time, Legacy had been in the military, leading a much different life than now. The rigid discipline of his former life had almost completely vanished.

Legacy considered organization in its traditional form to be a hindrance to his pursuit of understanding human motives, and even when pushed to organization by the necessity of his job, his efforts were less than inspired. He had marked out five sections on his desk with masking tape; each area was home to a wide array of pictures, police documents, press clippings and evidence from a single case plucked from the archives. He kept his least favorite case to the far left side of his desk and had been known to sweep an entire docket into an abnormally wide trashcan, which resided just below.

A special janitor was assigned to the office, so all of the papers that landed in the bin were processed and returned to evidence files. Legacy had no concept of the web of special treatment that surrounded him, but his breakthrough moments were enough to justify any unreasonable fuss. His genius made the world around him bend and flex to meet his needs.

After exasperating seconds of complete helpless searching, he saw something foreign on top of his phone, something he'd never dream of using.

A goldenrod sticky note read, "Check your inbox and enjoy the coffee."

The inbox. How could that possibly be of use to anyone? Legacy never checked his inbox; the interdepartmental, departmental, cross-agency, internal external memo pipeline was a direct connection into the inane bureaucracy he considered functionally useless. Yet today, sitting on top of a stack of papers, most of them marked "urgent" was an envelope marked in block letters LOCKSMITH.

Legacy gently slid the key out of the manila housing and felt the weight on his fingers. The original he'd formed in his mind, long ago, would have been brass. The duplicate that pressed against his skin was a clean silver-plated composite metal. Legacy was prone to distraction. His mind wanted to debate the origin of the metal that he weighed in his hand, but then, he heard a single beep of his watch and came back to the present moment. Five o'clock— not much time.

How had the delivery of this key slipped past him during the day? He quickly went over all of the comings and goings into his office that day. At eleven twenty-five, the regional director had entered and asked him something; it hadn't registered as important; he hadn't even replied. The director got impatient and left seven minutes later. One twenty-five, someone had entered and spoke to him, couldn't recall what. Random comings and goings of no distinction until someone had entered and set a cup of coffee, prepared exactly how he liked it on the desk. He picked up the cup and tasted the jet-black liquid, now cold, and deduced that the key must have come in with the coffee. There had been no other interruptions during the day. The internal phone had rung, but Legacy never answered the phone. His taste buds worked over the coffee until he decided that it was exactly room temperature, 72 degrees, and that enough sugar had fallen out of the solution to fix a time on the delivery. The key had been there for just over four hours.

A melody emerged from the piano clanging in the background interrupting his train of thought, a sweet harmonic sound that died as suddenly as it came to life. Legacy turned to the tape player with an uncharacteristic look of complete engagement.

He thought about how in the regular world people respond to people and leave background music in a place of inconsequence. Legacy's experience was the opposite. He thought of all the people who had passed through his office today. Background music held his full attention, and the sounds that most people placed great importance upon were akin to the stroke of a graphite point across an interoffice memo. They meant little or nothing at all.

The key Legacy was holding in his hand was where worlds overlapped. It meant the end of a search for a killer who left absolutely no trail of evidence back to himself, and it meant the end of Legacy's involvement in the case. It was the precipice of discovery, and even set back four hours by the interference of the inbox, it felt immediate.

As Legacy reached across the table, the cuffs on his suit started to ride up revealing two burn scars on top of his wrists. These were the cause of many discussions, and even appeared in his psych file. He always answered any questions with a blunt statement "they were self inflicted" and depending on who was asking he'd add "I've put others through worse, much worse."

His hand found what it was looking for. He pulled out an old rusted sea captain's lock from a plastic bag. On the label included with the lock it stated, "Slain Couple, Barbaric Discovery Bound and Gagged"

He paused, thinking about how barbarians never would waste their time on such deviant behavior. Barbarians had a clean, brutal way of life that didn't offer much time for perverse fantasy. The minute a barbarian started planning the elaborate death of two people, he'd get his throat slit for thinking small.

Fifteen minutes passed. The key was now warm in his left hand, and the lock had rusted imperceptibly more. He needed to put his wandering mind to better use, a quick review. Legacy looked again at the folder that contained the documents on the case. A note on the front page in clear, official handwriting read, "this one isn't going to be easy." He began to draw his hands together; the key would either fit the lock or not, and it would be over. He looked at the clock and started packing up the file.

He remembered vaguely where it all belonged, a long filing cabinet marked "Fridge."

The Fridge was the area where the coldest cases got their last official stamp of final review. They certainly never got solved. That was until Legacy came to preside over it. The resolution rate was something over ten percent for his predecessor, and that figure included cases that were resolved by confession or reclassification while sitting in the Fridge. Not all crimes stay crimes, almost five percent become accidents, or acts without any consequence. The regional director, prone to simplifying, called those cases AWACs.

The chief had explained the lingo to him on the first day, chuckling and snorting through what seemed to be a hilarious jargon-driven FBI anecdote.

Legacy had had to pretend he was listening, and resorted to resolute nods to convey attention; it was irrelevant to him what others called things or how things came to be. Each case was its own chaotic tune, played over a simple constant rhythm.

A silence blossomed as the chief waited for Legacy's reaction. Nothing. Legacy should have known better and laughed, but he didn't have much to laugh about at the time. The chief knew that Legacy was a special case, sent down from the central office. He probably forgave Legacy's lack of interest on that day because the clothes covering him were the same he'd worn for the entire first month of his tenure at the Alexandria office - as gossip claimed, the clothes that he wore to his wife's funeral. Actually, Legacy owned several identical dark suits and that their perception wasn't quite true, but Legacy recognized that it was quite true that he had never completely taken off the clothes he'd worn to his wife Laura's funeral.

Now five years later, key in hand, Legacy couldn't muster a sign of satisfaction as the key reached the lock.

CLICK, it skated on the rusty metallic surface. There it stayed. A furl on Legacy's brow, it wasn't like him to be this wrong. He turned the lock to the light and realized that the keyhole was covered with a brass swivel guard that had to be moved out of the way before the key could be inserted. He'd studied the lock for hours, a thousand

times in his mind, and could have described it down to the last detail with his eyes closed, but this close to the end of the day, Legacy always lost concentration.

The door opened. A woman's voice spilled into the room, commanding and distant: she sounded like she was hailing a cab. The interruption didn't sound the least bit important. Legacy slid the guard away from the keyhole, and that's when someone grabbed his hand and pressed their own palm up against it, shaking it professionally.

"Hello."

Legacy looked up, something about her impatient tone didn't seem to mix with the perfectly applied make-up, and cropped black hair framing her fresh young face. She had a stiff, official posture. Legacy didn't need to hear another word. She was a product of the academy, down from Washington on orders: ambition and charisma shared signature marks on the defining lines on her figure. It took him no time to realize that whatever she said next was going to be a lie.

"I said, 'Hello'."

Well, maybe he would have to wait. Legacy had perfected a completely expressionless expression in his days in the army, and he was wearing it now. She continued.

"I'm here to help." There it was. "I'm your new partner."

"I had an old partner?" Legacy quipped.

"Agent Traxel has been your partner for three years." She pointed to a desk across from Legacy's. "He packed up over a month ago."

"He wasn't my partner."

Wagner ran a curious eye over the papers on Legacy's desk. "I know they let you do whatever you want around here—"

"Listen, if introducing yourself will finish this conversation, just do it and move on."

Wagner took an awkward step backward, like she felt the force of his words flow into silence, even the piano clanking from the tape player took a rest as if it were in some silent complicity with the moment. Wagner cocked her head and spoke.

"I'm Agent Spears. Brittney Spears."

Legacy regained his momentum, "Well Agent Spears —"

"What kind of music sounds like that? I mean I've got a cousin who plays like that, and I certainly wouldn't reproduce it amplified."

Legacy found himself answering the question before taking offense at the remark. Later, he realized he could have ended the conversation right there.

"You have to be patient, this tape was produced by a boy who can't effectively tie his shoes."

The rattle became a loud pounding, it sounded just like -

Agent Spears chimed in, "Is that him banging his head against the keyboard?"

A voice in the background of the recording asked if they should stop the recording.

Wagner took quick steps around the desk and scanned Legacy's tape collection. Each tape was labeled with an instrument, a name, recording time and the word "savant".

Wagner continued, "Is this what you're going to listen to all the time? My God, who could listen to a glockenspiel for 14 hours?"

Legacy looked up and found himself staring into Wagner's deeply sarcastic green eyes. He was compelled to answer from a rusty internal social reflex. "Recordings like this remind me how much can be hidden under layers of resistance, real or unreal."

Her words had the graceful arc of razor wire "Are you a recording, too?"

Legacy looked her up and down and then let his eyes settle on her shoes.

"The music has the additional benefit of keeping civil people away."

"Considering this particularly charming reception, you must be beating them off with a stick."

Legacy smiled inside, the tumblers in his brain had finally clicked, but he remained visibly unchanged as he regarded Wagner. He sat in his chair and looked straight ahead. The words were directed at Agent Wagner's waist.

"Now, are we almost finished?"

It wasn't a question. She wouldn't, however, give up.

"Is that the key? Does it fit?" Wagner continued. "They want me to learn from you. I tried being polite earlier when I delivered the key, it didn't work." The phone rang, Legacy didn't move. Wagner fixed on Legacy's eyes, which remained totally still, as if the sound didn't even register.

"Aren't you going to get that?" Pointing to the cradle attached to a curling wire that brought the phone into Legacy's world.

"What if it's a call from your daughter?"

The word "daughter" brought Legacy back into the world where people pick up phones and listen to other people's voices.

"I have a cell phone." It was a reflex; he'd trained himself to always immediately respond to anything concerning his daughter. He wondered, as he continued, if he'd been trapped into a conversation by Agent Spears or if coincidence was keeping the communication lines open. A part of him wanted to believe that it was pure manipulation on the young agent's part. He could respect that. Coincidence was the cowardly way the world kept things in motion. The notion that he might have wasted ten minutes on coincidence angered him.

"I haven't tried the key yet. I don't answer questions; those are my rules." Legacy found a crumb of sympathy crunching under his foot. "Ask for a transfer, today. I am your superior, right?" She nodded, "You are dismissed."

Legacy had no way of knowing that her orders had come from the very top; there was no way to change her assignment. Something about his tone said that she would have to set the place on fire to get his attention again. She had one last ploy.

The agent's cell phone rang, a melody of Bach she'd downloaded off the internet. Plunging her hand into her coat pocket, she headed for the hallway, reaching the door. Legacy's voice called out from the office, unexpected, forceful.

"Wait!" Legacy was standing. Whatever had caught his attention, it was now more than merely a passing interest. "Who are you?"

Wagner silenced the phone. "I told you –"

"I know, you're Brittney Spears. Listen, my daughter is fourteen, I noticed the humor when you introduced yourself."

"Does anyone really notice humor? I think you either get it, or you don't."

"That's the ringtone my daughter chose for my phone."

She took a step back into the office. "Look, I have an important assignment. It's only my second assignment and the first didn't end up well, so this is it for my career at age 23."

"I went through the same thing at 29."

"Did you go through it as a woman?"

Legacy hadn't expected that; a hint of interest lit his eyes.

"I see you are beginning to get me."

Legacy paused and put all aspects of her behavior since she had entered the room into an equation. An invisible timeline of events dangled in the periphery of his thoughts, and like a three-dimensional puzzle, all he needed to do was focus his eyes on an indistinct point in front of him. He squinted as his mind went through a series of approximations that usually led him to a definite conclusion. When his eyes focused again on the room, Wagner was standing in front of him, holding the key; he could tell that she wanted him to offer up the lock. She was unlike anyone who had knocked on his door in years – everybody wanted something from Legacy. She did too, but it was clear that Agent Wagner understood that asking was the surest way not to get an answer in Legacy's realm.

A single beep from Legacy's watch made him flinch. "Is that your wake up call?" Agent Wagner asked in a surly tone. Legacy checked his watch, and the time indicated that he had to go. In a quiet, ritual fashion, Legacy stood and prepared to leave. He blew past Wagner with the same even stride that took him to the door.

Legacy knew everything about Wagner from the moment he'd first seen her. She was the type who believed in laws, rules, and the distinct pleasure of being right by pointing to a code in a book and winning an argument without a thought wasted in contemplation of a solution. She could not be stopped in climbing the ladder in the official ranks of the bureau. He was equally sure that she had ammunition in her gun that would stop him, but short of that, he was leaving. But at the door, the room went silent. The plug to his cassette player had been ripped from the wall and Wagner stood holding the chord like a prize, daring him to notice.

Legacy stopped, still facing the door in front of him. "Plug it back in before you go."

"Aren't you going to try this key? It could put a killer in jail tonight."

"Nothing in the killer's world changes by my waiting for morning. My daughter expects me home at six."

Legacy took another step, Wagner's shoulders rolled forward in defeat. Legacy paused outside the door, his voice echoed from the hall.

"Come in early, read everything in the case file, I'll be in at nine and you can tell me whether the key is going to fit, in your opinion. Until you know everything about the case, the solution is just another answer in a sea of questions."

Wagner heard Legacy's footsteps trail off over the concrete floors of the substructure. She walked slowly over to the desk and spread her arms in a pose of victory. She plugged the cassette player back in and, at the same moment, a stab of melodic perfection erupted from the speakers. It was like the tape was responding to her personal breakthrough, and it was gorgeous.

She flipped out her cell phone.

At the sound of a connection she spoke, “I’m in.”
The beauty of the tune pouring from the player collapsed into sour dissonance.

* * * *

Chapter 2 - The Talk

Not far away, at Legacy's destination, a study session of the highest priority was going on. Three teenage girls "studied" with second-year French books open flat in front of them.

"Nothing leaves this room, I mean it." Lane wasn't going to budge when it came to confidentiality. "I'll have your dad go federal on anyone that tells."

Giggles, shrieks and gasps, the recurring staples of the adolescent conversation rang down the halls of the large turn-of-the-century apartment. Lane leveled a weighted stare at Chessapeake, or Chess, a bright young girl who, like the true masters of her namesake, had an intellect and intensity that asserted itself onto the world in a playful way. As carefree as she was, she had a competitive streak in her that was totally her father: she liked to win. Her emotions shone out of her eyes unfiltered by any of the baggage of adulthood—beaming beacons, ice blue, lighting up with the promise of a secret about to be told.

Trisha rushed into the silence like running water pulled a by fifteen-year-old's hormonal gravity, "Let your dad interrogate me any day, please."

"Your dad is hot. Deal with it." Lane switched into a civil tone; her father was a lawyer.

"It's not her fault." Trisha's exuberance could be explained, argued, and acquitted.

Chess scowled at her friends, but the pinched expression could not possibly hold. Chess had a natural warm smile. She'd practiced it in the mirror for hours as a child. At fourteen she had perfected a series of facial expressions that could neutralize the sternest teacher at ten paces. The smile that Lane's comments about her dad had brought to life was filled with retribution and pride. Chess let her fingers dial an invisible phone.

"Pick up the truth phone."

Lane picked up an invisible receiver. "I've got it." Chess let her words trickle out pointedly. "My father is not the subject of our conversation, n'est-ce pas? He is not the boy you made out with in the audio isolation cubes in French class is he? Shouldn't we be talking about him?"

"Non, non, non. Il etait un garcon; ton pere est un vrai homme."

Chess stood and let her fingers run along the wallpaper as she strolled around Lane. There was little beyond the walls of the lovingly decorated, somehow frozen-in-time quality to the apartment. Despite the loss of her mother suffered by she and her father, the walls had echoed more of her laughter than the floors had drunk her tears in the years she'd spent growing up here. Her thoughts slowed her gait until Lane was ready to burst waiting for her to talk. Chess used the anticipation to let out with:

"Est-ce que ton petit-ami – grand?"

The delivery was perfect, "Is your little friend, big?" a squeal of laughter blanketed the room, and for a moment there were no French textbooks, there was no nation of France at all. The world disappeared outside and the three teenage girls wrapped themselves in a blanket of nonsense. The embroidery at the top read 'best friends forever' and it was warm underneath.

After a moment it was time to get back to the task, but the nonsense hadn't passed.

"Your top is dipping open. Or are you trying to impress us with your cleavage?"

Chess looked down; she was wearing a sweater, not a single cleave in sight.

"Actually, I was talking about myself." It was Lane that was blossoming quickly and her private school outfit had been modified to invite notice.

Trisha threw a quick signal at Lane and both of them checked the clock. "Why do you keep checking the time?"

"Pas de raison." Lane's watch beeped.

Chess saw that it was approaching six. Both of the girls were looking at the front door. They knew it would open soon. A wall clock started to chime and at exactly six the latches on the door began sliding open. Trisha's

fingers twisted nervously in her hair. Three clicks, and the door opened. Martin walked in pulling his coat off in one motion.

“Dad.”

He lit up hearing Chess' voice. It was a total transformation, like every bit of social energy he could gather was for her. His baby girl brought out every ounce of charm Legacy had – wooden, yet still a thousand times softer than the cold steel he so closely carried to his heart.

“Bonjour!” Trisha chimed in quickly. She extended her hand and Martin watched it for a moment before awkwardly shaking it. The father checked off his daughter with a glance.

“We’re studying French.” Chess was used to filling in the gaps with Legacy.

“Really?”

“Oui. Actually, it’s bonsoir!” Lane walked up to Martin. “And they kiss hello, in France.” She leaned in and stole a cautious peck on his cheek.

Martin turned immediately to his daughter, awkwardness hung in the air until he spoke.

“Well, if we are going to adopt French customs from now on, you can’t give me any trouble for doing this.” He kissed both of Chess' cheeks then scrubbed the top of her head with his knuckles with a half-smile on his face.

Trisha swooned audibly; Lane pushed the back of Chess' sweater. “Your daughter has a question to ask, monsieur.”

“I was going to wait until dinner, but I guess that this is the best time.” She shifted weight back and forth on her brown penny loafers.

“Whatever it is, yes.” Martin tapped her on the head with the newspaper he carried in his hand, then swiveled and headed down the hall.

“I want to go on a date, a triple date with my best friends.”

Martin stopped, a slow glance over his shoulder, “With boys?”

“That’s what a date is, dad.”

As dry as the martini that was being delayed because of this conversation darted the response.

“Fine, you know the deal.”

“That’s not fair, it puts all the responsibility on me.”

Lane chimed in, “what deal?”

Martin resumed a measured step toward the study door at the end of the hallway. He intoned his answer to the girls.

“If Chess chooses a boy, and he hurts her, I’ll end up in jail for what comes next.” The hum continued from Legacy; he loved being home, where the threats stayed in the family. “Make sure he’s the right boy, a mature choice, and we’ll be fine.” When Martin reached the end of the hall, he closed the study door behind him, cutting off any reply.

A truck could be driven through the silence, but it wouldn’t be loud enough to drown the peals of laughter that burst out of Trisha and Lane the moment the door latched behind Legacy.

It wasn’t ridicule, but Chess blushed a deep red in front of her friends. Chess charged after her father, “I’m going to talk to him. He will say yes.”

“He already said yes.”

“He will say yes the way I want him to say yes.” She crossed the floor, clop clop clop, all the way to the study. The door closed behind her.

Trisha swooned staring at the study door, “My dad would never go to jail for me.”

Music was coming from a stereo near a high-backed chair. The rattle of ice in a glass and the radiator at a steady volume alternating between hiss and click drowned out the noise of the door latching, or at least they should have. She had to catch him off balance.

Three careful paces into the room, Legacy spoke. A deep voice, “Is this boy the one you’re going to marry?”

“Dad!” Chess screeched. “Are you trying to humiliate me? Those are my friends, they all date.”

She realized the weakness of her argument and saw her chances slipping away, but then her mind landed on a trump card.

“You can’t keep treating me like a child. If you do I’ll resent you later –”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I read it in a magazine.”

“I can’t argue with that. I relent.”

Chess started for the door, victorious. The only thing missing was lip-gloss, and she dug into her pocket to make the necessary re-application before greeting her friends with a smile.

Chess was only steps away from the door.

Legacy thought back to his former training at special ops, and the days when nobody turned their backs on him. He was a black eagle interrogator, the top one percent of the top one percent: meaning he got almost every one of his “clients” to break. Very few of the methods he had used in the past would be appropriate for a fourteen-year-old girl that he loved so dearly. Still...

SQUEEEK. His chair produced a painfully drawn out creak that stopped Chess in her tracks. The message was delivered: it wasn’t over.

“If you are ready for dating, then you’re ready for the talk.”

Chess willed her feet to bolt out the door, but they stood still. “What talk?” she asked.

He looked over his glass waiting – Chess circled the comment like it was bait, not willing to commit. Her eyes slid to a sidelong glance.

“Every girl,” he continued haltingly “who is dating, needs to have a frank conversation with their dad about all of the things that go on between men and women –”

“You mean?”

Legacy tilted his head to the side neither confirming nor denying the content of the conversation waiting on her next words.

“I’m not ready.” She looked unabashedly horrified, defeated, and, totally wigged out. Legacy turned away. She muttered on her way out. “This isn’t over, I’ll be back when I – argh - I may never date.”

When the door clicked back in place, shutting behind Chess, Legacy’s relief couldn’t be contained, “Good,” he thought.

He’d bought himself maybe six more months of childhood. He looked at a picture on his desk of Chess in the sixth grade. She had her mother’s smile. He never wanted to lose her. Everything she did warmed his heart to its current temperature, livable.

At the same time, Chess brought with her a sense of loss that stung him to the core. She was so much like her mother.

Chapter 3 - Ask

“BZZZ” Agent Wagner let the phone rattle along her metal desk. She’d turned the ringer off, but it hardly mattered. The vibration traveled through her fingertips and woke her from a moment of deep concentration. Wagner often substituted deep concentration for sleep. “BZZZ” this time the phone moved toward the edge of the desk. Wagner lurched forward to keep it from dropping into a wastepaper basket. The caller ID read out 14 voice mails at 9:02 AM. “Totally unacceptable,” she thought so forcefully that it echoed, and she wondered for a second if she’d said something aloud. Wagner had made 54 phone calls over the night with explicit instructions to get back to her by nine.

Local law enforcement professionals know better than to leave an FBI agent waiting. She wasn’t going to start thinking about reprisals until ten, but there were going to be follow-up calls, and these would be conferenced with their direct superior to get their attention.

Her cell phone suddenly burst into a polyphonic song. Only one number had been programmed to ring through and it wasn’t her mother. She stiffened up like a soldier coming to attention. She scolded herself for the reaction. People who want to lead never should allow themselves to act like – well to act like a follower. She was not a follower, and she was in fact in charge of her entire class. Wagner had decided early in her cadet days that she would be the first female FBI director, and that it would happen before the age of fifty. Probably she overcompensated when answering the phone with sudden bluntness.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Then click. She’d just hung up on the principal, or in her case the deputy director. She batted her eyes quickly until moisture gleamed in the corners, then she licked her lips, an old college trick to keep men looking from her eyes to her mouth. It kept their attention to what she was thinking and what she was saying, and that is the way she liked it.

There were plenty of reasons to look elsewhere and very few reasons to be disappointed. The stares of men had followed her since her second year of training. She’d been a late bloomer and she hadn’t grown into her 5 ft. 7 inch frame until well past graduation. Wagner didn’t give a second thought to her adult appearance; it was a tool, and she maintained it with artful precision. Something inside drove her to keep a sharp edge on every tool that she had. Her face hardly showed an outward trace that she’d slept only two hours a night for over a week. Her haircut, architectural and perfect, provided a jet-black frame around a face filled with unflinching gunmetal resolve, cold and accurate. Her professional attire fit close to an athletic body. Wagner’s eyes were her real assets. On the job they seemed to stare beyond her surroundings, like they were in competition with anything that might confine her.

Natural light cast a blue tint after filtering through the dual pane windows of one of the most secure buildings in the country. It made the center atrium and social center of the complex feel more like an aquarium. Wagner looked longingly at the coffee cart line before pressing forward into busy hallways, confidently navigating the honeycomb of dividers and private offices that stood between her and the director’s large corner office. She wasn’t going to let herself overreact this time. She was comfortable, in her element, and ready for anything he could throw at her. Or so she thought. It took only one statement from the director and about three steps inside the door from Wagner before she found her composure challenged.

“How in the hell can you do this to me, Bradley?” Not her best opening line.

Wagner was shouting from just inside the entryway at a tall, dignified man three times her rank, twice her age. “You’re putting me in left field.”

Bradley Wilkes had never tolerated crap from underlings. He was the one that the cadets called Ice. He turned toward Wagner eyes ablaze. “Call me Bradley again, Agent.”

“I’m sorry Director Wilkes-”

“That’s not much better.” He said between clenched teeth.

“I don’t want to be pulled out of the action. I’m making progress, I keep developing leads –” She changed her tactic, “I want to stay close to the team. I’m learning so much just working around you.”

Wilkes’ smile vanished before it reached the production stage. He seemed to take great satisfaction handing over a file. Wagner knew it had to contain some kind of punishment. “Here’s the file, take the train down and meet his supervisor this afternoon.”

With resignation, Wagner let her fingers close around the heavy envelope. It had a picture on the cover of a young man in field fatigues. In the photo, he leaned close into a man tied to a chair. The young interrogator had an

expression that was completely unreadable, disturbing in its complete blankness, and the look in the eyes of the man being questioned was pure fear.

Wagner broke her fixation on the photo with the sound of the door opening behind her. She looked up to see the director welcoming in a visitor, "Bob, come in, you've met Ashley right?"

Wagner dropped her folder and stammered. "Your honor."

"Is this one of your daughters? I can't imagine one of your girls would be that polite, or come to think of it carry weapons in a shoulder, and ankle strap." He identified the positions of Wagner's concealed weapons despite the fact that there seemed to be no visual evidence. "Must be one of the younger agents. I'm Robert Doorner."

Doorner hadn't visited their office in over three years. It had to be about the case. There must have been a new wrinkle. She realized suddenly that she was standing dumbfounded in front of the director of the FBI. He was about to draw back his lonely extended hand when Agent Wagner grabbed it suddenly, not remembering that her cell phone was still in her palm. A sudden vibration shot up both of their arms. Doorner didn't show a sign of surprise; he merely commented. "Might have been too quick to judgment."

"May we have the room, Agent?" She studied the stiff, precise, military stance and tone. The news he was about to give wasn't good. Wagner would have still put up her pension to stay in the room and hear it.

"Yes Deputy Director, sir." Wagner collected herself and her folder; she gave Wilkes one last questioning look before leaving the office, something big was up. The door closed behind her.

The meeting between the men started on a light note.

"She's not much older than my daughter. She looks pretty young to be reporting directly to you Bradley." He noted.

"I just gave her some distance. She lobbied hard to get onto this case, and considering how little progress we've made—" Wilkes replied, setting up the director for the low expectations that he was peddling.

The director's brow creased unexpectedly, Wilkes had known him for over twenty years and a display of emotion was almost unheard of. This was the man whose stony demeanor had earned him the nickname "flat line." He was rumored not to have a pulse. Doorner hid his disappointment so quickly that the expression might have easily been explained as a flicker of the light. His voice presented a gruff charm.

"I know the type, give them a life raft when the ship's going down and they look at you like you handed them an anchor."

"Exactly," Wilkes studied the heavily lined face of the operations director; he had been through public scandals, triumphs and years of unnoticed success. He didn't want to answer the question that came next.

"So Bradley, is the ship sinking?"

"I'm sending her to meet with Legacy."

Director Doorner sighed, his question had been answered, and it was clear that he wasn't pleased. "So the lifeboats are in the water. I'll tell you if this next one goes down it's going to blow the lid on this operation sky high."

THUD THUD THUD. Boxing gloves dug into worn canvas. Wagner worked the bag over like a blood quarrel between her and the center mass. She was going to have to do something she didn't like to do today.

THUD THUD THUD. She couldn't control it and it couldn't be out of her control. There was a life at stake. She wanted a couple more hits before she changed into her travel clothes. Her travel clothes were indistinguishable from her work clothes, but she separated them out as a completely different category in her own mind.

THUD THUD THUD. Let a little more sweat seep into the hair.

THUD THUD THUD. Her life had no room for frustration, no room for the variables, uncertainty principles, or randomness. This detour wouldn't change her course, whoever he was. He would have to bend.

Thud. Wagner entered the Virginia office, marble stonework over the front portal depicting a woman holding a flag in rippling, curving extension. Wagner was willing to bet that the woman in the pose would rather be holding a cup containing a triple cappuccino, like the one that was in her hand. She flashed a badge at the front desk and asked to see Regional Director Sam Bailey. A fresh-faced clerk was assigned to escort her. He looked out of place in the navy blazer and tie.

"I'm Dill." He said in a lazy voice, staring directly at the pinstripes on her chest. "Um, follow me, Agent—" Wagner said nothing. He finished the sentence in his mind. She walked through the metal detectors, confused when they didn't go off.

In a relaxed tone, Dill explained that the equipment had broken down about a week prior and that they still acted as if it worked to deter the people who might bring in a gun or a knife.

They got into the elevator and went to the top, the third floor. Cracked masonry tiles made a line down the center of the corridor. The line of broken tiles led to the door of Sam Bailey.

The clerk opened the door and entered without knocking. Bailey was on the phone and nodded pleasantly at the interruption. He silently offered something wrapped in tin foil to the clerk, a slice of homemade bread.

“Blackcurrent banana bread, my wife’s newest specialty.” He shielded the phone to explain. “Honey, I have to go. I’ll get their impressions, for sure.”

He put down the phone, smiled up at Wagner. Wagner felt like she’d been dropped into the Deep South even though she was only twenty miles out of Washington. The capitol of the confederacy was only fifty miles away from the capitol of the union, and yet the division of attitude was still wider than stubborn geographical distance would allow. Wagner stared at Bailey across a gorge so wide and so deep that she felt like if she’d stepped forward she might lose her balance and fall into the black current bread abysmal.

The clerk broke the silence “Tell Cecille, it’s the best yet.”

“I’ll let her know.”

The clerk backed out of the room, using every moment to stare at Wagner.

Wagner scanned the room, looking for some opening for their conversation. A series of framed fly-fishing images were against the far wall, a solid body iron cast safe sat behind the desk, it had the original FBI logo painted in raised gold leaf on the crown of the lock. The only window had blinds shut.

“It’s a southern custom to flatter the cooking of a man’s wife. It’s like winding a watch, doesn’t make much sense to anything but the insides, but it does keep things moving smoothly.”

Wagner put out her hand. “How about a handshake?”

“Excuse the crumbs.” He shook her hand then pointed to a chair. Wagner sat.

Bailey looked her up and down. “So, what’s your game plan for getting him on the case?”

“It’s orders from Washington.”

Bailey couldn’t contain a long high-pitched chuckle. “Have you read his file?”

Wagner had, on the train from Washington. She knew that Legacy had taken over the Cold Cases Division five years ago. He had taken a dead-end job and made it into modern mythology, an untapped niche. Cold case review was a formality before Legacy walked into the position. After the percentage of cases closed jumped, Legacy had become a bit of a magnet for unsolved crime. Bailey now received requests for his assistance around the clock.

“Unsolvable crime is a better way to put it. Everything that hit a dead end suddenly had a previously unseen outlet once Legacy started looking into it.” Bailey took pride in the fact that his backwater office had a bit of star quality in the basement. “He thinks different than us, Agent.”

“How?”

He walked to the window searching for an explanation. “It’s like that spider web on that stem, see it?” Wagner nodded. “You and I might notice a pattern, develop ideas about the geometry, the location of flies, how the prey became trapped by the sticky threads—”

Bailey turned back to Wagner, and in a warm tone. “Legacy would look at that and tell you which strand the spider made first and which repair he made last. That gives him insight into where the next fly will be caught. His web is oh so tangled.”

“I bet he doesn’t have to use conditioner either, and his hair is still full and manageable.” Her voice was dry, snide.

“He developed his own method, instead of tracing clues back to the criminal, he projects his theories forward. He creates a profile of what the criminal will do based on what they have already done or who they should be. He got his psy-ops training as an interrogator.”

“And he was pretty good. His files indicate that he was considered the top talker in the FBI.”

“He was a lot better than that, miss. I still think that someone at your office and other offices around Washington are praying that he’ll finish his rehabilitation down here and come back to work. The Army says he could crack stone by glancing at it.” Bailey lit a cigarette and blew smoke out the window. “Still legal in Virginia.” He gazed out the window posed like a statue. He had an indifferent way about himself. It was easy to see how he’d gotten to the top. He’d never asked anyone for permission to do anything. Wagner studied that part of him, because it was the only part worth her time.

Bailey seemed to have a perpetual inward smile, an amusement with himself that made everything he did seem annoying. The satisfaction that he took in being watched made Wagner choke on the cold breeze that blew in from the north. It smelled like vanity mixed with stale apples and tobacco. She cleared her throat.

“I’m just here to hand him an assignment then walk him through the work. Holed up in the basement you say?” She was ready to leave. Wagner turned on her heels and headed for the door.

Bailey was used to subordinates that tolerated him and waited patiently while he was grandstanding. He nearly dropped his cigarette as he tried to cut her off. “You’ll need a strategy or he won’t even acknowledge you’re there.”

Wagner was too quick to the door, and with a raised eyebrow and confident smirk she breezed through the doorway. She would get his attention. She had a reputation too, nothing got past her and to prove it she added one last comment. “You should have used a four-wheel dolly when you moved that safe in, spread the weight.” She walked over broken tiles to the elevator. She pressed the button.

Bailey's raised voice echoed down the hall calling in a sugary superior tone. "At least change your shoes." Change my shoes thought Wagner? Then she remembered, she was in Virginia; people didn't have to make sense here, and if they made sense even some of the time, they were put in a position of power.

Bing! The elevator arrived at the lowest level. A wash of green tinted light made the dingy cream-colored walls look like they were somehow bent. In a trick of uniform light, flat surfaces can appear continuous over long stretches and the eye cannot appreciate that kind of continuity. Rather, it will instinctively strain to make something else: bending elevator walls. Wagner's shoes made a clicking sound. The buzz of the lights and a faint rumble of the furnace accompanied her like a choir. The sad thing was, the music was about to take a turn for the worse. She opened the door that had lettering on the inset frosted windows: Cold Cases, Room BB2, Martin Legacy.

She straightened her suit, took a deep breath, and stepped into the room. The bad attitude that had been cultivated over a morning of disappointments would see her through; she was sure of it. This would be done, and she'd be headed back to Washington by mid-day.

Twenty minutes later she was standing in Bailey's office. Her lips quivered in visible fury.

Bailey's voice was sticky sweet, barely veiling his expectation. "Didn't say nothing? Didn't even raise his head? Probably thought you were the secretary, the women around here wear shoes like that." Bailey left a lazy ring finger extended toward her shoes, raising his gaze and seeing if Wagner would rebound. Wagner met his stare and after a moment of internal calculation and then she smiled at him. It was a hollow smile, but appearances were all that Bailey respected anyway.

"I need to get to know more about Legacy. May I sit? May I have a piece of that delicious bread now?"

A beaming response from Bailey told her that she'd behaved properly. "Wouldn't that be the way to start off?"

Wagner took notes for the better part of an hour. She learned of Legacy's rise through Special Forces to become one of the most heralded field officers in the history of the American Military complex. He was what they called an "information quantity," which was the title given to the top interrogation specialists. These people were considered so vital during the cold war that they were the only agents shared by CIA, NSA, military and FBI. In intelligence circles it was well known that there were three people who got called when information had to be extracted. Two of them belonged to the other side, or sides, Gerhard Shulz worked out of Egypt, he'd shattered men made out of steel. Chrysa Valcheck, better known as the Chrysanthemum, was a medical doctor, organic chemist and sympathetic ear for the Ukraine secret service. It was rumored that people that entered her office ultimately begged for the opportunity to tell their secrets and that she would only let them tell after she was finished breaking their mind into a thousand pieces.

Legacy's ability to get information out of human sources was based on a technique that became known as Hollow Man. It was a modification of a common technique used where the interrogator assembles a series of educated guesses then presents them as facts depending upon the reaction of the person in custody. His intuition had such an overlap with reality that it was hard for anyone to keep a secret as he drilled so far into the bedrock of fact on which they were standing. Legacy's methods relied on him getting inside the mind – perhaps the mind isn't the best way to put it - inside the sequence of thoughts of anyone sitting across from him. Rational or irrational, fanatic or cold calculating capitalists all have an inner logic that is like a code, Legacy seemed to always crack the code and get inside. He was always in use.

"Human nature is the same the world over, I guess."

Wagner looked up from her notes. This was getting her prepared, but she knew that history wouldn't help her get in the door. She had to find something that interested the man now. Legacy wasn't interested in himself, his own accomplishments or his own capabilities. If he were, he'd be back doing his old job; he certainly wouldn't be in the basement of a regional office. Bailey's patient smile made her dive right back in, "Tell me more about his daughter."

Wagner had read about the death of Legacy's wife, but the details were blacked out on her report, making the tidbit of information from Bailey quite haunting. "He was five minutes late getting home, literally minutes away from stopping the whole thing."

Bailey paused, uncertain of how far to go, Wagner picked up the tail end of the story, "I saw in the report that his daughter sat tied to a chair in the closet."

Bailey added, "Thankfully not watching her mother bleed out."

Bailey continued adding details about Legacy's life while sucking deep re-filtering the smoky air through the lit end of another cigarette. Bailey's face maintained a loathsome shade of exquisite indifference. Wagner decided that she had what she needed, or at the very least, had all she could take.

Bailey lit a slim, long black cigarette from the dying embers of his last. Wagner couldn't keep the curiosity off her face even though the slightest digression meant more time in his presence. A sour thought. Bailey wafted the tip in circles, drawing attention to his mannerisms. "I never smoke the same brand of cigarette twice in one day," he continued with a self-satisfied smile "I wouldn't want to become addicted."

Bailey was supplying her with more than textbook information. She wondered why. Wagner saw that vanity was the driving factor for Bailey. He might be showing off, but she also recognized a strong officious streak in the man - he must have gotten permission from above to give out secure parts of Legacy's file. The idea he was simply stupid crossed her mind; it was an attractive thought, one that she would revisit many times in her future associations with Bailey. Wagner knew there was still more to the story even after Bailey stopped talking. Should she go strong or weak - that was the question. She leaned forward, Bailey's eyes took a predictable parabolic arc downward. The frustrated pout of Wagner's lips was pure art.

"I just need something to get his attention. Is there anything he considers important, or something he's protective of, anything at all?" She asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Something that connects in with his emotional side. Has anything ever caused an outbreak of temper or anger?"

He didn't take a moment to think, "He doesn't have an emotional side."

She decided it was time to test his pride.

"This briefing is useless then. They told me at headquarters that you had very limited influence with him--"

"There was a time when he came up here because he couldn't get to his daughter's web cam. He was going to leave to check up on her until tech fixed the blamed thing. I guess technology frustrates him as much as it does the rest of us."

Wagner slid a slim laptop out of her briefcase. Asking no permission, she pulled a network wire out of Bailey's computer and plugged it in to her own.

Bailey remarked how her computer suited her. "An odd convergence."

Wagner looked at the screen. Her fingers tapped the keys, then traced the sleek lines tilting the screen to get a better viewing angle. She must have driven the high school debate club crazy. It was probably a coincidence that Bailey stared at all of the ports on the backside of her machine.

Wagner had found what she was looking for, as the face of Legacy's daughter, Chess appeared on screen. Her home page loaded and Wagner hinted at a breakthrough for the first time since crossing the Mason-Dixon line. Chess was the best way to get to Legacy. She clicked on Chess' bio page and read. Afterward she left with a plan.

Twenty minutes passed, three different brands of cigarettes littered the ashtray before Wagner poked her head back into the office.

"I need an access card as I'll be here for another day."

"Was it something I said?"

Wagner flipped her hair and smirked, then said with an edge "Isn't it always about you?"

He chuckled through his nose, and then skidded a set of keys across his desk, her hands were filled and she caught them at the edge of the desk with her thigh. Bailey's eyes reflected the glowing tip of his cigarette, satisfied. "Wilkes said that you never sleep."

She eased away from cold metal and let the keys drop into her cupped hand. Wagner looked up and to her surprise Bailey had slipped past her and was standing in the doorway ready to leave.

"There's a gym and a shower on the second floor. That and keys to the records room should keep you busy for the night."

Chapter 4 - Youth

Legacy buttered a piece of thin burnt toast and crunched distractedly while a bright fresh-faced Chess crashed over his shoulder reaching for his coffee cup. She wore her school uniform, skirt and jumper over a clean pressed white shirt. She brushed the crumbs off of Legacy's suit talking and spitting more on top of the momentarily clean pinstriped landscape.

"Dad, turn down the toaster." She snatched Legacy's cup of ominously black coffee and took a gulp before plunging down another piece of toast for her father.

"Why is it that when you make coffee this shade, it's fine, and when I make toast like this, it messes up your whole morning? How come the toaster setting keeps changing?" He was off on a visual tangent. "Is that skirt at least two inches below the knee?"

Chess pushed his cup back into his hand, "In reverse order of your questions, yes, exactly two, I don't know. Check it next time and because toast is my life." Legacy knew that she always turned the toaster setting to black when she programmed the coffee machine on a timer the night before.

"I don't like change." Legacy played the game; it made Chess smile, and after three years, he actually liked burnt toast.

"I'll be home at—"

"Six."

"I'll check in on you at—"

"Three."

"The gun is in the—"

"Hall closet."

"Always shoot for—"

"The knees."

Legacy didn't like that answer. He preferred a tight center-mass cluster, six shots then reload. Chess had researched the matter and in an act that could be counted as teen rebellion declared that a knee shot hurt most, incapacitated best, and almost never led to a mortal wound. They had reached a compromise early on in their intruder defense preparations; Chess got one shot at the knee, and if she missed, she had to go for the head. Chess had become an unconscious marksman as a result.

Legacy let one eyebrow arch in a show of pained acceptance, then began packing any hint of emotions back inside for the remainder of the day. He grabbed his umbrella in one hand, briefcase in the other, and was out the door.

Legacy could leave a room and it would feel like he was still there, because there never was an actual sound that went with his exit.

Chess harrumphed as the door closed behind him. She hiked up the hem of her skirt using Velcro patches to secure it. She turned down the toaster before pressing down the plunger on a toaster pastry. She stomped around the kitchen, gathering up her books and shoving them into her backpack. She did things her way, too.

The shadows were cast long with soft edges from the overcast skies. Legacy checked his watch; he always caught the 7:32 train from Terrace station. That wasn't completely true; on rainy days, he used the awnings of the city center mall to backtrack and catch the 7:31 train from Baudley Station. That required pre-planning, so he left three minutes early on those days.

He cleared security at exactly 7:42. If he was early he'd exchange a few sentences with the guard, ask him about his family. Legacy had noticed years before that the guard's security badge was thicker from the side than any other employee, and when the guard turned it over it revealed a family picture tucked inside the plastic cover. Anybody that kept their family that close to the heart deserved a reminder of them once or twice a day.

Legacy had a lot on his mind that day. It was clear that Chess was getting to that stage where he could not protect her openly. All of his work would have to be seamlessly constructed behind her back so that it was not thought of as intruding on her personal space.

He thought about many things on the walk down the hallway to his office, but not a single mental mention of the young agent, until he was reminded of her presence the moment he opened his door. She was there, in his chair, waiting, intruding on his personal space.

She moved quickly to the tape player and turned on the music. He didn't immediately recognize her.

"Are you?" He kept a noncommittal tone.

"You told me to come back. And you asked me to tell you if this key fit this lock." She pointed to both the lock and key out on the desk.

Legacy was unreadable, "Listen my answer is no."

Wagner lit up, "And what is my question?"

"You're here from Washington. I can't imagine you want to be here, unless my reputation has been completely forgotten, so let's get this over with and you can go home." Legacy kept his words as clinical as possible, "I am unwilling to assist in any investigation that Jeremy or Tom or Paul think that I am needed for."

Wagner had a look of shock on her face and Legacy knew why. He had named the three top field officers at the Bureau by their first names. Why did he get to call them by their first names? It was a clear double standard.

"Tell them that I looked haggard, unorganized and I'm unable to concentrate on tasks handed me. Mention that I still keep my wife's murder case in the back of the fridge and that should seal the deal." An uneasy look on Wagner's face made Legacy believe that she'd had a similar thought. "I know what is in my file and I love to live below their expectations."

Wagner stiffened with resolve and gave a reply that surprised Legacy.

"How about if I tell you with absolute certainty whether this key fits this lock, and then you decide whether you want to work with me."

"What do you know about the case?"

"More than you do at this point." She let her words linger a while on the sharp edge of the upturned corner of one side of her mouth, "I know the answer."

Legacy took the key from her hand, using the exchange to lock eyes with the young agent "Did you try it?"

There was something deeply unnerving about the way he stared at her. It was like he'd entered a room of hers, a private place, uninvited. The most disturbing part was that he treated it like it was his home, even with her most private thoughts. Wagner felt her skin quiver, she wanted out of that office more than she wanted out of Bailey's. It took all of her determination to meet his eyes and say, "No."

There were thirty-six tells that Legacy could have looked to if he'd had any doubt that Wagner was telling the truth. Involuntary responses like the tightening of the skin of the forehead, even-numbered blinking pattern, pupil dilation to name a few, but there was no need. He did, however, harvest a wealth of information on how Wagner presented truth while guarding a greater secret.

"Then how do you know if it fits? I took it off the wall of a locksmith 200 miles away from a crime that happened twelve years ago. You're playing the odds, 50/50 to the layman, but altered dramatically if you know the details of the case. He had no connection to the crime, the victim, he didn't even need an alibi because nobody ever questioned him."

"Why would they?" Wagner chimed in. "But he did it. And that key is going to open this lock." Legacy stared at her hand as she tilted the envelope holding the key and - CLACK. It tumbled onto the desk. She had been unready for the weight of the lock and it slid in her grip.

"You haven't already tried the key." He continued. It was not a question.

Wagner blew a stray piece of hair out of her eyes, "You asked me not to, and we're partners."

Legacy let that one slip by. He asked her for the key that he'd left behind in the folder. He spoke his observations out loud as he held the cold steel in his hand. "Nobody has touched this, no oils, and it's cold as the room."

Wagner kept her face neutral. "I could have done it late last night wearing gloves."

Legacy didn't want to explain why she was wrong. The barrel of the key was made of a soft metal, and any resistance from the lock would have left scratches on the louvers. He replied dryly, "I hadn't thought of that."

He pulled a key out of his briefcase and put it into the lock. After a moment of fishing around the rusted interior sleeve of the lock, it gave a sharp click, and the lock opened.

The shock sent a visible shiver through Wagner's body. Legacy watched as Wagner's confidence turned to anger. Her feelings seemed so close to the surface that it felt like he might almost touch them.

Legacy walked around the desk, took all of the evidence from the case and with a long arm swept it into the bin that sat beside his desk. "Time for the next case."

Wagner took advantage of the moment. "I have something for you that will sweep everything off your desk."

Legacy felt a twinge of authority enter the room. "Put whatever you've brought in the filing cabinet, Agent. I'll get to it."

Wagner launched into an explanation about how this new case needed his undivided attention. Specifically, he needed to familiarize himself with the facts over the evening. She would come up with a plan to mobilize their assets by the next morning. It took her fifteen minutes to lay out a detailed organizational brief.

Legacy, in the meantime, moved about, shifting the other two cases across the division markers on the desk and away from the trashcan. He then pulled out another file and put it on the extreme left-hand side of the desk. There were five cases again in front of him vying for his attention. He sat and began leafing through the documents in the center one. The noise in the background faded and he looked up.

Wagner was watching him with impatience. Legacy knew she would be there, but as he tipped his head up, he looked surprised. "Are you still here?"

Wagner looked like she wanted to overturn the desk and jump up and down on his chest with the heels she had discarded because they made her sound like a secretary. Legacy could see that she was looking for a way out of this assignment without conceding defeat. She wouldn't let this strange attention-deficit poster-person ignore her. Legacy had once been told by someone very close to him that every conversation with him was a puzzle that had to be solved. Even silence drove people crazy around Legacy. Wagner filled the silence. "I saw you palm the key you had cut last night, the key for the lock, and realized that the key you left must have been the blank that you made to show the agents who were searching the locksmith shops. You knew that key fit, so you took it home expecting me to use the blank then tell you that the key didn't fit. It would have proven that I couldn't keep up with you and gotten me out of your hair."

She leaned over his desk forcing him to either stand or look up to a younger woman. Legacy sat with a supremely confident look on his face.

"I figured it was based on a guess, since you certainly didn't know enough about what happened to come to a conclusion." Legacy's expression was flat and unchanging; he noticed that Wagner couldn't even look at him. She blasted into a speech. She had a lot to prove and it seemed like she was trying to do it all in one breath.

Wagner went point by point. She traced Legacy's notes backward in time, and the profile he had created of the criminal as a meticulous, precise male. Also, there were the photos of intricate knots. This was a guy who would be working in a field where detail was paramount, one where he could work alone, a clockmaker or art restoration. Her feet walked a line back and forth on the carpet in front of Legacy's desk. She continued, not looking at Legacy for fear that she'd lose control and slap his expressionless face until it turned a blushing shade of red.

Her voice was under control by the time that she explained how the old sea shanty lock led him to fix on the idea of a locksmith. He'd then sent agents on errands in a radius of the crime, all looking for a trophy case, with a key inside. It would be somewhere in sight of the proprietor at all times. It would remind him of the perfection that he had experienced.

He had instructed the field agent to make a half-hearted bid on the object. If the owner were eager to take it down and show it to the agent, he would do what he could to make an impression of the key secretly and bring it back to HQ.

Wagner finished up by recounting what Legacy already knew; it had taken Legacy two years to find the right locksmith. After countless hours wasted in expedition, he hadn't backed off his theories because he had gotten into the head of the killer. He didn't have a shred of evidence, and he didn't need any to catch him. She finished with a phrase that stuck in his mind, a crafted complement that nonetheless struck home. "Your work on the case had a peculiar, forward-thinking brilliance – the kind that only gets proven right by result."

Wagner immediately stopped short after the compliment. She hadn't looked up since she'd launched into her narrative, something that Legacy took as fear that he wasn't paying attention to a word she'd said. But her fears couldn't be further from the truth. He stared at her, studied her, fascinated with something just below the surface. It was an interest level he reserved for only – well, to be honest, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt that involved with words that were not his own. Still not a partner, he thought.

"You read all the files in one night?" His most respectful tone still sounded like mockery.

Wagner nodded. "Now that we know he did it, it should be easy to connect him to the crime." Legacy could tell that she was up to something.

"Too easy, I would even anticipate that you're ready with that information. I would go so far as to expect you to slap it down on my desk in dramatic fashion." Legacy drummed his fingers on the loose stacks of paper on his desk. A few pages slid off the side.

Wagner produced a file, and she carefully laid it on the desk. "I'd rather not disrupt your system."

The locksmith was named Burt Edger. He had attended high school with Ms. Miller, and he got a job working in the same department as her in college at the reprographics center. Coincidence again when he opened a locksmith shop in the neighborhood where she and her husband moved outside of town. He was contracted to put new locks on their front door two years before the killings. "He was a very patient man," interrupted Legacy.

"He saw the act as inevitable; impatience didn't enter the picture." It was a grace note that Legacy obviously agreed with. Her assessment pleased him visibly.

"Exactly," Legacy found himself moved to agree, "you also read my case notes." Wagner nodded. "A laudable invasion of privacy."

"I thought so," Wagner stretched back in the chair, fingers linking behind her head in victory. "I did my part, now I need you to accompany me to Washington for a briefing. We're going to be partners."

Legacy's face tightened. He didn't like the word partner. The word partner led to involvement. It wasn't personal, but a change came over his demeanor.

"I can't leave. I don't travel."

"You have seen duty on all parts of the globe." People never saw him; they never saw him coming and that was part of the job.

"I don't go anywhere, anymore. Whatever you think I'm going to do for you is not going to happen. Get out of my chair." His tone was suddenly dry and reprimanding.

Wagner never liked being told to move "It's your duty, I don't have to convince you – I can have someone who outranks you on the phone in five minutes."

"And I guarantee, I'll be less impressed with them than I was with you. You should have been honest with your expectations from the start. It would have saved you time." He'd already started digging through drawers searching for a file. He had begun taking notes on the folder cover when a hand slammed down on his.

"How honest do I need to be?"

"I can't train you in my methods, I can't reverse your instincts in one day. You're FBI through and through. I know about the reports and deadlines that come with taking a live case. I can't work with that."

"Give me a chance."

"Tell me why I am so damn important, tell me why standard methods are ineffective and the people on the case are so incompetent that you need me. Tell me that and I'll show you why we can't work together."

Demeaning the FBI struck Wagner like a blow to the cheek, her eyes welled up in fury.

Legacy compounded her frustration by putting pen to page, motioning for her to start talking. "I'll translate what you say, from FBI speak to what you're really saying as you go along. If that doesn't prove how far away we are, nothing will." He readied a pen in the crux of his angled fingers. The curves at the joints strongly indicated that they had been dislocated or broken several times. Still, his grip was a rock, and the pen hovered motionless in the air. If there was pain, it was controlled.

Wagner started, "We don't need you."

He wrote down, "We need you."

"There are other people we can go to."

Legacy scribbled, "There's nobody else we can go to."

"It's like you said yourself, it's not life or death."

Legacy paused, then "Somebody's about to die."

She tore the paper out of his hand and scanned it for a moment. A wave of tension rippled through her body, and it seemed to persist swirling in the pale green waters of her eyes. Legacy couldn't put his finger on what drove her desperation. Everything he'd written down was true; he could see it in the way his words had gone through her body. She would lash out at him soon and leave. It was exactly what he wanted, but something else lay below the surface of her anger. He had no idea what it was, and for a moment it fascinated him. Legacy didn't hear what she had to say, and the sound of the door slamming brought him back to an empty room.

The paper was on the floor. She'd ripped it into remarkably uniform strips. And looking at a fragment of his notes, it finally hit him. He understood what was going on. Now he just needed to decide what to do about it. He looked over the desk at a phone that he hadn't picked up in five years.

Wagner dropped her keys three times on the way to her rental car. It was a nervous tick. She dropped trivial things, like business cards and college boyfriends. She'd never dropped anything important. She'd never dropped her weapon in an Alkali swampland during training, even when the first layer of skin cells turned slippery due to the drop in Ph levels. She had never dropped a coffee cup on the way to her mouth. It was her keys. Perhaps the sound of them clattering against the pavement comforted her. She couldn't wait to discharge her weapon at something.

She wondered if she could tune in on any felonies in progress. No, killing somebody in the commission of a crime wasn't the answer. It was an answer, but it wasn't the solution.

She picked up the keys off the pavement. Her fingers began deftly flipping the keychain over and over like a pinwheel. The keychain slalomed up her fingers only to slide down the backside of her hand. It was like the old coin trick except as the ring moved up, her other fingers rotated the keys.

It did keep her mind off of her frustration, and it kept her hand off her gun. Two very positive results. Frustrated was not the right word, pissed off. Of course that was two words, but she was willing to be verbose in this instance to set the right internal descriptive tone for her feelings. Pissed off and something else; she couldn't put her finger on it.

She was going to have to report to her superior that she was ineffective in activating Legacy on the case. It would look even worse after the tantrum she'd thrown in his office in front of the director. There was no going

back to this case; it was a disgrace. The only thing that could save her would be if one of the leads that she'd dug up before she'd left turned the case around. She started mentally reviewing every contact she'd made in the last week.

Fingers occupied, mind occupied and she still couldn't help her body from shaking in anger. She was so pissed off and something else, what was it? CLANG the keys dropped.

Her phone vibrated as she knelt to pick up the keys. Wagner thought that she'd inadvertently pushed one of the buttons as she leaned over, but a second vibration had her reaching under her coat to her belt where it was strapped. Bailey's voice was on the other end.

"Legacy called me, he needs you back."

"I've been humiliated enough for one day, I'm pissed off and – and—" she searched through her vocabulary for the most acid-laced word that would describe how she felt. She really wanted to get a little bit back from Legacy and the way he'd trivialized what she stood for, which made it all the more surprising when the word she spit out hit the air. "And ineffective." That was it, ineffective! She had never been ineffective in her entire life. It was a description that had never been placed beside her name, and now she was using it in judgment of herself. Bailey was also clearly not prepared for the quick change in her tone, and his voice took on the syrupy false timber of step-fatherly support.

"You'd best hear what he has to say." She ended the conversation and stood in the garage. Pools of light zebra-striped along her path back to the entrance. It seemed such a long way back.

Legacy sat in the conference chair in the central briefing room. The file that she'd left sat closed in front of him. Wagner entered from the door behind him, as she did her best to sneak into the room. Legacy's head rose immediately. A smile spread across his face. His opening move had been met, and he was pleased with the young agent's ability to adapt. She didn't let him enjoy the moment.

"So what did you learn in five minutes?"

"Nothing, I haven't read it. You realize that we cannot work on this together, I'll give you my insights and then you can take them back to your superiors. That's all I have to offer. We won't work together again after today.

Wagner thought for a moment, then walked slowly to a nearby chair, kicked it out from under the table. She let the rattle of the metal legs ring in the room for a moment before quieting them by sitting down.

"On the inside, my heart is breaking Agent Legacy. Really. Am I going to sit here while you read it?"

"No," Legacy was suddenly serious, focused. He made no wasted movement, and his eyes were as piercing as a blade. The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Wagner pulled her arms close to her body and crossed them. "I am going to tell you what is in the report without reading and watch you. I should know everything I need to without asking you a single question."

Legacy began. The case was certainly an abduction, or rather a series of abductions. Murders get attention and nothing matches any of the facts of the case. At this, Wagner interrupted, "but you don't know any of the facts of the case. You said so yourself."

"I don't need to." Legacy didn't bat an eye and continued. He told her that the first victims had been released unharmed, but that it seemed to be escalating, and recently one of them had been killed.

"If you're just guessing, I can talk to a psychic down the hall—"

Legacy spoke over her, every word emphatic. "And now someone has been taken – and this time they're somehow connected to the FBI." It was a connection that Legacy surprised himself with.

"How could you know that?"

"Believe it or not, you told me at the end of our last discussion." When Legacy worked himself into this state, there was no time for distractions; he pursued the facts like an addict. His voice was insistent. "An agent?"

Wagner, always a fast learner, began to reply in short bursts. "A cadet."

"Female?"

"All of them."

"A sexual predator," He watched Wagner's pupils as he interrogated the case through her eyes, essentially interrogating himself on the possibilities. Each time, she gave him a response that indicated yes or no something spurred him onto another thought. "No something worse, a group of sexual predators."

"Close."

"The perpetrator pursues originality, recognition – the repetition indicates confidence, an agile operation, something different, no ransom?"

"None."

"Something's wrong though, why is this case so desperate? If they're looking at my methods – I mean usually they take years –"

"They can't this time. We need to get this one, that's why we need your full cooperation."

"You're acting like this is a matter of national security –"

“They have the director’s daughter; she is the cadet that needs your help. The details are at a level for which you’re not cleared. I am not supposed to be confirming any of this – I don’t know why – they could arrest me –”

“Calm down, that’s my specialty. I needed to know, I was going to know anyway. We should take that briefing now.”

“We? Briefing? I thought you were through after this conversation.”

“I have known the director for twenty years, I knew his daughter, and I have a daughter.” He let his words sink in; the weight was surprising. Wagner wasn’t expecting emotion, and when it came out, it made gravity kick in stronger. His control over the room irritated her. If she’d only stopped to think about the irritation, she could have learned an important lesson, but at age twenty-five, she preferred simply being irritated.

“Let’s go.”

Legacy didn’t move, “They’re coming to us.”

Legacy and Wagner waited in very different ways for the briefing to come to them. Wagner had her keys out, flipping them around her fingers like a circus performer keeping her hands occupied. Legacy sat very still, analyzing her preparations for the arrival of the FBI’s top brass. He smirked enjoying the passive pleasure of watching another neurotic person. Her eyes flicked up occasionally as if to say “go ahead, call me strange you statuesque whack job.” Legacy was only guessing, but something told him he was on the right track.

“I really like to be stared at.” She broke the silence.

He shifted his attention to the corner of his eye and left it there for quite a while. Legacy didn’t really think about her as they sat in the room. His goal was not to make an impression; it was to find the proper level of help that wouldn’t commit anything to anyone. He could tell from his interview with Wagner that the situation involved a criminal who lived in a world of thoughts, not actions. The FBI is based around finding people who act without thinking. He’d said that once in a high-level meeting. He didn’t get invited to many high level meetings after that. It was a win-win situation. Now he’d have to be careful to step on just enough toes where they’d still listen, but they wouldn’t want him to be their dance partner. He planned his next move in silence.

After about twenty minutes the world came back into focus CLANK. Wagner’s keys hit the ground, and as she knelt, Legacy actually noticed the face of the woman opposite him. He was moved to speak. “You should fix your make-up before they get here.”

Wagner had smudged her lipstick. She took out her compact and after a swift succession of masterful brushstrokes, she puckered her lips, a wet, perfect, sarcastic kiss touched the air.

Wagner wasn’t going to let him get the better of her.

“You should fix your tie.” It was a perfect knot.

“I’m into grunge.”

CLANK. The doors opened.

Uniforms walked in, straight, official, purposeful brisk steps. Following them was Director Wilkes who walked right up to Wagner, at the head of the table. He was about to ask for her to move when Legacy broke the silence.

“I saved you a seat beside me, Larry.” The room watched as Wilkes bypassed Wagner and walked over to Legacy.

“Martin, we need you.”

“I don’t respond well to being needed.”

“You respond to being challenged- “

“That’s why you sent her.”

A loud intake of breath signaled that Wagner very much wanted to say something at this point. She bit her lip as Legacy pointed a long finger in her direction.

Legacy saw a light go on inside of Wagner as she made the realization that she was the lure. Not a lot of dignity in being used, especially for someone so concerned with her image. She had come into his office thinking that she was in the game when really it was all going on around her. She shot glances at the door, and Legacy knew that’s where she most wanted to be headed. They had many things in common.

Wilkes launched into his briefing, and Legacy openly split his attention. He looked at Wagner as she shifted in her chair, miles away. He could tell that she hadn’t expected this, and beyond that she hadn’t known why she’d been sent until now. Her disappointment was transparent. The tension on her face was like the top layer of a perfectly still lake, symmetric and balanced but waiting only for the smallest impulse to plunge below.

Now, Legacy wasn’t sure that Wagner’s face was pretty although he did notice the way men in her vicinity stole glances at her and one of the women from the CIA delegation did the same. Wagner didn’t look at any of them; the imbalance suggested some kind of charisma.

He thought for a moment, letting Wilkes drone on in the background. He interrupted Wilkes.

“Agent Wagner has already begun briefing me.” Legacy turned toward Wagner, which consequently put his back to the Deputy Director.

Everyone around the table knew Wilkes. The air momentarily left the room. The agents stared at Wilkes, waiting. His composure was barely equal to the task, but he calmly replied, “She is not up to date on the recent developments —”

“I don’t want to know recent developments.” He let his opening statement sink in.

Legacy turned in an arc. He scanned the faces, seasoned agents all with specialties. Legacy went down the line and silently identified their role on the case: coroner, forensics, communications, three regional investigators, five national, CIA – it wasn’t a parlor trick, it was his specialty, instant asset evaluation. He paused for a moment confused. Why would all of these officers be in this briefing room? He had known that this was big, but the assembly of personnel told him that every resource was being tapped, and the stunning part was, that it was being brought directly to his door. This assembly had been pulled from the case to meet with him. Legacy had been expecting a mixture of specialists and what he got was a room full of leaders; these weren’t people who were used to taking orders from anybody. The ripple that he’d started with his interruption went through each and every face at the table, and all of them had a reply. This was a team of the best the FBI had to offer, convened for the purpose of saving the Director’s daughter.

It was an operation of the scale that comes around only a few times in a career, something with no estimable price tag. His gaze circled the room and landed on Wagner, she was the youngest by far. Legacy continued.

“The perpetrator of this abduction pursues originality, recognition – the repetition indicates confidence, an agile operation. No ransom.”

A murmur went through the room. An older agent couldn’t contain himself and leapt into the conversation. “You’re saying you haven’t read the file?” Legacy nodded. “Why would he abduct and return without ransom?”

Legacy scowled at the interruption of his thought process. He stopped. He didn’t even look at the agent, instead turned to Wilkes and bit off each word.

“Keep your men silent.” It was a mode of Legacy’s behavior that hadn’t been seen for years. It was the side of him that kept him from being promoted and put him at the bottom of the list for the yearly company picnic. People in the bureau often spoke of his temper and related behavior. It was mislabeled as anger, arrogance, or intolerance. The truth of the matter is that his behavior was a well-honed result of all-consuming concentration. He had been trained for a single purpose, and couldn’t even conceive of breaking the concentration he required to pursue that purpose; therefore, any outside comment was dismissed as noise. Legacy had never worked with partners - it was a well-known fact.

Legacy in that moment returned to duty. His demeanor in years past was coming back to him as he strode about the room. Wilkes actually cracked a brief smile – he put out a hand to silence the offending and offended agent.

It was Wagner’s voice that brought Legacy back to the table “There have been no ransom demands.”

“Yet somebody must pay,” Legacy retreated into his thoughts, “something’s wrong with the timing. Why is this case so desperate?” He decided to test a pressure point and said, “the methods I use can take time —”

“They can’t this time.” Wilkes replied, “We need to catch them now; we need you to have these bastards collared in a matter of days.”

He nodded toward the senior agent. “I assume that a body has been found?”

Wagner jumped in “They haven’t escalated —”

Legacy turned to her. “They did. The day that you were sent seeking my involvement, they found a dead body. Isn’t that right, chief?”

Wagner’s words were a fast-rolling percussion, “We have been looking for the girl that went off camera last week, but it’s still a search and rescue, we have no reason to believe that she’s dead.”

“They found the body yesterday morning, Agent,” Legacy said with stone-cold certainty. He pointed to Wilkes.

Wilkes gave a military dip of his chin, signifying yes in the most respectful way he could.

The meeting ended after an hour, there were a series of expectations laid at Legacy’s door, none of which he fully committed to. He was “on board,” but as the members of the briefing left the table he knew that many would report private reservations to Wilkes about whether he was “fully on board.”

That was their problem.

It was five o’clock. He still had an hour before he needed to be home.

Chess sat stretching with her legs inching toward the splits. She was developing her own intuition, which told her that this move would almost definitely hurt, YES! She was right. She was going to be a cheerleader if it killed her. “Now, uh, was not the time to, uh think about pain,” she reminded herself. At a certain point in her inching downward, her weight suddenly became gravity’s subordinate and it carried her to the floor, legs perpendicular to torso. She practiced her father’s restraint for only a moment, and then tears welled up in her eyes. Her lungs filled. She screamed.

Legacy was nearing his apartment door when he heard Chess' scream. His keys were in his hand and with practiced precision locks opened, CLACK CLACK CLACK. He pushed the door and met resistance from the chain lock. A hard shoulder into the center of the door ripped the chain from the wall and sent the door flying open.