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At four o'clock one dark morning in the Basilica of San Silvestro in Rome, Brother Padraig O'Halloran entered a side chapel and paused before a sealed glass cube to offer a prayer to the brown, waxy, misshapen object reposing on a bed of velvet within. His whispered words went on for several minutes, a susurrus of faith drifting through the great silence of the basilica.

When he was done, he opened his eyes and read, yet again, the label in Latin that identified the object in the box.

**Caput
St. Joannis Baptistae
Praecursoris Domini**

Brother Padraig, whose Latin was excellent, knew well the translation: "Head of St. John the Baptist, Forerunner of the Lord." This was one of the most sacred relics in all of Christendom, and every morning before Lauds, Brother Padraig would light a candle and enter the chapel to contemplate in prayer at the precious object.

More than anything, Brother Padraig cherished his role as a member of the Irish Pallottine Fathers of the Basilica, the religious order that served as caretakers of this holiest of objects. The relic was not, it must be admitted, the entire decapitated head of Saint John, but rather a model of his head made from wax, in which a large piece of the saint's actual skullcap had been imbedded. The wax model had suffered greatly over

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the centuries, softened and distorted by time, until it had taken on a strange, if not grotesque, appearance. Looks notwithstanding, its spiritual authority remained undiminished.

As every good Christian knows, Saint John the Baptist was the messenger of God sent ahead of Christ, the prophet who foretold of His coming—“He that cometh after me is mightier than I,” Saint John proclaimed, “whose shoes I am not worthy to bear.” It was Saint John who baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, and when Jesus emerged from the water, He received the revelation of God—“The heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

That morning, as he often did, Brother Padraig contemplated the life and—particularly—the martyrdom of Saint John: how the woman Salome danced before Herod Antipas in his palace in Jerusalem; how Herod promised to grant her any wish; and how she had demanded the head of Saint John. And so the Forerunner of Christ was beheaded, and his head brought to Salome on a silver platter. The head was later taken from its resting place in Jerusalem to Constantinople. In 1204, Crusaders found it and carried it to France. In 1604, the back half of the skull of that holiest of relics was sent from France to Rome for the Basilica of San Silvestro, where it was incorporated into a wax model of the complete head.

When Brother Padraig first assumed his role with the Pallottine Fathers, the holy relic was absent from the Basilica. It had been taken from the church to be restored and stabilized. Brother Padraig well remembered that joyous day when the relic was returned to the chapel, to be placed in a climate-controlled glass cube that would preserve it for millennia to come. Every morning since, Brother Padraig had visited the chapel and offered a prayer to Saint John the Baptist, Forerunner of the Lord, by candlelight, as was proper.

On this particular morning, as he gazed at the holy object, eyes tracing the contours that he knew like the back of his own hand, he noticed something not quite right about it. He wasn't sure what it was, but the misshapen head didn't, somehow, seem the same. He approached closer

and raised the candle, but the cube sat high on a golden plinth, and he couldn't get near enough to inspect it properly.

Brother Padraig cast about for something to climb on. The chapel had short wooden pews where the faithful could sit and pray. They were heavy, but Brother Padraig was strong, and he shifted one of them over to the base of the plinth and stood on it. Now he could look directly into the cube. Holding up the candle, he peered inside and immediately saw that something was indeed awry. The dome of the saint's actual skull had come loose from its wax bedding.

He squinted, peering closer. It had shifted, yes—but in addition, a square-centimeter piece of the skull was missing. Had it fallen out? Holding the candle this way and that, he examined the velvet cushion on which the head rested but could not see a fallen fragment. A more thorough inspection of the missing piece revealed that it did not look like a natural break—not at all. The edges were smooth. There was a light dusting of bone particulates on the red velvet cushion, as if the head had been cut with a small saw.

Brother Padraig suddenly felt faint. With great care not to fall, he climbed down from the bench and then sat upon it, trying to steady his mind and gain control of his breathing.

It was unthinkable, this desecration, this sacrilege, this despoilation of the holy relic, a crime scarcely to be comprehended: Someone had stolen a piece of the true skull of Saint John the Baptist.

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Blood pounding behind her eyes, breath bursting from her chest, Frankie Cash dropped the rowing machine oar and jogged to the next station of her Orangetheory workout. She surveyed the web of straps and grips, trying to remember how the exercise was done. Sweat trickled into her eyes. Her brain was moving in slow motion.

Too late.

“Oh, Frankiiiiie,” sang the dreaded voice from behind her. “Don’t *tell* me I see you resting right now, girl.”

Cash turned in defeat. Her instructor, Max, hands on hips, head cocked to one side, evaluated her. The tiniest tank top stretched over his muscled chest, the words RAYS OUT GAYS OUT emblazoned across in green lettering.

“It goes like this.” Max dropped down into a plank and stuck his feet in the straps. Without breaking a sweat, he scrunched his knees forward and up to the side, keeping his arms parallel and palms on the ground. “Pull, and twist. Pull, and twist,” he repeated, and looked over at Cash from his position on the floor. “Easy.”

He extracted himself in a single movement, stood up, and indicated with an open palm and dazzling smile that it was now her turn.

“Right . . .” Frankie said. “Pull, and twist.” She wasn’t so sure about the “easy” part. She awkwardly got down. Losing weight was pure torture, but she was damned if she wasn’t going to stick with it. She’d already lost six pounds, and there was no way she was going to throw away the suffering that had required. As if on cue, a rivulet of sweat stung the

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corner of her eye. She flicked it off with determination, stuck her feet into the loops, and got ready to start the ordeal again, Max looking on.

The whistling ringtone of her cell playing the theme from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* swelled into life from her pocket, barely heard over the pumping club music that filled the air.

“Don’t answer that,” said Max sternly. “You’re *not* supposed to have that in here.”

“I have to,” said Cash, secretly relieved.

Max frowned as she disentangled herself from the apparatus and answered the call. “Cash here. Hold on.” She turned to Max, covering the mouthpiece. “I’ll take it outside.”

As she left, he called out after her, “It better be a murder!”

She took a seat on a bench outside the front door. “Yeah?”

“Frankie,” a familiar voice drawled, “if I didn’t know you any better, I’d say you sound glad to hear from me.”

Cash found herself smiling. “If only you knew,” she said.

Sheriff James Colcord got right to business. “We got a homicide call. It’s a weird one. An old guy dead in the Flat Tops Wilderness.” He paused. “You know what that means.”

“Neanders?” Cash sat up straight, alert now. In the first case they’d worked on together, Neanders—homicidal Neanderthals de-extincted by the Erebus Resort’s crazy chief scientist, Marius Karman—had escaped from a laboratory and disappeared into the Flat Tops Wilderness. Cash knew it was just a matter of time before they’d resurface.

“Probably not, but there’s a ritualistic aspect to it that’s worth looking into. I’m on my way to the crime scene. Northwest of Burns. Remote. We have to hike in to the site. Will turn into a media shitstorm for sure. I’ve already called CBI to assist on this one—and asked for you. You heard from Holmes yet?”

“Nope,” Cash answered. “But you better believe she’ll be hearing from me. Shoot me the coordinates, will you?”

Her cell chimed immediately, and she loaded them and looked at the map. “It’s on federal land. Do we even have jurisdiction?”

“Feds don’t think it’s connected to the Neanders and don’t want it. You know how the US Attorneys’ Office is—they spend more time trying to weasel out of cases than prosecuting them. Plus, the park rangers agree

that CBI should have this one—they hate working with the feds. I’m not complaining. I just hope the FBI don’t pull their usual and swoop in and take the case after we’ve done all the work.”

“So you want CBI to take the lead?” Cash asked.

“Now, I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

“Are the remains in a structure or out in the open?”

“Inside a log cabin. Apparently, the victim was squatting illegally on federal land, but you’re right—better safe than sorry. I’ve got a deputy writing the search warrant, which should be signed by Judge Greenberg by the time we get to the trailhead.”

They set up a time to meet at the trailhead, and Cash ended the call, wondering why she hadn’t heard from her boss, Blaisdell Holmes, the new director of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. She hoped Holmes wasn’t trying to give the case to someone else.

She had better get to the Lakewood CBI headquarters, and fast.

Cash took one of her famous “dunk and run” showers, barely letting the water run over her body long enough to rinse off the soap, taking care not to wet her hair. She threw on a pair of black slacks and a Milano blouse. Luckily, she had put on a pair of Ecco boots that morning, which she could hike in. A spray of dry shampoo fixed up her unwashed hair, and then she holstered her Baby Glock 9 and clipped her shield to her waist. The Baby Glock wasn’t the standard weapon assigned to CBI agents, but she had asked for an exception; it fit so well in her hand. Throwing on a black suit jacket, she was out the door.

Cash squinted at the sun, which was barely peeking over the horizon as she took Kipling Street south toward CBI headquarters. She didn’t have time for her usual post-workout cup of Café Bustelo instant espresso. She hoped Colcord would pick her up a coffee, but she was disinclined to give the old cowpoke the satisfaction of asking for one.

It was an eight-minute drive to the Lakewood headquarters, but it took Cash only five. Holmes’s Mercedes CLS glinted at her from the near-empty parking lot of CBI headquarters as she screeched in. A Model Y Tesla she didn’t recognize was parked a ways down—some other agent already in at six a.m., and she knew what that meant.

Holmes was giving away her case. She was sure of it now.

Half running, she threw open the doors of the CBI headquarters.

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Slowing down to a brisk walk, she threaded her way through the drab hallways to Holmes's office. She found her there, door open, seated at her desk, with another agent standing with their back to Cash. Holmes, wearing her usual crisp black-and-white suit, stood up as Cash knocked once on the open door.

"Christ, Cash. Good morning. Everything all right?" Holmes asked.

Cash looked down at her blouse and realized she had buttoned it cockeyed in her haste. Feeling self-conscious, she smoothed down her hair and tried to ease her agitation.

"I heard about the new homicide in Eagle County . . ." She swallowed, took a deep breath. "I want it."

The individual Holmes was chatting with now turned, and Cash saw George Standish, an agent with barely two years on the job. His black hair was slicked back, a hopeful smile plastered on his pasty face. He smelled of baby oil, and Cash had to stop herself from wrinkling her nose. She wasn't a fan of his; he had always seemed to her the kind of person who brought polished apples to his teachers.

"Agent Cash." George Standish stuck out a bony hand. "Good to see you in so early."

Cash glanced at Standish, wondering if he was being sarcastic. She took his hand and realized it was clammy. She discreetly wiped her palm on her pants. Standish caught the movement. He shifted stiffly back toward Holmes.

"You're in early too," Cash said to him.

"I listen to the police band with my morning toast," Standish said defensively. "I heard the homicide reported and figured they might, ah, ask for CBI."

"Murder on toast. Nice," Holmes said dryly.

Cash still hadn't quite figured Holmes out. The new director had handled the media shit show after the Erebus disaster with surprising skill and a laconic sense of humor, while still maintaining a cool demeanor, somehow. But she was hard to read, a woman with depth.

Standish cleared his throat awkwardly and continued, "Yes, ma'am. As I was saying, I think this case would give me important experience in homicide. I've cleared my last cases. I've testified at several trials that resulted in successful convictions pursuant to my assistance of investigations. I'd

like the chance, ma'am, to be AIC." He glanced at Cash out of the corner of his eye.

Cash watched him lace his fingers together to stop them from trembling. The guy was nervous. She had to give him credit—it took courage for a newish agent to request a case this big. She remembered not so long ago when she was in his position. But still: It wasn't good form for him to rush in like this, trying to scoop up a case that he knew very well should be hers. Colcord *had* requested her, after all.

"Plus, respectfully," he added, "I was here first."

Cash tried not to roll her eyes. What a crafty little upstart. "If I could interject," she said, "while I admire Agent Standish's initiative, I think this case might be a little complex as a *starter* case." Cash paused before deciding to play the Neander card. "I spoke with Sheriff Colcord, and he has reason to believe there's a ritualistic aspect to this homicide that might be connected to the Neanders."

Holmes did not look surprised to hear this. "I know the Neander investigation is of interest to you," she said, "but as you know, the FBI is handling that case now. If it's a Neander killing, we'll have to turn it over to them."

"That's exactly my point—we don't have nearly enough information to conclude—" George Standish began.

Cash cut him off. "Given my extensive experience both with the CBI and with the Erebus investigation, I think I'm better equipped to make that call. I have an established relationship with Sheriff Colcord. Furthermore, I was told he *requested* me for this case. If things were to go south, there would be less blowback if it could be shown you placed this case in the hands of an *experienced* agent." And she added, a little wickedly, "The press might, you know, have questions . . ." She let the sentence hang in the air. If this was a Neander killing, and it was shown Holmes knowingly gave the case to an agent with barely two years under his belt, it wouldn't look good.

Holmes raised her eyebrows. "The press might *have questions*? Oh my, wouldn't that be a shock."

Cash colored, realizing she had gone too far. Holmes wasn't as big of a media ass-kisser as her predecessor, McFaul, had been.

Holmes paused as if thinking. Finally, she said, "However, your other argument's persuasive. The case is yours."

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Holmes regarded her coolly. “But make sure CBI takes the lead, and not Eagle County, okay? George, I’ve got another homicide for you to work on in the meantime.”

Standish nodded stiffly. He didn’t look too happy. Cash tried not to let it bug her—she was damned if she was going to let him guilt her into not taking this case.

“And you can assist Agent Cash in digital forensics, should that be necessary.”

Standish was said to be a whiz with computers. Cash didn’t see how the murder of a crazy old coot in the wilderness would need that skill, but you never knew. “Of course,” she said, trying not to be cheered up too much by the pained smile fixed on Standish’s face. “George will be a welcome asset to the investigation, if needed,” with a slight emphasis on *if*.

Holmes nodded and consulted some notes. “Sheriff Colcord is en route. You’ll have to hike in. Don’t forget your sat phone, and if you see any sign of Neanders in the area, *anything* at all, get out of there and call for backup. We’ll notify the FBI and get the National Guard out there if necessary. No messing around this time, got it?”

Cash nodded, biting her tongue. It had been Holmes’s predecessor’s reluctance to bring in the National Guard during the Erebus Resort disaster that had allowed the Neanders to steal explosives and blow up the labs. But Holmes knew that.

Holmes continued with a brief synopsis. “Victim is William Grooms, age seventy-five, living by himself—illegally, it seems—in the wilderness. A man named Paul Brookfield found his body and reported it. He said something about the body having coins on the eyes, shrouded in white, wouldn’t elaborate. Romanski’s pulling together a CSI team, and the ME is also on his way.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Cash said. She nodded at Standish as she went out the door, feeling satisfied that things had gone her way but a little worried that she’d made an enemy for life. Burns, Colorado, was about a three-hour drive, and it would take another couple of hours to hike the four miles to the cabin inside the Flat Tops.

Neander territory. Cash shivered at the thought.

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Two hours and forty-five minutes later, Cash arrived at Forest Service Road 610, leading to the southern edge of the Flat Tops boundary. She was high in the mountains now, her GPS reporting over nine thousand feet of elevation. She eased her black CBI Tahoe into the forest road and slowed. It was a typical Colorado four-wheel-drive nightmare, the right side of the road gullied out with exposed rocks. But there was a strip of passable track on the left, which she edged along with care. She wondered how in the hell Romanski would get the crime scene van out here.

Tall firs rose like silent sentinels on either side, darkening the way. Cash gave an involuntary shiver, thankful for the sheet of glass between her and the surrounding forest.

Fifteen minutes later, she rounded a bend to see Colcord seated on the open bed of his truck. He was sporting his usual Stetson, boot-cut jeans, and a pair of muddy hiking boots. To her relief, two Starbucks cups rested next to him. He smiled and tipped his cowboy hat as she lurched up behind him and parked.

“Top of the morning, Cash.” He eased off his truck and handed her a cup, throwing her an apologetic smile. “It’s half empty. The other half is all over my front seat.”

“No apologies necessary, as long as it comes with a curtsy.”

He grinned and gave her an elaborate bow. “That satisfy you?”

She took a sip. The coffee was cold, but she was grateful for the caffeine. At the edge of the forest, everything was still and silent. Lofty fir trees closed ranks around them, trunks seeming to lean in toward her.

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Two warring red squirrels flitted and chattered through the understory. Now that she was out of the Tahoe, the feeling of unease grew.

“Let’s get going,” she said, busily checking the GPS on her phone. Even out of cell range, the GPS worked, but she’d had to remember to download the maps ahead of time—or all she’d see would be a dot for her location on a blank screen.

A footpath followed a stream that gurgled on their left: Middle Fork Derby Creek, according to the GPS. The path itself was overgrown and faint, sometimes disappearing completely. Thankfully, after five minutes of hiking, they passed their first trail marker: a faded message informing them that they were entering the Flat Tops Wilderness, with Solitary Lake four miles distant.

“Well, at least there’re some trail signs,” Colcord said, negotiating his way over a fallen tree trunk. “Wouldn’t want to get lost in Neander territory.”

After the disaster at Erebus, the FBI had taken over the case from CBI and the sheriff’s office. They had been going at it hammer and tongs now for eight months with no success: The Neanders seemed to have vanished. The popular consensus was that they’d moved northward in the Rockies, into Wyoming, or possibly even as far as Canada.

“Speaking of Neanders,” he went on, “any news from your FBI pals? I heard a rumor the SAC is about to be fired.”

“Normally, they don’t tell us shit,” said Cash. “But we did hear they’re bringing in a new guy who’s supposed to be a badass. CBI just got notice. His name is Makoto Ota. He’s starting next month.”

“You met him yet?”

“We liaise with him and his team on the twentieth. Seems he might be bringing CBI back into the case.”

“About time,” Colcord said. “Things are really getting out of hand. All these Neander admirers with their costumes and demonstrations—who would’ve believed it? And the ‘Sapiens supremacists’ who think the Neanders should be ‘re-extincted?’”

“It’s the world we live in today,” said Cash, shaking her head.

“God, I miss the old days—before the internet messed everything up. I used to hike into the Flat Tops as a kid, fishing in Trappers Lake. Some mighty fine native brown in there.”

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“You know the Flat Tops?” Cash was surprised.

“Just a part of it. It’s a huge wilderness.” Colcord paused to slap a mosquito on his neck. “So what’s going on with the woolly elephants over in Erebus?”

“Mammoths,” Cash said. “Being taken care of by wildlife biologists, along with the other megafauna. The valley’s closed and being maintained by a nonprofit while the investors fight over ownership and liability.”

“I’ll never forget the size of those things.”

They continued to hike in contemplative silence, the kind shared between old friends. The firs gave way to aspens, rustling in the wind. Despite the dappled sunlight, it was chilly, and she pulled her fleece around her.

As they crossed a meadow, it warmed slightly. Colcord stopped abruptly and pulled a pair of binocs out of his pack, motioning for her to stop.

“You see something?” Cash asked, mildly alarmed.

He peered into the trees. “Western tanager.”

“We got a dead body up there and you’re *bird-watching*?”

Colcord lowered the binocs, a grin stretching across his face. “I’d never let a stiff interfere with adding another bird to my life list.”

“Life list?”

“A list birders keep of all the bird species they’ve seen in the wild during their lifetimes. I’ve got about”—Colcord paused, chin in the air to think—“six hundred and two.”

Cash ducked to hide a smile. “All right, Mr. Audubon.”

They continued onward, stepping around tufts of grass and low mountain brush. When her phone indicated they were about a half mile from the lake, they hit a steep set of switchbacks. By the time they reached the top, Cash was pleased with herself; the climb had been far easier than she’d expected, and she vowed to thank Max for kicking her ass during her workouts. Colcord, slower than Cash, was drenched and blowing hard when he joined her at the top, much to her satisfaction.

“You look as wet as a cold beer on a hot day,” Cash said.

“Holy cow, that’s some serious climbin’.” He took off his cowboy hat and fanned himself. He paused to inspect her face. “Hey, Cash, without

a hat, you're getting a little pink from this high-altitude sun—I got some sunscreen in my pack.”

“I'm doing just fine,” she said. “I need the vitamin D.”

Colcord fixed the Stetson back on his head. “Gonna end up looking like a lobster, but hey, you're from Maine, right?” He gave a chuckle.

Cash swallowed her irritation at the dumb joke. They took a quick rest while Cash ran off to “water the trees.”

When she rejoined Colcord, he looked concerned.

“Something moving over there,” he said, indicating the edge of the forest.

Cash was immediately uneasy. She remembered how wily the Neanders had been. How well they had blended in with their surroundings. How goddamned *fast* they were.

“Let's keep going,” Cash said, shielding her eyes against the sun. “I'll keep an eye out.”

Walking quickly, with her hand on the butt of her gun, she followed the trail as it reentered the woods. The forest darkened as the sun hid behind a cloud, the wind making an eerie rustling through the firs. Suddenly, she heard it too: the crackle of a heavy step on twigs. They were being followed. Colcord unholstered his gun, and Cash did the same. Another step sounded behind her, and Cash whipped around, catching sight of a quick movement before it disappeared into shadows. She heard two more footfalls in quick succession, this time to her left.

“They've got us surrounded,” Cash whispered. She could hear them rustling and weaving through the trees all around.

A creature leapt into the clearing, a flash of brown and cream. Cash froze, then lowered her firearm. It was an elk—a bull with a rack, who looked at her, unconcerned, in the manner of an animal that knows it's too big to be messed with, before ambling back into the shadows. A baby elk stumbled into the clearing too, its mother following, pausing to lick it absently on the head. More emerged, a dozen of them, paying no heed to the humans. The bull threw its head back, calling mournfully, before shaking big antlers and trotting onward.

“*They've got us surrounded,*” Colcord said, grinning and mimicking Cash's whisper.

“Shut *up,*” Cash said.

They walked on through a dense forest at a clipped pace, making good time. After about half an hour or so, Cash checked her GPS and saw that they were almost at the lake.

Before she could update Colcord, he halted and pointed. “What the hell’s that?”

A human skeleton made of welded angle iron and rebar stood to one side of the trail, grinning at them with teeth made from an old saw and gears for eyes. As she looked around, she could see more sculptures made of junk scattered through the forest: a horned monster erupting from a stack of tires; a hunchbacked figure draped in tattered black cloth with a cracked hockey mask for a face; a china doll perched in the hollow of a tree, mouth open, from which scuttled a black beetle; a set of wind chimes made out of rusted dip cans and old pipes hung from a bicycle wheel, now all tangled up.

“Looks like old Willy was an artist,” said Colcord.

Cash squinted. It looked more like Grooms had raided a junkyard with a welding torch. Her eye alighted on the twisted shape of a rusted bear trap. She hoped this guy wasn’t some doomsday prepper who had booby-trapped the place. She remembered a home raid once where Agent Manahan stepped through a string trap, and before they knew it, a board with spikes rammed his left arm. She picked her way through more carefully, eyes moving from object to object, alert for any signs of snares.

She paused as a glimmer of light caught her eye. Through the trees, she could see a log cabin and, beyond it, the shining expanse of Solitary Lake. The body was reported to be inside the cabin. She turned to Colcord, trying to keep her voice as casual as possible. “So, CBI’s taking the lead on this one, right?”

Colcord frowned. “Hell no, Cash, I called CBI in for *assistance*, not to swoop in and take over. I don’t know your new boss, but if she’s anything like McFaul . . .” His voice trailed off.

“I’ll be AIC on this case, not her. This is going to be a challenging crime scene—CBI should lead.” She didn’t add that Holmes ordered her to get the lead on the case. She suspected that would not go down well.

Colcord looked at her. “This is my county. I grew up here. I know the Flat Tops well.”

“Whoa there, pardner. Don’t play the ‘I’m a local’ card with me. I

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value your expertise—I didn't say I was kicking you off the case completely.”

“I brought *you* in.”

Cash took a deep breath. “The Flat Tops Wilderness spreads out over at least four counties. Last time I checked, you were the elected sheriff of only one. If for some reason the case spills over the line, we'd have to take over anyway.”

Colcord shook his head. “Okay, okay. Fair enough. But if this goes south, it's on you. I'm the one who has to face the voters.”

At that moment, a long, forlorn, sobbing wail echoed through the trees and died away.

“What the *hell* was that?” Cash said, her eyes darting around at the creeping shadows of the trees.

“Common loon. The lake is just through those trees.”

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The cabin became fully visible, perched on the edge of the lake, looking like it only needed a good shove to send it spilling into the water. It commanded a view across to Derby Peak, still covered with snowfields, and beyond it Flat Top Mountain itself.

“Solitary Lake,” Cash said out loud. It certainly lived up to its name. Even more solitary now, with the Flat Tops almost devoid of backpackers and hikers out of fear of the Neanders.

The lake reflected the mountain as if in a mirror. Not too far out, a fish broke the surface, and the expanding ripples disturbed the image around it into a myriad of glittering points.

“Should’ve brought my fly rod,” said Colcord.

“So you can fish while I do all the work?”

“Why do you think I let you take the lead?” Colcord winked at her, then began to scrape his mud-covered hiking boots against an unlucky stump.

Cash spied an enormous man sitting on a tire outside the cabin. He was large in a way that spoke of manual labor, wearing cowboy boots and a denim shirt with pearl snap buttons. He certainly didn’t look as if he had been out here to hike. He sat in the shade of a blooming dogwood—a tree that must have been planted, since it was not native. He wasn’t carrying anything but a water bottle, and Cash immediately wondered why he didn’t have a backpack for such a strenuous hike. The man had an impressive red beard that took up half his face and chest. He lurched to his feet and held out a palm. Cash took it.

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“Paul Brookfield,” the man said, giving Cash a formidable squeeze.

“Frankie Cash, agent in charge, Colorado Bureau of Investigation. This here is James Colcord, sheriff of Eagle County.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Colcord said. “I wish it were under better circumstances.”

Paul nodded curtly.

“Mr. Brookfield, if you wouldn’t mind moving over there to wait by that tree? We need to set up a perimeter. We’d like to talk to you after we’ve looked over the scene,” Cash said.

Paul nodded, and as he seated himself farther away from the cabin, Cash and Colcord strung crime scene tape.

They finished, and Cash turned to Colcord. “What do you think? Do a walk-through or wait for Romanski?” Romanski was always a stickler for getting first looks with his team—but she was itching to get inside.

“I ain’t waiting. We can legitimately tell Romanski we were securing the site.” He unzipped his pack and pulled out a couple of sealed plastic packages. “Booties, hairnets, gloves.”

“Damn, you’ve got everything. Must’ve been a Boy Scout,” said Cash.

“Eagle Scout with twenty-one merit badges,” Colcord said with a touch of pride.

They put on the protection and crossed the yard to a rickety porch, stepping over empty vodka bottles strewn about.

Guy must have really liked his vodka, Cash thought. “Wait,” she said aloud, something catching her eye. “Look at this.” She pointed to an upside-down bucket. There was a mark in the ground where it had previously lain. “And this.” She gestured toward an old frying pan next to the porch steps. It too had been moved slightly, and recently, exposing some blades of grass that were yellow from lack of sun.

“Curious,” Colcord said.

“You know,” Cash said, “I get the feeling someone was looking for something among all this junk—but carefully. Wonder why? And for what?”

Colcord grunted. “Yeah. Interesting.” There was a silence, broken by the whistling wind through the trees. “Well,” he added, looking a little nervous himself, “we’ve got an appointment with a body. Are you ready, Agent Cash?”

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As soon as Colcord stepped into the cabin, he was hit with a cloying smell, thick and chemical, that stuck in his nostrils. The smell was strangely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Stinks like a wet basement," Cash said, "with an old piece of cheese rotting in the corner."

"Creative take. Think the killers cleaned up?"

"Sure smells like it." Cash wrinkled her nose.

Colcord paused to survey the scene. The small room was filled to the brim with junk, but it did not look like it had been trashed in a search. Stacks of delinquent library books leaned like towers of Pisa. Broken furniture legs were heaped on top of an old mining cart, along with the skeletons of umbrellas. Stuff was everywhere.

They moved slowly into the center of the main room, floorboards creaking underfoot. There was what looked like a doorway to a small kitchen, blocked with a faded curtain. A cot stood in one corner, next to a woodstove. Colcord could feel the weight of silence in the cabin; the place gave him a bad vibe.

"I saw this in a home décor magazine once," Cash said. "Hoarder chic."

Colcord gave a reluctant chuckle, but his heart was beating hard in his chest. He paused to scan the book titles in a pile. *True Bigfoot Stories*, *Eyewitness Accounts of Killer Bigfoot Encounters*, *Hydrothermal and Placer Gold Deposits*, *Understanding Surveillance Technologies*, and *The Tao of Pooh*. He pointed to a copy of *The Fly-Fishing Guide to Colorado's Flat Tops Wilderness*. "Hey, I've got this one."

“Sounds like you two could have started a book club,” Cash said. “And just a reminder, don’t touch anything unless necessary, else you’ll face the Wrath of Romanski.”

“You see those wicked bear traps in the woods?” said Colcord. “We better be careful in case he booby-trapped the place.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” Cash said.

It was warmer in the cabin, stuffy almost. Colorful vodka bottles, some broken, lay about among rocks, pieces of metal, and scraps of paper with drawings of monsters and sketched maps. A workbench and stool took up one corner, surprisingly neat. Among the curling wood chips lay small carvings of wildlife—some of them quite beautiful. For an eccentric recluse, the guy was creative, Colcord had to admit. He spied a large basket of unpolished red and polychromatic jasper pushed under the workbench. Next to it stood a rack with a green canister of oxygen and a maroon bottle of acetylene, with attached hoses and regulators—a portable welding setup, evidently for the sculptures.

He went over and inspected the unmade cot. Peering under it, he noted various tins and a small cashbox. Someone had recently dragged it out from underneath, disturbing the dust, and then pushed it back in place. Could thieves have murdered Grooms for money? Colcord reached out to open it.

“I’d take a photo before you move it,” said Cash.

“Lord almighty,” Colcord said under his breath. He made a big show of snapping photos, then carefully slid the box out from under the bed. A large wolf spider, startled by the movement, scuttled across the floorboards, and it took Colcord an effort to keep from jumping back, knowing he’d never live it down with Cash.

The cashbox was unlocked. He unlatched and opened it.

“Whoo-boy,” he said. Tucked in the corner were two rolls of what looked like hundred-dollar bills, held together with rubber bands. Several hefty nuggets of gold and a stack of Morgan silver dollars sat on top of a carefully folded piece of paper.

“Mind if I handle these, *Agent in Charge* Cash?” he asked.

Cash laughed. “Sure. Just take plenty of photos.”

Colcord chuckled. His mother had been an unassertive woman who let his father take charge of the ranch animals and the alfalfa fields while

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she ran the house. Cash was the complete opposite: bossy, forceful, and irritating as all hell. It took some getting used to. But he couldn't help but feel a fondness for the woman. There wasn't a phony thing about her. She was Frankie Cash through and through and made no apologies for who she was. He supposed that's why he tolerated her—why he had requested her for this case. That and the fact she was maybe the best CBI agent he'd ever worked with. Hell, after surviving the Neanders together, she was like an old war buddy.

Colcord plucked out the nuggets with his gloved hands, took out the paper, and unfolded it. It was a meticulously hand-drawn schematic map of a mine complex, like a treasure map, with notations in red pencil and an *X* marking the spot. A blue symbol was scrawled at the mine entrance—a *J* rotated ninety degrees from the left. The letter-number combinations CH₄ and CO₂ were written underneath it.

“What's that?” Cash asked.

“The *J*—not sure. But CH₄ and CO₂ stand for methane and carbon dioxide. Looks like these are notations about gas hazards in a mine Grooms must have explored. Risky business, that.” He took a few more photos of the map, then folded it and put it back into the box. Carefully removing one of the tins, Colcord opened it and exposed more rolls of hundred-dollar bills and chunks of ore: quartz threaded with wire gold. He peered under the cot, counting seven tins. If the other tins looked like this one, it was a hell of a lot of money.

Cash whistled. “Bold retirement plan,” she said.

Colcord came to a realization. “If they were looking for something, it wasn't money.” He put the items back where he had found them, careful not to disturb the dust.

The floorboards creaked under their collective weight as they made their way to the doorway into the kitchen. Colcord drew the curtain aside. There, on the table, lay Willy Grooms. At first glance, he looked to be peacefully sleeping. He was dressed in an old-fashioned nightgown, white, with a lace hem. His hands had been crossed over his chest like a corpse in a coffin . . . or a vampire. Silver dollars were pressed into the eyes, and the body appeared surprisingly clean. The skin was pale and rosy, even his weather-beaten face. There was no smell of decay—only that cloying chemical odor, as if the place had been scrubbed clean. Colcord did a double take.

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The old man looked more alive than any dead body he had ever seen. Unnaturally so. He had to stop himself from checking for a pulse, telling himself Dr. Huizinga would do that when he arrived, and he didn't want to contaminate the body with his DNA.

"Poor Willy," Cash said.

"Take a look at that." Colcord pointed to a cut on the right side at the base of Grooms's neck, just above the collarbone, where a purplish bruise radiated around a small wound. "Was he stabbed in the neck?"

"Maybe," Cash said. "And look at that foot."

Colcord turned his attention to it. Both feet were bare; the right one was covered with blood. It had been crushed, all the angles wrong, the toes broken and the skin lacerated. The left foot was normal. What the hell could have done that?

Colcord turned his attention to Grooms's eyes. "Jesus, I think his eyes might be gone," he said, noting the sunken nature of the coins in the sockets.

"Just like what the Neanders used to do."

Colcord felt a rush of adrenaline, his body stiffening at memories he wished to forget. "You think it could have been them?"

"I hope to hell not. But I'll feel a lot better when the cavalry gets here. This place is giving me the creeps."

"I don't like it either. There's something about it . . ." Colcord couldn't quite figure out how to finish the thought. Damn, what *was* that smell? He shook his head again, bothered. All he knew is that he wanted to get the hell out of there, and as soon as possible.

6

Cash took a deep breath. Her Neander worries had largely abated. If they were around, they'd have killed Paul Brookfield by now. With that off her mind, it was a relief to get back outside into the fresh air. She pulled off the booties, gloves, and hairnet. Brookfield was pacing just outside of the perimeter, looking impatient.

Cash approached the man, Colcord in tow.

"Could we ask you some questions?" she queried.

Brookfield nodded, crossing arms across his broad chest.

"Mind if I record?"

He shook his head.

Cash and Colcord took out their notebooks and she laid her cell down next to the man on a stump to record.

"Did you know the victim?" Cash asked.

Brookfield let out a sigh. "Sort of. My wife, Margie, knew him better, used to visit him a lot. I sometimes kept her company hiking up here. I usually stayed outside. Margie said I made Willy nervous. I tried to stop her going up there, especially after that Neander business, but that woman's got a mind of her own. Stubborn."

"Do you live near here?"

"We have a ranch near Burns on Maple Road."

Cash eyed him closely. "What brought you up here today?"

Brookfield sighed again, running a hand over his beard. "I was going to tell Willy to leave my wife alone. I felt like he'd been taking advantage of her good nature."

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“Taking advantage of your wife? How so?”

“Margie likes to help people. She’s a saint in a world of opportunists, but sometimes her generosity is a one-way ticket to being walked all over. She visited him regularly, delivering groceries and helping with all sorts of things. He’s become a real burden on our family, so I came here to talk to him—man-to-man—ask him to ease off. And that’s when I found him . . .”

“Why did Mr. Grooms need her help?”

“Well . . . Willy was a little . . . kooky. Had a fear of technology—Big Brother stuff. Moved out here to the mountains to get away from it. Said the government was spying on him through cell phones and computers. So, like I said, Margie would bring him food, keep an eye on him. He got his water from the lake, did some foraging and hunting, but not enough to live without help. Margie works for a financial firm as a CFP, that’s *certified financial planner*, so she helped manage his money, file his taxes, that sort of thing.”

“Grooms had money?” Cash asked.

“I guess he had some, but Margie doesn’t talk about it. Said it was confidential.”

“Did you know he kept money in the cabin?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Were there other reasons why you were concerned with Willy spending time with your wife?” Colcord asked.

“Well, he was a real nutjob. The guy was mentally ill—schizophrenia. Wasn’t anything violent, but I worried that he was relying too heavily on Margie for support. We need her at the ranch. It’s a lot of work running that place and taking care of our kids. Our daughter’s got some serious medical issues too. I thought Willy was a bit of a leech.”

“And how did the schizophrenia play out? What were the symptoms?” Colcord asked.

“Just a lot of delusions. He was convinced that there was a monster living in Keener Lake. Thought that snakes talked to him. He was always going on about UFOs—claims he saw one crash up there near Dome Peak. He said he could fly, and Margie had to stop him from jumping off the roof once to show her.”

“So what was your plan when you got up here?” Cash asked.

Brooksfield’s eyebrows drew together. “Hey, now. I didn’t have anything

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to do with his death, if that's what you're implying. I came out here just to talk some sense into him—if any sense was to be had. Ask him to lay off Margie for a bit, maybe find someone else to help him out, so she could spend some more time with her family.”

“And these, uh, sculptures”—Colcord gestured around—“are they his?”

“They sure are. Ugly things. Margie was convinced Willy had a talent for it. She even tried to get an art dealer out here once, but Willy chased the poor bugger off. Threw a vodka bottle at him.” Paul scowled. “He was always shooting himself in the foot, despite Margie’s best efforts at helping him.”

Cash glanced around at the constructions of metal and junk. She couldn’t imagine anyone wanting one of those monstrosities on their property.

“Although Willy did make some nice stuff too,” Brookfield added. “He would find jasper up by Flat Top Mountain, cut and polish it. He also carved little figurines out of wood and would paint them. That was another thing Margie did for him—delivered his carvings to a couple of local galleries downtown. More free labor from her.”

“How long has Margie been coming up here?”

“Five years, maybe.”

“And the last time she was here?” Cash asked.

Paul cocked his head to think. “Maybe four or five days ago, I suppose? Brought Willy some food.”

“How did Willy and your wife meet?”

“Willy’s son, Samuel, used to look after him, but he died of cancer. He was a member of Margie’s church, and I think that’s where she heard about Willy needing help.”

“Is there anything else that you can think of that might be helpful?” Cash asked. “Like if Willy had any enemies, or any thoughts on who might have done this?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think he had much contact with anybody in town or anywhere. But . . .”

“Yes?”

“This could be nothin’.” Paul hesitated. “Willy’s beard. It’s gone. He’d been growing the thing for years, called it his ‘mountain man beard.’ Seems out of character he would shave it.”

7

Detective Bart Romanski, head of the Crime Scene Unit at CBI, puffed his way up to the top of the trail, doubling over and gasping in the thin air as the cabin finally came into view. He had given up all semblance of pretending to be in shape about two miles back. He was skinny as a rail and always had been. Nothing to do except be proud of it. Plus, this was a tough hike. It was a good thing the body and evidence would be chopped out. Romanski's crime scene detectives followed behind him. The first CSA—a forensic specialist in trace chemistry, fibers, and miscellaneous evidence—was a new hire, a ball-capped redhead named Aisling Byrne, still too green and nervous to laugh at his jokes. She was accompanied by the crime scene photographer, Tyrone Harris, and a third CSA, a DNA specialist named Michael Reno.

As Romanski stopped to catch his breath, Harris bumped against Aisling behind him. “Whoops,” he said, grinning.

Aisling giggled.

Waiting a beat, he joined them at the perimeter and dropped his pack with relief. “People, time to dress for the party.” He pulled crime scene packages out of his pack and handed them out to the CSAs. They didn't need full monkey suits—apparently, the scene wasn't a bloodbath. Disappointing. Romanski loved a bit of gore.

Romanski scowled as he saw Cash step out of the cabin with the sheriff and duck under the yellow tape to join them. He liked the gal, but she was always barging into his damn crime scenes. Her face, tinged with freckles, was sunburned, auburn hair pulled back in a bun.

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Colcord ambled after her with his usual swagger, blue eyes hidden in the shade of a cowboy hat.

“Cash,” Romanski said, “may I ask what you were doing in my crime scene?”

“Don’t worry—all we did was eat some sandwiches as we walked around, dropping crumbs and touching everything.” Cash grinned and gave Romanski her hand. “Damn, you’re all sweaty.”

“And you’re red,” Romanski said. “Didn’t have a hat?”

“No, I didn’t have a goddamned hat.” Cash frowned. Her eyes flickered to Colcord and back to Romanski. “Is it bad?”

“Like a ripe tomato.”

Colcord coughed, hiding a smile behind his fist.

As they spoke, Dr. Chris Huizinga, CBI’s chief medical examiner, glided up the hill with his technician Saanvi Gupta. Romanski noted that Huizinga, not a blond hair out of place on his aggravatingly handsome head, had barely broken a sweat.

Huizinga laid his pack on the ground, adjusting black-rimmed glasses perched on an elegant nose. He turned to Cash and plucked a squeeze bottle of Coppertone out of his breast pocket. “Agent Cash, you’re rather red. You want some sun cream?”

Colcord chuckled loudly.

“If it’ll shut everyone up, then fine.” Cash snatched the squeeze bottle and began to smear her face.

“Not to interrupt whatever this is about,” Huizinga said, “but can we get to the briefing?”

Cash got to summarizing the victim, background, murder scene, and basic facts. When she finished, Harris, following protocol, disappeared into the cabin to photograph while the rest waited. Around twenty minutes later, he reappeared, looking a little jumpy.

“All right, follow me,” he said.

Romanski and Huizinga ducked under the tape, followed by the two CSAs.

Harris led them on the path he had delineated through the crime scene, Romanski picking his way among weird constructions and miscellaneous junk. He paused to admire a fish sculpture, with scales of colored glass held together with soldered foil. It was incredible what people threw

away these days. The sculptures he had seen on his way here had been remarkably original works of art. Without electricity, Grooms must have used an acetylene and oxy setup. He wondered if the man had lugged all this stuff out here. A lot of the sculptures had been made from old mining equipment that he must have found abandoned in the area.

Romanski stepped around Aisling, who had knelt and was collecting trace evidence with tweezers. Reno followed him into the kitchen, DNA swab kit in hand.

There Willy Grooms lay on the slab of a kitchen table, body bathed in the dappled sunlight reflecting off the water, looking disturbingly peaceful and almost alive.

Romanski took a whiff of air. There was a peculiar smell that he couldn't quite place.

He and his team remained in the doorway while Huizinga went over to the body. He circled it like a predator, crouching low and sniffing like a dog.

"Jesus, why don't you buy the guy a drink first?" Romanski said.

Huizinga ignored him. They had been working together ever since Eagle County had replaced the coroner system with trained medical examiners from CBI. The new ME system was a huge improvement over an elected, and usually ignorant, coroner. Huizinga was both an MD and forensic pathologist, a fact he loved mentioning in a faux self-deprecating manner. He definitely knew what he was doing, but he could be a pompous ass and had no tact, was terrible at expressing sympathy to the families of victims. He also had a strange sense of humor.

Romanski watched as the ME checked for a pulse and respiration. "Definitely dead," he said as if it wasn't obvious. Or maybe he was attempting a joke. "The deceased looks to be in exceedingly fresh condition. I won't be able to tell the exact time of death until a thorough autopsy." He lifted one of Willy's arms and dropped it with a sickening thud back on the table. He examined the wrists and ankles, pausing to examine the bloody right foot. He then poked one of Willy's cheeks, nose as close as possible to the dead body without actually touching it. "He's unusually pink, plump, and firm."

"You sure he's dead? You wouldn't want to pull another Angelo Hays," Romanski said.

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Huizinga raised an eyebrow in silent query.

“You know, Angelo Hays? Buried alive in the 1930s?”

“Well, he certainly won’t be alive after the autopsy I’ll be performing.”
Typical Huizinga humor, Romanski thought.

Resuming his inspection, Huizinga nudged his glasses farther up the bridge of his nose with one gloved finger. “I note,” he said, “that the victim was shaved postmortem. There are razor nicks that did not bleed. They must have cleaned up the hair and taken it with them. How odd.”

Reno now appeared, surgical mask covering up his big handlebar mustache, swabbing samples around the body.

“It looks like the eyes might be missing,” Romanski said. “Can you, ah, lift the coins to check?”

Huizinga lifted a silver dollar with his gloved fingers. “Yes, this one is indeed gone.” He gently lowered the coin back in place.

“And the foot?” Romanski asked. “You see that?”

“Indeed I do,” said Huizinga. “We shall certainly be looking at that with a CAT scan back in the lab.”

Romanski rubbed his hands together. This crime scene was getting interesting. The curiously bloodless wounds—aside from the foot—the missing eyes, the posed and dressed corpse, and the postmortem shaving. It had the markings of a serial killer, and a demented one at that. He couldn’t wait to get this stuff back to the lab and start putting the puzzle together.

“Think this could have been the Neanders?” Cash asked from the doorway, arms crossed.

“Very unlikely,” said Huizinga. “The *modus operandi* is too different. I hesitate to draw conclusions until I perform an autopsy. But . . .” Instead of finishing the thought, he grasped the hem of the lace garment Willy was dressed in, drawing it up to expose the old man’s naked body.

Romanski winced. “I did *not* need the full monty.”

Huizinga ignored Romanski and leaned in and sniffed at two strange holes, one above, and the other to the right of Willy’s belly button.

“Any idea of cause of death?” Cash asked.

Huizinga didn’t answer right away. He took out a magnifying loupe and examined two odd lacerations at the base of the corpse’s neck and the two marks near the belly button. Then he straightened up and tucked

away the loupe and looked around, an odd expression on his face. “This corpse has been embalmed,” he said.

Romanski stared. Of course—*that’s* why the smell had been familiar: It was formalin.

“You can see,” Huizinga went on, “these two incisions in the neck. One is to the carotid artery, where the embalming fluid was pumped in, and the other to the jugular vein, where the drain tube carried the blood out.”

Romanski peered more closely, fascinated.

“Now I would direct your attention to the hemorrhaging and ecchymosis evident around those incisions, as well as the petechiae here, around the umbilicus, where a trocar was used to pump out the cavity fluid and replace it with preservative.”

Huizinga now had everyone’s undivided attention.

“This indicates the victim was alive when this commenced. If he were conscious—and I believe he was, due to abrasions on the wrists that suggest restraint—it must have been terrifying. *And* painful.” He paused. “What I believe we are dealing with here is murder . . . by embalmmment.”