

PATRICIA
CORNWELL

THE
BODY
FARM

A NOVEL

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ALSO BY PATRICIA CORNWELL

POSTMORTEM

BODY OF EVIDENCE

ALL THAT REMAINS

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

The Body Farm

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To Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah
for his tireless fight against crime

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the
Lord, and his wonders in the deep.

Psalm 107:23–24

THE
BODY
FARM

On the sixteenth of October, shadowy deer crept to the edge of dark woods beyond my window as the sun peeked over the cover of the night. Plumbing above and below me groaned, and one by one other rooms went bright as sharp tattoos from ranges I could not see riddled the dawn. I had gone to sleep and gotten up to the sound of gunfire.

It is a noise that never stops in Quantico, Virginia, where the FBI Academy is an island surrounded by Marines. Several days a month I stayed on the Academy's security floor, where no one could catch me unless I wanted them to or follow me after too many beers in the Boardroom.

Unlike the Spartan dormitory rooms occupied by new agents and visiting police, in my suite were a TV, kitchen, telephone, and a bathroom I did not have to share. Smoking and alcohol were not allowed, but I suspected that the spies and protected witnesses typically sequestered here obeyed the rules about as well as I did.

As coffee heated in the microwave, I opened my briefcase to retrieve a file that had been waiting for me when I had checked in last night. I had not reviewed it yet for I could not bring myself to wrap my mind around such a thing, to take such a thing to bed. In that way I had changed.

Since medical school, I had been accustomed to exposing myself to any trauma at any hour. I had worked around the clock in emergency rooms and performed autopsies alone in the morgue until dawn. Sleep had always been a brief export to some dark, vacant place I rarely later recalled. Then gradually over the years something perniciously shifted. I began to dread working late at night, and was prone to bad dreams when terrible images from my life popped up in the slot machine of my unconscious.

Emily Steiner was eleven, her dawning sexuality a blush on her slight body, when she wrote in her diary two Sundays before, on October 1:

Oh, Im' so happy! Its almost 1 in the morning and Mom doesnt know Im' writing in my dairy because Im' in bed with the flash light. We went to the cover dish supper at the church and Wren was there! I could tell he noticed me. Then he gave me a fireball! I saved it while he wasnt looking. Its in my secret box. This afternoon we have youth group and he wants me to meet him early and not tell anyone!!!

At three-thirty that afternoon, Emily left her house in Black Mountain, just east of Asheville, and began the two-mile walk to the church. After the meeting, other children recalled seeing her leave alone as the sun slipped below the foothills at six P.M. She veered off the main road, guitar case in hand, and took a shortcut around a small lake. Investigators believed it was during this walk she encountered the man who hours later would steal her life. Perhaps she stopped to talk to him. Perhaps she was unaware of his presence in the gathering shadows as she hurried home.

In Black Mountain, a western North Carolina town of seven thousand people, local police had worked very few homicides or sexual assaults of children. They had never worked a case that was both. They had never thought about Temple Brooks Gault of Albany, Georgia, though his face smiled from Ten Most Wanted lists posted across the land. Notorious criminals and their crimes had never been a concern in this picturesque part of the world known for Thomas Wolfe and Billy Graham.

I did not understand what would have drawn Gault there or to a frail child named Emily who was

lonely for her father and a boy named Wren. But when Gault had gone on his murderous spree in Richmond two years before, his choices had seemed just as devoid of rationality. In fact, they still do not make sense.

Leaving my suite, I passed through sun-filled glass corridors as memories of Gault's bloody career in Richmond seemed to darken the morning. Once he had been within my reach. I literally could have touched him, for a flicker, before he had fled through a window and was gone. I had not been armed on that occasion, and it was not my business to go around shooting people anyway. But I had not been able to shake the chill of doubt that had settled over my spirit back then. I had not stopped wondering what more I could have done.

• • •

Wine has never known a good year at the Academy, and I regretted drinking several glasses of it in the Boardroom the night before. My morning run along J. Edgar Hoover Road was worse than usual.

Oh, God, I thought. I'm not going to make it.

Marines were setting up camouflage canvas chairs and telescopes on roadsides overlooking ranges. I felt bold male eyes as I slowly jogged past, and knew the gold Department of Justice crest on my navy T-shirt was duly noted. The soldiers probably assumed I was a female agent or visiting cop, and it disturbed me to imagine my niece running this same route. I wished Lucy had picked another place to intern. Clearly, I had influenced her life, and very little frightened me quite as much as that did. It had become my habit to worry about her during workouts when I was in agony and aware of growing old.

HRT, the Bureau's Hostage Rescue Team, was out on maneuvers, helicopter blades dully battling the air. A pickup truck hauling shot-up doors roared past, followed by another caravan of soldiers. Turning around, I began the one-and-a-half-mile stretch back to the Academy, which could have passed for a modern tan brick hotel were it not for its rooftops of antennas and location out in the middle of a wooded nowhere.

When at last I reached the guard booth, I veered around tire shredders and lifted my hand in a weary salute to the officer behind glass. Breathless and sweating, I was contemplating walking the rest of the way in when I sensed a car slowing at my rear.

"You trying to commit suicide or something?" Captain Pete Marino said loudly across the Armored Ailed front seat of his silver Crown Victoria. Radio antennas bobbed like fishing rods, and despite countless lectures from me, he wasn't wearing his seat belt.

"There are easier ways than this," I said through his open passenger's window. "Not fastening your seat belt, for example."

"Never know when I might have to bail out of my ride in a hurry."

"If you get in a wreck, you'll certainly bail out in a hurry," I said. "Probably through the windshield."

An experienced homicide detective in Richmond, where both of us were headquartered, Marino had recently been promoted and assigned to the First Precinct, the bloodiest section of the city. He had been involved with the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, or VICAP, for years.

In his early fifties, he was a casualty of concentrated doses of tainted human nature, bad diet, and alcohol. He drank, his face etched by hardship and fringed with thinning gray hair. Marino was overweight, out of shape, and not known for a sweet disposition. I knew he was here for the Steiner consultation, but I wondered about the luggage in his backseat.

"Are you staying for a while?" I asked.

"Benton signed me up for Street Survival."

“You and who else?” I asked, for the purpose of Street Survival was not to train individuals but to train forces.

“Me and my precinct’s entry team.”

“Please don’t tell me part of your new job description is kicking in doors.”

“One of the pleasures of being promoted is finding your ass back in uniform and out on the street. In case you haven’t noticed, Doc, they ain’t using Saturday Night Specials out there anymore.”

“Thank you for the tip,” I said dryly. “Be sure to wear thick clothing.”

“Huh?” His eyes, blacked out by sunglasses, scanned mirrors as other cars crept past.

“Paint bullets hurt.”

“I don’t plan on getting hit.”

“I don’t know anyone who plans on it.”

“When did you get in?” he asked me.

“Last night.”

Marino slid a pack of cigarettes from his visor. “You been told much?”

“I’ve looked at a few things. Apparently the detectives from North Carolina are bringing in most of the case records this morning.”

“It’s Gault. It’s gotta be.”

“Certainly there are parallels,” I said cautiously.

Knocking out a Marlboro, he clamped it between his lips. “I’m going to nail that goddam son of a bitch if I have to go to hell to find him.”

“If you find out he’s in hell, I wish you’d just leave him there,” I said. “Are you free for lunch?”

“As long as you’re buying.”

“I always buy.” I stated a fact.

“And you always should.” He slipped the car into drive. “You’re a goddam doctor.”

• • •

I trotted and walked to the track, cut across it and let myself into the back of the gym. Inside the locker room three young, fit women in various stages of nudity glanced at me as I walked in.

“Good morning, ma’am,” they said in unison, instantly identifying themselves. Drug Enforcement Administration agents were notorious around the Academy for their annoyingly chivalrous greetings.

I self-consciously began taking off wet clothes, having never grown accustomed to the rather militaristic attitude here, where women did not think twice about chatting or showing off their bruises with nothing on but the lights. Clutching a towel tightly, I hurried to the showers. I had just turned on the water when a pair of familiar green eyes peeked around the plastic curtain, startling me. The soap shot out of my hands and skidded across the tile floor, stopping near my niece’s muddy Nikes.

“Lucy, can we chat *after* I get out?” I yanked the curtain shut.

“Geez, Len just about killed me this morning,” she said happily as she booted the soap back into the stall. “It was great. Next time we run the Yellow Brick Road I’ll ask him if you can come.”

“No, thank you.” I massaged shampoo into my hair. “I have no desire for torn ligaments and broken bones.”

“Well, you really should run it once, Aunt Kay. It’s a rite of passage up here.”

“Not for me it isn’t.”

Lucy was silent for a moment, then uncertain when she said, “I need to ask you something.”

Rinsing my hair and pushing it out of my eyes, I gathered the curtain and looked out. My niece was standing back from the stall, filthy and sweaty from head to toe, blood smudging her gray FBI T-shirt. At twenty-one, she was about to graduate from the University of Virginia, her face honed into

beautiful sharpness, her short auburn hair brightened by the sun. I remembered when her hair was long and red, when she wore braces and was fat.

“They want me to come back after graduation,” she said. “Mr. Wesley’s written a proposal and there’s a good chance the Feds will approve.”

“What’s your question?” Ambivalence kicked in hard again.

“I just wondered what you thought about it.”

“You know there’s a hiring freeze.”

Lucy looked closely at me, trying to read information I did not want her to have.

“I couldn’t be a new agent straight out of college anyway,” she said. “The point is to get me into ERF now, maybe through a grant. As for what I’ll do after that”—she shrugged—“who knows?”

ERF was the Bureau’s recently built Engineering Research Facility, an austere complex on the same grounds as the Academy. The workings within were classified, and it chagrined me a little that I was the chief medical examiner of Virginia, the consulting forensic pathologist for the Bureau’s Investigative Support Unit, and had never been cleared to enter hallways my young niece passed through every day.

Lucy took off her running shoes and shorts, and pulled her shirt and sports bra over her head.

“We’ll continue this conversation later,” I said as I stepped out of the shower and she stepped in.

“Ouch!” she complained as spray hit her injuries.

“Use lots of soap and water. How did you do that to your hand?”

“I slipped coming down a bank and the rope got me.”

“We really should put some alcohol on that.”

“No way.”

“What time will you leave ERF?”

“I don’t know. Depends.”

“I’ll see you before I head back to Richmond,” I promised as I returned to the lockers and began drying my hair.

Scarcely a minute later, Lucy, not given to modesty either, trotted past me wearing nothing but the Breitling watch I’d given her for her birthday.

“Shit!” she said under her breath as she began yanking on her clothes. “You wouldn’t believe everything I’ve got to do today. Repartition the hard disk, reload the whole thing because I keep running out of space, allocate more, change a bunch of files. I just hope we don’t have any more hardware problems.” She complained on unconvincingly. Lucy loved every minute of what she did every day.

“I saw Marino when I was out running. He’s up for the week,” I said.

“Ask him if he wants to do some shooting.” She tossed her running shoes inside her locker and shut the door with an enthusiastic clang.

“I have a feeling he’ll be doing plenty of that.” My words followed her out as half a dozen more DEA agents walked in, dressed in black.

“Good morning, ma’am.” Laces whipped against leather as they took off their boots.

•••

By the time I was dressed and had dropped my gym bag back in my room, it was quarter past nine and I was late.

Leaving through two sets of security doors, I hurried down three flights of stairs, boarded the elevator in the gun-cleaning room, and descended sixty feet into the Academy’s lower level, where I routinely waded through hell. Inside the conference room, nine police investigators, FBI profilers, and

a VICAP analyst sat at a long oak table. I pulled out a chair next to Marino as comments caromed around the room.

“This guy knows a hell of a lot about forensic evidence.”

“And anybody who’s served time does.”

“What’s important is he’s extremely comfortable with this type of behavior.”

“That suggests to me he’s *never* served time.”

I added my file to other case material going around the room and whispered to one of the profilers that I wanted a photocopy of Emily Steiner’s diary.

“Yeah, well, I disagree,” Marino said. “The fact someone’s done time don’t mean he fears he’s going to do time again.”

“Most people would fear it—you know, the proverbial cat on the hot stove.”

“Gault ain’t most people. He likes hot stoves.”

I was passed a stack of laserprints of the Steiners’ ranch-style house. In back, a first-floor window had been pried open, and through it the assailant had entered a small laundry room of white linoleum and blue-checked walls.

“If we consider the neighborhood, the family, the victim herself, then Gault’s getting bolder.”

I followed a carpeted hallway into the master bedroom, where the decor was pastel prints of tin can bouquets of violets and loose flying balloons. I counted six pillows on the canopied bed and seven more on a closet shelf.

“We’re talking about a real small window of vulnerability here.”

The bedroom with its little girl decor belonged to Emily’s mother, Denesa. According to her police statement, she had awakened at gunpoint around two A.M.

“He may be taunting us.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Mrs. Steiner described her attacker as of medium height and build. Because he was wearing gloves, a mask, long pants, and a jacket, she was uncertain about race. He gagged and bound her with black and orange duct tape and put her in the closet. Then he went down the hall to Emily’s room, where he snatched her from her bed and disappeared with her in the dark early morning.

“I think we should be careful about getting too hung up on this guy. On Gault.”

“Good point. We need to keep an open mind.”

I interrupted. “The mother’s bed is made?”

The counterpunctual conversation stopped.

A middle-aged investigator with a dissipated, florid face said, “Affirmative,” as his shrewd gray eyes alighted, like an insect, on my ash-blond hair, my lips, the gray cravat peeking out of the open collar of my gray-and-white-striped blouse. His gaze continued its surveillance, traveling down to my hands, where he glanced at my gold Intaglio seal ring and the finger that bore no sign of a wedding band.

“I’m Dr. Scarpetta,” I said, introducing myself to him without a trace of warmth as he stared at my chest.

“Max Ferguson, State Bureau of Investigation, Asheville.”

“And I’m Lieutenant Hershel Mote, Black Mountain Police.” A man crisply dressed in khaki and old enough to retire leaned across the table to offer a big calloused hand. “Sure is a pleasure, Doc. I’ve heard right much about ya.”

“Apparently”—Ferguson addressed the group—“Mrs. Steiner made her bed before the police arrived.”

“Why?” I inquired.

“Modesty, maybe,” offered Liz Myre, the only woman profiler in the unit. “She’s already had on

stranger in her bedroom. Now she's got cops coming in."

"How was she dressed when the police got there?" I asked.

Ferguson glanced over a report. "A zip-up pink robe and socks."

"This was what she had worn to bed?" a familiar voice sounded behind me.

Unit Chief Benton Wesley shut the conference room door as he briefly met my eyes. Tall and trim with sharp features and silver hair, he was dressed in a single-breasted dark suit and was loaded down with paperwork and carousels of slides. No one spoke as he briskly took his chair at the head of the table and jotted several notes with a Mont Blanc pen.

Wesley repeated, without looking up, "Do we know if this was the way she was dressed when the assault took place? Or did she put on the robe after the fact?"

"I'd call it more a gown than a robe," Mote spoke up. "Flannel material, long sleeves, down to her ankles, zipper up the front."

"She didn't have on nothing under it except panties," Ferguson offered.

"I won't ask you how you know that," Marino said.

"Panty line, no bra. The state pays me to be observant. The Feds, for the record"—he looked around the table—"don't pay me for shit."

"Nobody should pay for your shit unless you eat gold," Marino said.

Ferguson got out a pack of cigarettes. "Anybody mind if I smoke?"

"I mind."

"Yeah, me, too."

"Kay." Wesley slid a thick manila envelope my way. "Autopsy reports, more photos."

"Laserprints?" I asked, and I was not keen on them, for like dot matrix images, they are satisfactory only from a distance.

"Nope. The real McCoy."

"Good."

"We're looking for offender traits and strategies?" Wesley glanced around the table as several people nodded. "And we have a viable suspect. Or I'm assuming we're assuming we do."

"No question in my mind," Marino said.

"Let's go through the crime scene, then the victimology," Wesley went on as he began perusing paperwork. "And I think it's best we keep the names of known offenders out of the mix for the moment." He surveyed us over his reading glasses. "Do we have a map?"

Ferguson passed out photocopies. "The victim's house and the church are marked. So is the path we think she took around the lake on her way home from the church meeting."

Emily Steiner could have passed for eight or nine with her tiny fragile face and form. When her most recent school photograph had been taken last spring, she had worn a buttoned-up kelly green sweater; her flaxen hair was parted on one side and held in place with a barrette shaped like a parrot.

To our knowledge, no other photographs were taken of her until the clear Saturday morning of October 7, when an old man arrived at Lake Tomahawk to enjoy a little fishing. As he set up a lawn chair on a muddy ledge close to the water, he noticed a small pink sock protruding from nearby brush. The sock, he realized, was attached to a foot.

"We proceeded down the path," Ferguson was saying, and he was showing slides now, the shadow of his ballpoint pen pointing on the screen, "and located the body here."

"And that's how far from the church and her house?"

"About a mile from either one, if you drive. A little less than that as a crow flies."

"And the path around the lake would be as a crow flies?"

"Pretty much."

Ferguson resumed. "She's lying with her head in a northerly direction. We have a sock partially c

the left foot, a sock on the other. We have a watch. We have a necklace. She was wearing blue flannel pajamas and panties, and to this day they have not been found. This is a close-up of the injury to the rear of her skull.”

The shadow of the pen moved, and above us through thick walls muffled gunshots sounded from the indoor range.

Emily Steiner’s body was nude. Upon close inspection by the Buncombe County medical examiner it was determined that she had been sexually assaulted, and large dark shiny patches on her inner thighs, upper chest, and shoulder were areas of missing flesh. She also had been gagged and bound with blaze orange duct tape, her cause of death a single small-caliber gunshot wound to the back of the head.

Ferguson showed slide after slide, and as images of the girl’s pale body in the rushes flashed in the dark, there was silence. No investigator I’d ever met had ever gotten used to maimed and murdered children.

“Do we know the weather conditions in Black Mountain from October one through the seventh?” asked.

“Overcast. Low forties at night, upper fifties during the day,” Ferguson replied. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?” I looked at him.

“On the average,” he enunciated slowly as the lights went back on. “You know, you add the temperatures together and divide by the number of days.”

“Agent Ferguson, any significant fluctuation matters,” I said with a dispassion that belied my growing dislike of this man. “Even one day of unusually high temperatures, for example, would alter the condition of the body.”

Wesley began a new page of notes. When he paused, he looked at me. “Dr. Scarpetta, if she was killed shortly after she was abducted, how decomposed should she have been when she was found on October seventh?”

“Under the conditions described, I would expect her to be moderately decomposed,” I said. “I also would expect insect activity, possibly other postmortem damage, depending on how accessible the body was to carnivores.”

“In other words, she should be in a lot worse shape than this”—he tapped photographs—“if she had been dead six days.”

“More decomposed than this, yes.”

Perspiration glistened at Wesley’s hairline and had dampened the collar of his starched white shirt. Veins were prominent in his forehead and neck.

“I’m right surprised no dogs got to her.”

“Well, now, Max, I’m not. This ain’t the city, with mangy strays everywhere. We keep our dogs penned in or on a leash.”

Marino indulged in his dreadful habit of picking apart his Styrofoam coffee cup.

Her body was so pale it was almost gray, with greenish discoloration in the right lower quadrant. Fingertips were dry, the skin receding from the nails. There was slippage of her hair and the skin on her feet. I saw no evidence of defense injuries, no cuts, bruises, or broken nails that might indicate a struggle.

“The trees and other vegetation would have shielded her from the sun,” I commented as vague shadows drifted over my thoughts. “And it doesn’t appear that her wounds bled out much, if at all, otherwise I would expect more predator activity.”

“We’re assuming she was killed somewhere else,” Wesley interpolated. “Absence of blood, missing clothing, location of the body, and so on would indicate she was molested and shot elsewhere then dumped. Can you tell if the missing flesh was done postmortem?”

“At or around the time of death,” I replied.

“To remove bite marks again?”

“I can’t tell you that from what I have here.”

“In your opinion, are the injuries similar to Eddie Heath’s?” Wesley referred to the thirteen-year-old boy Temple Gault had murdered in Richmond.

“Yes.” I opened another envelope and withdrew a stack of autopsy photographs bound in rubber bands. “In both cases we have skin excised from shoulder, upper inner thigh. And Eddie Heath was shot in the head, his body dumped.”

“It also strikes me that despite the gender differences, the body types of the girl and boy are similar. Heath was small, prepubescent. The Steiner girl is very small, almost prepubescent.”

I pointed out, “A difference worth noting is that there are no crisscrosses, no shallow cuts at the margins of the Steiner girl’s wounds.”

Marino explained to the North Carolina officers, “In the Heath case, we think Gault first tried to eradicate bite marks by slicing through them with a knife. Then he figures that’s not doing the job so he removes pieces of skin about the size of my shirt pocket. This time, with the little girl he snatched, maybe he just cuts out the bite marks and is done with it.”

“You know, I *really* am uncomfortable with these assumptions. We can’t assume it’s Gault.”

“It’s been almost two years, Liz. I doubt Gault got born again or has been working for the Red Cross.”

“You don’t know that he hasn’t. Bundy worked in a crisis center.”

“And God talked to the Son of Sam.”

“I can assure you God told Berkowitz nothing,” Wesley said flatly.

“My point is that maybe Gault—if it’s Gault—just cut out the bite marks this time.”

“Well, it’s true. Like in anything else, these guys get better with practice.”

“Lord, I hope this guy don’t get any better.” Mote dabbed his upper lip with a folded handkerchief.

“Are we about ready to profile this thing?” Wesley glanced around the table. “Would you go for a white male?”

“It’s a predominantly white neighborhood.”

“Absolutely.”

“Age?”

“He’s logical and that adds years on.”

“I agree. I don’t think we’re talking about a youthful offender here.”

“I’d start with twenties. Maybe late twenties.”

“I’d go with late twenties to mid-thirties.”

“He’s very organized. His weapon of choice, for example, is one he brought with him versus something he found at the scene. And it doesn’t look as if he had any trouble controlling his victim.”

“According to family members and friends, Emily wouldn’t have been hard to control. She was shy, easily frightened.”

“Plus, she had a history of being sick, in and out of doctors’ offices. She was accustomed to being compliant with adults. In other words, she pretty much did what she was told.”

“Not always.” Wesley’s face was expressionless as he perused the pages of the dead girl’s diary. “She didn’t want her mother to know she was up at one A.M., in bed with a flashlight. Nor does it appear she planned to tell her mother she was going to the church meeting early that Sunday afternoon. Do we know if this boy, Wren, showed up early as planned?”

“He didn’t show until the meeting started at five.”

“What about Emily’s relationships with other boys?”

“She had typical eleven-year-old relationships. Do you love me? Circle yes or no.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Marino asked, and everybody laughed.

~~I continued arranging photographs in front of me like tarot cards as my uneasiness grew. The gunshot wound to the back of the head had entered the right parietal-temporal region of the skull, lacerating the dura and a branch of the middle meningeal artery. Yet there was no contusion, no subdural or epidural hematomas. Nor was there vital reaction to injuries of the genitalia.~~

“How many hotels are there in your area?”

“I reckon around ten. Now a couple are bed-and-breakfast places, homes where you can get a room.”

“Have you been keeping up with registered guests?”

“To tell you the truth, we hadn’t thought about that.”

“If Gault’s in town, he’s got to be staying somewhere.”

Her laboratory reports were equally perplexing: vitreous sodium level elevated to 180, potassium 58 milliequivalents per liter.

“Max, let’s start with the Travel-Eze. In fact, if you’ll do it, I’ll hit the Acorn and Apple Blossom. Might want to try the Mountaineer, too, though that’s a little farther down the road.”

“Gault’s most likely to stay in a place where he has maximum anonymity. He’s not going to want the staff noticing his coming and going.”

“Well, he’s not going to have a whole lot of choice. We don’t have nothing all that big.”

“Probably not the Red Rocker or Blackberry Inn.”

“I wouldn’t think so, but we’ll check ’em out anyway.”

“What about Asheville? They must have a few large hotels.”

“They got all kinds of things since they passed liquor by the drink.”

“You thinking he took the girl to his room and killed her there?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“You can’t hold a little kid hostage like that somewhere and not have someone notice. Like housekeeping, room service.”

“That’s why it would surprise me if Gault’s staying in a hotel. The cops started looking for Emi right after she was kidnapped. It was all over the news.”

The autopsy had been performed by Dr. James Jenrette, the medical examiner who had been called to the scene. A hospital pathologist in Asheville, Jenrette was under contract with the state to perform forensic autopsies on the rare occasion such a need might arise in the cloistered foothills of western North Carolina. His summary that “some findings were unexplained by the gunshot wound to the head” was simply not enough. I slipped off my glasses and rubbed the bridge of my nose as Benton Wesley spoke.

“What about tourist cabins, rental properties in your area?”

“Yes, sir,” Mote answered. “Lots and lots of them.” He turned to Ferguson. “Max, I reckon we’d better check them, too. Get a list, see who’s been renting what.”

I knew Wesley sensed my troubled mood when he said, “Dr. Scarpetta? You look like you have something to add.”

“I’m perplexed by the absence of vital reaction to any of her injuries,” I said. “And though the condition of her body suggests she has been dead only several days, her electrolytes don’t fit her physical findings....”

“Her what?” Mote’s expression went blank.

“Her sodium is high, and since sodium stays fairly stable after death, we can conclude that her sodium was high at the time of her death.”

“What does that mean?”

“It could mean she was profoundly dehydrated,” I said. “And by the way, she was underweight for

her age. Do we know anything about a possible eating disorder? Had she been sick? Vomiting? Diarrhea? A history of taking diuretics?" I scanned the faces around the table.

When no one replied, Ferguson said, "I'll run it by the mother. I gotta talk to her anyway when I get back."

"Her potassium is elevated," I went on. "And this also needs to be explained, because vitreous potassium becomes elevated incrementally and predictably after death as cell walls leak and release it."

"Vitreous?" Mote asked.

"The fluid of the eye is very reliable for testing because it's isolated, protected, and therefore less subject to contamination, putrefaction," I answered. "The point is, her potassium level suggests she's been dead longer than her other findings indicate."

"How long?" Wesley asked.

"Six or seven days."

"Could there be any other explanation for this?"

"Exposure to extreme heat that would have escalated decomposition," I replied.

"Well, that's not going to be it."

"Or an error," I added.

"Can you check it out?"

I nodded.

"*Doc Jenrette thinks the bullet in her brain killed her instantly*," Ferguson announced. "Seems like you get killed instantly and there's not going to be any vital reaction."

"The problem," I explained, "is this injury to her brain should not have been instantly fatal."

"How long could she have survived with it?" Mote wanted to know.

"Hours," I replied.

"Other possibilities?" Wesley said to me.

"*Commotio cerebri*. It's like an electrical short circuit—you get a bang on the head, die instantly, and we can't find much if any injury." I paused. "Or it could be that *all* of her injuries are postmortem, including the gunshot wound."

Everybody let that sink in for a moment.

Marino's coffee cup was a small pile of Styrofoam snow, the ashtray in front of him littered with crumpled wadded gum wrappers.

He said, "You find anything to indicate maybe she was smothered first?"

I told him I had not.

He began clicking his ballpoint pen open and shut. "Let's talk about her family some more. What do we know about the father besides he's deceased?"

"He was a teacher at Broad River Christian Academy in Swannanoa."

"Same place Emily went?"

"Nope. She went to the public elementary school in Black Mountain. Her daddy died about a year ago," Mote added.

"I noticed that," I said. "His name was Charles?"

Mote nodded.

"What was his cause of death?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. But it was natural."

Ferguson added, "He had a heart condition."

Wesley got up and moved to the whiteboard.

"Okay." He uncapped a black Magic Marker and began writing. "Let's go over the details. Victim from a middle-class family, white, age eleven, last seen by her peers around six o'clock in the

afternoon of October 1 when she walked home alone from a church meeting. On this occasion, she took a shortcut, a path that follows the shore of Lake Tomahawk, a small man-made lake.

“If you look at your map, you’ll see there is a clubhouse on the north end of the lake and a public pool, both of which are open only in the summer. Over here you’ve got tennis courts and a picnic area that are available year-round. According to the mother, Emily arrived home shortly after six-thirty. She went straight to her room and practiced guitar until dinner.”

“Did Mrs. Steiner say what Emily ate that night?” I asked the group.

“She told me they had macaroni and cheese and salad,” Ferguson said.

“At what time?” According to the autopsy report, Emily’s stomach contents consisted of a small amount of brownish fluid.

“Around seven-thirty in the evening is what she told me.”

“That would have been digested by the time she was kidnapped at two in the morning?”

“Yes,” I said. “It would have cleared her stomach long before then.”

“It could be that she wasn’t given much in the way of food and water while held in captivity.”

“Thus accounting for her high sodium, her possible dehydration?” Wesley asked me.

“That’s certainly possible.”

He wrote some more. “There’s no alarm system in the house, no dog.”

“Do we know if anything was stolen?”

“Maybe some clothes.”

“Whose?”

“Maybe the mother’s. While she was taped up in the closet, she thought she heard him opening drawers.”

“If so, he was right tidy. She also said she couldn’t tell if anything was missing or disturbed.”

“What did the father teach? Did we get to that?”

“Bible.”

“Broad River’s one of these fundamentalist places. The kids start the day singing ‘Sin Shall Not Have Dominion Over Me.’”

“No kidding.”

“I’m serious as a heart attack.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, they talk about Him a lot, too.”

“Maybe they could do something with my grandson.”

“Shit, Hershel, nobody could do nothing with your grandson because you spoil him rotten. How many minibikes he got now? Three?”

I spoke again. “I’d like to know more about Emily’s family. I assume they are religious.”

“Very much so.”

“Any other siblings?”

Lieutenant Mote took a deep, weary breath. “That’s what’s really sad about this one. There was a baby some years back, a crib death.”

“Was this also in Black Mountain?” I asked.

“No, ma’am. It was before the Steiners moved to the area. They’re from California. You know, we got folks from all over.”

Ferguson added, “A lot of foreigners head to our hills to retire, vacation, attend religious conventions. Shit, if I had a nickel for every Baptist I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

I glanced at Marino. His anger was as palpable as heat, his face boiled red. “Just the kind of place Gault would get off on. The folks there read all the big stories about the son of a bitch in *People* magazine, *The National Enquirer*, *Parade*. But it never enters no one’s mind the squirrel might com

to town. To them he's Frankenstein. He don't really exist."

"Don't forget they did that TV movie on him, too," Mote spoke again.

"When was that?" Ferguson scowled.

"Last summer, Captain Marino told me. I don't recollect the actor's name, but he's been in a lot of those Termination movies. Isn't that right?"

Marino didn't care. His private posse was thundering through the air. "I think the son of a bitch is still there." He pushed his chair back and added another wad of gum to the ashtray.

"Anything's possible," Wesley said matter-of-factly.

"Well." Mote cleared his throat. "Whatever you boys want to do to help out would be mighty appreciated."

Wesley glanced at his watch. "Pete, you want to cut the lights again? I thought we'd run through these earlier cases, show our two visitors from North Carolina how Gault spent his time in Virginia."

For the next hour horrors flashed in the dark like disjointed scenes from some of my very worst dreams. Ferguson and Mote never took their wide eyes off the screen. They did not say a word. I did not see them blink.

Beyond windows in the Boardroom plump groundhogs sunned themselves on the grass as I ate salad and Marino scraped the last trace of the fried chicken special off his plate.

The sky was faded denim blue, trees hinting of how brightly they would burn when fall reached its peak. In a way I envied Marino. The physical demands of his week would almost seem a relief compared to what waited for me, perched darkly over me, like a huge insatiable bird.

“Lucy’s hoping you’ll find time to do some shooting with her while you’re here,” I said.

“Depends on if her manners have improved.” Marino pushed his tray away.

“Funny, that’s what she usually says about you.”

He knocked a cigarette out of his pack. “You mind?”

“It doesn’t matter because you’re going to smoke it anyway.”

“You never give a fella any credit, Doc.” The cigarette wagged as he talked. “It’s not like I haven’t cut back.” He fired up his lighter. “Tell the truth. You think about smoking every minute.”

“You’re right. Not a minute goes by that I don’t wonder how I stood doing anything so unpleasant and antisocial.”

“Bullshit. You miss it like hell. Right now you wish you was me.” He exhaled a stream of smoke and gazed out the window. “One day this entire joint’s going to end up a sinkhole because of these friggin’ groundhogs.”

“Why would Gault have gone to western North Carolina?” I asked.

“Why the hell would he go anywhere?” Marino’s eyes got hard. “You ask any question about the son of a bitch and the answer’s the same. *Because he felt like it.* And he ain’t gonna stop with the Steiner girl. Some other little kid—some woman, man, hell, it don’t matter—is going to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when Gault gets another itch.”

“And you really think he’s still there?”

He tapped an ash. “Yeah, I really think he is.”

“Why?”

“Because the fun’s just begun,” he said as Benton Wesley walked in. “The greatest goddam show on earth and he’s sitting back watching, laughing his ass off as the Black Mountain cops run around in circles trying to figure out what the hell to do. They average one homicide a year there, by the way.”

I watched Wesley head for the salad bar. He ladled soup into a bowl, placed crackers on his tray, and dropped several dollars in a paper plate set out for customers when the cashier wasn’t around. He did not indicate that he had seen us, but I knew he had a gift for taking in the smallest details of his surroundings while seeming in a fog.

“Some of Emily Steiner’s physical findings make we wonder if her body was refrigerated,” I said to Marino as Wesley headed toward us.

“Right. I’m sure it was. At the hospital morgue.” Marino gave me an odd look.

“Sounds like I’m missing something important,” Wesley said as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

“I’m contemplating that Emily Steiner’s body was refrigerated before it was left at the lake,” I said.

“Based on what?” A gold Department of Justice cuff link peeked out of his coat sleeve as he reached for the pepper shaker.

“Her skin was doughy and dry,” I answered. “She was well preserved and virtually unmolested by insects or animals.”

“That pretty much shoots down the idea of Gault staying in some tourist trap motel,” Marino said. “He sure as hell didn’t stash the body in his minibar.”

Wesley, always meticulous, spooned clam chowder away from him and raised it to his lips without spilling a drop.

“What’s been turned in for trace?” I asked.

“Her jewelry and socks,” Wesley replied. “And the duct tape, which unfortunately was removed before being checked for prints. It was pretty cut up at the morgue.”

“Christ,” Marino muttered.

“But it’s distinctive enough to hold promise. In fact, I can’t say I’ve ever seen blaze orange duct tape before.” He was looking at me.

“I certainly haven’t,” I said. “Do your labs know anything about it yet?”

“Nothing yet except there’s a pattern of grease streaks, meaning the edges of the roll the tape came from are streaked with grease. For whatever that’s worth.”

“What else do the labs have?” I asked.

Wesley said, “Swabs, soil from under the body, the sheet and pouch used to transport her from the lake.”

My frustration grew as he continued to talk. I wondered what had been missed. I wondered what microscopic witnesses had been silenced forever.

“I’d like copies of her photographs and reports, and lab results as they come in,” I said.

“Whatever’s ours is yours,” Wesley replied. “The labs will contact you directly.”

“We got to get time of death straight,” Marino said. “It ain’t adding up.”

“It’s very important we sort that out,” Wesley concurred. “Can you do some more checking?”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said.

“I’m supposed to be in Hogan’s Alley.” Marino got up from the table as he glanced at his watch. “In fact, I guess they’ve started without me.”

“I hope you plan to change your clothes first,” Wesley said to him. “Wear a sweatshirt with a hood.”

“Yo. So I get dropped by heat exhaustion.”

“Better than getting dropped by nine-millimeter paint bullets,” Wesley said. “They hurt like hell.”

“What? You two been discussing this or something?”

We watched him leave. He buttoned his blazer over his big belly, smoothed his wispy hair, rearranged his trousers as he walked. Marino had a habit of self-consciously grooming himself like a cat whenever he made an entrance or an exit.

Wesley stared at the dirty ashtray where Marino had been sitting. He turned his eyes to me, and I thought they seemed uncommonly dark, his mouth set as if it had never known how to smile.

“You’ve got to do something about him,” he said.

“I wish I had that power, Benton.”

“You’re the only one who comes close to having that power.”

“That’s frightening.”

“What’s frightening is how red his face got during the consultation. He’s not doing a goddam thing he’s supposed to do. Fried foods, cigarettes, booze.” Wesley glanced away. “Since Doris left he’s gone to hell.”

“I’ve seen some improvement,” I said.

“Brief remissions.” He met my eyes again. “In the main he’s killing himself.”

In the main, Marino was and had been all of his life. And I did not know what to do about it.

“When are you going back to Richmond?” he asked, and I wondered what went on behind his walls. I wondered about his wife.

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