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VOICE FOR THE DEAD

THE SWEET, CLOYING ODOR of blood and honeysuckle hung in the rain-misted courtyard like rancid smoke. A nude figure was curled against the courtyard's ivy-draped stone wall, his bound hands tucked beneath his face like those of a sleeping child, a stark counterpoint to his swollen and battered face. A dark mesh shirt was twisted around his throat and night-blackened blood pooled around his body. Gleamed upon skin and stone.

And on the wall above scrawled in blood—

WAKE UP

HEATHER WALLACE'S MUSCLES, KNOTTED from her long flight from Seattle, kinked even tighter. The message was a disturbing addition if this was the work of the Cross-Country Killer. A warning? A command? A dark, ironic joke aimed at his dying victim?

Drawing in a careful breath, Heather stepped from the back door of DaVinci's Pizza and walked into the shadowed court-

yard. She skirted the numbered evidence placards dotting the old stone floor.

“Daniel Spurrell, age nineteen,” Detective Collins said from the doorway. “From Lafayette. LSU student. Disappeared three days ago. Discovered in the courtyard about noon by an employee.”

Tortured somewhere else, then dumped, Heather thought. Why here

Old-fashioned gaslit lanterns cast pale, flickering light across the courtyard. Beneath the blood stink, Heather caught a whiff of jasmine and ivy, thick and wintergreen, a white-flowered bouquet unable to mask the smell of death.

Three years she’d been tracking the CCK. And dealing with his victims never got any easier.

She knelt beside all that remained of Daniel Spurrell. Tortured. Raped. Slaughtered. Posed. Latest victim of a wandering sexual sadist.

A deep, thudding vibration emanated from next door, snaked up her spine. “What’s on the other side of the wall?” she said, her gaze on Daniel’s bruised face.

“Club Hell,” Collins answered. “Music venue. Bar.” He paused, then added, “And a vampire hangout. Pretend, y’know?”

“Do you mean Goths? Or gamers?”

Collins chuckled. “Shit, you tell me. Sounds like you’re more in the know.”

“My sister fronted a band,” Heather said. “I met all kinds at her gigs.”

Long, midnight-blue hair veiled the boy’s face. NightGlo, Heather mused. A hair color Annie’d often used when she and WMD hit the stage in all their hard-edged punk glory. Before Annie’d flamed out in a spectacular bipolar meltdown and sliced her wrists onstage.

Heather focused on a mark on the boy’s chest—something

cut or scorched into the flesh. She leaned in closer. Blackened skin. Blistered. A series of circles—burned with a car lighter

The anarchy symbol.

Cold frosted Heather's veins. The symbol was also new. Like the blood message. If this was the work of the Cross-Country Killer, then his signature, his reason, his drive for the kill had changed from an insular intimacy, his victim's final desperate moments his and his alone, to an overt act inviting attention. Impossible. Theoretically. But if it had changed, what then?

Then she needed to find out why.

Heather studied Daniel's face, the midnight-blue hair, the twist of cloth embedded into his throat, knotted around it. Breathed in the lingering smell of death and tasted it.

Why you? Chosen? Or wrong place, wrong time? Why here?

She heard her father's voice, deep and low, his tone reverential: The dead speak through evidence. Through evidence alone are you a voice for the dead.

Heather stood. S.A. James William Wallace—the Bureau's leading forensic specialist and world's lousiest father.

The dead aren't the only ones seeking a voice, Dad.

Ah, Pumpkin—they found their voices the moment they picked up a gun, a knife, a rope, or a baseball bat, the moment they killed. Through evidence you will silence them.

Heather turned away from Daniel's curled body. She pushed rain-damp strands of hair back from her face, listened to the pounding bass beat coming from Club Hell.

Daniel's killer spoke loud and clear. He was an organized killer, deliberate. So it was no accident that he chose the wall next to the club. Had Daniel met his killer in there? So why leave his body here and not in the club's courtyard, on the other side of the wall?

And if this was the work of a copycat?

Then the Cross-Country Killer was still out there, enjoying his little jaunt across the States, casually selecting victims—male

and female—like a Bermuda shorts-wearing tourist picking out postcards.

Still out there. Still needing to be silenced.

As Heather crossed the courtyard, a familiar truth burned bright in her mind: She'd never allow a case to go cold to protect the reputation of a loved one; never bury evidence no matter how much it hurt.

Unlike the famous James William Wallace.

Heather joined Collins at the threshold leading into DaVinci's. She read the unasked question in the detective's eyes: **Is the Cross-Country Killer in New Orleans?**

"Signature's different," she said. "The message . . . I'll know more once we have the autopsy report and the DNA workup."

"What's your gut say?"

Heather glanced at the body. Huddled. Praying hands. Naked in the rain. Stabbed over and over. Strangled. Young and pretty, once.

Heather looked at Collins. Six one, she judged, and lean. Midthirties. She noted the tension in his shoulders, his jaw. "How deep in the shit did you get buried for calling in a fed?"

A flicker of surprise crossed his eyes. "They made you special agent for a reason. Neck deep and it's still piling up."

"I'll do what I can to dig you out," Heather said. "I appreciate your call."

Collins regarded her for a long moment, his hazel eyes weighing, considering. He nodded. "Thanks. But I'll dig myself out."

"Fair enough." Heather met his gaze. "My gut tells me this is the CCK's work. But that's off the record."

A faint smile touched Collins's lips. "Fair enough."

"He's probably long gone."

Collins nodded, face bleak. "Traveling man."

Shrieks of laughter and sharp jazz riffs drifted in from the street. And underneath it all, the steady thump-thump-thump of music from Club Hell.

“Mardi Gras,” Collins said. “Well, almost. Still three days out and it’s crazy.” He shook his head. “Y’ever been?”

“No, this is my first trip to New Orleans.”

“Let me thank your gut by treating you to a N’awlins-style dinner.” Collins pushed away from the doorway. His clean, spicy cologne cut through the courtyard’s thickening smell of death and blood.

“Thanks, but I’ll take a rain check. I want to look into a few things, maybe catch a little sleep.” Heather offered her hand. “I appreciate your time and help, Detective.”

Collins grasped her hand and shook it. Strong grip. An honest man. “Call me Trent. Or Collins, if you’re old-school. I’ll contact you soon as I hear anything.”

“Sounds good, Trent.”

Releasing Collins’s hand, Heather walked back into the pizzeria, headed for the front door. A thought circled around the anarchy symbol burning in her mind.

The pattern has changed. ~~He’s~~ communicating. But with whom, and why now?

SITTING AT THE SMALL, lacquered desk in her room, Heather connected her laptop to the hotel’s Internet service. She tabbed open a can of Dr Pepper and took a long swallow of the cold, sweet plum-flavored soda. It hit her empty stomach like a chunk of ice.

WAKE UP.

A challenge? To law enforcement? The Bureau? Her? None of the above?

Drunken laughter and shouts—“Dude! Wanna get a bite? Duuuude!”—boomed past her door and down the corridor, fading as the revelers found their rooms.

Heather worked her iPod’s headphones into her ears and thumbed the volume down low so she’d hear it if anyone called.

Knocking back another long swallow of Dr Pepper, she typed in an online search of Club Hell.

The Leigh Stanz bootleg she'd downloaded into her iPod curled into her ears and focused her thoughts. Low and intense, accompanied by acoustic guitar, Stanz's voice was husky and worn, like the voice of a man emptying his heart out for the last time.

I long to drift like an empty boat on a calm sea / need light / I don't fear darkness . . .

Checking the links pulled up on her search page, Heather learned that the very hip Club Hell had opened nearly four years earlier and was frequented by a Goth/punk/wannabe-vampires crowd. The kind of place Annie would've gigged at with WMD.

A lot of local bands and underground acts performed at the club, especially Inferno, an industrial/Goth band fronted by a young man rumored to also be the owner of Club Hell. He appeared to be known only as Dante.

Heather shook her head. Dante's Inferno. Cute. Good for marketing, no doubt. Hoping to find out more about the club's possible owner, she Googled Inferno and received a trillion hits. Scrolling down to the band's official Web site, she clicked on tour dates—none in the last year; albums—two, with the third due to be released in a few days; photos. She paused, studying the captured images.

Three men in their early to midtwenties—dreads, faux hawks, hard bodies pierced and tattooed—stood in one of New Orleans's cities of the dead, each of them looking in a different direction. Behind them stood a fourth figure in black jeans and baggy sweatshirt, hood pulled up. Head bowed, fingers holding the hood's edges, his face unseen, he seemed to be contemplating the seashell and gravel path beneath his boots.

But what caught Heather's attention was the pendant hanging at his throat. The anarchy symbol. She sat up straighter and

enlarged the photo. Stared at a circled letter A fashioned out of what looked like barbed wire and strung on a black cord.

Heart pounding, Heather checked the photo's caption. The figure was Dante. She clicked on the next photo. Dante's back was to the camera. No visible anarchy symbol. In the next photo, she caught a glimpse of the barbed-wire pendant dangling like a charm from a twist of wire around his wrist.

Heather scrutinized each photo. The anarchy symbol wasn't always present or visible. But she did notice one thing: Inferno's front man was never the focus of the photos. Dante stood behind the other members or off to the side or knelt in front, head bowed. Not once did she see his face. A flash of black hair in one, a pale cheek in another, but that was all.

Another marketing ploy? The oh-so-mysterious front man? Or genuine reluctance to be front and center—except when on-stage?

Heather scrolled through online band interviews and wasn't surprised to discover nearly all were conducted with the other members of Inferno. "In the studio" was the usual reason given for Dante's absence.

Heather finished her can of Dr Pepper, then lined down to the last article and opened it. This time, Dante wasn't "in the studio"; he sat, alone, for the interview. Clunking the empty can onto the desk, Heather leaned forward to read.

Dante spoke intelligently about music and the state of the music industry, French or Cajun words spicing his comments, his tone often dark and humorous.

DANTE: It's time to return to the days of the guilotine. If you don't have passion for music, if you don't have *le coeur* and you're only in it for the money, the fame, or the chicks, then off with your head.

AP: Are you serious?

- DANTE: Yeah. At least that'd be honest entertainment. You need to bleed for your audience one way or another.
- AP: Why don't you give more interviews?
- DANTE: I want the focus to be on the music. Not me.
- AP: But people want to know more about you. You **are** the music. Why did you open Club Hell?
- DANTE: (Tense) To showcase musicians, new talent.
- AP: How do you address the rumors that you're a vampire?
- DANTE: (Standing) Wrong focus. We're done.

VAMPIRE? WAS THAT A joke? More marketing? Heather suddenly remembered Collins saying: And a vampire hangout. Pre tend, y'know?

Using Bureau ID codes, Heather tapped into city records and looked up all pertinent info on Club Hell. The owner was listed as one Lucien De Noir, a French entrepreneur. All licenses and deeds were in his name, but based on that last interview and her own gut feeling, Heather believed De Noir was only the money man. Club Hell was Dante's baby.

Heather plugged into the NOPD's system with her guest security code and searched for Dante, though with no last name, she didn't hold a lot of hope for a hit. The search spat up a list of Dantes as first names and last names and she worked her way through them quickly. She came to a halt on Dante Prejean. No social security number. No driver's license. Age estimated to be twenty-one. Refused to give a birth date. No legal surname. Prejean was a name tacked on from the family who'd fostered him as a kid in Lafayette.

Lafayette. Daniel Spurrell's hometown. Connections clicked

and whirled through her mind like a slot machine. The bars all snapped to a stop in a line.

Anarchy symbol. Lafayette. Club Hell.

Heather skimmed Dante Prejean's file—criminal mischief, vandalism, trespassing, loitering—all misdemeanors. She scanned for a mug shot, but didn't find one posted. Frowning, she scrolled through case notes and arrest records. Camera malfunction was usually listed as the reason for no mug shot being taken, but one officer had jotted a different reason altogether:

Little shitwon't hold still. He moves so goddamned fast, every time we snap his picture, fucking gone. This happens every freaking time with this asshole. This is the only picture he's ever stood still for.

HEATHER CLICKED ON THE photo. A bowed, hooded head. And a hand in front of the hidden face, middle finger extended. Defiant, even under arrest, playing games. She stared at the photo for a long time. The only mug shot Dante ever stood still for? Were the arresting officers plain inept?

Let me go, bro, let me go . . .

Leigh Stanz's hoarse voice and sad, yearning words ended. In the ensuing silence the unasked question in Collins's eyes looped through Heather's thoughts: Is the Cross-Country Killer in New Orleans?

And is he . . . what? . . . identifying with Dante Prejean?

Now? Suddenly? After three years?

An instant message from her SAC, Craig Stearns, blipped onto the laptop's screen: Wallace, consultation progress?

Heather typed: Consultation continuing. Looks like the CCK, but not positive. She stopped, fingers poised over the keyboard.

Should she mention the records glitch she'd run into on the flight from Seattle? The inability to access ViCAP and NCAVC

files on the CCK's victims? A problem she'd never experienced before in working this case?

Heather rubbed her face. She glanced at the window. Rain poured outside, streaking the glass with ribbons of neon-lit color. Maybe she was being paranoid. Human error. Server malfunction. Shit happens. Maybe she needed to upgrade her computer.

And yet. A change in the CCK's pattern. A computer glitch.

Heather returned her gaze to the monitor and the blipping cursor. A knot of unease nestled in her belly.

And if the glitch ~~was~~ deliberate? Could it have been Stearns?

She shook her head. Her SAC was a stand-up guy, hard but honest. He'd even helped her with Annie when Dad refused. That kind of deception wasn't Stearns's way.

Heather's fingers dropped onto the keys: **Checking leads. Nearly finished. Will contact you tomorrow.** ~~hit send.~~

Scooting her chair back from the desk, she shut the laptop down and switched off her iPod. Heather shrugged on her trenchcoat. Scooping her Colt .38 up from the desk, she slipped it into the trench's specially designed inside breast pocket.

Time to go to Hell.