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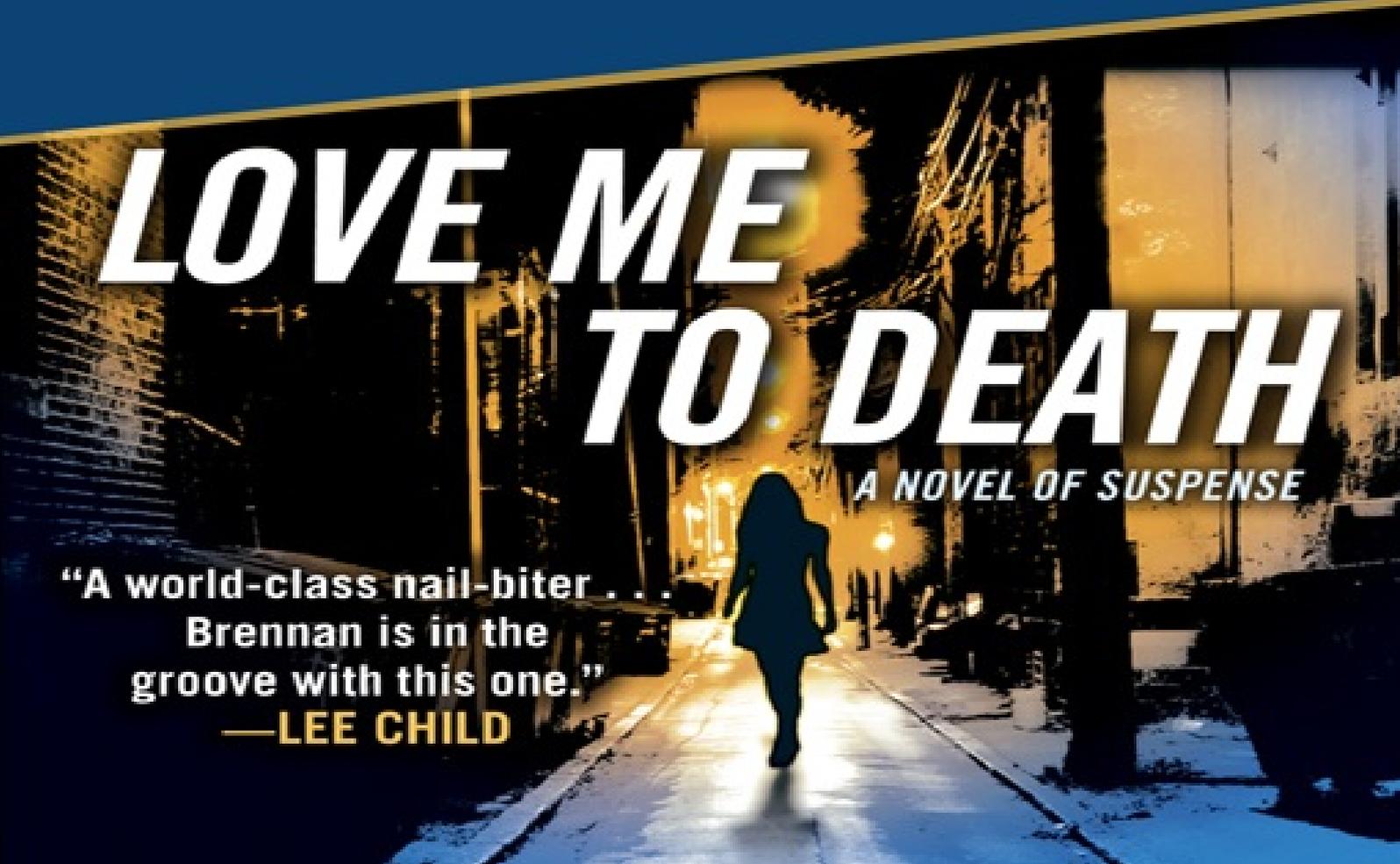
Allison BRENNAN

LOVE ME TO DEATH

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

"A world-class nail-biter . . .
Brennan is in the
groove with this one."

—LEE CHILD



She left WCF and stepped into the still, chilly air. She loved walking and didn't even mind the cold that much—though she still missed sunny, temperate So-Cal. She pulled her scarf up to cover her ears and neck and walked briskly toward the Metro.

A chill brought goose-bumps to her arms, like fingernails on a chalkboard. She told herself it was the cold, but she knew better—the feeling of being watched was far too familiar. She faked a cough and stepped to the side so she could discreetly observe the people walking around her, the traffic on the street, the dinner crowd eating in the restaurant on the other side. A man passed her, nodded a greeting, and kept walking.

She sighed, frustrated with herself for being paranoid. For six years she'd never been able to shake the sensation that people were looking at her, that they knew what had happened and somehow blamed her for her fate. The sensations had faded over time, but Lucy doubted they would ever disappear completely.

Her past would always be chasing her, no matter what she did.

“Suck it up,” she whispered to herself.

You're about to put a rapist back in prison. You have a lot to celebrate.

With that thought, she continued toward the Metro station, hyperaware of the people around her.

BY ALLISON BRENNAN

Love Me to Death

Original Sin
Carnal Sin

Sudden Death
Fatal Secrets
Cutting Edge

Killing Fear
Tempting Evil
Playing Dead

Speak No Evil
See No Evil
Fear No Evil

The Prey
The Hunt
The Kill

LOVE ME TO DEATH

A Novel of Suspense

Allison
BRENNAN



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Love Me to Death is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For Charlotte Herscher and Dana Isaacson, my amazing and insightful editors.

Your high expectations, sage advice, steadfast guidance—and Dana’s ruthless pencil—are always needed, and very much appreciated

I would not have been able to write this book without the kindness of experts who were willing to answer numerous questions—some common, some definitely unusual. I've probably taken some liberties with the facts, but I tried hard to keep the spirit and truth intact.

Authors Terry Spear and Kathy Crouch for information about the United States Air Force; the two soldiers from Travis Air Force Base who let me pick their brains about the USAF and the Ravens between SWAT training exercises at McClellan AFB (you know who you are!); SaVern Fripp with the D.C. Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, who graciously responded to my emails with terrific imagination; and my longtime friend Dora Kingsley, a California transplant to Georgetown.

A special thank-you to the Sacramento FBI Citizens Academy and fellow alumni for indulging my questions—and detours—during our trip to Quantico, FBI headquarters, and Georgetown; and especially the dedicated SAC Drew Parenti, and FBI SA and media rep Steve Dupre who joined us and made it all happen. I appreciate your time and answers to even my oddest questions.

I especially want to thank the volunteers and staff at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children who took the time to give our group an extensive and informative tour.

Stories may be written in solitude, but they are produced by many. The Ballantine team is truly exceptional in the industry. From editing to copyediting to production to cover design to marketing to publicity and the entire sales force, I'm lucky to have such a great group of people backing up my books. I particularly want to thank Scott Shannon, Kate Collins, and Gina Wachtel for their support and enthusiasm. And I would be remiss if I didn't thank my agent, Dan Conaway at Writer's House, who has taken over the reins with both vision and class.

Where would any of us be without the unconditional love and support of our friends and family? Toni, Rocki, and Karin—you guys stuck with me in good times and bad and I don't know what to say because thank-you seems so inadequate. How about I'm buying the next round when we all meet again?

My husband, Dan, who picks up the slack when deadlines loom, thank you for understanding my long hours and wandering mind. My kids—thank you for being young and keeping me focused on what's important, and occasionally making me stop everything just to play games. And of course my mom—wouldn't be here without her!

Finally, my readers—who love the Kincaids as much as I do. Thank you for the letters and emails and enthusiasm for Lucy's series. I hope you enjoy her stories as much as I enjoy writing them.

Contents

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Epigraph

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Forty

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter Forty-Five

Chapter Forty-Six

Excerpt from Kiss Me, Kill Me

What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

One Week Ago

This was Roger Morton's big chance—his *only* chance—to get out of the country and create the life he used to have. All because of a box of cheap jewelry.

The marina was closed this late at night, but Roger still kept to the shadows as he walked toward the docks. He'd picked this place because it was mostly open and flat; he could see who approached. Tonight, the marina was empty of people, covered boats monuments of warmer days. The security lights over the docks provided the only illumination; it was too foggy to see D.C. on the other side of the Potomac.

He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, wishing he had a warmer coat. It was friggin' cold. He couldn't wait to grab his money and get out of this miserable town. He already had a place lined up in South America. Even after six years in prison, Roger had contacts. Once he had the money in hand, he'd be sitting pretty.

Six long years behind bars. His attorney had said he was lucky to get away with only this after the attempted murder of a federal agent and felony rape. *Six years in the federal pen was lucky?* He'd spilled his guts, given the cops everything they wanted, admitted to everything—well, he *had* left out the crucial detail that he'd killed one of their own people. That fact he most certainly kept to himself, thanks very much. Anyway, the Feds didn't have anything implicating him—no gun, no witnesses, nothing. It had been easy enough to lay blame for that escapade on someone else.

Six years of his life gone. For *cooperating*.

Everything had changed while he was in the pen, and he was damned if he was going to start around working as a car mechanic making chump change. Not when he knew how to make real money. The kind of serious dough that would set him up in his previous lifestyle, the kind that bought freedom. In prison, his life had been on hold. Now he had the chance to start over.

Adam had spouted off that Roger was the dumb one. Well, Adam was *dead*—how smart did that make *him*?

Roger cautiously approached the meeting spot on the far side of the dry docks. The air coming off the Potomac was so damn cold he wished they could have found a bar to make the exchange. Except Roger couldn't be seen in his old stomping grounds. He had to keep a low profile. Make the exchange on neutral ground. Of course, he'd left his half of the bargain back at his motel. No fucking way was he going to have his new partner double-cross him. First, he'd get the money, then he'd tell him where to find the jewelry. He wasn't an idiot. The cops were bastards and Roger wouldn't put it past any of them to set him up. But he'd vetted this guy, demanding to see some of the action he planned on sharing with Roger's new venture. No way he was a cop.

Roger had enjoyed the digital files of young women getting screwed every which way. Some were experienced actresses; others were junkies desperate for a quick buck to pay for their next fix. Some of the recordings—the best, in his opinion—were those where the chick

didn't even know they were being filmed. Amateur whores—Roger saw the marketing potential for that campaign, practically salivating over the dollars he'd rake in. Straight porn wasn't illegal, but the money was in edgier areas—hidden cameras, underage teens, fantasized rape that wasn't necessarily consensual.

When there was this kind of money involved, he knew not to bring the merchandise without cash up front. *All* of it. They'd tried to pull a fast one on him yesterday; they learned real quick they weren't dealing with a novice. Adam had been a prick, but he'd taught Roger the tricks of the trade. Only now, with Adam six feet under, Roger wouldn't have to take orders or get a small percentage of the take. He'd run the website, handle the back end, and his new partner would provide the sex tapes. Fifty-fifty split. Roger was confident the cash would stream in fast, and he'd learned from Adam how to manage the credit cards of their customers and funnel money to offshore accounts. Best of all, without Adam around, Roger wouldn't have to worry anymore about the snuff films that had brought the Feds down on them in the first place. If Adam hadn't gotten his ya-yas off strangling the women he screwed, they'd never have been busted. Rape was a crime, but murder was a whole other story.

All Roger needed was some up-front cash to set up the offshore operation. It didn't matter that he was on parole; he'd skip out and never again step on American soil. That took more money than he could make working fifty-hour weeks at his cousin's car dealership changing oil. Originally, he'd demanded twenty thousand for startup costs, but when they expressed interest in Adam's old jewelry box, Roger doubled the buy-in.

Roger's contacts had given him the thumbs-up on the players involved, but he still hadn't liked any of the meeting places they suggested—too great a chance of being caught on a damn security camera. He'd told them the marina. Secluded, but close to everything and best of all, no surveillance cameras, few hiding places, and no witnesses. He was taking a risk, but the potential rewards were well worth it. Besides, using his old contacts, Roger had tracked the guys down. It wasn't as though they'd been looking for him. He'd kept a low profile since getting out six months ago.

He'd rather be dead than go back.

He spotted his new partner approaching the rendezvous point. The man was wearing jeans, a dark windbreaker, and a Yankees baseball cap—just like he'd said. Roger glanced around, saw no one else, and waited for the man to reach him.

"Hey," Roger said casually, sizing up the other man.

"The box?" The man's voice was raspy, as if he'd been a two-pack-a-day smoker for decades, though he didn't smell of cigarettes now.

"You got my advance?" Roger was waiting for entrapment clues—such as him explicitly saying that he was using the money to set up an illegal porn website—but the guy didn't get into details. An agreement could mean anything in court. Sure, he was in the marina after dark—a misdemeanor, and he could technically be thrown back in prison for even the smallest slip-up—but they still couldn't get him on anything big.

"I want the jewelry box and everything inside."

"I want to see the money first." Did this guy think he was an idiot?

Tensing as the man reached into his pocket, Roger's hand moved to the gun in his waistband, but he didn't need to use it. His new partner handed him an envelope.

Roger frowned. "A little thin for forty g's. This isn't what we agreed to."

"You were supposed to bring the box."

"You were supposed to give me half the cash yesterday. What kind of partnership is this you can't live up to your end of the deal?"

"Open it. You'll understand."

Cautious, but curious, Roger opened the unsealed envelope and removed a folded piece of paper. It was blank, with a faded photo tucked between the folds. A beautiful teenage girl with long black hair and large, sultry brown eyes stared at him in the faint light.

His instincts had him reacting almost before he recognized the dead girl, but not fast enough. Roger dropped the photo and paper and went for his gun, but the man moved faster, karate-kicking his wrist. In the faint glow from the dim lights over the dry dock, for the first time Roger saw the man's face dead-on.

Another ghost from his past.

"I wish I could be the one to put the bullet in your head," the man said before slamming Roger face first into the hard-packed dirt. A burst of pain told him his nose might be broken. He swallowed a thick wad of blood.

Coughing, Roger tried to rise, but the traitor kicked him between the legs three times with steel-toed boots. Excruciating pain froze him. It was worse than when he'd been raped in prison. And then, he'd had his revenge. This time he wouldn't get the chance. Panic and self-preservation rose with the pain as he tried to stand, only to be knocked back down.

"Mr. Morton." The quiet, cultured voice didn't belong to his attacker. Roger hadn't heard another man approach, and the idea that two—or more—men stood over him made him tremble even as he tried to get up one last time.

A boot in his balls had him seeing nothing. He almost didn't hear the slide of the nine-millimeter.

"I wish this hurt you more, but in this case expediency is more important than my personal satisfaction at seeing you suffer. Rot in Hell, bastard."

Roger Morton was dead before he registered the sound of the gunshot.

Present Day

Brad Prenter thought he had a get-out-of-jail-free card, but Lucy Kincaid would set him straight.

She glanced at the clock on her computer and frowned. It was nearly six, and she promised her brother Patrick she wouldn't be late after canceling their dinner plans twice last week.

"Come on, come on," she muttered as she split the large screen into six open chat windows that she could monitor simultaneously. "You've been here every day this week at five. Why are you late tonight?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Lucy saw *Women and Children First!* director Frances Buckle walking toward her desk. Fran had retired from the FBI nine years ago after putting in twenty-five years, and though she was sixty, she looked and acted a decade younger. After Lucy had started volunteering for WCF three years ago, Fran quickly became her mentor. She'd written a glowing recommendation letter for Lucy's FBI job application and had helped her prepare for both the written and verbal tests. And for the last three months, Fran had helped Lucy cope with the anxiety of waiting to hear whether she'd made it to the next stage in the hiring process.

Lucy didn't allow herself to think that she could be rejected. Still, she knew the process could take months, and not knowing either way was frustrating. For the last six years, all she'd wanted was to be an FBI agent. Everything she'd done—her double major in psychology and computer science; her internships with the U.S. Senate, the Arlington County Sheriff's Department, and now the D.C. Medical Examiner's Office; her volunteer work at high schools and here at WCF—was calculated to help her get into the FBI. She hoped the hiring panel could see that what she'd learned would make her a strong addition to the Bureau.

Fran put a hand on the back of Lucy's chair. "Tick-tock. It's six o'clock, Lucy."

"Five more minutes. Prenter isn't online yet, and he always logs on in the late afternoon."

"Life happens. You can't sit here all night waiting for him. You have a life, too. Don't you have dinner plans with your brother tonight?"

"Yes, but—"

"Lucy, Prenter will be here tomorrow."

She said, "I have some time—twenty minutes and I'll make it to Clyde's by seven."

"If you sprint to the Metro."

"I'm a fast runner." She smiled at Fran, mentally crossing her fingers.

The older woman shook her head but returned the smile. "I'll pull the plug if you're still here at six-fifteen."

That wasn't an idle threat—Fran had literally cut the power before. Lucy crossed her head with her right index finger and blew Fran a kiss before she turned back to the fast-moving chat rooms.

WCF had a secure bank of computers, as secure and untraceable as any in the FBI, when

they investigated the illegal sexual exploitation of women and children. When they collected enough evidence to identify a victim or perpetrator, they turned over the files to the FBI or local police for further investigation.

Aside from their primary charter, WCF tracked paroled sex offenders. By law, felony sex offenders had to register with local law enforcement after release from prison and with every subsequent change of residency.

Yet, depending on the state, on average half of all sex offenders required to register either never did or moved and didn't re-register. These parolees were the most likely to commit another sex-related crime, and therefore were the target of WCF's tracking project. Creatures of habit, these guys often made small changes to their online profiles but still targeted the same types of children or women; they thought because they'd moved to another town or state, they wouldn't be discovered. And if it were solely up to law enforcement, the predator would be right: they'd get away with it. There wasn't enough time or manpower to track down every sex offender who skipped registration.

For her master's thesis, Lucy had deduced that while most sexual predators may modify their behavior after serving time in prison, usually these changes were superficial. They could still be identified by vigilant trackers by scientifically breaking down the creeps' past activities: how they were caught, coupled with their victim preference—which rarely changed after incarceration. Lucy's research told her that predators could still be spotted even if they changed their location or online identities. Since graduating, she had continued to develop her database to incorporate all known data as well as a psychological scale that factored in minor behavioral changes. The more information she added, the more powerful—and effective—the system became.

Groups like WCF could use their private resources and volunteers to identify predators online and, if a parolee, it was much easier to put a predator back in prison if he violated parole. Lucy's database, though still technically in beta testing, had been instrumental in finding and tracking parolees most likely to reoffend, resulting in more than a dozen arrests to date.

For the past two weeks, Lucy had been working on one specific parolee, Brad Prenter, a convicted rapist who'd been paroled after serving only half his time. Normally, WCF targeted predators who hunted children and skipped town after parole, but Prenter was a special case. He used homemade GHB—Liquid X—on his dates. Mixed with alcohol, GHB was especially dangerous. The victim who'd sent him to jail—a Virginia college freshman he'd met because he was the teaching assistant in her chemistry class—had had the wherewithal to text her roommate when she started feeling strange. Otherwise Prenter would most likely have gotten away with his crime.

During the investigation leading up to his trial, authorities learned that Prenter had been suspected of raping another girl in his hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, but there had not been enough evidence to go to trial. He'd given that victim such a high dose of GHB that it had left her in a coma. Due to a delayed investigation—the police weren't immediately called, because the hospital didn't find signs of forced sex and didn't initially test for date rape drugs—Prenter had time to dispose of his home chemistry lab.

There had been circumstantial evidence that Prenter targeted other victims online. He'd hook up, drug and rape them, then drop them at their house. Waking up, the women

remembered very little. The only reason Prenter's name came up in another investigation was because a friend of the victim had seen him with her the night she was raped.

But even in that case, there had been no physical evidence, and the victim didn't remember anything. Prenter's house and car were searched, but the investigators found no GHB.

Two weeks ago, the research arm of WCF identified Prenter's new online persona, and based on his profile he was living in northern Virginia. He had registered as a sex offender and received permission to attend college at American University. He trolled a particular dating website to hook up in the flesh, so Lucy created a fictional character that met Prenter's personal criteria: a petite, blond college girl who liked running, rock music, and live bands. It didn't matter that Lucy was tall with black hair, her job was to draw him to a public location where he'd have the opportunity to violate his parole in full view of law enforcement. It had worked many times during her three years volunteering for WCF, and Prenter was already hooked. Lucy just had to reel him in.

And when she did? One of WCF's volunteer off-duty cops would be there to cuff him and haul him back to prison.

Justice would be *fully* served. All three to five years.

For too long she'd felt helpless. Even with all the self-defense training, her education, and her dreams, Lucy had felt she needed to be doing *more*. Interning with Senator Jonathan Paxton on the Judiciary Committee had been interesting, but when he introduced her to Frank at WCF, it had changed Lucy's life. She was a far stronger, better person today because of the work she did for WCF. She could almost believe she was a normal, average woman.

Even her brother Patrick had admitted the last time they'd talked that Lucy was back to her old self.

Perhaps not her *old* self. She was no longer the naïve teenager she'd been six years ago when she trusted too easily and thought she was invincible. But she'd finally let go of most of the pain and anger. Some righteous anger, the outrage for injustices in the world, kept her focused on what was important. Saving the innocent. Stopping criminals. Her inner drive was so strong that if she didn't get into the FBI, she'd find something else in criminal justice. She could go to law school and become a prosecutor. Or join a local police force. Or even go to medical school and become a psychiatrist specializing in crime victims.

But instead she wanted to be on the cutting edge of federal law enforcement in cybercrime.

Talking to predators like Prenter, even in the anonymity of a secure chat room, made her physically ill, but it was for a greater good and taught her more about cybercrime than years in the classroom.

Lucy had done her part to entice Prenter—playing coy and sexy, never suggesting they meet but always giving him the opportunity. He'd asked once, early on in their online chatting, about "hooking up" somewhere, but she'd declined. If she made it too easy for him, he'd smell a cop. And if the case ever came to trial—highly unlikely because he was a registered sex offender on parole—WCF would need to testify that Prenter had plenty of opportunities to walk away, that he actively pursued his intended victim.

The second time he asked, she again declined, but hinted that she was interested, just busy. She'd never suggest a meeting, because WCF played by the same rules as law enforcement—don't give them a chance to cry entrapment. Be as passive as possible while still giving the pervert the hints he needed to convince himself that he could have sex with the person

behind the computer.

At 6:10, Lucy's computer softly beeped. *aka_tanya* received a private message from *bradman703*.

bradman703: u there?

aka_tanya: yep. studying. sorta. lol.

bradman703: u free tonight?

Lucy's pulse quickened.

aka_tanya: i have a big test

bradman703: 2mrrw?

aka_tanya: where?

bradman703: ur choice

Even though Prenter was on parole and Lucy wasn't a cop—so this wasn't technical entrapment—the conversation was moving into the gray area. Lucy would much prefer to have Prenter pick the place.

aka_tanya: i dunno. someplace fun. close to fx.

bradman703: Firehouse?

Lucy rolled her eyes. She didn't hang out at bars, but everyone under the age of thirty knew of the Fairfax-area meat market that catered to a rowdy college crowd. Lots of drinking, music played too loud, and crowded. Not a place for quiet conversation; definitely not a place to hook up. It was perfect for men like Prenter, and perfect for the WCF operation.

aka_tanya: fab. time?

bradman703: 8?

aka_tanya: 😊

Lucy smiled herself as she typed the online happy face.

Fran called from the doorway: "Ten, nine, eight—"

"I got him!" she called out as she quickly typed a message to Prenter that she was logging off to study.

Then she sent the transcripts of all her conversations from the afternoon to her personal email, shut down each of the chat rooms she was monitoring, and logged off. She sent Officer Cody Lorenzo a text message.

Prenter will be waiting for "aka_tanya" at the Firehouse, eight tomorrow.

"You got Prenter?" Fran looked over Lucy's shoulder. "Good."

"Hope so. Cody has twenty-four hours to set it up, Prenter picked the time and place." She spontaneously gave Fran a hug. "Finally, I feel like I've accomplished something!"

"It's been a while since we had a victory, but don't count your chickens before—"

"They squawk. Right." But nothing was going to diminish Lucy's good mood. Now she had something to celebrate with her brother. She glanced at her watch. She was definitely going

to have to run. "I wish I could be there when Cody arrests him."

"Lucy, you know the rules." Fran forbade any of them from getting involved in the field, even on the periphery.

"I know, I know." Lucy shut down her monitor and grabbed her raincoat and scarf from under her desk. "I'll be satisfied with Cody's report." Not as satisfied as seeing Brad Prenter's expression when he realized his date was a setup, but it would have to be enough.

Movement in the lobby caught Lucy's eye. Fran glanced over to the doorway at the same time Lucy did.

"Jonathon." Fran smiled. "You're early."

"You work too hard, Fran." Senator Jonathon Paxton kissed her cheek lightly. "Hello, Lucy."

Lucy hid her grin. No wonder Fran wanted her out on time! She had a date, though Fran would never categorize her occasional evenings out with Senator Paxton as "dates." She said it was all business, but Lucy had hopes that two of her favorite people would get together.

Lucy stood and gave the senator a hug. "I didn't know you were coming by."

"Fran and I have a lot to discuss before Saturday night. You will be at the fund-raiser, correct?"

"Of course," she said automatically, though she didn't want to go. She would do anything to support Fran and WCF, but she never liked the large public events. Her brother Patrick had promised to attend with her, but then he got an assignment out of state. He wouldn't be back in time, which meant Lucy had to go alone.

"See you both later," she said and pulled on her coat. She draped her purse over her shoulder.

"Need a ride?" Fran asked.

"The Metro is only three blocks away," Lucy said. "But thanks."

She left WCF and stepped into the chilly air. She loved walking and didn't even mind the cold that much—though she still missed sunny, temperate So-Cal. She pulled her scarf up to cover her ears and neck and walked briskly toward the Metro.

The cold brought goose-bumps to her arms, like fingernails on a chalkboard. She told herself it was the frigid weather, but she knew better—the feeling of being watched was far too familiar. She faked a cough and stepped to the side so she could discreetly observe the people walking around her, the traffic on the street, the dinner crowd eating in the restaurant on the other side. A man passed her, nodded a greeting, and kept walking.

She sighed, frustrated with herself for being paranoid. For six years she'd never been able to shake the sensation that people were looking at her, that they knew what had happened and somehow blamed her for her fate. The sensations had faded over time, but Lucy doubted they would ever disappear completely.

Her past would always be chasing her, no matter what she did.

"Suck it up," she whispered to herself.

You're about to put a rapist back in prison. You have a lot to celebrate.

With that thought, she continued toward the Metro station, hyperaware of the people around her.

After ten years as an officer in the U.S. Air Force, Special Agent Noah Armstrong gave and took orders in stride, but even so, he found it unusual to be called into FBI Headquarters for a seven o'clock evening meeting with Assistant Director Rick Stockton. In addition to the time, it was odd that Stockton's secretary didn't give Noah a reason for the meeting. He was curious but unconcerned. He could think of no past or current case he'd worked to merit the attention of the higher-ups, and Noah didn't care much for speculation.

Noah passed his shield and ID through the slot at the main desk on the ground floor of the Hoover Building. Reception was closed, but the night guard was on duty to check credentials. The building was a virtual fortress, protected by bulletproof glass and multiple levels of security just to get upstairs. Once he was cleared, it was smooth sailing to the top floor since it was after business hours.

When Noah stepped out of the elevator, he recognized Dr. Hans Vigo, a behavioral science instructor and assistant director at Quantico, the FBI training institution.

Dr. Vigo extended his hand. "Agent Armstrong, thank you for coming after hours. Rick was delayed in a meeting, so I'll brief you."

He shook Vigo's hand. "Not a problem, sir. I understand."

"It's good to see you again. You were in the class—seven-thirteen or fourteen, correct?"

Noah nodded. "Seven-fourteen, sir."

"I've heard extensive praise of your work in the Bureau, most recently the Annapolis murders."

Noah raised his eyebrow, surprised that someone of Dr. Vigo's stature would concern himself with a typical mass murder. Under normal circumstances, the FBI wouldn't have involved themselves with murders by a disgruntled employee, except that it had taken place in a federal building and the shooter and victims were all federal employees.

While he acknowledged that his military experience helped him rise above being merely a competent agent, Noah didn't see why his record would have been brought to the assistant director's attention.

"Thank you, sir."

"Please call me Hans. I'm not one for formalities."

Noah followed Hans down the quiet hall. Every office door was open, lights off. There were two people meeting in a small conference room, visible through the partly open blinds. But the normally bustling headquarters was nearly empty.

Hans asked, "Coffee? Water?"

"No, thank you, sir."

Hans turned at the end of the hall and opened the door to Stockton's office. He closed the door behind them, then motioned for Noah to sit at the long table on the far side of the large, organized room.

Hans took a seat across from him. "We have an extremely sensitive investigation we would like you to head up, Noah."

"Yes, sir."

“Early Saturday morning, a park service employee found a body at the Washington Sailing Marina, on the Virginia side of the Potomac. The victim was shot once in the back of the head. He had no identification on his person, but his prints confirmed that he was Roger Morton. I got the call early this morning.”

The FBI didn't handle routine homicides. Noah's curiosity was piqued.

Hans said, “Morton was released from federal prison in Oregon six months ago, on July first.” Hans opened his file and slid over a prison mug shot. Morton had the hardened expression shared by many violent criminals, the half-snarl curling his lips telling Noah the guy felt remorse only over getting caught.

Hans continued. “This case is sensitive for two reasons. First, the nature of Morton's crimes. He was the right-hand man for a vicious killer who ran both a legal and illegal pornography business, specializing in online sex videos. Most of Morton's crimes were committed at the direction of his boss, Adam Scott, who was killed during a confrontation with federal agents.”

The case sounded familiar, but Noah couldn't remember why. “How long ago?”

“Six years last June. Are you familiar with it?”

“I was still in the Air Force.” He hadn't even been stationed in the States at the time.

“Scott charged online viewers to watch him rape and kill his victims live on the Internet.”

Now Noah remembered. “The case was discussed in my cybercrimes class at Quantico.”

“The agent who tracked Scott to his hideout made incredible strides in tracing masked Internet feeds. Many of her protocols have been integrated into our e-crimes unit.

“The reason this case is so sensitive,” Hans continued, “is because Morton was killed here just outside D.C. We've taken the case from the local police; all evidence is being sent to the FBI lab. Traditionally, jurisdiction is ours anyway because the murder was on federal land, though we usually let the locals handle routine homicides.”

Apparently, this situation was not routine.

“As part of Morton's probation,” Hans said, “he wasn't allowed within ten miles of anyone involved in his case, including his victims and their families. His last victim lives in Georgetown, as well as one of the agents involved in his capture.”

“Victim?”

“He was a repeat rapist.”

“And he only got six years?” Noah frowned. “Sentencing guidelines require—”

Hans cut him off. “There was no trial. It was a plea agreement.” He slid over the file in front of him. “It's sealed, not public. I made you a copy, but I don't have to tell you how sensitive the information is. Morton was apprehended while Scott was still at-large. In exchange for leniency, Morton gave us information that helped lead us to Scott, which resulted in saving lives. In addition, he turned over all bank accounts and financial documentation from Scott's money-laundering operation. The legal sex industry brings in a small fortune, but that doesn't even touch the amount of money in the illegal sex trade.”

Noah opened the file on Morton, slipped the mug shot back in, and skimmed the summary page while Hans continued to bring him up to speed on the case. A name in the files jumped out at him.

“Kate Donovan.” He looked up from the papers. “It says here she wasn't an agent, but she was the e-crimes instructor, correct?”

“Donovan was suspended at the time of Morton’s arrest,” Hans said. “I have another agent flying in from her current assignment to help—she can fill you in on the details not in the file because she was part of the original investigation.”

“Pardon me for asking, but why would you bring in an agent when Donovan—who was also involved in the investigation—is local?” When Hans didn’t immediately say anything, Noah added, “Do you think Donovan is involved in Morton’s murder?”

“No,” Hans said quickly, “but I’m personal friends with Kate and her family. That’s why you are investigating the murder, not me. Morton could have been killed for a hundred different reasons. But—”

Noah finished his thought. “A bullet to the back of the head suggests execution. Punishment.”

“Exactly.”

Noah skimmed the M.E. report. “Was he tortured prior to death?”

“Broken nose, bruising on his right wrist. The medical examiner believes his nose was broken when the killer pushed his head into the ground. However, someone kicked him repeatedly in the groin area while he was prone. So violently that had he not been killed, he would have lost at least one of his testicles.”

Noah shifted in his seat and said, “Morton was a rapist; that sounds like revenge.”

“On the surface.”

More than on the surface, Noah thought, but he continued reading the file. “His last known address is in Denver. Do you know when he moved to D.C.?”

“We just got the case this morning,” Hans said. “We don’t know anything more than you can find at this point, and what’s in Morton’s records. Rick Stockton wanted to speak with you directly, to explain the extreme sensitivity. He expects discreet due diligence. You will report directly to me, and I’ll keep Rick informed. Any clearances, anything you need from the U.S. Attorney—warrants, interviews, access—it’s yours. If you need to go to Denver to follow up, it’s approved. Anything you need, consider it approved. Just shoot me an email to CYA.”

“I understand what you need.” They had to believe someone in the Bureau was involved and go to such extreme lengths to avoid traditional channels. “Anything else?”

“You should know that one of Morton’s victims was Kate Donovan’s sister-in-law, Lucy Kincaid. She lives with Donovan and Donovan’s husband, Dr. Dillon Kincaid. Lucy wasn’t told of the plea agreement and as far as I know, she didn’t know Morton was out of prison.”

“Kincaid?” Noah stared pointedly at the assistant director. “The same Kincaid with the private security company Rogan-Caruso-Kincaid?”

“That would be Jack and Patrick, brothers of the victim. Kate is married to Dillon, a forensic psychiatrist and civilian consultant for the FBI.”

Hans leaned forward and eyed Noah. “You have a relationship with the Kincaids?”

Not the Kincaids. Face impassive, he said, “No, but I’ve followed the interesting career of the firm.” RCK was known to skirt the law and had access to information Noah suspected was in the darker gray shades of what a private security company should be able to access, which made him wonder just how many people inside federal law enforcement fed the intelligence.

While his initial assignment of the Morton investigation was sticky, RCK’s potential involvement made this muck as thick and foul-smelling as molasses. Specifically the Rogan-

part of RCK.

“Do you have any questions?” Hans asked.

“I need the investigator’s files, forensics, everything you have on Morton. Where he served his sentence, terms of his plea agreement and probation.” Noah paused. “And Kate Donovan’s personal contact information. I think it would be better if I went to her house. For the sake of discretion.” He glanced at Hans. “And it would be best if you avoid speaking with anyone involved until I have a chance to interview them.”

Hans agreed. “But don’t delay. While we took over the case, the Kincaids and RCK have a lot of friends in a lot of places. I’m sure no one knows yet—I would have gotten a call—but I’m waiting for the phone to ring.”

Lucy sat on the Metro train pretending to read a book. It wasn’t the writer’s fault that she wasn’t engaged in the story. Any other ride and Lucy would have been absolutely riveted by the action-packed plot, but tonight all she could think about was a rapist going back to prison. When the subway train slowed as it approached her stop at Foggy Bottom, she shoved her unread paperback in her satchel and snapped the buckle without thought—a habit from self-defense training.

Muggers go for the easy mark. Don’t be an easy mark.

She stood and maneuvered toward the doors, eager to meet her brother. Patrick was leaving tomorrow morning for two weeks at Stanford University, where he was working on a security system for their new laboratory. He’d been living in D.C. only a month, she was just getting used to his comforting presence in her life, and already he was going away again.

As soon as the doors slid open, Lucy exited amid the throng of commuters. Starting up the stairs, the back of her neck crawled with the all-too-familiar sensation of being watched. She unconsciously stiffened and stumbled, bumping into the businesswoman in front of her. “Excuse me,” she said automatically, but the woman never looked back. Painful tension started at the base of her skull, spreading rapidly, her heart racing as if she were running a marathon. By the time she reached the top of the stairs, she was fighting a full-fledged panic attack.

You’re in the damn Metro station! Of course people will see you.

But it was more than a casual perusal of her looks; someone’s eyes were focused on her. Dammit, hadn’t she just gone through this thirty minutes ago? When was it going to stop?

Hand shaking, she reached for her pepper spray while simultaneously thinking she was being ridiculous. Her vision was fading and she willed herself to breathe deeply. *In and out. Keep moving forward, no one’s watching, you’re fine, just fine.* She focused on the exit and calmly strode toward the stairs. Away from the eyes she couldn’t see.

“Lucy—”

She spun to face the voice and backed up at the same time, stumbling over a briefcase resting next to a businessman talking on his cell phone.

Cody Lorenzo reached out and grabbed her before she fell on her ass. “What’s wrong?” he asked, his face all cop, his eyes glancing left and right.

She pushed him back. “Were you following me?”

“I saw you get off the train. I was waiting for you because—”

“It was you.” She breathed deeply and closed her eyes, rubbing her temples until the

tension retreated into a tight ball in the back of her head. At least now she could think

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Watch me!”

“I didn’t mean to.”

She shook her head. It wasn’t fair to Cody, but she couldn’t shake the fear. She’d never been normal!

“I thought someone was following me. My fault,” she muttered.

He rubbed her arm. “I should have called. I just got off duty and saw your message. I thought I’d take you to dinner to celebrate.”

She discreetly moved out of his reach and said, “I’m sorry, I’m meeting Patrick for dinner. Rain check?”

“Of course. Can I walk with you?”

“Isn’t it out of your way?”

“Not far.”

She relented, though didn’t feel wholly comfortable. She’d met Cody through WCF and they dated for nearly two years before she broke it off. Working with her ex-boyfriend on WCF projects was one thing; socializing with him was completely different.

He took her elbow to steer her through the Metro station and into the chill January mist. She pulled her raincoat tighter around her and tilted the collar up to shield her ears from the shivering. Born and raised in San Diego, Lucy still wasn’t used to East Coast winters.

“It’ll snow tonight,” Cody said.

“And you know this because the weatherman is always right?”

“Because I was born and raised in Maryland. The first snowflake will fall before midnight.”

“You sound happy about this.”

He grinned as they crossed the street and turned left on Pennsylvania Avenue toward Georgetown. Cody looked and acted like a cop: broad-shouldered and physically fit, he moved with a swagger and arrogance that came as much from fear as from confidence. He had the Cuban good looks and manners that had Lucy’s mother singing his praises, with just enough wildness on the side that had Lucy enjoying his company. She had thought she’d loved him at one time, but she hadn’t known what love was. She only knew what love wasn’t.

It wasn’t Cody Lorenzo.

When she’d broken up with him, her family took it harder than Cody. They’d parted amicably, as friends, but Lucy knew Cody wanted to get back together. Lucy didn’t.

“Good work getting Prenter,” Cody said as they walked.

“We haven’t put him back in prison yet,” she said. “Do you think the judge will do it? They seem to be big on second, third, tenth chances these days.”

Cody grinned humorlessly. “Fifty-fifty. Though lately we’ve been having more success.”

Her stomach sank. Fifty-fifty. “If he has GHB or another drug on him, that increases our chances.”

“I’m hoping he will. If he’s truly going back to his old ways, he’ll keep doing what worked for him in the past. Possession of a date-rape drug would be hard even for some loony, feeble good judge to overlook. At the very least, Prenter will be spending one night in jail.”

“Small consolation.”

Cody stopped walking, and Lucy turned to look at him. He seemed angry. "I'll do everything I can to make sure he finishes the full five years, Lucy. I promise."

"I know—" She frowned, worried about her friend. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Frustrated. I had a domestic violence case earlier that really got to me." He looked over her shoulder, off in his world, more pain than frustration in his eyes.

"Cody?"

He shook his head, not wanting to talk about it.

She said, "Remember what you told me when I couldn't stop that teenager from meeting with her online boyfriend?" Lucy had befriended a thirteen-year-old in cyberspace, though WCF strongly discouraged it. Lucy did everything she could to stop the girl from making the same mistakes Lucy had made six years ago. She had failed.

Cody turned to her, gazing deep into her eyes as she spoke.

"You said, 'We can't save everyone, so we have to do what we can when we can.' That changed my life, gave me something to have faith in again. We're doing what we can. At WCF and on the job."

His intense stare began to make Lucy feel uncomfortable. Maybe she should have let Cody be angry and frustrated, not tried to talk to him about it. She didn't want to lead him on, give him any ideas that she wanted to restart their relationship. She smiled, squeezed his hand, then dropped it and started walking. "I'm going to be late meeting Patrick," she said.

"I'm going to cut through Rock Creek Park to get home."

She stopped walking and looked back at him. "You sure?"

"It's only a couple more blocks to Clyde's. I wanted to make sure you were okay with the Prenter thing, and of course you are. You're an amazing woman, Lucy." He stepped forward and kissed her cheek. "See you Saturday at the WCF fund-raiser."

Cody turned down the pathway through Rock Creek Park and raised his hand in farewell before disappearing from view. She walked briskly toward Clyde's, already late.

Lucy still had that creepy feeling someone was staring at her. She glanced over her shoulder, but no one even remotely suspicious was there. She stopped, looking in every direction, the street lamps providing ample illumination. The only people not walking stood on the corner waiting for the light to change. No one seemed to be watching *her* specifically.

She breathed in deeply, the icy air clearing her lungs and her mind. She willed the feeling away, as she'd learned to do six years ago when the sense of being watched by unseen eyes never left her, day or night, in public or locked in her bedroom.

It worked. She smiled to herself and continued toward the restaurant, where her brother was most likely irritated that she'd made him wait.

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