



Red Mist: Scarpetta (Book 19)

By Patricia Cornwell

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With high-tension suspense and cutting-edge technology, Patricia Cornwell—the world’s #1 bestselling crime writer—once again proves her exceptional ability to entertain and enthrall in this remarkable novel featuring chief medical examiner Dr. Kay Scarpetta.

On her quest to find out exactly what happened to her former deputy chief, Jack Fielding, murdered six months before, Scarpetta drives to the Georgia Prison for Women to meet a convicted sex offender and the mother of a vicious and diabolically brilliant killer. Against the advice of her FBI criminal intelligence agent husband, Benton Wesley, Scarpetta is determined to hear this woman out.

Scarpetta has both personal and professional reasons to learn more about a string of grisly killings: the murder of a Savannah family years earlier, a young woman on death row, and then other inexplicable deaths that begin to occur at a breathtaking pace. Driven by inner forces, Scarpetta discovers connections that compel her to conclude that what she thought ended with Fielding’s death and an attempt on her own life is only the beginning of something far more destructive: a terrifying terrain of conspiracy and potential terrorism on an international scale.

And she is the only one who can stop it.

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Editorial Review

Review

“When it comes to the forensic sciences, nobody can touch Cornwell.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Cornwell has created a character so real, so compelling, so driven that this reader has to remind herself regularly that Scarpetta is just a product of an author’s imagination.”—*USA Today*

“Scarpetta is one of the most believable characters in crime fiction.”—*The Vancouver Sun*

About the Author

Patricia Cornwell is one of the world’s major internationally bestselling authors, translated into more than thirty-five languages in more than 120 countries. She is a founder of the Virginia Institute of Forensic Science and Medicine; a founding member of the National Forensic Academy; a member of the Advisory Board for the Forensic Sciences Training Program at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, New York City; and a member of the Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital’s National Council, where she is an advocate for psychiatric research. In 2008, Cornwell won the Galaxy British Book Awards’s Book Direct Crime Thriller of the Year—the first American to win this prestigious award. In 2011, she was awarded the medal of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Ministry of Culture in Paris. Her most recent bestsellers include *Port Mortuary*, *The Scarpetta Factor*, *The Front*, and *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper—Case Closed*. Her earlier works include *Postmortem*—the only novel to win five major crime awards in a single year—and *Cruel & Unusual*, which won Britain’s Gold Dagger Award for best crime novel of 1993. Dr. Kay Scarpetta herself won the 1999 Sherlock Award for the best detective created by an American author.

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Praise for the novels of Patricia Cornwell

PORT MORTUARY

“With *Port Mortuary*, Cornwell has presented a gift to her readers—a return to over-the-top forensics and bigger-than-life characters that drew us to the Scarpetta series in the first place.”

—*The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*

“Entertaining...Scarpetta is one of the most believable characters in crime fiction because her many strengths are tempered by true human frailties...a must-read for crime fiction fans.”

—*The Vancouver Sun*

THE SCARPETTA FACTOR

“[An] insistent and gripping thriller.”

—*The Star-Ledger*

“A finely crafted, pulse-racing thriller that readers won’t want to put down.”

—*Library Journal*

SCARPETTA

“When it comes to the forensic sciences, nobody can touch Cornwell.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“The coolly graphic autopsy scenes are classic Scarpetta, but new elements...keep this tale fresh.”

—*People*

THE FRONT

“[A] classically written crime novel.”

—*USA Today*

AT RISK

“Highly entertaining.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“Scary.”

—*The Boston Globe*

BOOK OF THE DEAD

“Compelling.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“What a wallop, riveting mix of...adventure and psychology. Author Cornwell certainly is skilled at

dissecting the not always attractive innards of human nature.”

—*Forbes*

PREDATOR

“A fine psychological thriller.”

—*The Denver Post*

“Sensationally plotted, with a twist at the end that will leave you gasping for breath.”

—*Daily Express* (U.K.)

TRACE

“Cornwell gets her Hitchcock on...[She] can generate willies with subtle poetic turns.”

—*People*

“Fun [and] flamboyant.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

BLOW FLY

“[A] grisly fast-paced thriller...utterly chilling.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“A story so compelling that even longtime readers will be stunned by its twists and turns.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

THE LAST PRECINCT

“Ignites on the first page...Cornwell has created a character so real, so compelling, so driven that this reader has to remind herself regularly that Scarpetta is just a product of an author’s imagination.”

—*USA Today*

“The most unexpected of the Kay Scarpetta novels so far...Compelling...Terrific.”

—*The Miami Herald*

BLACK NOTICE

“Brainteasing...one of the most savage killers of her career...[a] hair-raising tale with a French twist.”

—*People*

“The author’s darkest and perhaps best...a fast-paced, first-rate thriller.”

—*The San Francisco Examiner*

POINT OF ORIGIN

“Cornwell lights a fire under familiar characters—and sparks her hottest adventure in years.”

—*People*

“Packed with action and suspense.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

TITLES BY PATRICIA CORNWELL

SCARPETTA SERIES

ANDY BRAZIL SERIES

Isle of Dogs

Southern Cross

Hornet's Nest

WIN GARANO SERIES

The Front

At Risk

NONFICTION

Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper—Case Closed

BIOGRAPHY

Ruth, A Portrait: The Story of Ruth Bell Graham

(also published as *A Time for Remembering:*

The Story of Ruth Bell Graham)

OTHER WORKS

Food to Die For: Secrets from Kay Scarpetta's Kitchen

Life's Little Fable

Scarpetta's Winter Table

BERKLEY BOOKS NEW YORK

My thanks to the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center, and also to Dr. Marcella Fierro, Dr. Jamie Downs, and other experts who were so helpful with my research, including Stephen Braga, who generously shared his expertise in criminal law.

As always, I am grateful to Dr. Staci Gruber for her incredible technical skills and expertise, and her patience and encouragement.

This book is dedicated to you, Staci.

And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth.

—REVELATION 16:1

Table of Contents

1

Iron rails the rusty brown of old blood cut across a cracked paved road that leads deeper into the Lowcountry. As I drive over train tracks, it enters my mind that the Georgia Prison for Women is on the wrong side of them and maybe I should take it as another warning and turn back. It's not quite four p.m., Thursday, June 30. There's time to catch the last flight to Boston, but I know I won't.

This part of coastal Georgia is a moody terrain of brooding forests draped with Spanish moss and mudflats etched with convoluted creeks that give way to grassy plains heavy with light. Snowy egrets and great blue herons fly low over brackish water, dragging their feet, and then the woods close in again on either side of the narrow tar-laced road I'm on. Coiling kudzu strangles underbrush and cloaks forest canopies in scaly dark leaves, and giant cypress trees with thick gnarled knees rise out of swamps like prehistoric creatures wading and prowling. While I've yet to spot an alligator or a snake, I'm sure they are there and aware of my big white machine roaring and chugging and backfiring.

How I ended up in such a rattletrap that wanders all over the road and stinks like fast food and cigarettes with a whiff of rotting fish, I don't know. It's not what I told my chief of staff, Bryce, to reserve, which was a safe, dependable, mid-size sedan, preferably a Volvo or a Camry, with side and head air bags and a GPS. When I was met outside the airport terminal by a young man in a white cargo van that doesn't have air-conditioning or even a map, I told him there had been an error. I'd been given someone else's vehicle by mistake. He pointed out the contract has my name on it, Kate Scarpetta, and I said my first name is Kay, not Kate, and I didn't care whose name was on it. A cargo van wasn't what I ordered. Lowcountry Concierge Connection was very sorry, said the young man, who was quite tan and dressed in a tank top, camo shorts, and fishing shoes. He couldn't imagine what happened. Obviously a computer problem. He'd be glad to get me something else, but it would be much later in the day, possibly tomorrow.

So far nothing is going the way I'd planned, and I imagine my husband, Benton, saying he told me so. I see him leaning against the travertine countertop in the kitchen last night, tall and slender, with thick silver hair, his chiseled handsome face watching me somberly as we argued again about my coming here. It's only now that the last trace of my headache is gone. I don't know why a part of me still believes, contrary to evidence, that half a bottle of wine will resolve differences. It might have been more than half. It was a very nice pinot grigio for the money, light and clean with a hint of apples.

The air blowing through the open windows is thick and hot, and I smell the pungent, sulfuric odor of decomposing vegetation, of salt marshes and pluff mud. The van hesitates and surges by fits and starts around a sun-dappled bend where turkey buzzards forage on something dead. The huge ugly birds with their

ragged wings and naked heads lift off in slow, heavy flaps as I swerve around the stiff pelt of a raccoon, the sultry air carrying a sharp putrid stench I know all too well. Animal or human, it doesn't matter. I can recognize death from a distance, and were I to get out and take a close look, I probably could determine the exact cause of that raccoon's demise and when it occurred and possibly reconstruct how it got hit and maybe by what.

Most people refer to me as a medical examiner, an ME, but some think I'm a coroner, and occasionally I'm confused with a police surgeon. To be precise, I'm a physician with a specialty in pathology, and subspecialties in forensic pathology and 3-D imaging radiology, or the use of CT scans to view a dead body internally before I touch it with a blade. I have a law degree and the special reservist rank of colonel with the Air Force, and therefore an affiliation with the Department of Defense, which last year appointed me to head the Cambridge Forensic Center it has funded in conjunction with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Harvard.

I'm an expert at determining the mechanism of what kills or why something doesn't, whether it is a disease, a poison, a medical misadventure, an act of God, a handgun, or an improvised explosive device (IED). My every action has to be legally well informed. I'm expected to assist the United States government as needed and directed. I swear to oaths and testify under them, and what all this means is that I'm really not entitled to live the way most people do. It isn't an option for me to be anything other than objective and clinical. I'm not supposed to have personal opinions or emotional reactions to any case, no matter how gruesome or cruel. Even if violence has impacted me directly, such as the attempt on my life four months ago, I'm to be as unmoved as an iron post or a rock. I'm to remain hard in my resolve, calm and cool.

"You're not going to go PTSD on me, are you?" the chief of the Armed Forces Medical Examiners, General John Briggs, said to me after I was almost murdered in my own garage this past February 10. "Shit happens, Kay. The world is full of whack jobs."

"Yes, John. Shit happens. Shit has happened before, and shit will happen again," I replied, as if all were fine and I'd taken everything in stride, when I knew that wasn't what I was feeling inside. I intend to get as many details as I can about what went wrong in Jack Fielding's life, and I want Dawn Kincaid to pay the highest price. Prison with no chance of parole forever.

I glance at my watch without taking my hands off the wheel of the damn van with its bad case of the damn shakes. Maybe I should turn around. The last flight out of here to Boston is in less than two hours. I could make it, but I know I won't be on it. For better or worse, I'm committed, as if I've been taken over by an autopilot, maybe a reckless one, possibly a vengeful one. I know I'm angry. As my FBI forensic psychologist husband put it last night while I was cooking dinner in our historic Cambridge home that was built by a well-known transcendentalist, "You're being tricked, Kay. Possibly set up by others, but what concerns me most is you setting yourself up. What you perceive as your wish to be proactive and helpful is in fact your need to appease your guilt."

"I'm not the reason Jack is dead," I said.

"You've always felt guilty about him. You tend to feel guilty about a lot of things that have nothing to do with you."

"I see. When I think I can make a difference, I should never trust it." I used a pair of surgical scissors to cut the shells off boiled jumbo prawns. "When I decide that taking a risk might produce useful information and help bring about justice, it's really my feeling guilty."

"You think it's your responsibility to fix things. Or prevent them. You always have. Going back to when you

were a little girl taking care of your sick father.”

“I certainly can’t prevent anything now.” I pitched shells into the trash and dashed salt into a stainless-steel pot of water boiling on the ceramic-glass induction cooktop that is the hub of my kitchen. “Jack was molested as a boy, and I couldn’t prevent that. And I couldn’t prevent him from ruining his life. And now he’s been murdered and I didn’t stop that, either.” I grabbed a chef’s knife. “I barely prevented my own death, if we’re honest about it.” I diced onion and garlic, the fine steel blade clicking quickly against antibacterial polypropylene. “It’s a lucky accident I’m still around.”

“You should stay the hell out of Savannah,” Benton said, and I told him I had to go and to please open the wine and pour us each a glass, and we drank and disagreed. We picked distractedly at my *mangia bene, vivi felice cucina*, or eat well and live happy cooking, and neither of us was happy. All because of her.

It’s been a hellish existence for Kathleen Lawler. Currently serving twenty years for DUI manslaughter, she’s been locked up longer than she’s been free, going back to the seventies, when she was convicted of sexually molesting a boy who grew up to be my deputy chief medical examiner, Jack Fielding. Now he’s dead, shot in the head by their love child, as the media refers to Dawn Kincaid, given up for adoption at birth while her mother was in prison for what she did to conceive her. It’s a very long story. I find myself saying that a lot these days, and if I’ve learned nothing else in life it’s that one thing can and will lead to another. Kathleen Lawler’s catastrophic tale is a perfect example of what scientists mean when they say that the beat of a butterfly wing causes a hurricane on another part of the planet.

As I drive the loud, lurching rental van through an overgrown marshy terrain that probably didn’t look all that different in the age of dinosaurs, I wonder what beat of a butterfly wing, what breath of a disturbance, created Kathleen Lawler and the havoc she has wrought. I imagine her inside a six-by-eight-foot cell with its shiny steel toilet, gray metal bed, and narrow window covered by metal mesh that looks out over a prison yard of coarse grass, concrete picnic tables and benches, and Porta-Johns. I know how many changes of clothing she has, not “free-world clothes,” she’s explained in e-mails I don’t answer, but prison uniforms, trousers, and tops, two sets of each. She’s read every book in the prison library at least five times, is a gifted writer, she’s let me know, and some months ago she e-mailed a poem she says she wrote about Jack:

FATE

he came back as air and I as earth

and we found each other not at first.

(it wasn’t wrong in reality,

just a technicality

that neither of us heeded

or god knows needed).

fingers, toes of fire.

cold cold steel.

the oven yawns

the gas is on—

left on like the lights of a welcoming motel.

I've read the poem obsessively, studied it word by word, looking for a buried message, concerned at first that the ominous reference to an oven with gas turned on could suggest that Kathleen Lawler is suicidal. Maybe the idea of her own death is welcome, like a welcoming motel, I offered to Benton, who replied that the poem shows her sociopathy and disordered personality. She believes she did nothing wrong. Having sex with a twelve-year-old boy at a ranch for troubled youths where she was a therapist was a beautiful thing, a blending of pure and perfect love. It was fate. It was their destiny. That's the deluded way she views it, Benton said.

Two weeks ago her communications to me abruptly stopped, and my attorney called with a request. Kathleen Lawler wants to talk to me about Jack Fielding, the protégé I trained during the early days of my career and worked with on and off over a span of twenty years. I agreed to meet with her at the Georgia Prison for Women, the GPFW, but only as a friend. I will not be Dr. Kay Scarpetta. I will not be the director of the Cambridge Forensic Center or a medical examiner for the Armed Forces or a forensic expert or an expert in anything. I will be Kay this day, and the only thing Kay and Kathleen have in common is Jack. Whatever we say to each other will not be protected by privilege, and no attorneys, guards, or other prison personnel will be present.

A shift in light, and the dense pine woods thin before opening onto a bleak clearing. What looks like an industrial area is posted with green metal signs warning me that the rural road I'm on is about to end, no trespassing allowed. If one isn't authorized to be here, turn back now. I drive past a salvage yard heaped with twisted and smashed-up trucks and cars, and then a nursery with greenhouses and big pots of ornamental grasses, bamboos, and palms. Straight ahead is an expansive lawn with the letters GPFW neatly shaped by bright beds of petunias and marigolds, as if I've just arrived at a city park or a golf course. The white-columned redbrick administration building is grandly out of context with blue metal-roofed concrete pods enclosed by high fences. Double coils of razor-sharp concertina shine and glint in the sun like scalpel blades.

The GPFW is the model for a number of prisons, I've learned from the careful research I've done. It's regarded as a superior example of enlightened and humane rehabilitation for female felons, many of them trained while in custody to be plumbers, electricians, cosmetologists, woodworkers, mechanics, roofers, landscapers, cooks, and caterers. Inmates maintain the buildings and grounds. They prepare the food and work in the library and in the beauty salon, and assist in the medical clinic and publish their own magazine and are expected to at least pass the GED exam while they're behind bars. Everyone here earns her keep and is offered opportunities, except those housed in maximum security, known as Bravo Pod, where Kathleen Lawler was reassigned two weeks ago, about the same time her e-mails to me abruptly stopped.

Parking in a visitor's space, I check my iPhone for messages to make sure there is nothing urgent to attend to, hoping for something from Benton, and there is. "Hot as hell where you are, and supposed to storm. Be careful, and let me know how it goes. I love you," writes my matter-of-fact practical husband, who never fails to give me a weather report or some other useful update when he's thinking about me. I love him, too, and am fine and will call in a few hours, I write him back, as I watch several men in suits and ties emerge from the administration building, escorted by a corrections officer. The men look like lawyers, maybe prison officials, I decide, and I wait until they are driven away in an unmarked car, wondering who they are and what brings them here. I tuck my phone into my shoulder bag, hiding it under the seat, taking nothing with me but my driver's license, an envelope with nothing written on it, and the van keys.

The summer sun presses against me like a heavy, hot hand, and clouds are building in the southwest, boiling

up thickly, the air fragrant with lavender mist and summersweet as I follow a concrete sidewalk through blooming shrubs and more tidy flower beds while invisible eyes watch from slitted windows around the prison yard. Inmates have nothing better to do than stare, to look out at a world they can no longer be part of as they gather intelligence more shrewdly than the CIA. I feel a collective consciousness taking in my loud white cargo van with its South Carolina plates, and the way I'm dressed, not my usual business suit or investigative field clothes but a pair of khakis, a blue-and-white striped cotton shirt tucked in, and basket-weave loafers with a matching belt. I have on no jewelry except a titanium watch on a black rubber strap and my wedding band. It wouldn't be easy to guess my economic status or who or what I am, except the van doesn't fit with the image I had in mind for this day.

My intention was to look like a middle-aged casually coiffed blond woman who doesn't do anything dramatically important or even interesting in life. But then that damn van! A scuffed-up shuddering white monstrosity with windows tinted so dark they are almost black in back, as if I work for a construction company or make deliveries, or perhaps have come to the GPFW to transport an inmate alive or dead, it occurs to me, as I sense women watching. Most of them I will never meet, although I know the names of a few, those whose infamous cases have been in the news and whose heinous acts have been presented at professional meetings I attend. I resist looking around or letting on that I'm aware of anyone watching as I wonder which dark slash of a window is hers.

How emotional this must be for Kathleen Lawler. I suspect she has thought of little else of late. For people like her, I'm the final connection to those they've lost or killed. I'm the surrogate for their dead.

2

Tara Grimm is the warden, and her office at the end of a long blue hallway is furnished and decorated by the inmates she keeps.

The desk, coffee table, and chairs are lacquered honey-colored oak and have a sturdy shape and for me a certain charm because I almost always would rather see something made by hand, no matter how rustic. Vines with heart-shaped variegated leaves crowd planters in windows and trail from them to the tops of homebuilt bookcases, draping over the sides like bunting and tumbling in tangled masses from hanging baskets. When I comment on what a green thumb Tara Grimm must have, she informs me in a measured melodious voice that inmates tend to her indoor plants. She doesn't know the name of the creepers, as she calls them, but they could be philodendron. "Golden pothos." I touch a marbled yellow-green leaf. "More commonly known as devil's ivy."

"It won't stop growing, and I won't let them cut it back," she says from the bookcase behind her desk, where she is returning a volume to a shelf, *The Economics of Recidivism*. "Started out with one little shoot in a glass of water, and I use it as an important life lesson all these women chose to ignore along the path that landed them in trouble. Be careful what takes root or one day it will be all there is." She shelves another book, *The Art of Manipulation*. "I don't know." She scans vines festooning the room. "I suppose it's getting a bit overwhelmed in here."

The warden is somewhere in her forties, I deduce, tall and svelte and strangely out of place in her scoop-neck black dress that flows midcalf, with a gold coin lariat wrapped around her neck, as if she paid special attention to her appearance this day, perhaps because of the men just leaving, visitors, possibly important ones. Dark-eyed, with high cheekbones and long black hair swept up and back, Tara Grimm doesn't look like what she does, and I wonder if the absurdity occurs to her or others. In Buddhism, Tara is the mother of liberation, which one might argue this Tara certainly is not. Although her world is grim.

She smooths her skirt as she sits down behind her desk and I take a straight-backed chair across from her.

“Mainly I needed to go over anything you might intend to show Kathleen,” she informs me of the reason I was directed to her office. “I’m sure you know the routine.”

“It’s not routine for me to visit people in prison,” I reply. “Unless it’s in the infirmary or worse.” What I mean is if an inmate needs a forensic physical examination or is dead.

“If you’ve brought reports or other documents, anything to go over with her, I need to approve them first,” she lets me know, and I tell her again that I’ve come as a friend, which is legally correct but not literally true.

I am no friend to Kathleen Lawler and will be deliberate and cautious as I extract information, encouraging her to tell me what I want to know without letting on I care. Did she have contact with Jack Fielding over the years, and what happened during episodes of freedom when she was on the outside? An ongoing sexual affair between a female offender and her younger male victim certainly has occurred in other cases I’ve researched, and Kathleen was in and out of prison the entire time I knew Jack. If there were continued romantic interludes with this woman who molested him as a boy, I wonder if the timing of them might be related to those periods when he went haywire and vanished, prompting me to find him and eventually hire him back.

I want to know when he first discovered that Dawn Kincaid was his daughter and why he recently connected with her in Massachusetts, allowing her to live in his house in Salem, and for how long, and was this related to his walking out on his wife and family? Did Jack know he was being altered by dangerous drugs, or was that part of Dawn’s sabotage, and was he aware his behavior was increasingly erratic, and whose idea was it for him to engage in illegal activities at the Cambridge Forensic Center, the CFC, while I was out of town?

I can’t predict what Kathleen might know or say, but I will handle the conversation the way I’ve planned and rehearsed with my lawyer, Leonard Brazzo, and give her nothing in return. She can’t be required to testify against her own daughter and wouldn’t be credible in court, but I won’t reveal a single fact that could find its way back to Dawn Kincaid and be used to help her defense.

“Well, I didn’t suppose you’d bring anything relating to those cases,” Tara Grimm says, and I sense she is disappointed. “I confess to having a lot of questions about what went on up there in Massachusetts. I admit I’m curious.”

Most people are. The Mensa Murders, as the press has dubbed homicides and other vicious acts involving people with genius or near-genius IQs, are about as grotesque as anything one might ever conjure up. After more than twenty years of working violent deaths, I still haven’t seen it all.

“I won’t be discussing any investigative details with her,” I tell the warden.

“I’m sure Kathleen will be asking you, since it is her daughter we’re talking about, after all. Dawn Kincaid supposedly killed those people and then tried to murder you, too?” Her eyes are steady on mine.

“I won’t be discussing any details with Kathleen about those cases or any cases.” I give the warden nothing. “That’s not why I’m here,” I reiterate firmly. “But I did bring a photograph I’d like her to have.”

“If you’ll let me see it.” She reaches out a fine-boned hand with perfectly manicured nails painted deep rose as if she just had them done, and she wears many rings and a gold metal watch with a crystal bezel.

I give her the plain white envelope I’d tucked into my back pocket, and she slides out a photograph of Jack Fielding washing his prized ’67 cherry-red Mustang, shirtless and in running shorts, grinning and glorious, when he was captured on camera some five years ago, between marriages and deteriorations. Although I

didn't do his autopsy, I've dissected his existence these five months since his murder, in part trying to figure out what I could have done to prevent it. I don't believe I could have. I was never able to stop any self-destruction of his, and as I look at the photograph from where I sit, anger and guilt spark, and then I feel sad.

"Well, I guess that's fine," the warden says. "He was easy on the eyes, I'll give him that. One of these obsessive bodybuilders, good Lord. How many hours in a day would it take?"

I look around at framed certificates and commendations on her walls because I don't want to look at her looking at that photograph, uncertain why it's bothering me so much. Maybe it's harder to see Jack through a stranger's eyes. *Warden of the Year. Outstanding Merit. Distinguished Service Award. Meritorious Service Award, Continuing Excellence. Supervisor of the Month.* Some of them she's won more than once, and she has a bachelor's degree cum laude from Spalding University in Kentucky, but she doesn't sound like a native, more like Louisiana, and I ask her where she's from.

"Mississippi, originally," she says. "My father was the superintendent of the state penitentiary there, and I spent my early years on twenty thousand acres of delta land as flat as a pancake, with soybeans and cotton that the inmates farmed. Then he got hired by Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, more farmland far away from civilization, and I lived right there on the grounds, which might seem strange. But I didn't mind living in the lap of my father's work. Amazing what you get used to as if it's normal. It was his recommendation that the GPFW be built out here in the middle of scrubland and swamps, and that the women take care of it and cost the taxpayers as little as possible. I guess you could say that prisons are in my blood."

"Your father worked here at some point?"

"No, he never did." She smiles ironically. "I can't imagine my father overseeing two thousand women. He would have been a bit bored with that, although some of them are a whole lot worse than the men. He was sort of like Arnold Palmer giving advice about golf-course design, no one better, depending on your vision, and he was progressive. A number of correctional institutions called upon him for advice. Angola, for example, has a rodeo stadium, a newspaper, and a radio station. Some of the inmates are celebrated rodeo riders and experts in leather, metal, and woodworking design that they're allowed to sell for their own profit." She doesn't say all this as if she necessarily thinks it's a good thing. "My worry about these cases you have up north is did they get everyone involved?"

"One would hope."

"At least we know for sure Dawn Kincaid is locked up, and I hope she stays locked up. Killing innocent people for no good reason," the warden says. "I hear she's got mental problems because of stress. Imagine that. What about the stress she's caused?"

Some months ago, Dawn Kincaid was transferred to Butler State Hospital, where doctors will determine whether she is competent to stand trial. Ploys. Malingering. Let the games begin. Or as my chief investigator, Pete Marino, puts it, she got caught and caught a case of the crazies.

"Hard to imagine she was all on her own when she was coming up with ways to sabotage and destroy innocent lives, but the worst is that poor little boy." Tara is talking about what is none of her business, and I have no choice but to let her. "Killing a helpless child who was playing in his backyard while his parents were right there inside the house? There's no forgiveness for harming a child or an animal," she says, as if harming an adult might be acceptable.

"I was wondering if it would be all right for Kathleen to keep the photograph." I don't verify or refute her

information. "I thought she might like to have it."

"I suppose I can't see any harm in it." But she doesn't seem sure, and when she reaches across her desk to hand the photograph back to me, I catch what is in her eyes.

She's thinking, *Why would you give her a picture of him?* Indirectly, Kathleen Lawler is the reason Jack Fielding is dead. *No, not indirectly*, I think, as anger simmers. She had sex with an underage boy, and the child they produced grew up to be Dawn Kincaid, his killer. That's about as direct as anything needs to get.

"I don't know what Kathleen has seen that's recent," I offer as an explanation, returning the photograph to its envelope. "It's an image I choose to remember him by, the way he was in better times."

I can't imagine Kathleen looking at this photograph and not opening up to me. We'll see who manipulates whom.

"I don't know how much you were told about why I moved her into protective custody," Tara says.

"I simply know that she has been." My answer is intentionally vague.

"Mr. Brazzo didn't explain?" She seems dubious as she folds her hands on top of her tidy square oak desk.

Leonard Brazzo is a criminal trial lawyer, and the reason I need one is that when Dawn Kincaid's attempt on my life goes to trial, I don't intend to entrust my welfare to some overworked or green assistant U.S. attorney. I have no doubt the team of lawyers who have taken her on pro bono will make my being attacked inside my own garage somehow excusable. They'll claim it was my fault she ambushed me from behind in the pitch dark. I'm alive because I was bizarrely lucky, and as I sit inside Tara Grimm's ivy-infested office, it bothers me more than I care to admit that I'm really not responsible for saving myself.

"As I understand it, she's been moved into protective custody for her own safety," I reply, as I envision the level-four-A camouflage vest with its inserted Kevlar-ceramic plates. I remember the body armor's tough nylon texture, the new smell of it, and its weight as I draped it over my shoulder inside my dark, frigid garage that night after retrieving it from the backseat of the SUV.

"Seems like my moving her to Bravo Pod might have made you hesitant about what you might be walking into down here in Savannah," Tara comments. "Seems like you might not be inclined to seek out anything *unsafe* after what you've been through."

I envision the blizzard of intense white specks as small as pollen on the MRI scan of the first victim Dawn Kincaid stabbed with an injection knife. Bright white particles densely concentrated around a buttonhole wound and blasted deep inside the organs and soft tissue structures of the chest. Like a bomb going off internally. If she'd finished what she'd started when she came after me with that same weapon, I would have been dead before I hit the ground.

"Not that I understand why you were wearing body armor at your own house." The warden probes because she can.

I don't offer that part of my job with the Department of Defense is medical intelligence, and that General Briggs wanted my opinion of the latest level of body armor developed for female troops. I happen to know for a fact that the vest can stop a steel blade. Luck, dumb luck, and I remember being shocked by what I saw in the mirror after it was over. My red-tinted face. My red-tinted hair. For an instant I smell the iron smell and hear the hissing red mist as it landed warmly, wetly, all over me inside my cold, dark garage.

“I understand the dog was out there in the garage with you when it happened, if what’s been in the news is true. How is Sock?” I hear the warden say, as I look down at my hands. My clean hands with their functional unpolished short squared nails. I take a deep breath and concentrate on any odors in the room. No iron bloody smell, just the hint of Tara Grimm’s perfume. Estée Lauder. Youth-Dew.

“He’s doing quite well.” I focus on her again and wonder if I missed something. How did we get on the subject of a rescued greyhound?

“So you still have him?” She looks steadily at me.

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m glad to hear it. He’s a very good dog. But they all are. Just as sweet as they can be, and I know Kathleen didn’t want to give him up to just anyone and is hoping she’ll get him back when she’s out.”

“When she’s out?” I ask.

“Dawn adopted Sock because Kathleen didn’t want anyone else to have him, she loved that dog so much,” Tara says. “Good to animals, I’ll give her credit for that, at least, and knowing all this should have alerted you that the two of them have a connection, an alliance. Kathleen and Dawn, even though Kathleen will lead you to think otherwise, as you’re about to find out. Since I’ve been the warden here, Dawn’s been a fairly frequent visitor, coming to see her mother three or four times a year, making deposits in her commissary account. Of course, that’s stopped. The two wrote to each other, but the police took those letters, although it doesn’t prevent the two of them from communicating now, one inmate writing another. You probably know all that.”

“I’d have no reason to.”

“Kathleen lies about it now that Dawn’s in trouble. Doesn’t want any guilt by association when it comes to someone who might be in a position to help her. You, for example. Or a prominent lawyer. Kathleen will say what she thinks is to her advantage.”

“What do you mean ‘when she’s out’?” I repeat.

“You know, everybody’s wrongly convicted this day and age,” she says.

“I didn’t realize there’s any suggestion Kathleen Lawler might have been.”

“She won’t get Sock back unless he lives to be a very old dog,” Tara Grimm says, as if she’ll make sure of it. “I’m glad you’re keeping him. I’d hate for one of the rescues we train here to be homeless again or end up in the wrong hands.”

“I can assure you Sock won’t ever be homeless or in the wrong hands.” I’ve never had a pet so bonded to me, following me everywhere like a needy shadow.

“Most of our greyhounds come from a racetrack in Birmingham, the same one Sock came from,” she says. “They retire them, and we take them so they aren’t euthanized. It’s good for the inmates to be reminded that life is a God-given gift, not a God-given right. It can be given or taken away. When you acquired Sock, you didn’t know he belonged to Dawn Kincaid, I assume.”

“He was inside a back room of an unheated house in Salem in the winter and had no food.” She can interrogate all she wants. I’m not going to tell her much. “I took him home with me until we could figure out

what to do with him.”

“And then Dawn showed up to get him,” the warden says. “She came to your house that same night to get her dog back.”

“It’s interesting if that’s the story you’ve heard,” I reply, and I wonder where she might have gotten an absurd idea like that.

“Well, your interest in Kathleen is a mystery to me,” she says. “I wouldn’t think it was the wisest move for someone in your position. Now, I said so to Mr. Brazzo, but, of course, he wasn’t going to elaborate on your real motive for agreeing to meet with Kathleen. Or why you’ve been so kind to her.”

I have no idea what she means.

“Let me be a little more blunt,” the warden says. “At certain times during the day, inmates with e-mail privileges are allowed to use the computer lab, and whatever they send to pen pals or receive from them has to go through our prison e-mail system, which is monitored and has filters. I know what she’s e-mailed to you over recent months.”

“Then you’re also aware I never answered.”

“I’m aware of all inmate communications to and from the outside world, whether it’s e-mail or letters written on stationery and sent by post.” She pauses, as if what she just said is supposed to mean something to me. “I have an idea what you’re after and why you’re being friendly and accessible with Kathleen. You want information. What should concern you is who’s really behind Kathleen’s invitation. And what that person might want. I’m sure Mr. Brazzo told you the troubles she’s had.”

“I’d rather hear your account of them.”

“Child molesters have never been particularly popular in prisons,” she says slowly, thoughtfully, in her blunted drawl. “Kathleen served her sentence for that long before I came here, and after she got out the first time, she got into one bad mess after another. She’s served six different sentences since her first incarceration, all of them right here at the GPFW, because she never seems to drift any farther away than Atlanta when she gets out. Drug crimes, until this most recent conviction for killing a teenage boy who had the misfortune of riding a motor scooter through an intersection at the moment Kathleen ran a stop sign. It’s a twenty-year sentence, and she’s required to serve eighty-five percent of it before she’s eligible for parole. Unless there’s intervention, she’s likely to spend the rest of her natural life here.”

“And who might intervene?”

“Are you personally acquainted with Curtis Roberts? The Atlanta lawyer who called your lawyer to invite you here?”

“No.”

“I don’t think the other inmates knew about Kathleen’s early conviction of child molesting until your cases up there in Massachusetts started hitting the news,” she says.

I don’t recall there being anything about Kathleen Lawler on the news, and the explanation I was given about why she’d been transferred to Bravo Pod was that she’d angered other inmates.

“Some of them decided they were going to teach her a lesson for what she did to your murdered colleague

when he was a boy,” Tara adds.

I’m quite certain Kathleen Lawler’s illicit relationship with Jack Fielding has not been in the news. I would know. Leonard Brazzo didn’t mention this, either. I don’t think it’s true.

“That, added to the boy on the scooter she ran over while she was driving under the influence. There are a lot of mothers in here, Dr. Scarpetta. Grandmothers, too. Even a few great-grandmothers. Most of these inmates have children. They don’t tolerate anyone who harms a child,” she goes on in a slow, quiet voice that is as hard as metal. “I got wind of a plot, and for Kathleen’s own protection I transferred her to Bravo Pod, where she’ll remain until I feel it’s safe to move her.”

“I’m curious about what’s been in the news, exactly.” I try to draw out details of what I suspect is a complete fabrication. “I don’t think I’ve heard this same news. I don’t recall hearing Kathleen’s name mentioned in connection with the Massachusetts cases.”

“Apparently one of the inmates, or maybe it was one of the guards, someone here caught something on TV about Kathleen’s past,” Tara says evasively. “About her being a sex offender, and it spread like wildfire. It’s not a popular thing to be at the GPFW. Harming a child isn’t forgiven.”

“And you saw whatever this was on the news as well?”

“I didn’t.” She watches me as if trying to figure out something.

“I’m just wondering if there’s another reason,” I add.

“You think there might be.” It’s not a question the way she says it.

“I was contacted about this visit two weeks ago, or, more accurately, Leonard Brazzo was,” I remind her. “Which was around the time Kathleen was moved to protective custody and lost e-mail access. What this suggests to me is the rumor started spreading like wildfire about the same time I was asked to meet with her. Would that be correct?”

She holds my gaze, her face inscrutable.

“I’m just wondering if there really was anything in the news.” I go ahead and say it.

3

The slayings began in northeastern Massachusetts about eight months ago, the first victim a star college football player whose mutilated nude body was found floating in Boston Harbor near the Coast Guard Station.

Three months later a young boy was killed in his own backyard in Salem, assumed to be the victim of a black-magic ritual that involved hammering nails into his head. Next an MIT graduate student was stabbed to death with an injection knife in a Cambridge park, and finally Jack Fielding was shot with his own gun. We were supposed to believe that Jack killed the others and himself, when in fact his own biological daughter is to blame, and perhaps she would have gotten away with it had she not failed in her attempt on me.

“There’s been a lot about Dawn Kincaid in the media,” I continue making my point to Tara Grimm. “But I haven’t heard anything about Kathleen or her past. For that matter, what happened to Jack as a boy hasn’t been in the news. Not that I’m aware of.”

“We can’t always stop outside influences,” Tara says cryptically. “Family members are in and out. Lawyers are. Sometimes powerful people with motives that aren’t always obvious, and they get something started, place someone in harm’s way, and next thing that person loses what few privileges she had or loses a lot more than that. I can’t tell you how many times these liberal crusader types decide to set things right and all they do is cause a lot of harm and put a lot of people at risk, and maybe you should ask yourself what business it is of someone from New York City to come down here and meddle in things.”

I get up from a prison-built chair that is as hard and rigid as the warden who ordered it made, and through open blinds I see women in gray prison uniforms working in flower beds and trimming grass borders along sidewalks and fences and walking greyhounds. The sky has gotten volatile and is the color of lead, and I ask the warden who from New York City? Who is she talking about?

“Jaime Berger. I believe the two of you are friends.” She steps out from behind her desk.

It’s a name I haven’t heard in months, and the reminder is painful and awkward.

“She’s got an investigation going on, and I don’t know the ins and outs of it, and shouldn’t,” she says, about the well-known head of the Sex Crimes Unit for the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office. “She has big plans and is insistent that nothing is leaked to the media or to anyone. So I didn’t feel comfortable mentioning anything about it to your lawyer. But it did occur to me you might have found out anyway that Jaime Berger has an interest in the GPFW.”

“I know nothing about an investigation and have no idea.” I’m careful not to let what I’m feeling register on my face.

“You seem to be telling me the truth,” she says, with a glimmer of defiance and resentment in her eyes. “It seems what I’ve just said is new information to you, and that’s a good thing. I don’t appreciate people telling me one reason for something when they really have another. I wouldn’t want to think your coming here to visit Kathleen Lawler is a ruse to cover up your involvement with another individual I’m responsible for at the GPFW. That you’re really here to help Jaime Berger’s cause.”

“I’m not part of whatever she’s doing.”

“You might be and not know it.”

“I can’t imagine how my coming to visit Kathleen Lawler would have anything to do with something Jaime is involved in.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that Lola Daggette is one of ours,” Tara says, and it’s a strange way to phrase it, as if the GPFW’s most notorious inmate is an acquisition like a rescued race dog or a rodeo rider or a special plant cultivated in the nursery down the road.

“Dr. Clarence Jordan and his family, January sixth, 2002, here in Savannah,” she continues. “A home invasion in the middle of the night, only robbery wasn’t the motive. Apparently killing for the sake of killing was. Hacked and stabbed them to death while they were in bed, except for the little girl, one of the twins. She was chased down the stairs and got as far as the front door.”

I remember hearing Savannah medical examiner Dr. Colin Dengate present the case at the National Association of Medical Examiners annual meeting in Los Angeles some years ago. There was a lot of speculation about what really happened inside the victims’ mansion and how access was gained, and I seem to recall the killer made a sandwich, drank beer, and used a bathroom and didn’t flush the toilet. It was my

impression at the time that the crime scene raised more questions than it answered and the evidence seemed to argue with itself.

“Lola Daggette was caught washing her bloody clothing and then made up one lie after another about it,” Tara says. “A drug addict who had problems with anger and a long history of abuse and run-ins with the law.”

“I believe there’s a theory that more than one person could have been involved,” I reply.

“The theory around here is justice was served, and this fall Lola should get to explain herself to God.”

“DNA, or maybe it was fingerprints, was never identified,” I begin to remember the details. “Opening up the possibility of more than one assailant.”

“That was her defense, the only remotely plausible story her lawyers could come up with that might explain how the victims’ blood could be all over her clothes if she wasn’t involved. So they manufactured an imaginary accomplice to give Lola someone to blame.” Tara Grimm walks me out into the hall. “I wouldn’t like to think of Lola being free in society, and it’s a possibility she could have that opportunity even though her appeals are used up. Apparently new forensic tests of the original evidence were ordered, something about the DNA.”

“If that’s true, then law enforcement, the courts, must have a substantive reason.” I look down the hallway to the checkpoint, where guards are talking to each other. “I can’t imagine the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the police, the prosecution, or the court would allow evidence to be retested unless there were legitimate grounds for it.”

“I suppose it’s within the realm of possibility that her conviction could be overturned. Could be others getting out early on good behavior, for that matter. Could be one big jailbreak here at the GPFW.” The warden’s eyes are hard, the glint in them now undisguised anger.

“Jaime Berger’s not in the business of getting people out of prison,” I reply.

“That seems to be the business she’s in now. She’s not paying social calls on Bravo Pod.”

“This was how long ago, exactly? When she was here?”

“I understand she has a place in Savannah, a getaway. It’s just something I’ve heard.” She dismisses the information as gossip, while I’m certain it’s more than that.

If Jaime came here to the GPFW to interview someone on death row, she didn’t do so without going through exactly what I am right now. She sat down with Tara Grimm first. *Social calls*, as in more than one. A getaway from what, and for what purpose? It seems completely out of character for the New York prosecutor I used to know.

“She’s been coming here, and now you’re here,” the warden says. “I have a suspicion you’re someone who doesn’t believe in coincidences. I’ll let the officers know it’s all right to take that photograph in and leave it with Kathleen.”

She steps back inside her office, and I follow the long blue hallway, returning to the checkpoint, where a corrections officer in a gray uniform and baseball cap asks me to empty my pockets. I’m told to place everything in a plastic basket, and I hand over my driver’s license and the van keys and explain the photograph has been approved by the warden, and the officer says he’s aware and I can carry it in with me.

I'm scanned, patted down, and given a clip-on red badge that says I'm official visitor number seventy-one. My right hand is stamped with a secret code word that will show up only under ultraviolet light when I'm leaving the facility later today.

"You might get in this place, but if your hand isn't stamped, you're never getting out," the officer says, and I can't tell if he's being friendly or funny or something else.

His name is M. P. Macon, according to his nameplate, and he calls on his radio for Central Control to open the gate. A loud electronic buzz, and a heavy green metal door slides open and clacks shut behind us. Then a second one opens, and visitation rules posted in red warn that I'm entering a zero-tolerance workplace for inmate-employee relationships. The tile floor has just been waxed and is tacky beneath my loafers as I follow Officer Macon along a gray corridor where every door is metal and locked and every corner and intersection are hung with convex security mirrors.

My escort is powerfully built and has a vigilant air that borders on combat wariness, his brown eyes constantly scanning as we reach another door that is remotely opened. We emerge into the yard in the heat, and low, ragged clouds stream overhead as if fleeing some encroaching danger. Lightning shimmers in the distance, thunder cracks, and the first drops of rain are the size of quarters on the concrete walkway they smack. I smell ozone and freshly cut grass, and the rain soaks through the thin cotton of my shirt as we walk fast.

"I was thinking this would hold off for a while." Officer Macon looks up at a dark churning sky that any second is going to split open directly over us. "This time of year, it's every day. Starts out sunny with a blue sky, just pretty as can be. Then we get us a bad storm, usually by four or five in the afternoon. Clears the air, though. This evening it will be cooled off nice. At least for this time of year in these parts. You don't want to be here in July and August."

"I used to live in Charleston."

"Well, then you know. If I could take summers off, I'd head up to where you just came from. Probably a good twenty degrees cooler in Boston," he adds, and I don't like it that he knows where I started out this morning.

Not exactly a difficult deduction to make, I remind myself. Anyone who checks would find out I work in Cambridge, and the nearest airport is Logan in Boston. He unlocks an outer gate and leads me along a walkway with high fencing and rolls of razor wire on either side. Bravo Pod looks no different from the other units, but when the outer door clicks open and we step inside, I feel a collective misery and oppressiveness that seems to seep from gray cinder block and polished gray concrete and heavy green steel. The control room on the second level is behind one-way mirrored glass directly across from the entrance, and there is a laundry room, an ice machine, a kitchen, and a grievance box.

I wonder if it's true, that this is where Jaime Berger came when she was here. I wonder what she talked about with Lola Daggette and if it is connected to Kathleen Lawler's being moved into protective custody and how any of it might relate to me. For Jaime to come here and deliberately place someone in harm's way doesn't sound like her, either. It's inconceivable to me that she could have been the source of a rumor about Kathleen Lawler's past that engendered hostility among the other inmates. Jaime is smart, shrewd, and exceedingly cautious. If anything, she is careful to a fault. Or she used to be. I haven't seen her in six months. I haven't a clue what is going on in her life. My niece, Lucy, never mentions her or what happened, and I don't ask.

Officer Macon unlocks a small room that has large plate-glass windows flanking the steel door. Inside are a white Formica table and two blue plastic chairs.

“If you just wait here, I’ll bring in Miss Lawler,” he says. “I may as well warn you, she’s a talker.”

“I’m a pretty good listener.”

“The inmates sure do love attention.”

“Does she have visitors often?”

“She’d like that, all right. An audience around the clock. Almost all of them would.” He doesn’t answer my question.

“Matter where I sit?”

“No, ma’am,” he says.

Typically in interview rooms if there is a hidden camera it will be mounted diagonally across from the subject, which in this instance would be the inmate and not me. There is no camera in here, I’m fairly certain, and I sit down and scan for hidden audio surveillance microphones, fixing my attention on the ceiling directly over the table, noticing the metal fire sprinkler and next to it a tiny hole surrounded by a white mounting ring. My conversation with Kathleen Lawler will be recorded. It will be listened to by Tara Grimm and possibly others.

4

Since Kathleen Lawler was moved into protective custody, she has been locked up twenty-three hours a day inside a cell the size of a toolshed with a view through metal mesh of grass and steel fencing. She can no longer see the concrete picnic tables, benches, or flower beds she’s described in e-mails to me. She rarely catches a glimpse of another inmate or a rescued dog.

The one hour she is allowed out for recreation she walks in “boring perfect squares” inside a small caged area while a corrections officer watches from a chair parked next to a bright yellow ten-gallon cooler. If Kathleen wants a drink of water, a small paper cup is pushed through chain link. She’s forgotten the human touch, the brush of fingers against hers or what it’s like to be hugged, she says, with a dramatic flair, as if she’s been in Bravo Pod most of her life instead of only two weeks. Being in PC, or protective custody, is the same thing as death row, she says about the new situation she finds herself in.

She no longer has access to e-mail, she explains, or to other inmates unless they yell cell to cell or stealthily carom folded notes called “kites” under the doors, a feat that requires rather remarkable ingenuity and dexterity. She’s allowed to write a limited number of letters each day but can’t afford stamps and is very grateful when “busy people like you bother to think about people like me and pay a little attention,” she makes a point of saying. When she isn’t reading or writing she watches a thirteen-inch TV built of transparent plastic with tamper-resistant screws. It has no internal speakers and the signal is weak, the reception very poor in her new confines, the worst ever, and she conjectures it’s because of “all the electromagnetic interference in Bravo Pod.”

“Spying,” she claims. “All these male guards and a chance to see me with my clothes off. Locked up in here all by myself, and who’s going to witness what really goes on? I need to move back to where I was.”

Allowed only three showers per week, she worries about her hygiene. She worries about when she will be allowed to get her hair and nails done again by inmates who aren’t the most skilled stylists, and she irritably indicates her overprocessed short dyed blond hair. She complains bitterly about the toll incarceration has

taken on her, about what it's done to her looks, "because that's the way they degrade you in here, that's the way they get you good." The polished-steel mirror over the steel sink in her cell is a constant reminder of her real punishment for the laws she's broken, she says to me, as if it is the laws themselves that are her victims, not human beings she has violated or killed.

"I keep trying to make myself feel better by thinking, *Well, Kathleen, it's not a real glass mirror,*" she muses from the other side of the white Formica table. "Everything that reflects anything in this place must cause distortion, don't you think? The same way something is distorting the TV signal. So maybe when I look at myself, what I'm seeing is distorted. Maybe I don't really look like this."

She waits for me to affirm that her beauty really isn't lost, that her steel mirror is guilty of fraudulent reflections. Instead I comment that what she describes sounds terribly difficult and if I found myself in a similar situation I'm sure I'd share many of her same concerns. I would miss feeling fresh air on my face and seeing sunsets and the ocean. I would miss hot baths and skilled hairstylists, and I sympathize with her about the food especially, because food is more than sustenance to me and I feel comfortable talking about it freely. Food is a ritual, a reward, a way of soothing my nerves and brightening my mood after all I see.

In fact, as Kathleen Lawler continues to talk and complain and blame others for her punishing life, I think about dinner and look forward to it. I won't eat in my hotel room. That would be the last thing I feel like doing after being trapped in a dirty stinking cargo van and now inside a prison with an invisible code word stamped on my hand. When I check into my hotel in Savannah's historic district, I will wander along River Street and find something Cajun or Greek. Better yet, Italian.

Yes, Italian. I will drink several glasses of a full-bodied red wine—a Brunello di Montalcino would be nice, or a Barbaresco—and I will read the news or e-mails on my iPad so no one tries to talk to me. So no one tries to pick me up, the way people often do when I travel alone and eat and drink alone and do so many things alone. I will sit at a table by a window and text Benton and drink wine and tell him that he was right about something being very wrong. I've been set up or manipulated, and I'm not welcome here, and the gloves are off, I'll let him know. I intend to grab the truth with my bare hands.

"Well, imagine not really knowing what you look like anymore," says the shackled woman sitting across from me, and her physical appearance is her biggest heartbreak, not the death of Jack Fielding or the boy she ran over when she was drunk.

"There was tremendous opportunity for me. I missed a very real chance to be somebody," she says. "An actress, a model, a famous poet. I have a damn good singing voice. Maybe I could have composed my own lyrics and been a Kelly Clarkson. Of course, they didn't have *American Idol* when I was coming along, and Katy Perry is a closer fit, more what I used to look like if she was blond. I suppose I could still be a famous poet. But success and acclaim are much more reachable if you're beautiful, and I was. Back in the old days, I'd stop traffic. People would gawk. The way I looked back then, I could have what I wanted."

Kathleen Lawler is unnaturally pale from years of being shielded from the sun, her body soft and shapeless, not overweight but broken down and doughy from a life that has been chronically inactive and unavoidably sedentary. Her breasts sag, and her upper thighs spread widely in the plastic chair, her former attention-getting figure as formless now as the white prison uniform she and other inmates wear in segregation. It's as if she's no longer physically human, as if she's evolved backward, returned to a primitive stage of existence like a platyhelminth, a flatworm, she says sardonically with a thickly elastic Georgia drawl that makes me think of taffy.

"I know you're probably sitting here looking at me and wondering what I'm talking about," she says, as I recall pictures I've seen, including mug shots from her arrest in 1978 after she and Jack were caught having

sex.

“But when I met him at that ranch outside of Atlanta?” she says. “Well, I was something. I don’t mind saying it, because it’s true. Long corn-silk hair, big-busted, with an ass like a Georgia peach and legs that wouldn’t quit, and huge golden-brown eyes, what Jack used to call my tiger eyes. It’s funny how some things get passed on, like you’ve been programmed in the womb or maybe at conception and there’s no escaping. The roulette wheel spins and stops and your number comes up and that’s what you are no matter how hard you try or even if you don’t try at all. You are what you are, you are what you’re not, and other events and other people just enhance the angel or devil, the winner or the loser in you. It’s all about the spinning of the wheel, whether it’s hitting the winning home run in the World Series or being raped. Decided for you, and forget undoing it. You’re a scientist. I’m not telling you anything you don’t know about genetics. I’m sure you agree you can’t change nature.”

“What people experience also has significant impact,” I reply.

“You can see it with the dogs,” Kathleen continues, not interested in my opinions unless she tells me what they are. “You get a greyhound that was mistreated, and it’s going to react to certain things a certain way and have its sensitivities. But it’s either a good dog or a bad dog. It was either a winner on the track or wasn’t. It’s either trainable or not. I can bring out what’s already there, encourage it, shape it. But I can’t transform the dog into something it wasn’t born to be.”

She finishes telling me that she and Jack were two peas in the same pod and she did to him exactly what was done to her, and she didn’t recognize it at the time, couldn’t possibly have the insight, even though she was a social worker, a therapist. She was molested by the local Methodist minister when she was ten, she claims.

“He took me out for ice cream, but that’s not what I ended up licking,” she puts it crudely. “I was crazy in love. He made me feel so excited and special, except in retrospect I don’t think *special* is what I really was feeling.” She goes into graphic detail about her erotic relationship with him. “Shame, fear. I went into hiding. I can see that now. I didn’t associate with other kids my age, spent huge amounts of time by myself.”

Her unrestrained hands are tense in her lap, only her ankles shackled, and the chains clink and scrape against concrete whenever she restlessly shifts her feet.

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty, as they say,” she continues, “and what was really going on was I couldn’t tell anyone the truth about my life, about the lying, the sneaking around to motels and pay phones and all sorts of things a little girl shouldn’t know about. I stopped being a little girl. He took that from me. It went on until I was twelve and he got a job with a big church in Arkansas. I didn’t realize when I got involved with Jack, I basically did the same thing to him because I was encouraged and shaped in a certain way to do it, and he was encouraged and shaped in a certain way to accept it, to want it, and oh, yes, he sure did. But I see it now. What they call insight. It’s taken me a lifetime to figure out we don’t go to hell, we build it on a foundation already laid for us. We build hell like a shopping mall.”

So far she has avoided telling me the minister’s name. All she’s said is he was married with seven children, and he had to have his God-given needs met and considered Kathleen his spiritual daughter, his handmaiden, his soul mate. It was right and good that they were joined in a sacred bond, and he would have married her and been open about his devotion but divorce was a sin, Kathleen explains to me in a flat, dead voice. He couldn’t abandon his children. That was against God’s teachings.

“Fucking bullshit,” she says hatefully.

Her tiger-eyed stare is unwavering, her once lovely face peanut-shaped and haggard now, with a spiderweb

of fine lines around a mouth that once was pouty and voluptuous. She is missing several teeth.

“Of course, it was unadulterated bullshit, and he probably moved on to some other little girl after I started shaving my parts and hiding from him when it was my period. Being beautiful and talented and smart didn’t land me anywhere good, that’s for damn sure,” she emphasizes, as if it is imperative I understand that the ruin sitting across from me isn’t who she is, much less who she was.

I am supposed to imagine Kathleen Lawler as young and beautiful, wise and free, and well intentioned when she began her sexual relationship with twelve-year-old Jack Fielding at a ranch for troubled youths. But what I see before me is the wreckage caused by one violation that caused another and another, and if her story is true about the minister, then he damaged her the same way she damaged Jack, and the destruction still hasn’t ended and probably never will. It is the way all things begin and continue. One act, one deception. A chronic lie that escalates to critical mass, and lives are disabled, disfigured, and defiled, and hell is built, lights on and welcoming and like that motel Kathleen described in the poem she sent.

“I’ve always wondered if my life would have turned out different if certain other things hadn’t happened,” she ponders depressively, resentfully. “But maybe I’d be sitting right here anyway. Maybe God decided while my mama was pregnant with me, *This one’s going to lose everything. Some have to, may as well be her.* I’m sure you understand what I mean. You see it enough in the morgue.”

“I’m not a fatalist,” I answer.

“Well, good for you, still believing in hope,” she says snidely.

“I do.” *But I don’t believe in you,* I think.

I slip the plain white envelope out of my back pocket and slide it across the table to her. She takes it in small hands with translucent white skin that pale blue veins show through, and her unpolished nails are pink and clipped short. When she bows her head to look at the photograph, I notice the gray in the mousy new growth of her dyed short hair.

“I’m guessing this one was taken in Florida,” she says, as if she’s talking about more than one photograph. “That might be a gardenia bush I’m seeing in the background, through the spray of water from the hose he’s using? Well, hold on. Hold on one damn minute.” She squints at the photo. “He’s older in this. It’s more recent, and those little white flowers are meadowsweet. There’s a lot of meadowsweet around here. You can’t walk a city block without seeing meadowsweet, and now I’m thinking Savannah. Not Florida but right here in Savannah.” After a pause, she adds in a strained tone, “You happen to know who took this?”

“I don’t know who took it or where,” I reply.

“Well, I want to know who took it.” Her eyes change. “If it’s Savannah or somewhere around here, and that’s what it looks like to me, well, maybe that’s why you’re showing it to me. To upset me.”

“I have no idea where it was taken or by whom, and I’m not trying to upset you,” I tell her. “I had the photograph copied and thought you might like it.”

“Maybe right here. Jack was here with that car of his and I didn’t know.” Pain and anger sharpen her tone. “When I first knew him, I told him how much he would love Savannah. What a nice place to live, and I said he should join the Navy so he could be stationed nearby at the new submarine base they were building at Kings Bay. You know at heart Jack had a wanderlust, was someone who should have sailed around to exotic parts of the world or taken up flying and been the next Lindbergh. He should have joined the Navy and gone

around the world on ships or in planes instead of being a doctor to dead people, and I wonder whose influence that was.”

She glares at me.

“I wonder who the hell took this picture and why I wouldn’t have known he was here if he was,” she says acidly. “I don’t know what you think you’re up to, springing something like this on me, making me think he would come here and not try to see me. Well, I do know, too.”

I wonder where Dawn Kincaid was five years ago, around the time I speculate the photograph was taken, and how often she might have come to Savannah to see Kathleen, and might Jack have come here to see Dawn but wasn’t interested in seeing her mother while he was in the area? Now that I’m confronted with Kathleen in the flesh, this woman I’d heard so much about but had never met, I seriously doubt Jack was driving his Mustang here or anywhere to see her as recently as five years ago or even ten years ago. It’s almost impossible for me to imagine that after a point he would have loved Kathleen Lawler anymore or bothered with her. She is remorseless and pitiless, completely lacking in empathy for anyone, and decades of substance abuse and self-destructive living and incarceration have taken their toll. She hasn’t been charming or beautiful in a very long time, and that would have mattered to my vain deputy chief.

“I don’t know where the photograph was taken or any of the details,” I repeat. “It was a photograph in his office, and I thought you’d like a copy, and this one is yours to keep. I didn’t always know where he was during the more than twenty years we worked together on and off.” I offer an opening for her to give me more information about him.

“Jack, Jack, Jack,” she says and sighs. “All you did was move. Here one minute and gone the next, while I stayed in the same damn black hole. I’ve been right here in one cell or another most of my life, all because I loved you, Jack.”

She looks at the photograph, then at me, and her eyes are harder than sad.

“I can’t seem to last on the outside for long,” she adds, as if I came here today to learn all about her. “Like any other addict who keeps falling off the wagon, only the wagon I fall off of isn’t abstinence. It’s the wagon of success. I’ve never been able to allow myself the success I’m capable of because it’s not in the cards for me to have it. I set myself up for failure every time. It’s what I mean about genetics. Failure is part of my DNA, what God decided for me and everyone who comes after me. I did to Jack what was done to me, but he never blamed me. He’s dead and I may as well be because the things that matter in life have a mind of their own. Both of us victims, maybe victims of the Almighty Himself.

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