

Blood Trail

The blood trail started at the front door. A light spray covered the wallpaper, so fine that it almost looked like part of the design. Then the spray became a spurt, and finally great arching lines of blood that had dripped down the walls into the baseboards.

Wheldon stepped inside the apartment, mourning the destruction of evidence. The crime scene was the entry itself. Even if he hadn't seen the body—face down in the area where the foyer opened into the living room—he would have been able to tell from the blood that the crime had been committed here.

He could even guess, without examining the body itself, how the wounds occurred: a preliminary stab wound on the left side of the back, into some blood vessels but nothing major; other stab wounds lower, at least one somewhere vital; and the last in a major artery which caused death quite quickly.

The attack started when the victim arrived home and unlocked her apartment door. Her attacker followed her inside, stabbed her, pulled the door closed, and continued to stab until she was dead.

“Is there another way into this place?” he asked the patrolman outside the door.

“Nope.” The patrolman was young, his face green. He'd been standing in the hall when Wheldon arrived, arms crossed, as if he were guarding the place. But Wheldon had seen enough rookies to recognize the reaction: the young man was trying to keep his lunch down and look official in the process.

“Who's been through?” Wheldon asked.

“The roommate—she's the one who called—my partner, me, the detectives, and the forensic guys.”

Wheldon nodded. “Keep everyone else out until I give permission. And I don't want you guys to leave until we bag your shoes.”

“Excuse me?” The patrolman looked at him with a mixture of shock and confusion.

“Your shoes,” Wheldon said. “This is the fourth entryway stabbing I've worked on in the last two months. The problem with all of them is that critical evidence gets destroyed from the get-go. I'm making sure that won't happen this time.”

“I gotta give you my shoes?”

“I'm afraid so, Officer,” Wheldon said.

“But how'm I supposed to finish my shift?”

Wheldon shrugged. He walked farther inside, careful to avoid the spatter that had reached the floor. There was a smear near an end-table, probably from a shoe. But the prints led into the living room and ended near the feet of the woman who sat on the sofa, twisting her hands together.

The roommate, the one who'd called the police.

She was talking to one of the detectives, her head down, eyes averted. She was making a studied attempt not to look at the body sprawled near Wheldon on the scuffed hardwood floor.

He studied her for a moment. She was thin—with a body style that would have been fashionable thirty years before, in the affluent '90s. He doubted her thinness had anything to do with diets and exercise. Judging from the apartment, she remained thin thanks to lack of cash.

Forensics was taking photographs using a hand-held computer, two different digital cameras, and then the standard camera required by regulation. Scientific changes, which had brought so much to police work, were still hampered by regulations; good work was getting tossed out in court because it didn't meet guidelines set before the turn of the century. In the last twenty years, Wheldon's job had gotten harder, not easier.

“What're you doing here, Zack?” Amy Mannis approached him from the other side of the living room. She had her hand-held out, and her white plastic gloves on. She looked official. “Dex and I drew this case.”

“You get to assist,” he said. “I'm overseeing you. I can tell you from the blood spatter alone that this one fits into a pattern.”

Her lips thinned. “Why don't you wait until the preliminary report before you hone in on our case, Zack?”

“Because the last time I did that, the vital evidence was gone. You don't know what you're looking for.”

“And you do?”

He glanced at the living room. The other detective and the roommate were watching the exchange. He lowered his voice so that they couldn't hear him.

“At first you thought robbery. But all that's missing are homemade DVDs and photographs of the victim, as well as some pieces of jewelry—anything with a gem or pearl on it.”

Her expression didn't change. She obviously hadn't been here long enough to know what was missing. He'd only gotten the call half an hour ago, and the 911 report had come in a half an hour before that.

“In the roommate's bedroom—not the victim's—you'll find the bed turned down and a Godiva truffle in its original box sitting on the pillow. That room will be neat as a pin even if it hadn't been left that way.”

Amy started. She had seen that.

“The jewelry will be missing from the roommate's room. The victim's room will be untouched.”

“Son of a bitch.” Amy shook her head. She knew that he would take charge. He'd worked with her before. She hated playing the subordinate. “I don't supposed I have a choice.”

His smile was thin. “I don't suppose you do.”

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The victim was Rhonda Schlaffler, a forty-five year-old book editor who worked just off Times Square. Divorced five years before, no alimony, no children, living off her salary which barely covered essentials, and saving for an apartment of her own.

Her roommate was 34 year-old Trisha Newman who managed a Greek restaurant off Times Square. Newman, who'd never been married, had a spotty employment history, and a tendency to quit jobs in the heat of anger. She was also extremely competent, so when she did find work, she was promoted rapidly.

The women had met when Newman advertised for a roommate through one of the apartment services. They'd lived together for five years, but never socialized. Newman didn't even characterize them as friends. Still, she'd been upset and terrified—upset at her roommate's death, terrified at the staged scene aimed at her.

The body confirmed what Wheldon had already guessed. The first wound, somewhat shallow, in the back beneath the ribcage, catching some blood vessels. Two more wounds, also in the back, near the spinal chord, and the fatal wound in the neck, severing the carotid artery.

The only surprise were matching rips in the collars of victim's coat and shirt, caused by a hand gripping them too tight and pulling, straining the material until it tore. Either the victim had made a near-successful bid to elude her attacker or her knees had buckled and he had to use her coat to hold her up while he finished the job. Judging by the blood spatter, she had nearly gotten away.

Wheldon had come to all of those conclusions by late evening of the first day. His greatest gift as an investigator was his ability to place himself at the crime scene—to see things that others missed.

It was also his greatest curse. His mind was always filled with what-ifs and would-have-beens. After thirty years of tough cases, he had become quiet and morose. His friends wouldn't let him drink with them any more, and he'd stopped dating ten years before.

The job was everything, and everything, for the moment, focussed on Rhonda Schlafli.

Her last few seconds must have seemed like hours.

He doubted she'd noticed her attacker following her, although he might have joined her in the elevator, making her uncomfortable. Or maybe not. Maybe she had been the kind of woman who closed into herself in an elevator, ignoring the people around her. In either case, she had gotten off the elevator on her floor, pulled her keys out of her purse, and unlocked both deadbolts on her door.

She'd pushed the door open before noticing him behind her, but there was no way to tell whether or not she had gone inside voluntarily. Perhaps he had shoved her forward, perhaps he had just followed her—the evidence was inconclusive about that. What it was conclusive about was that the attack started just inside the door. He had to still be standing in the hall when he stabbed her the first time.

Unfortunately, the building's security system was as primitive as its locks. An old-fashioned buzzer system on the front door instead of a doorman, security cameras set up in the 1970s and not maintained since, and a super who was away from his apartment more than he was inside it. New York had too many buildings like this, and the killer knew it. He seemed to know a lot about his victims and their roommates, and he used that knowledge to achieve his ends, whatever they might be.

That was what Wheldon couldn't figure out. He couldn't tell from the evidence whether he was trying to find a serial killer, defined as someone who killed randomly and indiscriminately within a certain physical or personality type, or a series killer, defined as someone who killed for a select period of time to fulfill some kind of pattern only he saw. After the second murder, Wheldon had ruled out murder for hire. Neither victim had been wealthy enough nor had they had enough enemies to justify the expense.

In fact, he had found only a handful of things in common between all four cases: the manner of death, the victims' gender, the neighborhood, the presence of a female roommate, the Godiva truffles and the turned-down bed, and the stolen DVDs and jewelry.

Everything else was different. The victims' ages ranged from 24 to 53; their incomes ranged from \$20,000 a year to \$80,000; and their marital status ranged from divorced with children to permanently single. None of them worked in the same place or even the same neighborhood, none of them frequented the same shops or restaurants, and none of them had the same friends. They even used different on-line services.

The murders weren't quite random, but they were random enough to give him fits. After the second

killing, he'd entered the information in the FBI's National Database of Unsolved Crimes. He'd thought the Godiva trick unique enough to bring a hit from another state, should such a thing exist. But after the third killing, he'd given up hope. He'd found nothing else like it in his search of unsolved crimes nationwide.

He'd also found nothing when he searched for murders connected to chocolates. His investigate of the Godiva boxes didn't help either—they were all from different batches which had been on the market all over the country on the day of the murders, and hundreds of them were sold in New York City alone—with most of the purchasers paying cash.

Even though he entered information from the fourth murder into the database, he had no illusions this time. He knew he would have to catch this killer on his own.

And he knew he would probably have to wait until the killer struck again.

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Wheldon had already moved the Schlaffler case off his desk when the Suits came to visit. In the two weeks since Schlaffler's death, Wheldon overseen four other difficult homicide investigations and helped solve three of them. The fourth would be wrapped within the week.

Solving difficult cases was his specialty, which was why the Godiva cases really bothered him. Still, he hadn't thought about them in two days when he arrived at his office to find two women in cheap black suits waiting for him.

They looked official. He figured they were either Internal Affairs, coming to see him about some of the cops he'd overseen, or the Feds, wanting to argue jurisdiction on something he hadn't even heard of yet.

He wasn't surprised when they flashed their shiny Bureau badges at him and asked him to shut the door. He did, after he ran their badge numbers through his hand-held, and saw photos that matched the faces before him. The women smiled as he did that, one of them commenting that she liked his caution.

He'd learned, over the years, that caution made him a good cop.

“Agents Ambersson and Kingsbury,” he said as he sank into his chair. “Your identification checks out, but doesn't tell me what unit you're in.”

“That's right,” said Ambersson. She was younger than he was by at least twenty years, a bright-eyed thirty-something who still had the patina of a true believer. “Our status is on a need-to-know.”

“And our superiors believe you need to know,” said Kingsbury. She was closer to his age, with a deep rich voice, and a world-weary manner. He got the sense that she tolerated her partner, but didn't entire approve of her.

Wheldon folded his hands, leaned back, and waited. They clearly wanted something from him, and they would take their own sweet time to get there.

“We understand you've been investigating a series of murders in the West 80s.” said Kingsbury.

“That's right.”

“We're particularly interested in the last murder. Rhonda Schlaffler.”

Despite himself, he felt a surge of hope. At last a breakthrough. Maybe Schlaffler had a secret double-life. Maybe she had been under FBI surveillance for political actions in the late 80s, her college

years. Maybe she had been a Person of Interest in another crime.

“According to the information you entered in our database,” Ambersson said, “you can pinpoint the time of death to a 15-minute window, is that correct?”

He frowned, somehow not expecting them to pick up on that detail. “Yes.”

“You came to this conclusion how?”

“Her workplace uses an electronic i.d. system. Her employee identification number ran through the exit machine at 6:05 p.m. She walked with a friend to the subway and took the train home. It arrived at her stop at 6:32 that night. The stop was a two-minute walk from her apartment. Even if she stopped somewhere, like a deli, she had to have arrived before 6:50.”

“Because?” Kingsbury asked.

“Because her neighbor received a visitor at 6:50—his ex-wife. He didn't get along with the wife, and didn't want her inside the apartment, so he talked with her, more like argued with her, in the hallway for the next half an hour. He watched Schlaffler's roommate unlock her apartment door, enter, and heard the screams. We figure Schlaffler arrived home at the earliest at 6:35 and died before 6:50, since there was no other way out of the apartment.”

“Not even a fire escape?” Ambersson asked.

“A point of contention between Schlaffler and her landlord. There had been a fire escape out the bathroom window, but the iron had rusted through and fallen away from the building. Anyone trying to exit that way would have had a three-story drop before hitting another fire escape landing, which probably wouldn't have supported the perp's weight.”

“I trust you checked this,” Ambersson said.

Wheldon was beginning to get impatient. He wasn't used to being quizzed on his cases. “Of course. We looked for fibers, blood, hair, asked residents about strangers or anything out of the ordinary, even checked with the two homeless guys who slept in the alley, and we turned up nothing.”

“Excellent,” said Ambersson.

“Excellent?” Wheldon asked. Whatever response he had expected, it was not that one.

She wasn't paying attention to him. Instead, she was looking at her partner and smiling as if they'd caught the killer without Wheldon's help. “Sounds good to me.”

Kingsbury shrugged. “I'd like something tighter, but this'll have to do.”

“What are you talking about?” Wheldon asked.

The agents turned toward him. The look of expectation was still on Ambersson's face. Kingsbury's expression hadn't changed at all.

“For the past three days,” Kingsbury said, “we have conducted an investigation of you.”

“Me?” Wheldon frowned. “For what?”

“A high-level security clearance. If you sign the forms we've brought with us, you will receive a six-month clearance, subject to renewal and review. We have brought documents with us for you to sign. Anything

you learn because of your security clearance will remain classified. You can't speak of it to anyone. Ever. Is that clear?"

"No," Wheldon said. "I haven't requested security clearance and I really don't want one. I have no desire to work for the FBI, and I don't appreciate being investigated."

He said that last a bit breathlessly. It was, he realized as he spoke the words, the real reason he was irritated. He was the one who conducted the investigations. He wasn't the person who was investigated. He'd worked his entire career at being a clean cop, despite all sorts of temptation. He didn't appreciate having that spotless record examined now.

"It's just a matter of routine," Ambersson said.

"For you, maybe. Not for me."

Kingsbury held up her hand. It was a small gesture, meant to silence her partner, not Wheldon.

"You want to find this killer, don't you?" she asked Wheldon.

"Of course."

"Well, we have the means to do so. We can do it with or without you, but you know the most about these cases. It's better to have the primary detective involved."

"How can you help me?" he asked.

"In order to answer that question, you have to accept the security clearance."

He stared at her for a moment. She stared back. Ambersson shifted in her chair like a child caught on the sidelines of an adult fight. Kingsbury continued to wait.

He was actually considering it. This particular killer frustrated him. The brazenness of the murders, the suggestion of making things right for the roommates, the personal nature of the thefts, disturbed him more than he wanted to admit.

Besides, the FBI had already conducted their investigation of him. Nothing he could do could change that.

He sighed. "If I accept your damn clearance, I'm not going to have to do anything else, am I?"

"Like what?" Ambersson asked.

"Like join the FBI?"

Ambersson started to answer, but Kingsbury held up her hand again.

"Of course you won't." Kingsbury shot an irritated glance at her partner. Wheldon's sense that the two of them were a marriage of convenience rose again. "You've got it only for this case. That's why the clearance is limited."

"What do I tell my superiors?"

"Nothing," Kingsbury said. "We've already briefed them and told them we need you to catch this killer. They've approved your time away."

He glanced at the cases on his in-house computer. He closed 85% of the cases he was involved in—the best closure record in the precinct and, in some years, the best record in the entire department. Six months was a long time to concentrate on one case. The others would sit until they got cold.

Finally he shook his head. “I can't afford the time away.”

“It may only be for a few hours, Detective.” Kingsbury's irritation had turned on him.

“You've gotten me a six-month clearance.”

She nodded. “They don't give 3-day high-level security clearances.”

“So I'll be back here within a few days?”

“Probably.”

“And if not, a week? A month? Six months?”

Ambersson smiled at him. “I wouldn't worry about the time, sir.”

The “sir” surprised him. It seemed involuntary, an acknowledgement of their age difference. It also seemed a bit condescending, as if his advanced years had made him a doddering fool.

“I have to worry about the time,” he said. “It's what we lack around here.”

Ambersson's smile grew. “Then accept our clearance, and we'll make sure you have more of it than you could ever imagine.”

Kingsbury's cheeks flushed—not with shame, he realized, but with a sudden anger. He got a sense that Ambersson would get a tongue-lashing once he was out of earshot.

“Can you guarantee me we'll catch this killer?” he asked Kingsbury.

“Can you guarantee me that everything you told me about the case is accurate?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Then I guarantee you, we'll catch the killer.”

He took a deep breath. He was almost as curious about how an FBI agent could guarantee that a murderer would get caught as he was about who this killer actually was.

“All right,” he said. “Hand me the documents. I'll take your clearance. But I'm leaving if we haven't made any progress in a few days.”

“Don't worry,” Ambersson said as she tapped her hand-held. On his desk screen, a series of documents appeared, the signature line blinking. “You'll be pleasantly surprised at the kind of progress we can make.”

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He'd been to the New York branch office of the FBI dozens of times, but had never been allowed anywhere except the public areas. For the first time, they let him keep his gun and handcuffs. The two agents took him to a documents room where he got his security badge and some temporary identification.

Then they led him through a labyrinthian series of corridors, each gray and lit with florescent bulbs that

dated from the previous century. They went down several flights of stairs, until they reached what had once clearly been a parking garage.

The concrete beams remained and, in some places, so did the oil-stained concrete floor. Parts of it were covered in carpet, but the deeper the women took him into the building, the more of the old parking garage became evident. The walls that had been added seemed both old and temporary. Some of them appeared to be made of fraying particle board. Others were no better than the cubicle dividers popular when he was just starting out.

So when the women opened a double-locked steel door at the very bottom level of the former parking garage, he entered with trepidation, expecting even rattier furnishings than he had seen at the upper levels.

Instead, he found himself in a stainless steel room, filled with modern lighting and wall-to-wall computer access. The floor was covered with carpet so thick that he couldn't hear his own footsteps. The furniture was comfortable, and the area was warm and inviting in a medicinal sort of way.

People looking both busy and productive, hurried along their way. Many of them smiled as they passed him. Most of them were as young as Ambersson. Some seemed even younger. He and Kingsbury were the oldest people in the room.

“Welcome to the Temporal Offices of the FBI,” Ambersson said, her tone smug.

“Excuse me?” He glanced at her.

She put a hand under his arm and led him forward. Kingsbury followed. She was the only person in the area who did not look happy. If anything, it seemed like she had swallowed something that tasted bad.

Ambersson led him to a wall covered with glass. Just inside the wall sat people hovered over digital consoles. Beyond them was another room. Only he couldn't quite see that room clearly. He felt as if he were looking at it through a layer of water. Something—the room in front of the glass, the second level of glass beyond, or the room itself—altered his perspective.

He felt like he should remove his glasses and clean them, only he didn't wear glasses any longer. He'd gotten laser surgery fifteen years ago and hadn't had a problem with his vision since.

Until now.

He looked at the women in the hallway. They seemed the same. Something about the room, though. Something about it made him very uncomfortable.

“What's this?” he asked, trying not to let his discomfort show.

“The Temporal Chamber,” Ambersson said, that note of pride and awe still in her voice.

“We have ourselves a time machine,” Kingsbury said dryly.

“What?” He glanced around. “That's not possible.”

“It's very possible,” Ambersson said. “We've just gotten the technology, but it's existed in experimental form for three years. We—”

“How come I haven't heard about it?”

Ambersson shook her head slightly and tapped his security badge. “Top secret, remember?”

“That's not what I meant,” he said. “A discovery of this important should have leaked. The scientific journals, if nothing else—”

“Parts of it have,” said Kingsbury. “You just weren't able to put the pieces together.”

“Me? Or the world?”

“The world,” she said. “When it became clear that time travel was even a remote possibility, the government bought a lot of scientists. Those who didn't play got discredited.”

“Those who did lost their chance for recognition.”

“In exchange for unlimited funding and the chance to work in a brand new universe.” Ambersson smiled at him. “And they succeeded.”

“Giving miracle technology to the FBI?” He felt as if his entire world had turned around.

“Various branches of government are using it. The Congress, in a closed session, decided to allow each government agency the chance to use this technology—subject to certain guidelines, of course.”

“Of course,” he muttered, feeling cold. He didn't like the idea of the federal government having secret control of time. “How does this work?”

“Complete temporal revisitation is possible,” Ambersson said. “Interference is strictly forbidden, of course. But observation is allowed. And that's what we're going to do with your help.”

The case. He'd forgotten about the case. “Why's interference illegal?”

“Because they don't know what it does,” Kingsbury said quietly.

Ambersson shushed her, but Wheldon turned his back on the younger agent. “What do you mean?” he asked Kingsbury.

“They haven't studied this enough. It's new technology. We might change the current timeline or we might be creating alternate universes. No one knows and no one knows how to test it.” Kingsbury didn't approve. He could see it in her eyes.

“That's not entirely true,” Ambersson said. “Tests are continuing—”

“So why are you involved?” Wheldon asked Kingsbury, ignoring Ambersson.

“My theory is that it's better to have too much information than not enough. These younger agents, they see only the possibilities. Not the dangers.”

“We know the dangers,” Ambersson said. “That's why we insist on full clearance—”

“So why me?” Wheldon asked.

“We've been dealing with old cases, solved cases,” Kingsbury said, “ones where we knew the timelines to the letter—or at least we thought we did. At the moment, we're limited in how far back we can go in time. Our system is still quite primitive, and we can only go back with certainty about five years. They tell us that will change in the near future, and then we can begin unraveling history's mysteries.”

Her voice got even dryer. She found all of this objectionable in a way he didn't yet understand.

“This case isn't old,” he said.

“Precisely.” Ambersson moved so that she was beside Kingsbury. Her eyes were bright with anticipation. “We have just gotten permission to look at unsolved cases in which the timeline is clear. We have strict rules. We couldn't pick a single case. We had to pick something on-going that would have a positive impact if solved. You have a serial killer. We can identify him and stop him.”

“I don't see how.” He didn't like her certainty that the Godiva killer was a serial killer. He didn't like assumptions at all. “We can't prevent him from murdering Schlaffler. All we can do is watch. He's not going to scream out his name as he does so, and we already know he left no fingerprints. If I understand you correctly, we can't call the police to arrest him as he comes out of the building, and we can't pluck a hair from his head to get a DNA sample.”

“We can follow him home,” Ambersson said.

“To what end?” Wheldon felt his own frustration growing. “I don't know how things are done in the Temporal Unit of the FBI, but in the rest of this country, you need to build a solid case based on evidence—evidence that will hold up in court. You bring me a machine I can't talk about, send me into the past to observe something I never could have seen on my own, and expect me to somehow magically prevent this slob from killing again. I think I'm better off doing this the old-fashioned way.”

He pushed past both the women and started for the door.

“Grand juries can hear Temporal cases,” Ambersson said. “Testimony is secret and the records can be sealed. You will be able to get an injunction on your eye-witness testimony alone.”

He stopped, intrigued despite himself. “Then what? Once the case goes to regular court, your little secret will be all over the news.”

Ambersson shook her head. “We picked your case very carefully, Detective. New York is one of the few states without a sunshine law. We can have the case tried behind closed doors and the record sealed.”

“Sounds like you have it all figured out,” he said. “What do you need me for?”

“It's not our case,” said Kingsbury. “Not our jurisdiction.”

“And it's not hard to make it your case. We clearly have a multiple killer here,” he said. “All you have to do is request jurisdiction and you'll get it.”

Kingsbury's smile was thin. “We're with the Temporal Unit, Detective. We don't solve cases. We're trying to see if this new technology has a place in the FBI. For this to have FBI jurisdiction, we need to place other agents on this case.”

“So?” he said.

“We prefer not to.”

“Why? Because I'm easier to control?”

Ambersson bit her lower lip, but Kingsbury shook her head. “Sunshine laws,” she said. “We take on this case within the FBI, and there's a chance that we'll end up in Federal court. We're not ready to do that—in fact, we don't dare risk having this technology revealed just yet—and at the moment, we're the only division who has to use the technology in court.”

He stared at them. He didn't want to think about the implications of what she just said. Wheldon's head spun. "I suppose there are no laws governing the use of the time travel."

"Only natural laws," Kingsbury said. "Which we don't entirely understand."

He didn't want to know that. He wanted to be blissfully ignorant of all the possibilities which had just opened before him. But he couldn't ignore those possibilities in the future. Knowledge was irreversible. And he wasn't the sort of man who forgot anything he learned.

"We need you, Detective," Ambersson said.

Wheldon looked at Kingsbury. Now he was beginning to understand why her expression was permanently sour.

"It's a tool," she said.

"So was the atomic bomb," he said.

She nodded. "There's still a killer out there, someone smart enough to attack swiftly and leave little forensic evidence of his presence. This might be your best chance to stop him."

It might be his only chance, but she was too polite to say that.

"All right," he said. "I've been taking you on faith. Why don't you show me how this cosmic delusion of yours really works?"

* * * *

Five hours of meetings later, he was ready to go. Kingsbury would accompany him. She was along to oversee the entire case and to make certain he acted within regulations.

They tried to give him a crash course in both time travel and in the rules the Temporal Office had established. Time travel, they had discovered, only worked backwards. No one seemed to be able to go forward which one of the techs took as proof that predestination did not exist.

Another tech explained to Wheldon that so far, they had seen no evidence that the Butterfly Theory was an actual fact. The Butterfly Theory, they'd had to explain to him, was that a change in the smallest, least consequential thing—such as stepping on a butterfly—could change the course of history.

However, they didn't want to take any chances. Everything was planned to the exact detail, at least so far as they could know it. The technology was too new to tamper with. Perhaps taking a taxi meant for someone else might have no cosmic effect, but what happened if that taxi, which was supposed to end up in Queens, ended up in Washington Heights? And what happened if the driver, on the way back to Mid-town, got stabbed by a passenger he picked up near the George Washington Bridge? Would that be sufficient to change the timeline for the rest of the world?

No one knew. And no one wanted to risk it.

There were other time travel theories that had yet to be fully tested as well. The theory of alternate universes. Some believed that each new action taken in a past timeline opened up a new universe rather than changing the past. But there was no concrete evidence on this yet either. Some travelers believed that small things were different upon their return to their timelines. Others said nothing had changed.

And then there was the thing the techs all feared the most: that a man might meet himself in the past.

Some believed that would cause instant death to the person involved. Others thought it would be a curiosity and nothing more, and still others believed that such a meeting would wipe out, not only the man involved, but also everything around him. It might even, one tech said in a hushed tone, cause a rupture in the Space-Time Continuum that couldn't be resolved.

Wheldon didn't like any of this. It made him wish, even more than he had wished before, that he hadn't been called in to play in this experimental project.

But he kept thinking about Schlaffler, the way she had died, how another woman, while he dithered here, might be dying in just the same way.

So he memorized and listened, and thought about the way that crimes happened and laws were made, about the way that men like him were always behind events and never in front of them, about how his job was to pick up pieces, not repair them.

But ultimately, he was a rules and regulations man, and he did his best to understand everything the techs had told him. He would do the best job he could within the perimeters they set, and he would live with the consequences, just like he always did.

* * * *

The actual room was ice-cold as if it were a poorly functioning refrigeration unit. The cold had pockets and he thought he felt several different breezes coming from different directions, sources unknown.

He'd needed no special preparation, no special training. They had a copy of his latest physical on their desk, and their doctor double-checked his blood pressure and his heartrate, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

The room was large and dark, and it magnified noise in the way that a lake did on a calm, moonless night. Kingsbury helped him toward a small platform, then she clung to his arm as if she were the one traveling for the first time.

He could see the technicians who had been teaching him about this new science. They sat on the other side of the leaded glass window, preparing their calculations to send him and Kingsbury into the near-past. The techs had a wavy undefined quality, as if Wheldon were watching them through fog. He felt as if part of himself had already been displaced, sent to a future he would never completely understand.

A wave of nostalgia ran through him—not for the past, but for his naivete. He wished he had never picked up the report on Schlaffler, never met Kingsbury or Ambersson, never crossed the threshold into this cold, shifting room. But he had, and nothing could change that.

He was trapped in this place forever.

“Here we go,” Kingsbury said, tightening her grip.

And a feeling, not unlike the heady, dizzy sensation he got when he dropped off to sleep after a long and exhausting day, ran through him. The placement of the breezes seemed to move too—he felt as he were going from cold spot to warm spot to cold spot without changing his position.

He couldn't see anything except windows before him—leaded, black tinted, they didn't seem to change. He could no longer see the people behind them, however, and he found that unnerving.

The entire experience was unnerving. He hadn't moved at all and yet he knew he was

somewhere—somewhen—else.

“Here we are.” Kingsbury sounded breathless, as relieved as he felt.

“How do we know we're in the right time?” he asked.

She glanced at him, her face pale and dotted with beads of sweat. Obviously this mode of travel wasn't one a person got used to. She pointed over his head. He turned.

A clock, with the time and date in large digital numbers, was attached to the wall over his head. He hadn't noticed it before, but then when he had entered the room, he hadn't looked.

The clock, with its date two weeks in the past, made him feel even more disoriented. Part of him believed, however, that they were playing some sort of trick on him—see how the stupid detective would react in a darkened room, after being told he was a rat in a maze.

“Let's go,” Kingsbury said.

“What about the techs?” he asked.

“We're not to talk to them. They don't know what's going on.”

“But they've seen us.”

“Perhaps,” she said. “It's the only real risk we're supposed to take.”

She continued to hold his arm, using it to pull him out of the room. The bright lights and clean lines of the hallway made him woozy. He stopped, put a hand on the cool concrete wall and took a deep breath.

“Nauseous?” she asked.

He hadn't been nauseous since he was a rookie, but this feeling was close. “Dizzy.”

“It's normal. It'll pass.” She stood, no longer touching him, not even patting his back. She just waited.

“Don't we have a timeline?” he asked.

“This is built-in.” Her voice was flat. She continued to wait.

It took a moment for him to accept the solidity of his surroundings. As the wooziness passed, he realized he hadn't been in this hallway before. He wondered if it were specifically designed for travelers coming from the future so that they wouldn't run into the busy young agents who populated the Temporal Offices.

“All right,” he said.

Kingsbury let out a sigh, revealing her impatience for the very first time. Then she led him down the hallway to a stairwell.

It smelled damp and old, the concrete flaking. He could hear cars honking above him, shouts on the street, the sounds of New York on an average day. Yet he couldn't remember what kind of day it had been—rainy, sunny, cold or warm. He could remember Schlaffler's apartment and the body, sprawled on the hard wood, but he couldn't remember the weather or what he'd had for lunch or what kind of casual conversations he'd had.

Was his life that unimportant that he couldn't recall it two weeks later? Had he allowed his work to so

consume him that it was the only thing that mattered to him, the only thing he remembered?

Kingsbury pushed open a steel door, and stepped outside. Thin sunlight came through the canyons between the buildings. The air had a slight chill.

The street sounds seemed louder here, yet less real, as if the pale light diminished them somehow. Or maybe it was his knowledge that this day was two weeks dead, a mere shadow of its former self, only a memory—yet one they could walk through.

“Come on,” Kingsbury said. She waited for a break in traffic, then hurried across the street.

Wheldon followed, being just as careful, the instructions he had received sticking with him. Anything—a fender bender, a missed appointment—had potential significance. He had to be cautious of his every move.

Kingsbury waited for him on the corner, near the subway stop. He joined her, and they went down the stairs together. The air smelled of exhaust, and he could hear the rumble of the trains. Everything felt real. Only those first few moments in this time period had reminded him that he was from a not-so-distant future, and what he had felt in those moments might have been caused by his imagination, by what he believed might happen.

Kingsbury paid their way in with tokens, then led him to the right train. She glanced at her watch. “Now we have to be precise.”

“Why now?” he asked.

“Some of our guys were here before, making sure we have a nearly empty car.”

Kingsbury glanced at her watch. People joined them on the platform as the first train arrived, but she didn't let him enter it. They stood with a handful of others, waiting for a different train.

The others were long gone by the time the second train arrived. She counted five cars from the wall, then stepped inside. He stood beside her and was about to sit down when she stopped him.

“We'll stand,” she said.

Five others entered around them and took the available chairs. But, as she had predicted, the car was nearly empty when the train pulled out.

According to Kingsbury's watch, they were almost two hours early. He had no idea what they would do in the intervening time. As the train clacked down the tracks, he tried to remember where his other self—his younger self as the FBI called it—was at this moment.

When the call had come in, he had just come back from dinner—a knish from a stand across the way. He remembered that not because the meal was particularly good, but because it had formed a lump in his stomach when he saw Schlaffler's body, one that stayed with him all night, and made him swear off knishes for the next two weeks.

Before that, he had been writing the final report on a rape/homicide in Central Park, and before that, he'd been overseeing a line-up in an incredibly brutal murder of a bodega clerk.

His younger self had to be witnessing the line-up, completely oblivious to his future, happening simultaneously.

Kingsbury clung to the overhead bar and stared at the windows, even though all that was visible through them was darkness. She seemed to be the only one in the Temporal Office who had an inkling about the kind of power the government now had. Or perhaps she was the only one who was disturbed by it.

Wheldon was glad she was traveling with him and not Ambersson.

The train was slowing down.

“This is our stop,” Kingsbury said.

He braced himself, paying attention, suddenly, to the people around him. He had no real idea who he was looking for, who the perp was. He guessed—because the statistics were on his side—that the perp was a man, but he wasn't even certain of that. Anyone on this train could be the killer. Anyone with enough anger and a willingness to use a knife.

The train stopped and the doors opened. Wheldon followed Kingsbury onto the platform. The enclosed smell of oil, grease and exhaust seemed even more intense here. People swirled around him, intent on finding the exits.

“Now what?” he asked. They were still early.

“We wait.” She led him to a metal bench and they sat. She took out her hand-held and tried to be inconspicuous. He watched people, as he usually did when he was waiting for something.

The subways hadn't changed during his entire life nor had the people who rode them. All income levels, all attitudes. Only the fashions shifted and the items that people carried. When he'd been a boy, there had been newspapers and books and magazines under people's arms. Now everyone had their hand-helds. Newsstands were long gone, replaced by food and beverage vendors selling anything prepackaged, from chips and candy bars to cola and iced coffee.

He'd never really thought about the past and the present before, how they flowed into each other, merged and mingled and became something else, something that differed from day to day.

Occasionally, Kingsbury would look up from her hand-held to inspect the platform as if it had somehow changed, and then went back to her absorption. Her screen, shaded so that no one looking over her shoulder could read it, hadn't shifted since she sat down. He knew her study of the machine was all an act.

At 6:32, just like he'd had in his report, Schlaffler's train stopped. Kingsbury didn't even look up. Only Wheldon watched the passengers disembark.

The train had been crowded, people packed together so tightly that they stumbled out of the exit instead of stepping easily. It took him a moment to see Schlaffler. She was wearing the same clothes she died in—the tweed jacket with matching skirt and sensible shoes—but the colors were different, lighter, prettier, without the deep dark stains caused by her blood.

Her hair was falling out of its neat bun and her shoulders slumped as she moved forward—showing either exhaustion or depression, he couldn't tell which from this distance. No one seemed to be following her, but he couldn't be certain of that.

He tapped Kingsbury slightly and they both stood. To anyone watching it would seem as if they were getting ready for their train or they were meeting someone. Kingsbury slipped her hand-held in her pocket and took his arm, turning her face toward his as if they were having a conversation. He put his hand over hers in a manner that would look protective, and then followed Schlaffler toward the exit.

She stopped at the food stand. Her hand hovered over the chocolate bars, then she shook her head and walked on. The movement made the knot in his stomach return. The man who was going to kill her was carrying chocolate, but he wouldn't give it to her.

He would give it to her roommate.

Wheldon wanted to warn her, to turn her away from her home, but he had been cautioned against that. It might not do any good—the perp might kill her elsewhere—or it might succeed, and then he would have altered the past in an unacceptable manner.

His shoulders tightened. Never before had he had this kind of advance knowledge and it made him nervous. Even when he conducted stings, he had the belief—the hope—that the potential victims would get out alive.

He shuddered. He was watching a dead woman walk.

Kingsbury's grip tightened on his arm. She gazed up at him, her expression intense. Wheldon nodded once—he understood the rules—and then he concentrated on Schlaffler.

They followed her at a discreet distance, always able to keep her in sight. No one else seemed to be behind her. She took the stairs out of the subway slowly, as if each one were a burden. Her head was down, her hair covering her face.

Depression, he thought again. Or intense sadness. Maybe even loneliness. He could feel it radiating off her, part of her body language, the listless way she moved.

At the top of the stairs, she bumped into a young man. His face flushed, and Wheldon could feel Kingsbury stiffen beside him. The young man cursed at Schlaffler, then continued down the stairs. He jumped the turnstile, and disappeared on the platform.

Kingsbury did not relax.

They reached the top of the stairs. Schlaffler was standing in front of a sidewalk flower vendor, staring at the hothouse roses. She leaned toward one, sniffed, and shook her head.

“They had more of a smell when I was a child,” she said to the vendor. Her voice was deep and rich. It startled Wheldon. He'd imagined her to have a voice as listless as her body language.

“You gonna buy one, lady or not?” the vendor asked.

She leaned back as if the vendor's harshness startled her, then shook her head, a small apologetic smile on her face. Then she continued to walk toward her building, head down, shoulders hunched even more.

“Damn,” Kingsbury whispered.

Wheldon glanced at her.

She shrugged. “I didn't need to see this.”

He understood. A lot of the work he did forced him to reconstruct a victim's life. But he had never ever seen a victim walk before, interact with the world around her, or breathe.

Schlaffler was letting herself into the building now.

“What time is it?” he asked Kingsbury.

“Six-thirty-six,” she said. “You’re good.”

He nodded, not feeling as if he’d accomplished anything. No one was following Schlaffler except them. No one seemed to be watching her except them. A chill ran down his spine. What had he missed?

The door was swinging shut. He bounded up the stairs and caught it just before it closed, holding it open for Kingsbury. As they stepped into the building’s foyer, the elevator doors closed across from them. They’d missed the opportunity to ride with Schlaffler.

He cursed and ran for the stairs. Kingsbury followed. They took the steps two at a time, hurrying up several flights. If he pushed, Wheldon knew he would arrive before the elevator did. It was nearly a hundred years old and very slow.

He shoved the door open on the sixth floor. The hallway was empty, the elevator’s doors closed.

Schlaffler hadn’t arrived yet.

Kingsbury stepped out beside him. “We need a good spot to watch.”

“Already picked out.” Wheldon moved her toward the corner where the hallway turned, and they leaned against the wall, arms around each other, as if they were waiting for a friend to come home and let them in.

They weren’t visible from the elevator or Schlaffler’s apartment unless someone was looking for them. But their view of her apartment door was clear.

The elevator opened and Schlaffler got out, adjusting her purse strap as if she were trying to pull the purse closer to her body. She looked even more uncomfortable than she had outside.

Wheldon tensed. He couldn’t see what had upset her, and he didn’t dare move closer.

Schlaffler made her way to her apartment. No one was behind her.

“What is this?” Kingsbury whispered.

Then, just as the elevator doors closed, a hand slid between them and grasped the left door. The doors held for a moment, then slipped open. A man peeled himself off the elevator’s side wall and hurried into the hallway.

He fit the profile: slender, white, rather plain. But he was younger than Wheldon expected, and his eyes were cold. His hands were stuffed in the pocket of his coat, and Wheldon thought he could see the shape of a box and a knife.

Wheldon’s heartbeat increased. He had to clamp his lips together to keep from shouting a warning.

Schlaffler stood in front of her door, fumbling with the locks. She’d managed the lower deadbolt, but the upper was giving her trouble.

The perp walked down the hall, his shoes not making a sound. He slipped behind her as she turned the second lock.

Kingsbury’s fingers bit into Wheldon’s arm. He could feel how nervous she was.

Schlaffler shoved her door open, and the perp was on her, one hand over her mouth, the other slipping the knife into her back. She made a single, startled cry, muffled by his hand, and then disappeared into

the apartment.

Wheldon cursed and ran forward, Kingsbury clutching at him. He reached the apartment as the perp pulled the knife out for the second time.

Wheldon grabbed the man, yanked him off Schlaffler, and tossed him into the hallway. The man hit the wall and slid down it.

Kingsbury was shouting at Wheldon to stop when a woman pulled open a door, and Wheldon yelled at her to call 911.

The perp got to his feet. Wheldon turned, unable to reach him. The perp started to run, but Wheldon tripped him. The perp went sprawling, the knife skittering from his hand. Wheldon pulled out his gun and aimed it at the back of the perp's head.

"Move and I'll shoot, you piece of shit," he said.

Kingsbury came up beside him. She was shaking. "What are you doing? You have to let him go."

"It's too late," he said.

The perp moved. Wheldon shoved the gun against his skull.

"Make sure Schlaffler is okay, and make sure someone called 911."

"No," Kingsbury said. "We've already made a mess of this."

"And I'll make a worse mess if you don't help me out."

Another door opened. Wheldon couldn't see the person behind it.

"It's all right," he said to the person who opened the door. "We're cops. Call 911."

The perp's hand was inching forward, toward the knife. Wheldon knelt, shoving his knee into the perp's back.

Something made a cracking noise. He hoped it was the perp's spine.

"They're on the way!" a man's voice yelled.

The elevator doors opened again. A woman stood inside, clutching her hands together. When she saw the people on the floor, she leaned back in the elevator, and let the doors close.

The ex-wife. Apparently, she had arrived a little later than the neighbor had initially claimed.

Kingsbury bent over the perp and shoved at him with her foot. "Who are you, asshole?"

The perp closed his eyes. She shoved at him harder.

"Answer me."

The perp squirmed beneath Wheldon. So much for the broken back. "I'd answer her, buddy."

The perp inched his hand forward. In a minute, he would reach the knife.

Wheldon shoved the gun harder against the perp's head. Kingsbury kicked the knife farther down the

hall, and then she stomped on the perp's hand. "You gonna talk to me?"

He squinched his eyes tightly closed, and then his mouth for good measure.

"Asshole," she said again and moved out of Wheldon's line of sight. After a moment, he heard her crooning, telling someone she'd be all right. A deep rich voice, filled with pain, answered, and Wheldon's shoulders relaxed. Schlaffler was alive then. He hadn't taken this risk in vain.

His knee was getting sore and his shoulder ached from the pressure of pushing the gun against the perp's head. It seemed to take forever before he heard sirens below, and knew that his relief had arrived.

The paramedics came up first, taking the stairs. Wheldon waved them toward Schlaffler, and they disappeared into the apartment.

Then the elevator doors opened. The roommate had arrived. It must have been 7:20.

She looked terrified. Someone told her to remain at that end of the hall. Her gaze kept going to the open apartment door.

Finally the cops arrived. They cuffed the perp, then covered him as Wheldon moved away. He flashed his badge at them, but Kingsbury covered for him, telling them she was FBI and this was a planned sting.

She told them to book the perp and she'd meet them at the precinct. She waited until they took the perp down the stairs before pulling Wheldon aside.

"You made one hell of a mess of this," she whispered. "We've got to figure out what to do now and how to make sure this guy gets charged with a crime. The problem is that there's two of me and two of you in this timeline and things are about to get very confusing."

"No, they aren't," he said. "Your younger self is going to take care of this."

"How?" she said. "She doesn't even know about you or this case."

He nodded. "Give me something of yours, something she'll recognize. I'll go to her and explain. She's with the Temporal Unit. She'll understand."

"No, she won't." Her voice was calm. "I never thought I'd break the rules. She won't believe you."

"Really?" he asked. "You never thought of this? Never wondered how hard it would be to just observe?"

She looked away. "No."

He didn't believe her. "Then why did I hear your footsteps behind me when I ran to stop the murder?"

She didn't say anything, and that surprised him. He expected her to lie, to say she was trying to stop him. But she could have stopped him easily. She had ahold of his arm when the attack began. She could have held him back.

Instead, he had felt her fingers slipping away, maybe even felt a slight nudge from her body, propelling him forward, making him act in her stead.

Maybe that was why she had picked him. Not because this was his case, but because she could trust him to break the rules. She had studied him after all. She had gotten him the clearance. She knew how much he cared about the victims after they died. Did she think he'd stop caring just because they were alive?

And then his eyes narrowed. Of course she hadn't. She knew him. They all knew him.

"You set me up," he said.

Kingsbury raised her gaze to his.

"What the hell is going on?" he said.

She shrugged, looking remarkably calm, considering what had just happened. "You didn't understand the mission. You acted without thinking, saving the woman. And I couldn't stop you, so now we have to deal with the consequences."

"What?" he breathed. He had never misunderstood a mission in his life.

"Fortunately, you'll be fine. We brought you in from outside, and we'll never make that mistake again." Then she grinned. "At least, that's what we would have told the folks who administer the new technology if they knew what you'd done."

"What?" he asked.

"At least," Kingsbury said, "we now know what happens when someone takes an action in the past. I'll be able to brief the entire unit when we get back. Unofficially, of course."

People stood in the hallway, watching them, staring at the open apartment door. A couple of cops surrounded the roommate, interviewing her.

His shock was turning into anger. "You risked my life."

"Not really," she said. "We figured one of two things would happen. Either you would push him out of the way and we'd both vanish, going back to a brand new present with no knowledge of what we had done, or we'd be standing here, discussing how we changed things."

"You used me."

"Yeah?"

"Why the hell couldn't you have done this yourself?"

Her smile was guileless. "It's against regulations. They'd have taken the technology away from us if things hadn't gone as we'd planned. We would have had to blame you. But we were lucky. As it stands right now, they'll never know. Only you and I know what we did. Schlaffler's still dead in our timeline. We saw a few things, but we didn't get the perp's name. And that's all that happened."

He looked down the hall at the open apartment door. He'd thrown the perp against the wall. He'd felt the man's back beneath his knee. He'd heard Schlaffler speak after the attack.

"I did all this for nothing?" he asked.

Kingsbury shook her head. "She's fine in this timeline. We have him. You probably saved several lives, not just hers. The problem is that we didn't get his name. We don't know who this guy is. Once we get back to our own timeline, we're screwed."

"Maybe," he said softly.

She frowned at him. "What?"

He stared at the scene. In his mind's eye, he could still see the perp, peeling himself off the side wall. The hand, catching the doors as they split apart, the fingers grabbing the edge.

He said. "We can make a case."

"Against whom?"

He smiled. He was already imagining it. The prints removed from the elevator door, the sketch artist drawing the perp's face, the legwork—going to various Godiva stores in New York, canvassing the neighbors.

Because Wheldon had seen enough to know this perp had staked out the building. The perp knew what time Schlaffler got home. He probably knew when the roommate arrived. Wheldon would wager the perp knew everything about both women.

Only he hadn't been interested in Schlaffler. He'd been targeting the roommate, planning to free her from the person who weighed her down. That was why he cleaned up the room, added the chocolates, made the place more inviting.

Wheldon could catch this guy easily now, using old-fashioned police methods, building an old-fashioned case that would stick.

"You gonna tell me how we'll have a case?" Kingsbury said.

"I'll tell you after I send your younger self to the precinct," he said. "I want a little more time to think about this."

The roommate was wiping tears away from her eyes. The cops were still talking with her. The neighbors had inched closer, watching everything.

Kingsbury hadn't moved. She was looking at the apartment door too.

"I wonder why she was so sad," Kingsbury said softly.

It took him a moment to realize that she meant Schlaffler. From Schlaffler's perspective, her day had gotten even worse—arriving home to be stabbed by a crazy man waiting in an elevator.

She would never know how close she came to being another statistic, how the fine spray of blood on her apartment wall would have become a spurt that dripped rivers into the baseboard if Wheldon hadn't been there.

She would never know that in another universe, she had died.

Wheldon had saved a life.

He had never done that before, at least, not directly. By pulling the perp off her, he had saved a number of lives—not just in this new universe, but in his as well. Because Kingsbury had brought him back here, Wheldon would be able to make sure this perp would never kill again.

And that pleased him. Even though he was annoyed at being used, he didn't mind that the blood trail had led him here, to this moment.

To this odd, but somehow satisfying, point in time.