



MONSTER

An Original Short Story by

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I.

ANDREW WORRELL, 38, HAD WORKED FOR THE Sheriff's Department of Sumner County, Tennessee, for three years before he broke protocol to quail a nagging hunch. His gut feeling led to the arrest of the Blue Springs Strangler, landing him both commendations and the attention of Doctor Kurt Presley. Presley, a professor of criminal psychology at Quantico, had been brought in to catch the serial rapist and asphyxia fetishist, a man named Harold David Harlan. Four months later, Worrell left Tennessee for Virginia and the Sheriff's Department for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Cutting his teeth under Presley in the Violent Crimes Unit, it was a short leap to the Bureau's Behavioral Analysis Unit in Washington, D.C., where Worrell took work as a profiler. At the height of his career, the special agent received an offer from the doctor to join a special test-unit he had been authorized to oversee. Based upon Presley's own theories, the unit sounded fringe to Worrell, but he was unsettled by the idea of an outsider discrediting and disrespecting his mentor.

Again, Worrell reassigned to the five-agent unit and relocated, this time to the third most dangerous city in the world: St. Louis, Missouri. A string of impressive successes

found him promoted to the rank of Supervisory Special Agent and partnered with junior agent Bryan “Connie” Connors. His fourth investigation with the unit centered on a Floridian-born body artist and graphics design student named Ruby Mercer. An incest survivor, Mercer had accumulated a string of misdemeanors and escalated to physical violence after being rear-ended at a stoplight two blocks from her place of employment.

Mercer was held over at county lockup at the request of the FBI and was well beyond agitated the first time Worrell interviewed her. He explained the sort of work he was doing, how violent crime experts and scientists were trying to determine which offenders would escalate to murder based upon their histories and the correlation to the histories of known serial offenders of violent crime. Ruby cursed him, struck him in the face and was subdued and detained by arresting officers.

During a 30-day stint for striking a federal agent, Mercer was interviewed a second time by Worrell. She had been violently assaulted and retreated within, which prompted Worrell to put heat on the administration of the women’s detention center. When he went before a judge and had his attacker released and admitted to a hospital for recovery, Worrell’s intentions became misinterpreted by Ruby.

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For the next seven months, anytime she found herself against a wall, Ruby turned to Worrell. The night she slashed the face of the administrator of the detention center, Ruby called her hero. He arrived at her apartment, having abandoned his date, and found her wielding a jagged shard from a broken mirror. Ruby confessed she had followed the agent, had seen the woman he took to dinner, had lashed out to prove to herself that he still cared for her.

As though a fairy tale deranged by her mind, Ruby slashed Worrell and set fire to her apartment in an effort to always be with him. The agent kicked open the inner door to Ruby's bedroom and oxygen spilled in like a wave of the sea. Flame washed over them as Worrell disarmed her and collapsed. He awoke two days later in the burn ward, his mentor watching over him instead of leading the manhunt to find Ruby, who had evaded capture.

Worrell spent six months in rehab and another three in isolation before returning to work with the Bureau. Sometimes he sat in silence in his apartment, remembering the screams, the smell and the heat. Other nights, he drove the streets looking for some sign of his attacker. In the ten months since the assault, he had received three phone calls from her. The last time, Ruby gasped when he spoke her name and then she hung up the phone.

As he surveyed the area around his parked car and stared at his burn-scarred hand and forearm, Worrell longed for one more moment with his attacker. Coeds scurrying to class passed by him unaware and he scanned every face as though to see her there. They all looked so innocent, but he doubted they truly were without sin. Staring deep into the pack of students, he wondered again if he had pushed Ruby to become a monster.

ROBIN STILLWELL, 43, WAS THE PUBLIC FACE OF the special unit spearheaded by Kurt Presley. She understood the politics of perception and had both the looks and grace to put the media and local law at ease. The fact that she was now the one sweating was not lost on her as she rubbed perspiration from her upper lip against her left thumb and index finger until the pads of her fingers dried. Squinting into the morning sun, she adjusted a pair of amber-lensed sunglasses and returned her hands to the backsides of her hips.

The view from the steps of the university was, in fact, lost on her as she instead recalled her first time meeting Presley. For six weeks she had fielded several offers following her involvement in the rescue of Tabitha Burrows, the seven-year-old granddaughter of Senator Robert Burrows. Though she had not single-handedly taken down the kidnapper, it was

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Stillwell's face plastered across every news station in Phoenix holding the child in a blanket and carrying her into daylight. She might as well have been named the poster girl of the FBI after that.

She was in the middle of an interview with KPHO-Phoenix when she noticed a man watching her from behind the scenes. He harbored a scowl, what she called his owl-impression, and absorbed her story as though he had never heard it before. When the twelve-minute segment ended, Presley met Stillwell at her chair and introduced himself as though she had never heard his name before. The fact that she had sat through two of his lectures and even engaged him in a Q&A session gave her a leg-up on him, or so she thought.

He proceeded to remind her of how hard she grilled him for pandering to the media in order to lure out Nathan Wellesley, one of the many killers he apprehended while running the Violent Crimes Unit. Her stance on the matter had not changed and that, Presley claimed, was the reason he needed her on his team. She was a fine investigator and shrewd with the media, perfect for a team that could not afford to answer too many questions.

When she arrived at Presley's office to meet with him a second time, Stillwell found a tall man slumped in a chair. Presley had not forgotten about the meeting, rather, he was

off on another one of his lectures and had not thought to reschedule. She was determined to walk out then and there, to file a formal complaint with her section chief and to burn every copy of every book authored by Presley that sat on her bowed bookshelf at home.

Instead, the broad-shouldered agent in the chair asked her a question about SERE training in the military. An Army brat and former MP herself, Stillwell educated the agent without even knowing his name. Ninety minutes with the case file passed before Stillwell introduced herself to Andrew Worrell. He convinced her to ride along with him on an interview and even bought her dinner, a chili dog and lemonade, no onions. That night, she saw how the influence of a Drill Sergeant father had turned a fifteen-year-old boy into the kind of bully who pulled a gun on his classmates.

She told Worrell her life story in the passenger seat of his car and realized how late the night had gotten when her husband called looking for her. Knowingly but without conceit, Worrell said he would see her the next day. She bought breakfast for him and filed for a change of assignment before lunch. Months passed before she concluded Presley had set the entire thing up all along to give her the chance to prove her abilities without it feeling like he was watching her every move.

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Seventeen cases later and she had solidified herself as the face of the unit. The mother of two boys, she extended her maternal instincts to the members of the unit. She shielded them from Bureau politics, law enforcement rivalry, media harassment, ex-wives, ex-girlfriends and, at times, themselves. She cared about them and, though they shielded her from the horrors of the job, she felt the burden of their pain.

Like her own failed marriage, she witnessed the fracture of her work-family after the attack of Ruby Mercer on Worrell. She sat in a waiting room for nineteen hours while doctors treated her colleague. She made statements to the press, took on an additional caseload and handled the interview of replacements after Bryan Connors quit the team due to pressure from his wife. She oversaw the manhunt for Ruby Mercer and reviewed her recorded interviews nearly as often as Presley had.

“Agent Daniels?”

She was poised and direct but there was still a hint of friendliness when Stillwell spoke. Even with her thick mane of autumn blond curls, not a single strand of hair was out of place. Athletic if not petite, she looked eye to eye at the auburn haired junior agent with the dusting of freckles and a stylish pair of jade-lensed sunglasses.

“Ma’am.”

Shaking hands, Daniels stood a bit taller, her shoulders back and her chin up.

“We’re running a little late,” Stillwell announced. “The lecture hall is this way. I appreciate your coming here straight from the airport. How was your flight?”

“Good until Denver and then bumpy the rest of the way.”

“I must have taken that same leg a hundred times when I worked in the Phoenix office. You’re really from Montana?”

“I’m really from Montana.”

Daniels had been asked that question so many times she almost wondered if it was a bad thing.

“My first year at the academy, I think a guy from Montana lived on my floor at the dorms,” Stillwell admitted.

“I doubt I know him,” Daniels confessed with slight sarcasm. “I thought, that is, as I understood it, I would be based from Market Street.”

“You’re one of two new transfers to the division and the other hasn’t shown up yet. We need you here for now, but it is temporary until I can find out just when Agent Reeves will be joining us. You’ve done field work before, haven’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” Daniels reported respectfully and looked around the campus.

“Good.”

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“This all reminds me of the first time I attended one of Dr. Presley’s lectures,” Daniels claimed. “I was a junior in college and he spoke on how he brought down the Minneapolis Mauler. I saw him a year later after he wrote that book on his time interviewing Lloyd Francis.”

“I think most of us saw him on that circuit,” Stillwell noted. “SSA Worrell is already inside, I’m sure you remember reading about him in Presley’s book. It’s too crowded to try to find him now but you can meet up with him after the lecture.”

RUBY MERCER’S FACE WAS BEAUTIFUL BUT HER eyes were wildly turbulent, like lightning striking a pool of oil. Wisps of hair from a disheveled ponytail fell over her face as though razor slices disfiguring her features and revealing her inner turmoil. With a fractured psyche and a flood of emotion saturating her every gesture, Ruby fidgeted and struggled to control her movements. Sitting atop her hands, she locked her elbows and stiffened her shoulders to deny her body the tingle of life it felt.

“How are you feeling today, Ruby?”

“I like when you say my name,” she smiled but fidgeted. “I’m having a hard time keeping it all together. I feel like I’m about to burst wide open and blow out the sun. Do you know what they call it when a star explodes?”

“A supernova,” Worrell said to her.

An energetic smile burst across Ruby’s face as she looked at him and felt the connection they shared. He understood her train of thought and that meant the entire world to her.

“Yeah,” she said with delight, “a supernova...”

“That’s an interesting way of seeing yourself. One school of thought suggests that a supernova is caused by the star’s own gravitational collapse. What’s left behind is barely recognizable as the once splendid entity.”

“But I was referring to the magnitude of its luminosity and the speed it has when it blows out. You have a dark side, Mister,” Ruby laughed. “But maybe I do, too. Maybe that’s why I always feel this way.”

“Talk to me about that.”

Slamming her hands down on the table, Ruby said, “I don’t want to talk about this! Why can’t we ever just have a simple conversation like we did in the beginning? Why is it always questions with you?”

Flinging her chair backwards, Ruby rushed for the room’s only window and took comfort in the overcast skies and raindrops. Splaying her fingers against the glass, she pressed as forcefully as she could muster before the trembling of her upper body caused a twitch in her shoulders. To hide it, she rubbed at the back of her neck and pushed her face against the cold surface.

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“I want to be out there again,” she said softly.

“I know you do. Would you come back to the table, please?”

“All of my life I’ve wanted to be where I could see the stars. When I was a little girl, my parents used to take me to this observatory. It’s closed now, but I still remember it. Just like a supernova,” she whispered, “just like me. Try to contain it and you’ll kill it. It needs to be free to be beautiful.”

“What will you do about your need?”

“I don’t know,” Ruby said. “I feel like I’ll die before I know what it is...what it is that...I’m supposed to be.”

With the rage of wildfire and lust in her eyes, Ruby stared back at her interviewer. Slowly, her eyelids began to close until they became frozen in a position which caused the glints of light to disappear and leave behind only the opal shadows. In an instant, her entire expression stilled as the digital video frame paused. As the recorded interview remained frozen on Ruby’s expression someone in the audience coughed.

AS THE LIGHTS OF THE AUDITORIUM CAME UP, Dr. Kurt Presley, 53, braced himself against a podium, cocked his jaw and stared out on the shadowy mass of listeners hanging on his every word. In that instant, a sense of power coursed through him but his eyes dimmed. He knew he had a tremendous opportunity to educate and shape the minds of

those who wanted to understand the workings of violence and the delicacy of his theory.

“Six weeks after this interview,” Presley spoke with a voice that had the fragility of sandpaper, “this patient acted on her feelings. A pyromaniac suffering from delusion and homicidal psychosis, she set fire to her apartment and nearly cost a federal agent his life. No amount of therapy, rehabilitation or pathos could have deterred her from her course. That is why we must understand the patterns of the killer and attempt to stop them before they escalate. Believe me when I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, the signs were there and in this course I will teach you to identify them.”

As he scanned the crowd of intent listeners, Presley barely recognized a man who stood from his seat in the crowd. In a gray suit and light colored shirt, Worrell glowered back at his mentor. Though a few in the crowd turned to eye the man, none recognized who he was before he exited the auditorium. All things considered, it was not the way Presley had wished to be reunited with his protégé.

“Do you see the man in the gray suit, walking towards the doors?” Stillwell whispered towards Daniels.

“Yes.”

“You’re going to want to catch up with him. That’s Agent Worrell.”

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Even though Worrell's appearance had changed so much that he hardly looked like the same man in the video, Daniels did not question her superior. With a confident gait, she side-stepped her way down the row eager to catch up with her team member.

READING THE TEXT MESSAGE FROM STILLWELL, Worrell thought her request to 'be nice' was strange. With an arched brow and a shrug, he returned the phone to its holster and leaned against his car in wait. From fifty yards out, he saw a slender woman with long hair approaching, her eyes never wavering from her path. She was attractive, with wide cheek bones and golden skin that made Worrell imagine Cherokee hePamge, prominent for the region of her birth.

From only twenty-five yards away, she removed her blazer and began rolling up the sleeves of her pastel blouse. The color flattered her complexion and build, making her appear leaner and softer, less gawky. Worrell saw his reflection in her sunglasses and leaned off the car as something about her struck him. A bewildered look disrupted his face, as though he no longer remembered the emotion behind the agent's smile. Or maybe it was his reflection he failed to recognize.

"Is it always so humid here?"

The mugginess trapped the morning heat and sweat glistened across Daniels' face as Worrell nodded in reply to her question.

"You don't look like a Terrence," he noted.

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't be sorry, it's a bad name for a woman."

"My name's not Terrence Reeves, I'm Callie Daniels."

"Much better," Worrell decided. "Where you parked?"

"I caught a cab from Lambert," she informed him. "Where are we going?"

"If I told you that, it'd ruin the surprise. Hop in."

WORRELL WAS NEVER THE TYPE OF AGENT WHO needed to occupy every waking moment with conversation. Much of his life, he sat in silence listening to the world most people never even noticed. As much as he enjoyed observing, he was less a fan of being observed...especially in the doting manner in which Daniels operated. It made him wonder why the lecture circuit appealed so much to Presley and he hid his anxiety by pressing the floor button on the elevator.

"So the Bureau recruited you?"

"Yes, that's right," she replied eagerly, "during my third year."

"Montana State?"

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“University of Central Florida, actually,” she corrected and noticed how he never took his eyes off the indicator lights. “They have a great forensic science program. You studied here in Missouri, didn’t you, at Mizzou?”

If only for a moment, Worrell glanced directly into Daniels’ eyes and forgot the overhead lights. It was obvious he wondered how she knew where he had gone to college.

“Presley mentioned it in his book when he was talking about you,” she smirked.

Worrell nodded. “This won’t be like anything you’ve read about in a book, you understand?”

“Dr. Presley said in one of his lectures that—”

“—And don’t do things the way Presley does them. We’ve already got Presley for that. Find a way to expand upon his methods. You must be a good investigator or they wouldn’t have wasted the airfare to bring you out here.”

“Yes sir.” *Daniels wondered if Worrell knew anything about her at all.*

“Don’t get me wrong, I have all the respect in the world for the man. I don’t necessarily believe in the work we’re doing here, but he’s proven himself to me, you know? We’ve had a good run together.”

Together, Worrell and Presley had stopped eleven headlining serial killers, not counting individual

accomplishments. Daniels or any agent would consider that more than a *good run*.

“It isn’t about watching their actions or listening to their words. You have to listen to what they aren’t saying. You have to see what they don’t want to show you. Sometimes the smallest things add up to one big warning sign.”

“Is that how you caught the Blue Springs Strangler?”

Daniels noticed that Worrell tapped his index finger against his thigh each time the elevator cleared another floor in their ascent.

“Pardon?”

“Is that how you caught Harlan Harold?”

Still detached, Worrell returned his attention to the overhead panel and replied, “No.”

He practically gasped as he rushed off the elevator, not that Daniels preferred cramped spaces any more than he did. The air quality in the precinct was, at best, stale and hot. Before she even found her bearings, she saw a squinty eyed detective with a wide smile approaching quickly. He was confident but his teeth were far too white and the sun had tanned everything but the crow’s feet around his eyes. Clearly he wanted to look well-groomed for press conferences.

“Agent Worrell,” he spoke but did not shake hands.

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The detective patted high on the left arm of the agent, as though he knew the routine. There was no sense of rivalry between them and when the cop spoke, he did so quietly.

“Thank you for that tip on Jeffries.”

“Glad it worked out for you,” Worrell said. “My partner, Agent Daniels.”

“Daniels,” the detective spoke. “Detective Rick Landry, it’s good to meet you.”

Daniels nodded and grinned, cautious about her teeth and how approachable she might seem.

“A patrol car picked up your boy a block away from his court-appointed anger management session. He went ape shit and broke the group leader’s nose.”

“Ape shit being one notch better than bat shit crazy,” Worrell said almost drolly to Daniels, who smirked nervously.

Landry stared directly at Daniels and tilted his head towards Worrell.

“The son of a bitch was licking the blood off his hand when they picked him up. It took four officers to detain him. I gotta tell you, if you hadn’t earmarked his jacket, we’d have loved to handle this guy ourselves.”

“Well, you might get the chance yet,” Worrell said.

He knew how gung-ho cops got when they had a suspect in their craw. Daniels saw the look of relief in Landry’s eyes

and understood how the supervisory special agent was working him to build rapport.

“He’s right this way,” Landry said as they walked.

“When we get in there, I don’t want you to say a word,” Worrell spoke out the corner of his mouth to Daniels.

Daniels nodded but Worrell was focused straight ahead as they walked.

“Did you catch that game last night? I’ve seen better pitching at my kid’s little league practice,” Landry noted.

ALLEN ROBERT MURPHY, JR., 32, WAS BAD NEWS from the word ‘go’. A brawler and vandal in his youth, he hospitalized a sixteen-year-old he beat during a home invasion before turning eighteen and one of the county’s last hanging judges gave him the option of prison or the military. Murphy was dishonorably discharged from the Army after twenty-eight months and striking two superior officers. According to his jacket, he spent more time in the brig than he did fulfilling his duties.

Murphy stayed on the police radar the first year post-discharge, but managed to fall between the cracks after taking on a slew of cash-paying jobs. He bounced around from job to job, always blue collar and always hard labor. His neck had disappeared about an inch beneath the roll of fat on the back of his shaven head and beneath layers of tattoo ink that jutted

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from the fabric of a stained wife beater. His skin radiated heat and was pinkish in color and, to Daniels' way of thinking, he reeked of propane gas.

She was the one in the room he kept his eyes on, relishing her as a thin smile spread across gap teeth and made him flex like a boa constrictor. His lifeless brown eyes darkened as he glanced at Worrell, then darted back as Landry closed them into the room from the outside. It was Daniels' job to hold the file and her sweaty palm left an impression on the fibrous pulp of the folder.

"Worrell, you bastard," Murphy hissed in a voice that was several octaves higher than his size suggested. "You come here to jam me up again?"

"You're making it easy for me, sugar," Worrell claimed and folded his arms, unimpressed by the thug. "I hear you've developed a taste for blood. Sit up straight."

"Go to hell, pig."

Worrell sneered, "STLDPD is aching to get a piece of you now. What happened? Did the guy look at you wrong again?"

"Who's the new bitch?"

"That's what all the inmates are going to be wondering about you tonight," Worrell decided and circled the room aimlessly. "I'd start talking if I were you."

“I read up on you, pig, and that crazy ass bitch who tried burning you down. What’s that like? Smelling your pig flesh roasting?”

Unaffected by personal taunts, Worrell said, “I told them to send patrol cars to your house, your job, Bonnie’s job. There’s another car sitting on that schoolyard where her kid goes. I thought I told you to sit up straight.”

“How about you, sweetheart? You ever smelled charred pork before? Day like today, I’ll bet the stench just rolls off him in waves,” Murphy smiled. “Why don’t you come over here and sit on my lap? Tell me your story.”

From behind Murphy, Worrell slammed the man’s face against the table and jerked him up in his chair until he no longer slouched.

“When I tell you to sit up straight,” Worrell whispered, “you sit your ass up straight.”

Daniels looked to the mirrored wall, but there were no disruptions. Tears formed in Murphy’s eyes and his face turned a deeper shade of pink as he trembled in his plastic chair. Worrell eyed Daniels and she stepped back away from the table. He had not lied. This was nothing like the scenarios she read about in text books.

“This isn’t like last time,” Worrell warned. “You won’t be remanded to county lock-up or anger management sessions. You broke a man’s nose and knocked out four of his teeth.

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When I was profiling, we'd have called this your period of escalation. You're circling your stressor, that one shining moment that snaps you and sets you on a rampage."

Murphy cautiously rubbed at the knot forming in the center of his crown. He was woozy, both agents knew, but there was more to it than that. Daniels was no more ready than the man when Worrell slammed an open palm against the belly of the metal table. A thud resonated through the room like thunder and tears welled up in Murphy's eyes. His breathing quickened and the man looked back at the two agents as though he were about to crumble.

"You'd better start talking. Or is it already too late?"

Murphy stared hard at Worrell, through him, and a tear ran down his glossy, pink cheek. Daniels felt uncomfortable now, her body tense and expecting him to try clearing the table to grab hold of Worrell's throat. She never expected tears.

II.

LANDRY ENTERED THE OBSERVATION ROOM TO find Worrell still staring into the interrogation room at Murphy as a public defender counseled the man. For two hours, the man had recalled his childhood to the federal agents and never once did he threaten to sue. In point of fact, it was Worrell who urged Murphy to speak with a lawyer.

Now the detective stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Daniels and watched the quiet investigator as he stared intently.

“I just got off the phone with Murphy’s boss. He says he worked late last night and wasn’t scheduled to work this afternoon until four. I couldn’t reach his wife. I assume you guys will follow-up with her later today?”

Looking to Worrell for a response, Daniels finally answered for the both of them.

“We will.”

“He doesn’t mean anything by it,” Landry said quietly to Daniels. “He helped us on a case two years ago where he stood like that for six hours, never said a word. Never even interviewed the guy but he told us what questions to ask and we had a confession by the time we clocked out. I don’t know how he does it.”

Daniels grinned and eyed her partner.

“Are you a profiler too?”

Shaking her head, Daniels sheepishly reported, “I worked White Collar in Houston and Seattle.”

“White Collar, no kidding? Talk about a career change,” Landry smiled. “Once upon a time, Worrell and I were trading notes in lecture hall at Mizzou.”

“Small world,” Daniels whispered with a grin.

She watched her partner more, how he never even seemed to notice the conversation happening around him.

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Before she had even landed the position with the unit, Daniels had learned as much as she could about Presley, Stillwell and Worrell. She had heard volumes of stories, rumors of cases they had consulted on and been connected to. Before Ruby Mercer, there was talk that Worrell was one of the best profilers in the Bureau.

“What do you think, Andy?”

Daniels liked that the detective spoke what was on *her* mind.

“I think...he’s too good at falling between the cracks.”

“Are we missing something?”

Sneering and shaking his head, Worrell refused to speak to that.

“We’ll keep a close eye on him, you know that,” Landry reassured the agent.

“Already missed the chance with this one, I’m afraid,” Worrell said and patted his old friend on the back. “Have you eaten anything?”

“Yeah, Mary came by earlier. She thought she might bump into you, actually. You’ll have to swing by for dinner again soon.”

“I’ll do that,” Worrell nodded.

Landry grinned and shook Daniels’ hand. He knew Worrell would never come for dinner.

A HAND ON WORRELL'S WRIST WAS AS GENTLE A touch as he had felt in some time. Looking away from the rack of refrigerated beverages and snacks, he saw a woman with moist eyes and jagged bangs grinning back at him. Some weeks had passed since he had looked on Heather Wilder's face but she was just as beautiful and hope-filled as ever. For him, that made it worse.

"I thought that was you," she smiled and kissed his face. "How are you?"

"I'm hanging in there," he said and politely asked, "How about you?"

"Oh, you know me, I've been keeping busy. My flower garden is going to look better than my neighbors at long last," she smiled, almost infectiously.

He remembered conversations about the small references she made and tried not to hold eye contact too long.

"It's ninety-one degrees out, Andy. You still won't roll up your shirt sleeves? You're too hard on yourself," she said in an affectionate way that was all her own.

"Suspect that's so," he spoke with a hint of drawl in his voice. He only had an accent when he was too tired to mask it.

"And you aren't sleeping," she noted.

Worrell hailed from Union City, Tennessee, roughly a hundred miles from Heather's hometown of Bartlett.

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Common statehood was one of the factors that helped them connect when they first crossed paths two winters earlier.

“Are you back on the job?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he reported with a single nod.

When he looked at her eyes, he noticed that she was staring just over his shoulder. With a quarter-tilt of his head, he noted Daniels standing behind him holding her tray as though she were walking across hot coals. Smoothing down the bangs along her cheek, Heather smiled politely and looked to Worrell. He felt awkward, felt the sweat stinging his skin and the heat radiating off his body. Still he kept quiet.

“I’m sorry, I’m interrupting,” Daniels realized.

“No, it’s my fault,” Heather swore. “I didn’t know he— sometime you should call me, Andy. I just want to catch up.”

“I know,” he said with a frown.

She reached out to touch him again, but refrained and wrapped her hands together.

“I should go,” she winced.

Backing away, Heather took two steps before spinning on her heel and exiting into the crowd. Quietly, Worrell looked back to his partner and kept his head down. Heather Wilder, bank manager and hobby gardener, was one of the finest women Worrell had ever known. Had Ruby Mercer not called that night during their date, he wondered how differently things might have turned out for them.

“She’s pretty,” Daniels said kindly of her fellow redhead.

“She is,” Worrell agreed easily.

“She cares about you a lot,” the junior agent added.

“To a fault,” he believed.

Finding a seat, he cleared the portion of the table across from him and gave Daniels a place to sit down and eat. She smiled appreciatively at the gesture, noticing how he never used his burned arm. He had full use of it, so she assumed it was more a matter of pride than anything. She had seen how some people stared at the scars on his neck and the back of his hand. She had been one of them, after all. Both tasted their drinks, cold and sweet, and she paused a moment in silence.

“My dad used to wail on my mom,” Worrell said out of the blue. “She took the brunt of it to keep him from laying a hand on her children. When someone of authority came around, he would never let her out of his sight. He would make this face...I saw that same look on Harlan Harold’s face. That’s how I knew.”

Swallowing with slight force and unable to lift her sandwich, she asked, “What happened to your mother?”

“She stopped getting hit. Have you ever drawn your weapon on a suspect, Agent Daniels?”

“Two times, three suspects.”

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She did not expand on the story but she told Worrell volumes.

“We’ll meet Murphy again soon,” he said.

In silence they thought on that scenario and pretended to enjoy their meal.

DANIELS HAD ONLY MET PRESLEY ONE TIME during the interview process and it was, at best, a mere introduction. To be standing in the same room with him was overwhelming; especially given the fact that the veins were pulsing in his neck and that he had been on a tirade against her partner for the better part of ten minutes. They were the first ten minutes she had spent with him since joining the unit. Like Stillwell, she did not move, did not even budge from her uncomfortable seat at an uncomfortable desk.

“What the hell were you thinking?!” Presley challenged in a throaty scold. “You know better than anyone how vital it is that the subjects be told under the appropriate conditions.”

“I know you like to be the one to play the all-knowing one,” Worrell equally challenged. “That’s just one more reason why everyone thinks that you’re a douche bag.”

Exiting the room alone, Worrell stepped into a side room with white boards and photographs and shut the door behind him. The tension in the room dissipated immediately and a cold chill shot down Daniels’ spine. As Presley scoffed and

strutted to the windows to look in on Worrell, his confidante and team liaison, Supervisory Special Agent Robin Stillwell, stepped beside him.

“You really didn’t tell him that you were including his attack in your lecture?” She questioned.

“I thought he would understand,” Presley said. “People don’t really say that I’m a douche bag, do they?”

“Yes,” Stillwell answered unapologetically and exited the room.

“Interesting,” Presley said and eyed the newest member of his team.

Daniels grinned politely and Presley responded with a smile that made one eye close and seemed to suggest that nothing was wrong.

“Which one are you again?”

“Daniels, Sir.”

“Right, I knew that,” Presley claimed. “And what was *your* impression of Allen Murphy?”

On the spot, Daniels peeked into the other room at Worrell, who had his back to her.

“A classic bully, Sir,” she confessed. “He talked a big game but the moment his bravado was challenged, he cowered and regressed to a state of child-like meekness brought on by fear. He doesn’t feel remorse for what he’s done but he certainly knows that he’s done wrong.”

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“You know how he made his way into our caseload?”

“STLCPD picked him up last year as one of six suspects in a string of home invasions. It was the same offense that landed him before a judge when he was seventeen. Only, now the suspect had added rape to his list of offenses.”

Impressed by her memory, Presley said, “We thought we had him then, but, internal affairs busted the arresting officer for taking payoffs the same day he picked up Murphy. His lawyer argued it was a bad bust and a judge agreed. They never solved the case and local LEO’s passed his name up the ladder. We’ve kept an eye on him, but...”

“...he’s too good at falling between the cracks.”

“Yes, he is.”

Daniels remembered Worrell saying that at the station and now she understood the context.

“Stillwell is going to interview Murphy’s wife,” Presley announced. “Why not ride along with her?”

“Yes sir.”

Leaving her blazer and to-go cup behind, the agent rose from her seat, eyed her boss respectfully, and exited with her essentials in-hand. Presley scratched the back of his head, turned to face the room where Worrell was working, and approached the door with a curious manner.

THE WALLS OF THE ROOM DISPLAYED A VISUAL biography of the life of Allen Robert Murphy, Jr., documented in photos, official records, handwritten notes and newspaper clippings. Expulsion records from middle school were one of the earliest documents, the haggard edge of the paper always first to catch Presley's eye. He and his agents had logged extensive hours constructing the criminal life of the man, a virtual timeline documenting the evolution of a killer. That is, a man they believed would become a killer.

Under Presley's evaluation, the psychologist compared the early lives of over six thousand convicted killers and composed a tracking system – an early warning detection system, in layman's terms – for determining which offenders would escalate to murder. It was up to him and his team to single out these individuals and, whenever possible, intervene before that person escalated. In the case of Murphy, the team believed they had weeks to intervene. Murphy's outburst earlier in the day had proven otherwise.

In the eight months Presley had been actively following the case, he logged over two hundred hours watching Murphy from a distance. Telling a person they had the potential to become a murderer was never a polite conversation. Murphy, upon being confronted, had threatened the team with violence should they come around

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again. Every agent in the unit had interviewed Murphy and Daniels marked the fifth.

“What’s your opinion of Daniels?” Presley asked.

“Murphy cried before she did,” Worrell noted as he studied the board.

Presley smirked. He had often admired Worrell’s ability to compartmentalize life. With him, everything and everyone had its place. After the attack on his life, he had reorganized and relabeled those compartments, doing away with as much clutter as he could bear to part with. Presley wondered how he kept going, though it never occurred to him to ask. It was more fascinating to watch and learn.

“She didn’t question the way you came down on Murphy at the precinct?”

“She’s a thinker,” the agent told. “I imagine she’ll try piecing it together for herself before she demands an explanation.”

“I wonder if it wasn’t too soon to be throwing you into the fray,” Presley confessed. “You’ve made it so he’ll come after you. That’s the reason why I wanted to be the one to talk to him.”

“Maybe I wasn’t ready for that to happen,” Worrell told. “Anyway, they seem to like me more than you.”

Presley understood the reference and how it pertained to Worrell’s history even before either man had heard of Ruby

Mercer. Throughout his own career, Presley had been likened to Wyatt Earp for his ability to dish out the law and stand in the middle of hell without getting so much as a scratch on him. They were extreme opposites in that regard and neither man seemed able to shake it.

“I blindsided you today,” Presley thought aloud.

Worrell eyed a trio of photographed beaten faces, two men and a woman. In the back of his mind, he heard the words of his boss registering.

“Pardon?”

“By including that footage of you and Ruby in my lecture,” he referenced. “I hadn’t intended it to seem thoughtless.”

“People need to know the truth,” Worrell admitted, “even if it’s from my mistakes.”

“I mistook your reaction, maybe? I thought you were angry.”

“I am angry,” Worrell said. “But not with you. I just have to direct it into the work and away from other areas of my life.”

“I think we all could stand to focus on that,” Presley said admirably. “What was your impression of the man? How right is our profile?”

“We might have been more forgiving than we should have been,” Worrell told. “He’s already taken a life. Of that I

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am certain. Something else, Landry mentioned that when they picked him up, he was licking the blood from his hands.”

“You’re thinking bloodlust?”

“I was thinking about Victor Stevenson.”

“The first case we ever worked together after you joined the Bureau?” Presley sneered, “You aren’t getting sentimental on me, are you?”

With a smirk, Worrell asked, “Do you remember how he said that his first taste of blood, even though it was purely coincidental, turned him on to the idea of ingesting more? It eventually led him to butchery and cannibalism.”

“Oh, I remember,” Presley confirmed.

“Am I off base?”

“I don’t know. But if you’re right, if he has killed, I mean, then the chances are that whomever Murphy has attacked, he’s dismembered them,” Presley realized. “We need to identify the stressor. I’ll give Stillwell a call.”

S.S.A. STILLWELL GESTURED WITH ONE FINGER for Daniels to wait curbside as she rounded the car with her cell pressed to her ear. Nonchalantly, both women sized the other up like a pair of carnival workers trying to guess the other’s height and weight. Though Daniels had more of a fresh-scrubbed appeal and auburn hair, she slumped her shoulders just enough to appear submissive to her superior.

An inch or two shorter, Stillwell stood with immaculate posture and stared through Daniels' eyes, even though they both sported sunglasses.

"No, that makes perfect sense. I'll see what I can sniff out," Stillwell told and ended her call a moment later.

Without prompting Daniels, she began to approach the workplace of Bonnie Murphy and watched Daniels' shadow follow her own.

"Presley wants us to sort out the trigger that set Murphy off today," she announced. "We all feel like he's on the verge of devolving, in which case he'll no longer be able to control his impulse to kill. Did Agent Worrell let you do any of the interrogation on Murphy?"

"He told me not to speak," Daniels said.

"And I guess you obeyed him?"

Daniels shrugged innocently.

"If you're going to make it in this job, you need to learn when to show some tit, when to show some balls and when to tell the guys to stop treating you like a girl."

Daniels smirked precociously.

"Oh, I bet all the boys loved you," Stillwell teased and opened the door for them both.

Before Daniels could ask what she meant, Stillwell made a beeline into the low-end fashion accessory store towards an

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olive-skinned woman with the saddest eyes Daniels had ever seen.

“Special Agent Stillwell,” sad-eyed Bonnie Murphy greeted. “What are you doing here?”

“I think you know,” Stillwell said and plucked her sunglasses from her face. “Have you spoken to your husband today?”

“No,” the woman spoke with a genuinely fretful urgency.

Daniels noted how the woman’s lips caught between her front teeth and revealed a scabbed wound.

Extending her hand in caution, Stillwell said, “He was picked up this morning after an incident. He’s been charged with assault and battery, resisting arrest and disturbing the peace.”

“Shit,” Bonnie swore.

As though her cursing embarrassed her as much as the news, Bonnie looked at the slender redhead she did not know. The trio was uncertain if the expression on her face was one of apology or a request for sympathy.

“He was doing so much better,” she sighed. “Who...who did he hit?”

“His anger management counselor,” Stillwell informed her.

Bonnie laughed nervously, sickly, and wiped strands of hair away from her face. Daniels instantly thought of the way

Ruby Mercer looked in the video she had watched earlier that morning.

“If it wasn’t my own family, I’d think it was a funny bit of irony. I’m about at my end, you know?”

“Is there some place you and your son can stay...for a night, at least?”

“That would piss him off even more, no thank you. It’s better to be there when they let him out. How much is that going to cost me?”

“I can’t say,” Stillwell said. “With his record, he’s likely looking at a little time.”

“Damn him,” she swore again. “You people should have just left him alone. I could manage him when he didn’t have all your words and your tests in his head. He spins things so much in there, you got no idea.”

Both agents looked to an older woman who seemed to show concern for Bonnie.

“I gotta get back to work, you know?”

Raising her badge, Daniels surprised the women by claiming, “Ma’am, we’re asking Mrs. Murphy some questions concerning some forgeries in an art collection at the children’s library where she volunteers. Do you know anything about that?”

“Me? N-no,” the woman said.

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She backed away sheepishly until she could vanish into a small break room near the back of the store and Mrs. Murphy eyed Daniels with a hint of confusion.

“I haven’t volunteered at that library in two years. How did...”

Daniels stared at Bonnie and knew the next word she would say.

“*Feds.*”

At the very least, Daniels thought her making up a crime that did not fit her husband’s arrest record would get the other woman off Bonnie’s back.

“What’s been going on with your husband lately, Bonnie? You said he was doing better. What’s changed most recently?”

“I don’t—no, I don’t know. Why are you talking to me? Don’t you already have him in custody?”

Stillwell continued, saying, “Like us or not, we’re trying to help your husband before he crosses a line he cannot come back from. Now, we know something set him off. The sooner you tell us what’s happening, the more likely we’ll be able to help him. Help yourself out here and tell us.”

“You’re trying to turn him into an animal but you threw me into the cage with him,” Bonnie criticized. “That other guy, that doctor, he rattled the cage real good. He was so interested in showing how smart he is instead of considering

the mess he's making. That other agent told me I didn't have to say anything that would put me or my son in any more danger. Is that true?"

"This isn't an interrogation, Mrs. Murphy."

"Then leave me alone. You've made my life hard enough already, lady," Bonnie told Stillwell. "I gotta get back to work now."

CONSUMED BY PAPERWORK AND PHOTOGRAPHS, Worrell was hip-deep in the case when he subconsciously answered his ringing cell. Whether or not he even addressed his caller was unclear, but it was almost ironic timing as he poured over Murphy's cellular bill.

"Andy, bad news," a haggard Detective Landry sighed.

"Let's have it."

"Steve Whitmore, the anger management counselor and resident bleeding heart, is refusing to press charges. He just walked out of my office after claiming that he fell and, in a panic, Murphy rushed out of the meeting. He even posted bail for the guy. Can you believe this bastard's luck? I have to wonder if we're ever going to pin him for anything."

"When are you going to release him?"

"The public defender walked through the door with Whitmore. I'm sorry, Andy, I know how bad you guys

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wanted this one. I'll have a unit shadow him, but there's only so much we can do."

"Yeah, okay," Worrell said as he hung-up on Landry mid-sentence. "618-555-9102."

"Whose number is that?"

"Edwin Markel's. Why do I know that name?"

Digging through the case files, Worrell wetted his thumb against his lower lip and hunted for a face and bio to salve his curiosity. Presley joined him in the search, staring over the top of his bifocals at the driven agent for only a moment. Rifling paper after paper, the team leader was the one who came up with the puzzle piece.

"Edwin Markel is the father of Bonnie Murphy's son. They were married for two years."

"He called her cell number three times last month."

"They must share custody."

"How many ways can two people discuss drop-off times in a...forty-seven minute conversation?"

"I'll have Stillwell ask, in case she's still with the wife."

"Ask her how long it takes to discuss drop-off times with *her ex*."

"I'd guess they break land-speed records getting apart from each other. Was that Landry on the phone?"

"Yeah, the guy Murphy beat on refused to press charges so they cut him loose."

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Presley sighed, “Nothing like playing beat the clock and figuring out in the eleventh hour that it’s also the end of daylight savings time. Stillwell? Where are you?”

Worrell was glad she answered before Presley mixed another metaphor.

III.

“I SWEAR THEY’RE NEVER GOING TO FINISH THE roadwork on I-55,” Stillwell moaned as she entered the office. “If I had to drive that stretch every day, you guys would have to hunt *me* down.”

“Where’s Daniels?”

There was sharpness in his demeanor, but Worrell’s words lacked genuine emotion.

“I...may...have convinced her that the new recruit buys dinner their first...week,” Stillwell said with mock innocence.

“My partner,” Worrell said with mock pride. “And I had such high hopes for the girl.”

“Oh, don’t be too hard on her. I seem to remember you pulling the same prank on Connie.”

“And look how he turned out,” Worrell mentioned.

“I’m sure he’s very happy...*in Dubuque.*”

“He would have gotten Bonnie to talk.”

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“Well, she was quick to reference the agent who told her that she didn’t have to talk to us,” Stillwell said with a tinge of venom. “Was that you?”

“You know that it was, Robin,” Presley answered in regards to Worrell without even looking up from his paperwork. *Both agents wondered if he realized how paternal he sounded when he scolded them.*

“Why would you do that? You tied our hands.”

“We’ve had this argument before and I’ve no doubt we’ll keep having it,” Worrell claimed. “I don’t feel we have the right to go in and turn these peoples’ lives upside down. It backfires too easily.”

Presley smirked at the way Worrell ended the argument without letting it become unfriendly or unprofessional. The room practically sighed as the fire dwindled from Stillwell’s passion. Despite her penchant for becoming argumentative, she respected all that Worrell had suffered too much to belittle it because of one bad interview.

“Tomorrow we can go door-to-door with the list of regulars in his life,” Worrell said.

“You’re buying breakfast,” was all Stillwell said back.

The younger agent nodded and took his time looking away from the boards to eye his colleague.

“We would never deprive you of your breakfast, for our own sakes,” Presley commented.

“Two things my dad was a stickler about: exercise in the morning and breakfast.”

“My father was adamant about Wolverines football, never drinking beer from a bottle and deer hunting,” Presley said, “and doing at least two of those things at the same time.”

Worrell scoffed and looked back at the boards.

“I can’t even begin to picture you drinking from a beer can,” Stillwell said with an upset shake of her head. “What sort of traditions did Papa Worrell pass down to his son, Andy?”

“He was arrested with a hooker,” Worrell said and rose from the table.

“Wow, and all I brought were tacos,” Daniels announced from the doorway.

“Say again?” Stillwell asked.

“What?” Worrell questioned Daniels.

“Who?” Stillwell questioned him.

“Murphy’s father,” Worrell explained and held up a photo. “When Murphy was fourteen, his old man was arrested in an alley downtown with a hooker.”

“Sex worker,” Presley commented.

“*Ohhh* no, she was a ho-bag,” Stillwell said as she eyed the mug shot.

“Allen Murphy, Sr.’s infidelity broke up the family.” From memory, Worrell cited, “Pam Murphy abandoned her family

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and Murphy's father became an abusive alcoholic. Last month, according to their phone records, Bonnie Murphy spent about five hours in all talking to her ex-husband. If Murphy thinks his wife is having an affair—"

"—that could be the trigger that set him off," Presley concluded.

"We need to get to Murphy's house," Worrell decided and removed the box of dinner from his partner's clutches. "Stilts, can you call Landry and ask him to send a team to Murphy, Sr.'s house?"

"On it," Stillwell confirmed and dialed a number on her phone.

"Call us when you're on-scene," Presley called out to Worrell and Daniels.

IN THE ST. LOUIS SUBURB OF BRIDGETON, FOUR members of the SWAT detail tiptoed northerly along the property line of Allen Murphy, Sr.'s house. Though technically not a part of his jurisdiction, Landry played cards with some members of the Bridgeton Police Department and had been allowed to ride along as an interdepartmental courtesy. He and his wife had considered moving to Bridgeton, a thought he could not shake as he paced the same twelve-foot stretch of sidewalk across from the residence in question.

“Detectives,” a voice squawked over the radio.

Detective Fred Jamison eyed Landry in recognition of the voice of the SWAT leader.

“Go ahead, Ramsey.”

“Jamison, you’re gonna wanna see this.”

“Do you have a visual on our guy?”

“It’s *someone*,” Ramsey reported back. “There are *pieces* everywhere.”

Landry eyed Jamison and then looked across the street at the house. Jamison did the same and held the radio close to his lips.

“Come back. Did you say *pieces*?”

“That’s affirmative. You’re the scene commander, but I think someone better call in the crime scene detectives for this.”

“I don’t want this case to go federal, Landry,” Jamison warned. “We don’t need that, with the times people here are having already.”

“And the county does? Let’s just see what we’ve got. My guy at the Bureau is a cool customer. If it gets grisly, he’ll keep a lid on it.”

STEPPING OUT OF THE CAR, WORRELL STOOD IN shadows and stared up at the second-story Hyde Park apartment rented by Allen Murphy, Jr. The swell of humidity

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suffocated the slightest breeze and brought tension to a scene already sweltering. In the trunk of his car, he kept a scatter gun and a couple of bulletproof vests. Keeping his mind busy with those details, he thought less on the way the heat seemed captured in the burns on his body.

“Yes sir, I understand,” Daniels spoke with respect at a cautious decibel.

“They found something at the old man’s house,” Worrell noted as he slipped into a Kevlar vest.

“What looks to be a single dismembered corpse,” she reported and eyed the second vest in the trunk.

“Lose the jacket and your blouse if you’re prone to sweat,” he recommended.

“This isn’t my first time, you know?”

“First time in this city,” Worrell told. “I don’t need you passing out from the humidity in there.”

Understanding him better, Daniels removed her jacket but left her blouse tucked and buttoned. Fitting herself into the vest, she eyed the shotgun, which she had never been fond of using. There were things she considered saying, things she needed someone else to know, should the situation get out of hand quickly. As though Worrell could read her mind, he spoke words of slight comfort.

“Relax, Daniels. I don’t aim for either one of us to get shot tonight.”

Heavily, she exhaled as sweat ran down her neck.

“Now, shut off your phone so your favorite ring tone doesn’t give us away. This has to be more fun than White Collar work,” he decided.

“Their air conditioning worked better,” she sighed.

“We get through this, I’ll take you out for frozen custard after,” Worrell offered. “It’s a thing here.”

“Maybe we should save the talk for then?”

Sneering, Worrell studied the building and headed for the wooden staircase attached to the outer west wall. Drawing his weapon, he kept to the shadows with confidence in his actions and that his new partner had his back.

FROM THE WINDOWS, THE AGENTS HAD A CLEAR view of the kitchen. A pot of water was boiling over on the stove and shards of broken crockery were strewn around the floor and countertops. There was no sign of Murphy, his wife or her son. Beneath a lopsided kitchen table with folding legs, a turned-over chair caught Daniels’ eye.

The muddled shouts of a man’s voice made them crouch down in tighter positions as a grim look washed over Worrell’s face. Both agents had been in situations like this one before and the scenes replayed vividly in their minds. Looking to a set of trashcans, Worrell saw yellow, plastic drawstrings jutting from beneath the lid. Safely holstering his

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sidearm, he eyed his new partner and raised his hand high enough to give the doorknob a twist.

A thud resounded and he gave the door a nudge, jarring it open and reaching out his hand far enough to keep the door from shutting. Daniels breathed slowly, her nostrils flaring as her pale eyes watched his every move. Rising to his feet, Worrell counted out four breaths and, with a quick and quiet step, entered the apartment. As he surveyed the countertop and turned off the burners, a woman's scream startled him.

Lowering her stance from outside the apartment, Daniels kept her weapon aimed into the next room and an eye trained sharply on Worrell. A glint of light hit the blade of a butter knife and she squinted as he palmed it in his right hand. Removing his sidearm, Worrell covered Daniels and waved her in. Hurriedly, she entered and watched as he crept along the slender, green wall that was a few shades brighter than Daniels' blouse. Now they both could hear sobbing and cursing.

Stepping out from behind the wall, Worrell pointed his gun into the room. In the reflection of the picture window, Daniels could see that Murphy had his back to them. She crept closer to her partner and saw the photo of a young boy on the wall. From the file, she knew his name to be Jeremy, the only child of Bonnie Murphy and Eddie Markel.

“FBI, do not move another inch,” Worrell said in a low, steady voice that froze Murphy.

A gasp filled Daniels ears and she saw the same boy from the photo huddled on the floor against a sewing basket.

“Jeremy,” Daniels said soothingly, “come stand by me.”

The agent was smooth-skinned and had a kind smile, so when she stretched out her hand it made the child want to be near her. There was nothing frightening about her, but still he could not bear to leave the room where his mother was being kept.

“What are you doing in my house, pig?” Murphy taunted.

“Mrs. Murphy, are you okay?”

“In my house, you answer me, pig,” Murphy taunted further.

“Mrs. Murphy,” Worrell repeated, “If you can move, I want you to go sit on the couch.”

“Don’t you move,” Murphy growled in a low, demonic voice that caused both his wife and the child to whimper. “You don’t own them, pig. They’re mine.”

Spinning around, Murphy took hold of Bonnie and raised his weapon to stare down Worrell and the agent’s weapon which was fixed a half-inch beneath his eye. Smiling sickly, Murphy stared down the sight of his own weapon at the Feds who had been dogging him for months.

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“I was eleven-years-old the first time I shot a man,” Worrell told. “A gun in my face doesn’t frighten me.”

“You think this is the first time *I’ve* stared down cold steel, pig? I live for this!”

“Did your father point a gun at you? They found him tonight.”

“Not all of him,” Murphy smiled still. “He used to hit me with closed fists. So I cut them off. They’re in my freezer. Don’t worry, pig, I saved enough room for your head.”

Murphy laughed, his gap-teeth showing and his eyes nearly disappearing behind bulging eyelids. He was drenched in sweat and his shirt was spattered in blood, cast-off, as were his chafed and gashed knuckles. Worrell remained mindful of the gun in his face but still recorded the scene mentally.

Sniffing the air, Murphy asked, “Is that the same sweet-smelling pig you brought with you before? I want to taste it.”

“Really? I didn’t picture you as someone who ate unclean things. I guess you’re just as common as your whore-loving father.”

Worrell’s trash-talking hit a nerve and, as Murphy flinched, the agent drew the knife and lunged. Using the weight of his body, he drove the dull tip of the butter knife against Murphy’s meaty bicep and forced him down. Toppling a coffee table, the fabricated wood shattered and the knife went through his arm and into the plaster of the

wall. Murphy cried out and in a deft motion, Worrell planted his knee in the man's shoulder and slapped handcuffs around the wrist of Murphy's injured arm and the gas inlet pipe on a radial space heater.

Behind Worrell, Daniels charged into the room and scooped up the boy, barricading him with her body and surveying the scene as she pointed her gun at the still-howling Murphy. Worrell cleared the weapon from the suspect and eased Bonnie away from her abusive husband, covering her with his forearm. Her face had been struck and her nose and lips bled, but she still looked like a force to be reckoned with.

In that moment, Worrell had a decision to make. He thought of having seen so many battered women in his life. The whimpers of all the children caught in the middle filled his ears and made the heat seem less debilitating. He thought of Ruby, his attacker, and how he had allowed her to escape into the night after she set him on fire. The decision now, at least to him, seemed like a no-brainer.

"Agent Daniels, step outside."

Tugging Jeremy to her side and with her weapon still fixed on Murphy, Daniels refused to budge.

"Callie," Worrell spoke with greater warmth than she had witnessed all day.

"No," she said boldly.

"The boy has seen enough."

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Daniels turned the child's face into her breast as her hand slipped around his head to shield him. Worrell stared at the kid with lost innocence but the sight was not enough to deter him from his intentions. With Murphy's gun in hand, he lifted his arm as though to offer the weapon to the battered wife. With nerves frazzled by tension and exhaustion, she trembled as she looked to the agent controlling the scene.

"It's okay, take it," he tempted her. "Take it."

Her arms were frail, so much so that the gun was a strain to raise and aim steadily. Just the same, Bonnie pointed the weapon at the monster that had belittled, abused and tormented her for years. Every bruise, every drop of blood, brought her to this place and she fought to take the next step.

"It can all end tonight, Bonnie," Worrell whispered. "You can give that trigger the slightest squeeze and he'll never be able to hurt you again. You know how good he is at slipping through the cracks. You can make sure that never happens again. You do that and if anyone asks, I'll say that it was me."

Out of the corner of her eyes, she stared at him.

"Look at him. Look in his eyes. He knows," Worrell told her. "He knows that as of this moment, you've taken back your life. He knows that he can never take that away from you again."

"I'm tired of being afraid," she gasped nervously and struggled to hold her aim.

“I know,” the agent reassured her. “After tonight, you never have to be afraid again. But right now, right here, you have to make a choice. Are you going to take away his life or are you going to give it back to him?”

In the background, Daniels holstered her own weapon and snaked both arms around Jeremy to draw him tighter against her breast. His muffled sobs wetted her vest and filled the ears of his mother. Her own eyes filled with tears, stinging and heavy tears. She struggled to hold the gun steady as the tears burned in her eyes. The instant Worrell placed his hand around the weapon she released her grip and rushed to her child as sirens echoed down the street.

DANIELS WATCHED WITH CALCULATING, COOL eyes as paramedics loaded a restrained Allen Murphy into the back of an ambulance. There was still a through-and-through stab wound to tend to, courtesy of Worrell and a butter knife. The rush of the job coursed through her veins while a sheen of sweat clustered around her neck and chest and puddled along her collar bone. With a slow, rattled exhale, she tensed and released every muscle in her body as the ambulance drove away with a police escort.

Bonnie Murphy and her son, Jeremy, sat with a kindly neighbor couple who knew too well of the life she had been subjected to. It fascinated Daniels, unapologetically, and she

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hardly even batted an eye as Bonnie stared in her direction with an appreciative grin and empty eyes. The young agent nodded and knew there were no words that could be spoken about a night like this, least of all by her. There were only versions of the truth to protect the secret of what had really gone on inside that cramped apartment.

She had informed Stillwell that the scene ended, had been instructed to return to base when she could and to keep the media away from SSA Worrell. As the clock wound down on her first day with the unit, she wondered if she was ready for the next case. All she wanted to do was shower and crawl into bed, but she didn't even have her own vehicle yet. Those hopes fell to the wayside temporarily as Detective Landry stepped away from a few leering uniforms and headed in the direction of the agents.

“What the hell happened in there?” Landry wondered.

“Something far less worse than what might have happened,” Daniels replied cautiously.

Eyeing the agent, Landry decided, “Well, whatever it was, I'm glad we finally nailed this one. How's Andy doing?”

Joining Landry in looking over Worrell, she felt the weight that the detective and her fellow agents harbored in regards to their concern for the burn-scarred investigator.

“He's okay. But it's been a really long day.”

“Yeah. Look after him, will you?”

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Landry touched her upper arm kindly, as though to communicate a deeper meaning to his words before he walked away. Daniels looked to the unresponsive agent, mesmerized by his actions as much as his silence. She had read Worrell's jacket but text on a page lost so much when describing such visceral, life-shaping moments. In her mind, she replayed the scenes of the day that she shared with him and connected the dots between Worrell's comment about shooting a man and his protectiveness of Jeremy.

"Was it your father?"

"Hm?"

Worrell never looked at her, never even seemed bothered by the invasiveness of her question.

"You said that you shot a man when you were eleven. It was your father, wasn't it? You told me earlier that your mom stopped getting hit. That you knew Harold Harlan was a killer because he made the same expression as your father. That's who you shot when you were a child, isn't it?"

She watched his eyes, racing with thoughts and wearied from all the darkness he had survived thus far. A chill ran up her spine on the humid night and she felt the heat increase as the spotlight of a news camera shone their way. Worrell stared off into the distance, past a pretty red-headed reporter, and through the gathering crowd. As far as Daniels was concerned, he had earned the right to daydream.

MONSTER

CALLIE DANIELS, 33, TRAINED UNDER PROFILER Gerald Hughes during her assignment to the FBI offices in Los Angeles. Hughes was a BAU legend who reportedly burned out and switched to Robbery/Homicide in the late eighties. He likened Daniels to the daughter he never knew and imparted as much wisdom upon her as possible. After Hughes's retirement from the Bureau two years ago, Daniels continued a close relationship with him, keeping her path in check. She often spoke to him about things her minister father would never understand and, upon his suggestion, made the transfer to the White Collar Crimes Division.

Hughes was a renowned teacher and the common link between Daniels and Stillwell, who had been assigned to his unit in the mid-nineties. Daniels caught Stillwell's eye only because she had heard whispers about how highly Hughes thought of the junior agent. Stillwell took a redeye to San Diego and drove down to Poway, CA, to meet with Hughes and ask him about her face-to-face. It was an informal meeting and Hughes invited her to hang around long enough to meet Daniels, who had a standing Tuesday night dinner reservation with the old man.

To the casual observer, the former Fed might as well have been having dinner with two beautiful daughters rather than two federal agents. Only the waiter knew of the grisly subject

matter they discussed. Stillwell offered up details on a case she kept close to her heart and watched intently as Daniels weighed in on the facts. With a hint of dread, the seasoned veteran listened as Daniels' thoughts paralleled her own. Three weeks later, the two women found themselves staring across an FBI cubicle at one another.

“When I recommended you for transfer to the unit, I did so because I care about the people in these offices,” Stillwell told. “We’ve all logged ungodly hours and made tremendous sacrifices to see this project succeed. Some of us have lost more than others.

“Presley,” she smiled coyly, “he has a one-track mind to catch monsters. Sometimes I don’t think he realizes what’s happening right under his nose. I think that’s why he wanted me on this team, to handle the things he can’t be bothered with. Andy, well, Andy has a gift. But sometimes the gift becomes a curse.”

Daniels watched Stillwell rub her temple and slump uncomfortably in her seat. It was apparent that she did not know how to move forward without insulting the way she felt about her colleagues. Casually, the elder agent propped the toe of her shoe against the desk and flicked lint from her pant leg, as though preventing what needed to be said.

“Yes ma’am,” Daniels said, showing they were on the same page and that she was eager to listen at any speed.

MONSTER

BENEATH THE SOFT GLOW OF LIGHT FROM THE lamp on Presley's desk, a bottle of single-malt shimmered as it rippled within the bottle. The thud of his shoe against the desk went unmentioned as he crossed his leg and reclined in his chair. It had become an official custom among the team to gather in his office for a drink after a case ended. Though it was not a failure by any means, the case of Allen Robert Murphy, Jr., hardly felt like a success either.

Worrell ran his tongue along his teeth and stared into his glass as he considered the actions taken. There would likely be questions and he was uncertain Daniels would keep quiet if pressed. It struck him oddly that he felt nothing about the entire incident, that for the first time he was not worried about repercussions or permanent files. For the first time, it felt like he was finally doing the work he was meant to do.

"It's a tricky business," Presley asserted. "Maybe if we had a lesser caseload we could have kept a closer eye on Murphy."

"You don't believe that," Worrell decided. "We knew what was in his nature before we ever approached him. All that we can really hope for is that his wife and that kid find a way to live out a normal life somehow."

“WE DON’T LEAD NORMAL LIVES,” STILLWELL affirmed. “But you knew that before you took the assignment. That case I told you about when we were having dinner with Gerald...it makes more sense to you now, doesn’t it?”

“Completely,” Daniels confessed. “He’s a great agent, maybe one of the most brilliant that I’ve ever met.”

“Easily one of the most brilliant,” Stillwell agreed so deeply that it pained her heart. “I’ve worked with a lot of committed cops before, a lot of agents who put their lives on hold for the case. I’ve never worked with anyone who becomes so consumed with the work, who knows how to read an opponent, but—”

“—But,” Daniels interrupted, “he’s fighting his nature. He’s trying to resist but there’s such pain in that for him. I’m not sure he can keep doing the work at the level people have come to expect from him. He said something to me today about listening to what someone doesn’t say.”

Stillwell grinned, “It’s one of his favorite phrases.”

“I tried doing it. He’s not the man in his file,” the junior agent concluded. “I told you that a day wouldn’t be enough time. After tonight, though, I think my mind’s made up.”

“What happened out there?”

MONSTER

With a smirk, Daniels shook her head but remained otherwise calm. “That isn’t the question you want me to answer.”

POLISHING OFF HIS SECOND GLASS AND EYEING the bottle, Presley sighed heavily and ran a hand through his thick head of dark brown hair. He had an itch, a need to be on the hunt and in the field. For him, the morning could not come fast enough. There was no peace in the night when there were so many cases left for him and his team to solve. There was only peace in destroying the abyss.

“We’ll have to settle for catching the next one, won’t we?” Presley forced a grin that was as rumped as his pinstriped shirt.

LEANING FORWARD ON HER DESK, STILLWELL seemed to brace herself for the answer to her question.

“Is Agent Worrell devolving?”

“ABSOLUTELY,” WORRELL SNEERED.

Finishing off his drink, he stared with turbulent eyes at the distorted view through an empty glass.

END