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11th Hour

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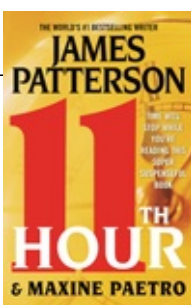
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REVENGE

A GOOD-LOOKING MAN in his forties sat in the back row of the auditorium at the exclusive Morton Academy of Music. He was wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and a snappy striped tie. His features were good, although not remarkable, but behind the blue tint of his glasses, he had very kind brown eyes.

He had come to the recital alone and had a passing thought about his wife and children at home, but then he refocused his attention on someone else's child.

Her name was Noelle Smith. She was eleven, a cute little girl and a very talented young violinist who had just performed a Bach gavotte with distinction.

Noelle knew she'd done well. She took a deep bow with a flourish, grinning as two hundred parents in the audience clapped and whistled.

As the applause died down, a gray-haired man in the third row popped up from his seat, buttoned his jacket, stepped out into the aisle, and headed toward the lobby.

That man was Chaz Smith, Noelle's father.

The man in the blue suit waited several seconds, then followed Smith, staying back a few paces, walking along the cream-tiled corridor, then taking a right past the pint-size water fountain and into the short spur of a hallway that ended at the men's room.

After entering the men's room, he looked beneath the stalls and saw Chaz Smith's Italian loafers under the door at the far right. Otherwise, the room was empty. In a minute or two, the room would fill.

The man in the blue suit moved quickly, picking up the large metal trash can next to the sink and placing it so that it blocked the exit.

Then he called out, "Mr. Smith? I'm sorry to disturb you, but it's about your car."

"What? Who is that?"

"Your car, Mr. Smith. You left your lights on."

The man in the blue suit removed his semiauto .22-caliber Ruger from his jacket pocket, screwed on the suppressor. Then he took out a tan-colored plastic bag, the kind you get at the supermarket, and pulled the bag over his gun.

Smith swore. Then the toilet flushed and Smith opened the door. His gray hair was mussed, white powder rimmed his nostrils, and his face showed fierce indignation.

"You're sure it's my car?" he said. "My wife will kill me if I'm not back in my seat for the finale."

"I'm really sorry to do this to your wife and child. Noelle played beautifully."

Smith looked puzzled—then he knew. He dropped the vial of coke, and his hand dove under his jacket. Too late.

The man in the blue suit lifted his bag-covered gun, pulled the trigger, and shot Chaz Smith twice between the eyes.

A LONG SECOND bloomed like a white flower in the blue-tiled room.

Smith stared at his killer, his blue eyes wide open, two bullet holes in his forehead weeping blood, a look of disbelief frozen on his face. He was still on his feet, but his heart had stopped.

Chaz Smith was dead and he knew it.

The shooter stared back at Smith, then reached out a hand and pushed him off his feet. The dead man fell into the stall, collapsing onto the seat, his head knocking once against the wall.

It was a perfect setting for the late Chaz Smith. Dead on the toilet, a fitting last pose for this crud.

“You deserved this. You deserved *worse*, you son of a bitch.”

It had been a good kill, and now he had to get out.

He put the plastic bag containing the shell casings, the GSR, and the gun back into his jacket pocket and closed the stall door.

Then he carried the trash can out of the men’s room and put it down so that it blocked the door from the outside. That would hold people off for a while, make them think that the men’s room was temporarily closed.

The man in the blue suit heard a rush of sound. The auditorium doors had opened for the crowd. He headed back by way of the main hallway, turning left just as people poured into the lobby, chattering and laughing. None of them noticed him, but even if they had, they would never have connected him to the dead man.

There was a fire alarm box on the wall next to a door marked TEACHERS’ LOUNGE.

Using his handkerchief to glove his hand, he opened the door to the box, lifted the hammer, broke the glass, and pulled the lever; the alarm bell shrilled.

Then he walked directly into the thick of the crowd.

Children were already starting to scream and run in circles in the lobby. Parents called out to their kids, took their hands or lifted them into their arms, and moved quickly toward the front doors.

The man went with the crowd, through the glass doors and out onto California Street. He kept going, turned onto a side street, passed Chaz Smith’s Ferrari, and unlocked his scarred SUV parked right behind it.

A moment later, he cruised slowly past the school. All the good people—the kids and their parents—were facing the building, staring up at the roof, watching for smoke and flames.

They didn’t know it, but they were all safer now.

Chaz Smith was only one of his targets. The media had started tracking this shooter’s kills—drug dealers, all of them. One of the papers had given him a nickname and it had stuck.

Now they all called him Revenge.

Fire engines approached from Thirty-Second Avenue, and the man called Revenge stepped on the gas. Not a good time to get stuck in a traffic jam.

He had shopping to do before he went home to his family.

THE HOUSE OF HEADS

Chapter 1

YUKI CASTELLANO OPENED her eyes. She was in her lover's arms, in her mother's bed. If she was dreaming, it was a pretty funny dream.

She grinned to herself, almost seeing her dead mom sitting in the green slipper chair by the dresser with a look of disapproval on her face—and, as sometimes happened, her mother's voice got into her head.

Yuki-eh, you want to have hus-band. Not lover.

Mom. Mom, he's so great.

He so married.

Separated!

Jackson Brady stirred beside her, pulled her toward him, lifted her hair, and kissed the side of her neck.

She said, "It's... early... you can sleep for another..."

Yuki sighed as Brady ran his hands over her naked body, started her engine, and revved it up.

Pillows went over the side, blankets bunched up at the footboard, and he fitted himself inside her. She cried out and he said, "I've got you."

He did. He had her good.

Gasping, they bit at each other, moved together in a race that they both won. They finished entangled in bedding and each other, both of them sweating, satisfied, amazed.

"Oh my God." Yuki sighed. "That was... just... okay."

Brady laughed. "You're too much."

He kissed her again, put his fingers in the thick black curtain of her hair, watched as the strands fell through his fingers.

"I have to go," he said softly.

"Not without coffee."

He gave her bottom a smack and got out of bed. Yuki turned on her side and watched Brady walking away from her. She took in his perfect body, his pale hair hanging almost to his shoulders, the simple Celtic cross tattooed on his back.

When the bathroom door closed, Yuki got out of bed and put on a silk robe the color of watermelon, a gift from Brady.

She stepped over the clothes they'd dropped on the floor last night, took one of his clean shirts out of a drawer, put it on the green chair. She listened to the shower and thought about Brady being in it.

Tsutta sakana ni esa wa yaranai, said Keiko Castellano. A man won't feed the fish he caught.

Shut up, Mom. I love him.

In the kitchen, Yuki opened the cupboard, got out the coffee beans, filled the coffeemaker with water. She put bread in the toaster.

It wasn't even 6:00 a.m. She didn't have to be at her desk in the DA's office until nine. But she didn't mind getting up with Brady. She wanted to do it, because, jeez, she loved him. It was almost embarrassing how much, but God, she was happy. Maybe for the first time in her adult life.

Nah, no maybe about it. This was definitely the happiest she'd been in twenty years.

Brady came into the kitchen. His tie was knotted, shoulder holster buckled over his blue shirt, and he was shrugging into his jacket. He looked worried, and she knew he was already working on the case.

that had been tearing at his guts.

She poured coffee, put buttered toast on a plate.

He stirred a lot of sugar into the coffee mug, took a sip. He took another, then put the cup down.

“I can’t eat, sweetie. I have to—Christ, I have a meeting in fifteen minutes. You okay? I’ll call you later.”

He might not call her later.

It didn’t matter. They were good.

She kissed him good-bye at the door and told him she hoped that he’d be safe. That she’d see him soon, whole and well.

She hugged him a little bit hard, a little too long. He tousled her hair and said good-bye.

Chapter 2

THE SUN WAS still in bed when I parked my Explorer across the street from the Hall of Justice, home to the DA's office, the criminal court, and the southern division of the SFPD.

I badged security, went through the metal detector, and headed across the empty garnet-colored-marble lobby to the staircase and from there to the Homicide squad room on the fourth floor.

Lieutenant Jackson Brady had called us together for an early meeting but hadn't said why. I'd been working for Brady for ten months and it still felt wrong.

Brady was a good cop. I'd seen him perform acts of bravery and maybe even heroism—but I didn't like his management style. He was rigid. He isolated himself. And when I'd been lieutenant, I'd done the job a different way.

My partner, Rich Conklin, looked up from his computer as I came through the gate. I loved Richie—he was like a little brother who looked out for *me*. He was not just a fine cop but a sterling person, and we'd had a great couple of years working Homicide together. What I appreciated about Conklin was how, in times of high stress, he always kept a steady hand on the wheel.

Our desks were pushed together at the front of the squad room so that we worked face-to-face. I hung my jacket over the back of my chair and said, "What's going on?"

"Lindsay, all he said was, 'I'll tell you when everyone is here.' "

I showed my childishness by making a lot of noise banging my chair against the desk. It took me about a minute to get it out of my system. Conklin watched me patiently.

"I haven't had coffee," I said.

Conklin offered me his. Then he threw paper clips at me until I calmed down.

At 6:30 a.m. the Homicide squad was present, all eight of us, sitting at our desks under the fluorescent lights that made us look embalmed.

Brady came out of his hundred square feet of glass-walled office and went directly to the whiteboard at the front of the room. He yanked down a screen, revealing 8 x 10s of three high-ranking bad-news drug dealers, all of them dead.

Then he stuck up photos of a fourth dead man—both his mug shot and morgue shot.

It was Chaz Smith. And his death was news.

Smith was a notorious scumbag who lived his upscale life in Noe Valley, passing as a retired businessman. He made a good living brokering the sales of millions of dollars in high-grade cocaine, delivering it to other dealers who sold on the street.

Smith had avoided capture for years because he was stealthy and smart and no one had ever caught him stopped next to another car on the shoulder of some highway transacting business through the window of his Ferrari.

Judging from the two bullet holes in his head, I figured it was safe to say he'd made his last deal.

Brady said, "Smith was at his little girl's music recital yesterday afternoon. He went to the men's room to have a snort, then took two shots through his frontal lobe. He was armed. He never got his gun into his hand."

Smith's death meant one less heinous dirtbag preying on the weak, and he'd been taken out without any taxpayer expense. I would have thought Narcotics would be dealing with this, not Homicide, but something was different about this murder. Something that had gotten to our lieutenant.

Brady took his job seriously. He didn't waste words. And yet right now he seemed to be skirting the reason he'd brought us onto the case.

I said, "Why us, Lieutenant?"

"Narcotics has requested our help," he said. "I know. We've got more than enough active cases, but here's the thing—Chaz Smith was taken out by a twenty-two that was stolen from our evidence room, one of six twenty-twos that have disappeared in the last few months. The shooter had access to SFPD floors. And the evidence log was deleted."

There was some gasping and shuffling in the room. Brady went on.

"There were no witnesses to Smith's murder, no evidence was left behind, and the fire alarm was pulled to create confusion.

"It was a professional hit, the fourth in a string of slick hits on dealers. It points to something—ah, shit," Brady said. "I'm not going to finesse it for you.

"I think the shooter is a cop."

Chapter 3

CINDY THOMAS WAS walking down the long slope of Divisadero, with its crystal view over the rooftops all the way out to the dawn-lit bay. It was a fantastic sight that normally gave her a real rush to the heart, but Cindy wasn't sightseeing. Wasn't walking for the exercise either.

She was struggling with a conflict, a big one, and she hoped that by airing out her brain, she would get some clarity.

Her fiancé, Rich Conklin, had woken her at something like five thirty this morning when he'd gotten up to go to work. He'd been sitting on the side of the bed tying his shoelaces in the dark and he'd said, "We'll get used to this kind of thing when we have kids."

This was Rich's *third* comment about having kids in the past couple of weeks.

She'd said to him, "Hey, mister. What's the rush?"

"It's better to do it while we can still keep up with little ones, ya know?"

He'd pulled the covers over her shoulders, kissed her, said, "Go back to sleep," and she'd tried, but she'd failed, absolutely.

At six thirty she'd dressed and gone out for what she'd thought would be a short walk. She had not been walking for over an hour and was no closer to an answer than she'd been when she'd gone out the door.

An investigative reporter with the *Chronicle*, Cindy had been working the crime desk for six years. She'd earned a seat at editorial meetings and a lot of respect for her talent and her tenacity. She was well positioned for top management and a big, big future. But this job that she loved was always at risk. If she had children, she wouldn't be able to work the kind of hours she needed to; she'd never be able to compete.

Richie was handsome, sweet, and she loved him. A few months ago, he'd surprised her with his mother's diamond ring, dropped to one knee in front of the altar in Grace Cathedral, and proposed to her—like they say, in front of God and everyone.

Seriously, what more could a girl want?

As it turned out, she wanted a lot.

If she told Richie how she felt, maybe he would change his mind about her. Maybe she'd break his beautiful heart.

When Cindy got to the stop sign at the corner of Divisadero and Vallejo, she glanced at her watch and realized that if she didn't get a cab, she'd be late to work.

She got out her cell phone, and, as if taking out the phone had *caused* it, a rush of unmarked police cars and cruisers blew past her and turned onto Vallejo.

She looked down Vallejo at the impressive row of megamansions on each side of the magnolia-lined street and saw that the cop cars had stopped a few blocks away, right in front of the infamous Ellsworth compound.

Something had happened at that house. And if there really was a reason for everything, then she'd walked four miles this morning so that she would be the first reporter on the scene.

Cindy broke into a run.

Chapter 4

THE ELLSWORTH COMPOUND was an immense and fanciful brick mansion built in the late 1800s, considered one of the most spectacular homes in Pacific Heights. A vine-covered wall fronted the house, and four attached buildings, built as servants' quarters, wrapped around the corner of Vallejo and went halfway down Ellsworth Place.

The compound had a colorful history of political intrigue and sex scandals going back over a hundred and twenty years.

But as Cindy ran along Vallejo toward the scrum of squad cars bunched in front of the mansion, she was thinking about the *recent* history of the house.

Ten years earlier, the Oscar-winning actor and legendary womanizer Harry Chandler had bought the Ellsworth compound and moved in with his glamorous wife, fashion designer to the stars Cecily Broad Chandler.

A year later, Cece Chandler simply disappeared.

Cindy had been an editorial assistant at the paper at the time, but she followed this gripping story over the next eighteen months as Harry Chandler was investigated, then tried for his wife's murder.

Chandler had pleaded not guilty, and because his wife's body was never found, the prosecution couldn't prove its case.

No body, no crime.

Harry Chandler was exonerated.

He had kept the Ellsworth compound as an investment while he lived on a yacht at a country club marina a few miles away.

Cindy had seen Chandler a couple of times at big social events and benefits. Looking at a man who had made so many famous films, you couldn't know if he was a killer or if he just played one on the big screen.

Now, blowing hard from her run, Cindy walked the last hundred yards to the front entrance of the Ellsworth compound, saw that it had already been cordoned off by uniformed officers. There was a crowd in front of the gate, tourists who had clearly come off a red bus marked STAR HOME TOURS.

Cindy went up to a cop she knew, Joe Sorbera, and asked him what was going on.

"You don't want to get me in trouble, Cindy. Do you? Because you know I can't tell you anything."

A young man wearing a Boston University sweatshirt came up next to Cindy and said, "Chandler thought he'd get away with it again."

Cindy introduced herself to the BU guy, said that she was a reporter, and asked the tourist to speak into her camera phone.

"The case of Cecily Chandler is a perfect example of how privileged people get over on the system," the young man said. "Harry Chandler had a famous defense attorney for a lawyer, a slick talker who probably played tennis with the judge."

Cindy shut off her phone, said, "Thanks," then muttered to herself, "for less than nothing."

A Channel Two news truck was turning onto Vallejo as two uniformed cops put out wooden barricades to block it.

Walking backward, Cindy tried again to get information from Sorbera.

"Can't you give me something, Joe, anything? I can quote you or keep you off the record, whatever"

you want. Please. Any detail will do.”

“Stand back, Cindy. Thatta girl. Thank you.”

Officer Sorbera stretched out his arms and corralled the crowd behind a barricade, letting the unmarked car Richie was driving go through.

Chapter 5

I WAS AT my desk when the 911 call came in at 7:20 and was relayed to the squad room by dispatcher May Hess, our self-anointed Queen of the Batphone.

Hess told me, “A woman of few words called and reported two people dead at the Ellsworth compound.

“She sounded for real,” Hess continued. “She said there were no intruders in the house and she was in no danger. Just ‘Two people are dead.’ Then she hung up. I called back twice but got an answering machine both times. I put out a call.”

I listened to the 911 tape. The caller had a British accent and sounded scared. In fact, the fear in her voice and whatever she *wasn't* saying were more alarming than what she said.

Brady listened to the tape, then tagged me and my partner to take a run out to Pacific Heights.

“Just do the prelim,” he said. “I’ll assign a primary when you bring back a report.”

Yes, sir. Forthwith, sir.

At 7:35 a.m., Conklin braked our car in front of the Ellsworth compound. Four cruisers had gotten there before us and there was also a red double-decker bus parked parallel to the curb. A gang of maybe twenty tourists were taking pictures from behind barricades across the street.

I had known the Ellsworth compound was on the historic-house tour, but I guess when Harry Chandler bought it for umpteen million dollars ten years ago, the compound went on the stargazing tour as well.

I got out of the car and approached Officer Joe Sorbera, who had been the first on the scene. He took out his notebook and said to me, “I got here at seven ten, spoke to Janet Worley, the caretaker, through the intercom. There’s the box next to the gate. She said she was not in any danger and that the victims, two of them, were dead. *Definitely dead* were her exact words.”

The uniformed cop continued. “Lieutenant Brady told me to cordon off a perimeter and to wait for you, Sergeant. He told me not to go into the house.”

“Has the ME been called?”

“Yes, ma’am. And CSU is on the way. I took some photos of the crowd.”

“Good job, Sorbera.”

I looked at the mob, saw it was thickening. Cars were backed up on Vallejo and were being detoured around Divisadero. Because of the traffic, and a million Tweets and YouTube posts by tourists, the scene would be red-flagged by the press.

Death plus celebrity was a heady news combination. The media was going to train its brights on this house, and any law enforcement errors would be documented for posterity.

I told Sorbera to set up a media liaison and a command post on Pierce, then I went to where Conklin was examining the front gate to the compound.

The wrought-iron gate was set into a ten-foot-high ivy-clad brick wall that gave the house total privacy from the street. The metalwork looked old enough to be original, and the lock had recently been forced. I saw fresh cuts in old iron.

“It was pried open with a metal tool, not a bolt cutter,” Conklin said.

Joe Sorbera said there were two victims, *definitely dead*. Who were they? Was Harry Chandler involved?

Brady had assigned us to do the preliminary workup, meaning we had to determine where law enforcement and forensics could walk on the scene without destroying evidence. We were charged with taking pictures, making sketches, and forming an opinion.

After that, we'd turn the scene over to the primary investigator on the case.

I gloved up and pushed at the gate, which swung open on well-oiled hinges. A stone walkway crossed a mossy grass lawn and led past a couple of flower beds, one on each side of the steps, to the ornate front door.

The door showed no sign of forced entry. Conklin lifted the brass door knocker, banged it against the strike plate.

I called out, "Janet Worley, this is the police."

Chapter 6

THE PETITE WOMAN who opened the door was white, late forties, five three, one hundred and ten pounds, wearing leggings under a floral-print smock. Her expression was strained and her mascara was smudged under her eyes. Her nails were bitten to the finger pads.

I showed her my badge, said, "I'm Sergeant Lindsay Boxer. This is my partner, Inspector Richard Conklin."

She said her name was Janet Worley.

Conklin asked, "How are you doing, Ms. Worley?"

"Horribly, thank you."

"It's okay. We're here now," Rich said.

Conklin is good with people, especially women. In fact, he's known for it.

I wanted to learn everything at once, which was what always happened when I started working a case. I looked around the foyer as Conklin talked to Janet Worley and took notes. The entranceway was huge, with a twenty-foot-high ceiling and plaster moldings; to my right, a wide and winding staircase led to the upper floors.

Everything was tidy, not a rug fringe out of place.

Janet Worley was saying to Conklin, "My husband and I are just the caretakers, you understand. This house is thirty thousand square feet and we have a schedule. We've been cleaning the Ellsworth Place side of the house over the past three days."

Looking through the foyer, I thought the house seemed gloomy, what you would expect from a relic of the Victorian age. Had we stepped into a *Masterpiece Theatre* episode? Was Agatha Christie lurking in the wings?

Behind me, Janet Worley was still talking to Conklin and she had his attention. I wanted to hear her out, but she was going the long way around the story and I felt the pressure of time passing.

"Why did you call emergency?" Conklin asked.

Worley said, "I had better show you."

We followed behind the small woman, who took us through the foyer, past a library, and into a living area with an enormous stone fireplace and large-scale leather furniture. Sunlight passed through stained glass, painting rainbows on the marble floors. We went through a restaurant-quality kitchen and at last arrived at the back door.

Worley said, "We haven't been in this part of the house since last Friday. Yes, that's right, three days ago. I don't know how long these have been here."

She opened the door and I followed Worley's pointing finger to the chrysanthemum-lined brick patio in the backyard.

For a moment, my mind blanked, because what I saw was frankly unbelievable.

On the patio were two severed *heads* encircled by a loose wreath of white chrysanthemum flowers.

They seemed to be looking up at me.

The sight was grisly and shocking, made for the cover of the *National Enquirer*. But this was no alien invasion story, and it was no Halloween prank.

Conklin turned to me, my shock reflected in his eyes.

"These heads are real, right?" I asked him.

“Real, and as the lady said, definitely dead.”

Chapter 7

ADRENALINE BURNED THROUGH my bloodstream like flame on a short fuse. What had happened here?

What in God's name was I looking at?

The head to the right was the most horrific because it was reasonably fresh. It had belonged to a woman in her thirties with long brown hair and a stud piercing the left side of her nose. Her eyes were too cloudy to tell their color.

There was dirt in her hair that looked like garden soil, and maggots were working on the flesh, but enough of her features remained to get a likeness and possibly an ID.

The other head was a skull, just the bare cranium with the lower jaw attached and a full set of good teeth.

Two index cards lay faceup on the bricks in front of the heads and both had numbers written on them with a ballpoint pen. The card in front of the skull read *104*. The other card, the one in front of the more recently severed head, read *613*.

What did the numbers mean?

Where had these heads come from?

Why were they placed here in plain sight?

If this was a homicide, where were the bodies?

I tore my gaze away from the heads to look into Janet Worley's face. She covered her mouth with both hands and tears sprang to her eyes.

I saw a meltdown coming. I had to question her. Now.

"Who do these remains belong to? Where are the bodies? Tell us about it, Mrs. Worley."

"Me? All I know is what I just told you. I'm the one who called the police."

"Then who did this?"

"I have no idea. None at all."

"You understand that lying would make you an accessory to the crime."

"My God. I know *nothing*."

Conklin said, "We need the names of everyone who has been inside this house since last Friday."

"Of course, but it's only been my husband, my daughter, and me."

"And Mr. Chandler?"

"Heavens, no. I haven't seen him in three months."

"Have you handled these heads or disturbed anything on the patio?"

"No, no, no. I opened the door to air out the room at about seven this morning. I saw *this*. I called my husband. Then I called nine-one-one."

Janet Worley went inside the house, and Conklin and I were left to consider the nature of "this."

Was it Satanism? Terrorism? Drug-related homicide? Who were these victims? What had happened to them?

I wanted to start looking around, but Conklin and I had to stay on the bricks and focus on what we could see without contaminating evidence.

Brady had told us to do the prelim.

That was the job: scope out the crime and tell our lieutenant whether this was a double homicide or

a freak show that should be handed off to Major Crimes.

“I don’t know what the hell we’re looking at,” I said to Conklin.

Truly, I’d never seen anything like it in my life.

Chapter 8

THE BACK GARDEN was a dark, three-quarter-acre triangular plot that looked as though a slice of woodland had been dropped down in one piece behind the Ellsworth house.

The parcel was shadowed by buildings and mature trees, crossed with mulched paths, bounded by the house on one side and by two ten-foot-high brick walls that met at a toolshed at the farthest end of the garden.

Looking for entrances, I saw, in addition to the front gate with its broken lock, five doors that opened to the garden from the main house and a gate in the wall next to the toolshed.

“There’s a multipurpose tool,” Conklin said.

He was pointing to a shovel half hidden by a shrub, and beyond the shovel was a mound of soil and a hole dug in the dirt. The hole was about two feet across, the right size for potted chrysanthemums—and also just right for disembodied heads.

I saw a second hole, just visible from the far corner of the patio, and beside that hole was a rounded stone.

Now that I was looking for them, I saw other stones around the garden. Maybe they were decorative in a gnomish way, or maybe the stones were markers.

If the shovel had been used to break the lock, it would mean that whoever broke in knew where to look for the disembodied heads and had then exhumed them.

Did that mean that the intruder was the killer?

Or was he an accessory to whatever mayhem had taken place?

I took another look at the numbered index cards.

When a killer deliberately leaves a calling card, it’s a dare. Usually means he’s trying to show the cops that he’s smarter than they are. It’s playing a very risky game.

Here was the game board as I saw it: a large hidden garden, two severed heads wreathed with flowers, cryptic numbers on a matching pair of index cards.

Did the numbers indicate how many heads were in the garden? Could hundreds of skulls be in this place, perhaps stacked in holes, one on top of another?

Beyond the complete creepiness of the skull tableau, I didn’t have a sense of the meaning or intention of any of it, but we were just getting started and hadn’t yet scratched the surface.

I said to Conklin, “The quickest way is also the best.”

“Ground-penetrating radar,” he said, staring out into the garden.

“And cadaver dogs. We’ve got to dig this place up.”

Chapter 9

WE MET NIGEL Worley in the kitchen of the Ellsworth house.

At six three, he was a full foot taller than his wife and had almost a hundred and fifty bloated pounds on her too. His face was puffy. Looked to me like he was a heavy drinker, and I noticed that he had rough dark-stained hands. He answered only questions directed specifically to him, and when he spoke, it was to a place in the air between Conklin and me.

Mr. Worley had no theories about the severed heads, and his tone was hostile. But he had to make a statement on the record. We gave him no choice. The Worleys were witnesses and they were also the only suspects we had.

We put on the siren and drove the English couple from their residence back to the Hall.

While Conklin interviewed Nigel Worley, I sat across from Janet Worley in the smaller of our two interrogation rooms. Brady paced unseen behind the glass.

Brady had already told me that he was unhappy with how our day was turning out. In his opinion, the Ellsworth case was a tar pit, and Conklin and I were going to get sucked under. He needed us to work the vigilante-cop case, and he wanted us to work it now.

I understood his concerns, but I'd seen the severed head of a woman who'd been alive a week ago. She was a Jane Doe, and because we didn't know her name, she was about to get an official case number and a spot on a refrigerated shelf in the city morgue.

The camera in the corner of the interview room rolled tape as Janet Worley told me that she and Nigel had come to the United States from England ten years before and that they had been working for Harry Chandler since he bought the compound.

She said that she'd "adored" the Chandlers and were shocked and heartbroken when Mrs. Chandler disappeared. The Worleys had stayed on at the compound when Mr. Chandler went on trial, in part because their daughter loved living there and still did.

"Nicole is with Fish and Wildlife," Janet told me. "She hasn't been home all weekend. She's a biologist, you know. Off on some animal rescue mission in the wilderness, I expect. I haven't been able to reach her on the phone."

Janet Worley thought Nicole would be returning home that evening but said they never knew her movements for sure.

"She's twenty-six, you understand. She leads her own life."

"Explain to me about the buildings on Ellsworth Place, the ones that look to be part of the compound."

"They were servants' quarters originally, then over the years they became apartments. Mr. Chandler owns them all," said Janet Worley, "but he's been moving the tenants out. There are very few occupants now."

Janet Worley told me that Nicole lived in number 2 Ellsworth, that Mr. Chandler's driver lived in number 4, and that the other two buildings were vacant.

I strained Worley's statement for inconsistencies, watched her body language, and I thought she was being truthful. I asked her to write down names and phone numbers of the Chandler staff living on Ellsworth Place, and while she did that, I went out of the room and compared notes with Conklin.

Nigel Worley had told Conklin the same story Janet had told me. He'd said that no one had a

grudge against him, his wife, or his daughter and that Mr. Chandler hadn't received any hate calls or letters at the compound.

Nigel Worley, like his wife, insisted that he had no idea who could have put the severed heads on the patio and that he had never before seen the victim with the long brown hair.

If we were to believe them, the Worleys had been together virtually every minute of the last ten years and could vouch for each other's whereabouts over the weekend in question.

I was frustrated but tried not to show it.

How could Brady expect me to leave our Jane Doe and that naked skull unidentified? How could I put this case down without solving it?

I couldn't.

Chapter 10

I KNOCKED ON Brady's open office door. He waved me in and told me to sit down.

I knew this office very well. It had once been mine, but I had given up the job of lieutenant so that I could do detective work full-time instead of watchdogging time sheets and writing reports.

Warren Jacobi had been my partner back then.

Ten years older than me, with many more years on the street, Jacobi had good reasons to move into this corner office when I left it. He didn't want to work the street anymore. He wanted more access to the top, less sprinting through dark alleys. He had taken over from me and gotten the squad running like a fine watch, and soon he was promoted to chief, leaving the lieutenant's job vacant again.

That was ten months ago.

Jackson Brady, who had recently transferred from Miami PD, had asked for the promotion and gotten it, along with the small glass-walled office with a window looking out on the James Lick Freeway.

Applying the whip was nasty work, but someone had to do it. Brady was doing fine.

"I need a minute," I told Brady now.

"Good. That's all the time I've got."

"I want to run the Ellsworth case as primary," I said. "It's going to be a bear, but I'm into it. I can handle both Ellsworth and the vigilante cop if I work with Conklin and another team."

Brady got up from behind the desk, closed the door, sat back down, and gave me his hard blue-eye stare, full-bore.

"There's something you have to know about the vigilante cop, Boxer. He's not shooting just dirtbags. His last victim, Chaz Smith, was working undercover."

"I'm sorry. Say that again."

"Chaz Smith was a cop."

Brady told me his theory: a cop who worked in the Hall of Justice had gotten fed up with due process and decided to go it alone, but he had screwed up more than he knew when he took out Chaz Smith.

"Smith was running a big operation for Narcotics," Brady told me. "And he had other cops working for him down the line. We have to protect those cops, and we have to bring this vigilante down. No room for failure. No excuses."

"I have to tell Conklin."

"Where is he?"

"Driving Harry Chandler's caretakers to a hotel."

"You can tell him," Brady said, "and I'm willing to give you a shot working both cases, Boxer. But if one of them has to take a backseat, I'll tell you right now, it's going to be your house of heads."

"I hear you."

"Make sure you do. This vigilante is not only a cop, he's a cop *killer*. He murdered one of us."

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