

Chapter 1

The small retail clothing store is located on a charming bustling street lined with other boutique shops and a cafe and coffee shop. The storefront features large, inviting windows that showcase the latest summer outfits on stylish mannequins. The store name Chic Haven is displayed in modern font above the entrance in sleek, modern lettering. A deep burgundy painted door beckons costumers inside. Flower boxes flank the entrance with colorful blooms, adding a touch of charm and warmth.

Upon entering, customers are greeted by a cozy, well lit space that feels both intimate and stylish. The store layout is designed to make the most of its limited square footage. Light wooden floors and soft, neutral wall colors create and airy open feel. To the left, a series of well organized clothing racks showcases a curated selection of women's apparel. The racks are arranged by type and color, making it easy for customers to find what they are looking for. To the right are two sections, one for kids and the other for teen girls.

Near the center of the store, two elegant display tables hold and array of accessories including scarves, jewelry, hats and handbags. This central display encourages customer to browse and consider completing their outfit with the perfect finishing touches. Along the back left wall, shelves are filled with shoes, neatly organized by size and style. The checkout counter is located towards the front of the store. Behind the counter shelves are stocked with small items like socks, belts, and gift cards. The stores ambiance is further enhanced by the soft background music playing a mix of modern hits. The subtle scent of vanilla and lavender wafts through the air. It is relaxed yet sophisticated. Track lighting and stylish pendent lamps highlight key areas and displays. At the back of the store is an alcove of fitting rooms that are

designed for comfort and privacy. Each room holds a full length mirror, a padded bench and hooks. Flattering lighting and plush curtains ensure a pleasant experience.

Katelyn sat in the office finalizing this weeks inventory. She had a small order to place as well. Katelyn loved her job as a Retail Manager. She had a great crew that worked for her and Katelyn was well liked because she didn't micromanage. She actually encouraged employee's to create when it came time to the store's displays. When Keri came to her with the idea of having a community board that gave information on things happening in the community Katelyn not only loved the idea, she let Keri be in charge of it.

She finished the inventory and opened the ordering software and logged in. She put in for more scarfs, socks, four belts and she wanted to do something different. A lip gloss and lipstick line and perfume. Being summer she figured it would be a hot seller. With the order placed she called it a night. Katelyn made sure the only things that were on was the overhead display lighting. She double checked the front door. She exited out the back of the store. It was dark outside. At her car, she pulled her keys out of her purse and dropped them. Bending down to pick them up she felt a sharp jab in the neck when she stood up. Immediately, her head felt woozy. Her knees felt like rubber. Not able to stand any longer, she passed out.

The operating room smells of a chilling blend of antiseptic and metallic tang. The Bone Thief's lair is meticulously organized with surgical tools laid out in gleaming rows on a sterile tray under harsh surgical light.

Katelyn awoke with a start to find herself strapped down to a metal table, Her wrists and ankles secured. She tried to pull free but couldn't nor could she sit up from being secured with a strap going across her chest and upper arms. Sweat formed as terror took hold. She

tried to call out for help but the ball gag muffled her efforts. Her breathing came in ragged shallow breaths, each one a desperate plea for mercy. The Bone Thief approaches with a calm demeanor, his face covered with a surgical mask. His gloved hands ever so steady. He picks up a syringe, plunges the needle into her neck, pushing down the plunger, the light blue liquid entering her vein and going straight to her brain. "I know you expect me to say that everything will be ok. Quite the opposite, actually. Nothing is going to be ok. What I gave you is not a sedative or any kind of anesthesia. It is a drug that will keep you from passing out. There will be no anesthesia. Your body produces certain chemicals that I require when you feel pain. I am sorry but it is a necessity. I will be taking your Radius. It is one of the bones in your forearm. Lets begin." Her whimpers fell on deaf ears. He picked up the Electrocauderic scalpel. With the ability to cauterize blood vessels and arteries there should be little to no blood until he takes the bone itself. Starting at a couple of inches below the elbow, he makes his incision along the thumb side of the forearm till about a couple of inches above the wrist. Katelyn's scream is visceral.

The Bone Thief doesn't flinch. Setting the scalpel down, he uses retractors to open the incision to reveal muscle and sinew beneath. Her screams tear through the air once more as he trims muscle and ligaments away from the bone exposing it's whiteness.

Finished with the scalpel, he picks up the bone saw, it's wicked sharp teeth reflects the surgical light. "Almost done." He pushes the trigger making it whirl to life. The Bone Thief positions it over the radius. Her eyes are wide with a horror of realization of what is about to take place. As metal meets bone a horrific sound of grinding and rasping fills the air. Katelyn's body convulses against the restraints, her screams growing more desperate with each passing second.

As the bone saw cuts deeper, bone dust mingles with blood making a sickening paste. The vibrations from the saw travel up her arm, intensifying the pain. She can feel every agonizing second, every tooth cutting through bone. The Bone Thief pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow, his eyes giving away an expression of clinical detachment. He picks up a bone chisel and mallet at the nearly severed radius. With a few precise taps of the mallet, the bone snaps with a sickening crack. Katelyn's screams reach a new pitch, her voice hoarse and broken. With the radius now detached, the Bone Thief uses forceps to grab it. He tugs, and the sound of ripping muscle and sinew still attached fills the room. Tendons give way with a wet tearing sound. Blood spurts, coating his gloves and apron. He takes the reward and places it on a stainless steel tray. Next he chooses a regular scalpel and severs her carotid artery, letting her bleed out.

Chapter 2

Elena arrived back home from her early morning three mile run. Elena Aldridge's home is a reflection of her meticulousness and driven personality, combining functionality with subtle touches of comfort. Located in a quiet tree lined suburb, the two story house has a quaint, unassuming exterior painted in a soft blue with dark blue trim. The front yard sported a well maintained lawn and a few shrubs. Do to her hectic schedule she has no time to garden. Upon entering the front door, the foyer opens into a spacious living area filled with natural light that streams through large windows. The furnishings are minimalist yet comfortable, with a blend of cool gray and tans with a burst of color from throw pillows. The couch faces the wall mounted television with a couple of arm chairs that flank the coffee table. Crime novels and forensic magazines sit upon the coffee table.

The kitchen, a blend of modern appliances and rustic charm features light oak cabinets, marble counter tops, an island with bar stools, and a breakfast nook. An old hand written recipe book and mismatched coffee cups add to the charm. The bedrooms are up stairs. The master, Chelsea's and a guest room. Elena wasn't done with her workout routine yet. She entered the garage that had been converted to an exercise room through the kitchen. There stood a total workout weight machine, and exercise bike, and for rainy days, a treadmill. Hanging from the ceiling was a full heavy bag. She laid down upon the carpet and did her thirty sit ups. Getting up she pressed play on her CD player. The heavy chords of Powerwolf filled the room.

Elena's fists pounded against the heavy bag, each strike a precise and powerful blow. Her elbows followed, slicing through the air and landing with a sharp impact. Sweat dripped

down her brow, but she kept her focus, her movements fluid and controlled. She shifted her stance, delivering a swift roundhouse kick that reverberated through the bag, the power behind it a clear indication of her Muay Thai training. The bag swung back to be met with rapid knee strikes, each one aimed with surgical precision.

Her mind wandered to her last case. She stood under a spring azure sky. Not a single cloud marred the expanse. Yet it wasn't as pretty as it sounded. Elena pointed her gun at Fredrick Tillman. He held a knife at a young girl's throat, his head slightly behind hers. "Let her go, Fredrick."

"You know I can't do that, Agent Aldridge. As soon as I do you shoot me."

"No Fredrick, it doesn't have to be that way. It will be just a simple arrest."

He chuckled. "Come now, Agent Aldridge, you know there is nothing simple about this. You take me in and I become a guinea pig to a bunch of psyche students." Elena thought about pulling the trigger but he was too close to her. She could kill the girl instead. "You know something? I decided that indeed today is a beautiful day to die for both of us."

"No." She saw the knife slice through skin and flesh. He let her go. Elena fired, placing five rounds in his chest. He went down and fell over. His lifeless eyes staring at nothing. Ever since that case she has second guessed her actions. The only other case she worked was a collaboration with another Agent on a set of bank robberies. The heavy bag swung back, knocking her back onto her ass. Oh well, it was time to take a shower anyways.

Stepping out of the shower, the hint of coffee teased her nose. Sitting on the counter was a cup of black gold. She smiled and took two sips. Dressing in a pair of jeans and blouse, she put her auburn hair back in a pony tail, grabbed her coffee and headed downstairs to the kitchen. Elena leaned against the kitchen counter, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee

mingling with the scent of pancakes Logan was flipping on the grill. Ten year old Chelsea sat at the table, a pencil tucked behind an ear as she diligently colored in her sketch book with map pencils. "Mom, can you look at my drawings?" Chelsea's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Elena walked over to her daughter's side, "of course, sweetie, lets see what you got." Chelsea proudly showed off her drawing of a partial brick and glass building with an awning. "Wow, Chelsea, that is really good. Logan, look at this."

"I love how you added such detail."

"She definitely has your talent for drawing," said Elena.

"Our future Architect." Logan flips the last pancake on to the plate. "Breakfast is ready."

"You spoil us," said Elena.

"You both deserve it."

As they dug into their breakfast, Elena couldn't help but feel content. Moments like these were precious, a reminder of the love and happiness that bound their family together. Despite the darkness she faced at work as FBI Special Agent Elena Aldridge, here she was just Elena and mom. A bond, no matter what she faced, could not be broken.

Later that afternoon, when she was about to prepare some corn on the cob for the BBQ pit, the doorbell rang. Katie stood on the other side. "Come on in. Chelsea's in her room."

"Oh, mom said that she is bringing over some potato salad."

"That will be great. I love your mom's potato salad."

A little while later the doorbell rang again. This time it was Katie's parents, Jacob and Jill. "Logan's out back. Katie said you were bringing potato salad. Yours is the best." They went into the kitchen while Jacob went out back and joined Logan.

"It's official," said Jill.

"Really?"

"Yes, got the news yesterday. I am now VP of Marketing."

"I'm so happy for you. You worked your ass off for that. Wine is in order." Elena opened a bottle and poured two glasses. This BBQ will be a true celebration. Chelsea and Katie came downstairs in their swim suits and headed out the back to the pool.

"You don't mind having her this weekend?"

"I never do. She is like a daughter to me."

"Thanks. Jacob says he's got all night planned out. Dinner at York's, movie and clubbing."

"York has the best filet mignon. You get three instead of two. I'm going to take the girls to the mall and movies tomorrow."

"What do you think they will do tonight?"

"Swim till its dark and then watch horror movies all night till they fall asleep."

They took their glasses, bottle of wine, and the corn out back. "Jill, Jacob told me the good news, congrats."

"Thanks, I'm still trying to get used to it. I'll have my own big office with a great view."

Later that night, the girls laid out on the couch with popcorn and cans of coke watching horror movies with the TV being the only light. Logan and Elena were in the bedroom. "I should sneak down there and give them the scare of their lives," said Logan.

"Sure, if your going to clean up the popcorn and coke."

"It would almost be worth it."

"You want to go to the mall and movies?"

“What and wait for you three to get your nails and hair done?”

“How do you know that’s what we’re going to do?”

“Three girls and a mall? Hair, nails, chick flick.”

Elena laughed. “Your right.”

“I need to go to Plotters tomorrow and pick up some supplies. I’m also getting a surprise for Chelsea.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to get her her very own portable drafting set and teach her how to use it.”

“Awe, she would love that.”

“She really is good.”

Chapter 3

The office was awash with the noise of printers, phones, fax machines, along with the hum of voices. Elena thrived in this chaos. This compared to Logan's office was like daylight and dark with his soft jazz. This was her symphony. While most agent's desks had a pile of files, she had only two. Sign off on the final report on one and print out the other and sign it then she can file them as closed. She printed and signed both. Taking both files to the back, she laid them in a basket for the clerks to file. On her way back, Douglas, a new agent stopped her. "Can you help me with something?"

"Sure, whatcha got."

"I got three suspects but none match the signature on the insurance policy. Not the holder's name but the signature here."

"Let me see." She rummaged through the pages. "Look here it is. See Carl's signature here?"

"Yes."

"The two signatures are different though they are the same name. This is no longer your case. Take it to fraud."

"Thanks."

Her last solo case shook her up pretty bad. Standing there with the choice to shoot or not shoot. If she pulled the trigger she might have saved her. But on the other hand she might have missed and killed her. The damned if you do or damned if you don't scenario made her second guess herself. Elena sat there and stared at her blank computer screen. Her phone rang interrupting her thoughts. "Agent Aldridge."

“Come to my office.” The line went dead. It was Tom Larson, the Assistant Special Agent in Charge. What did I do, misfile a record? She weaved through the desks to get to the admin offices. Elena stood at the open doorway of Tom’s office. As he talked on the phone, he motioned for her to come in and sit down. A couple of minutes later he hung up. “Elena, how are you doing?”

“I’m good.”

“I’m glad to hear that because the powers that be believe it’s time to get you back in the field and I happen to agree.”

“Tom, I...”

“Elena, no one blames you for what happened. You did nothing wrong. Anyone in that same situation would have done the same thing.”

“I should have tried. I should have...”

“What? Pull the trigger? Forensics stated that from the footage of your dash cam, there was a sixty percent chance you would have hit her.”

“She still died.”

“If you would have pulled that trigger and kill her you would be feeling a lot worse than you do right now. You can’t let it eat you up. I know its only been a month, but we need you on this case. At least take a look at the file and then decide.”

“Ok, but I can’t make any promises.”

Her eyes slightly narrowed and one eye brow raised. “Since when does the FBI take on grave robber’s?”

“Not graves but the living.”

“Wait, what?”

“The wounds are fresh with a missing bone. The worst part is according to the pathology report, the victims were alive and according to the Medical Examiner, the victims were still alive and conscious with no anesthesia.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Apparently so. There have been two murders. Both a week apart. The press has dubbed him the Bone Thief. The contact if you have any questions is Sheriff Greg Anderson.”

“I need time to look through this first.”

“Go ahead.”

When she arrived home she found that Logan and Chelsea were gone. This allowed her to look through the file undisturbed. Due to the crime scene photos, Chelsea wasn't allowed to look at the files. She had to admit, this case intrigued her. Why would someone need fresh bones? The idea of the victims being conscious was a gruesome thought. If she decides to take this case it will be her strangest. So far two murders a week apart. The killing time held a pattern. That would put her in a time crunch. Hopefully the file reveals more patterns. She grabbed a legal pad and pen and took the file to the dining room table to have more room. Katelyn Spencer, age 26, retail manager. Mark Collins, age 37, Mechanic. She made notes of this. Looking at the crime scene photos made her stomach churn. Elena has seen a lot of bad stuff, but this was the worst. Katelyn's radius bone was missing from her right arm. The skin seemed to have been expertly cut, but below that was a mess of muscle, ligaments, and tendons. With the Radius gone the Ulna was the prominent bone.

Mark's picture was just as horrible. A large section of flesh, cut in two flaps that was pulled back exposing the left rib cage. There were two ribs missing, exposing the lung underneath. The killer was a brutal monster and had to be stopped at all costs. Full body

shots showed they were dumped in the woods. Two more photos showed how they died. The carotid artery was severed. He bled them out. A flash back of Fredrick and the girl came to mind causing her to shiver.

Elena read the Medical Examiner's report. Not only were they conscious, the tox screen showed that no anesthesia of any kind was used. They felt every bit of it. However, there was an unknown substance found. A sample was sent to the lab. In a few days there would be a third victim. Who would take this case? She wanted to. Dare she? A lot of lives would depend on her. She would have to trust her instincts and not second guess herself.

Grabbing her cell phone she called Tom.

"Hey, Elena."

"I'll do it. I'll take the case."

"I hoped that you would. When can you leave?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Thanks, Elena."

"Your welcome."

She went back to the file to find a connection between both victims. A retail manager and a mechanic. No similarities there unless they knew each other. On the legal pad she wrote their names and an equal sign with a question mark in between. Did they have the same friends? What about family? Were they dating? These questions would have to wait till she could talk with the families. There had to be a pattern. Serial killers don't pick random victims.

Elena wrote down what she wanted to do when she arrived in Pinecrest. See the Sheriff, go to the crime scenes, talk with the Medical Examiner, and talk with the victims families. She

was very curious about the substance found in the tox screen of both victims. Looking at the time, she figured it was about time for Logan and Chelsea to come back home so she put everything back in the file and put it in one of her desk drawers just as Logan and Chelsea walked in. “We got pizza,” said Chelsea.

“Good, I’m starving. Where did you go off to?”

“Building hunting,” said Logan.

“Building hunting? What is that?”

“Took her to see some unique architecture.”

“I saw lots of stuff and took lots of pictures with my tablet for a bunch of ideas. Going to use my new drafting set.”

“Really cool. I have a new case.”

“What’s it about and when do you leave?”

“Day after tomorrow. At a small town called Pinecrest, about 80 miles south,” she made sure Chelsea was out of ear shot, “a serial killer is kidnapping people and removing bones from their bodies while they are still alive. The media is calling him the Bone Thief.”

“Jesus, Elena. And you chose this case?”

“Yes, I am the best one they have to catching this guy.”

“You never had a case like this. You’re going after one sick bastard. You be careful.”

“I will.”

Later that night, she sat up in bed with her laptop, getting a feel of Pinecrest. Logan was reading his book Ancient Architecture. Pinecrest held a population of 15,234. Median income of 72,500 with a 3% poverty rate. Industries and trade included retail, artisan, and textile. She continued reading. Pinecrest, nestled in the rolling hills of North Carolina, is a

picturesque town that embodies the charm of the south. The town is surrounded by lush sprawling forests of towering pines and majestic oaks, their branches dripping with Spanish moss that sways in the gentle breeze. The heart of Pinecrest is the town square where a beautiful restored courthouse stands. Cobble-stoned streets surround the square, lined with mom and pop shops, such as pharmacy with an old fashioned working soda fountain, and a couple of cafe's and a bank. The scent of Magnolias fill the air mingling with fresh coffee and baked goods. The nearby river is wide and slow moving, ideal for fishing and kayaking.

The pictures showed that the description to be true. A type of town Elena wouldn't mind living in. It would be a perfect place to raise a child. So hard to believe that such horrors are being visited upon the community. None knowing who will be next. Fear gripped its heart. And here she is, the only thing standing in the way between the safety of the people and a mad man. Did she bite off more than she can chew?

On the morning of her departure she went for her ritualistic run and exercise routine then after a shower she tiptoed through the room trying to get dressed without waking up Logan. "You can turn the light on."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, cant go back to sleep anyways. What time is it?"

"Seven."

"What time are you leaving?"

"Nine."

"You got two hours. How about some coffee and breakfast?"

"That sounds great."

By the time she finished getting dressed and made it downstairs, the coffee was done and Chelsea was sitting at the table. "You gonna be good for your Dad?"

"No," Chelsea laughed.

"That's ok I'll just hang you by your toes and tickle you till you pee," said Logan. Elena was going to miss this. Eggs, bacon, and biscuits were ready.

"Dad's gonna teach me how to draw on his computer."

"That is cool," said Elena

Sooner than she wanted it was time for her to go. She gave Chelsea a big hug and kiss. "I love you," she said

"Love you too."

"I'm going to miss you," she told Logan

"Will miss you too. You be careful."

I will."

Logan put her duffle bag in the trunk and they waived bye. Next stop, Pinecrest.

Chapter 4

Elena couldn't wrap her mind around why someone would want fresh human bones. Sure, Serial Killers take trophies, an ear, a tooth, but a human bone? Why go through all that trouble of cutting out a bone? She has investigated a lot of murders but this is one sick twisted individual. Thoughts ran through her mind like a whirlwind. From the pictures in the file and the unknown substance, she would say that her suspect was a doctor. The initial cut was smooth and not a jagged mess. But what laid underneath was chaos. With her mind lost in thought, the one and half hour drive went by fast. She came upon a large wooden sign. Welcome to Pinecrest population 15,284. Minus two, she thought. Elena pulled into the parking lot of the Pinecrest Inn. She went inside to secure a room. The front desk was to the right. To the left stood a rack of pamphlets about local and state attractions. "Welcome to the Pinecrest Inn, can I offer you a room?" said the blading middle aged man.

"Yes, I need it for two weeks, maybe longer."

"That's fine but it doesn't come with a kitchenette."

"It's ok. You do have internet?"

"Yes, in every room. No password."

"That will work for me."

"Please fill out this card. Are you here on business or vacation?"

"I'm here about the murders. I'm FBI Special Agent Elena Aldridge."

"Oh that's good, What terrible times have befall our community. That bumbling Sheriff couldn't solve a stolen bike case. That will be four hundred sixteen."

"She handed over her expense credit card. He charged her and handed it back."

“Here is the key to your room, 114.”

“Can you tell me how to get to the Sheriff’s office?”

“Go up three blocks to Wilhurst. Take a right, it will be on the left.”

“Thank you I appreciate it.”

Elena went to her room and unpacked her duffle bag. The room consisted of a bed, a dresser and tv and a round table and chair. Leading to the bathroom was an alcove to hang clothes. She put her laptop and the file on the round table. This just got real. It wasn’t some words on a piece of paper. The killer was real. The murders were real. Her goal; to stop a monster. To remove a bone with little blood loss, the killer had to be a doctor. It was a good lead to follow up on.

Finding the Sheriff’s office was easy enough. It was a nondescript building with the words Denton County Sheriff’s Office bolted to the brick face. She parked her car and went inside. A sergeant met her at the counter. “May I help you?”

“Elena Aldridge, FBI.”

“We have been expecting you. Come on in.” She went through the small swing gate to the left. They passed three rows of six desks. Dispatch was in the front left corner. They stopped at an open office. “Greg, FBI is here.”

“Come in Agent, have a seat. I’m Sheriff Greg Andrews.”

He was built like a bull. His salt and pepper hair only added to his physique. “Elena Aldridge, FBI.”

“You read the file.”

“Yes.”

“Have any questions?”

“Do you know of any similarities of the victims?”

“They didn’t know each other.”

“No commonalities?”

“You can question the families but I didn’t find anything. What all would you like to start doing first?”

“First see the crime scene’s then talk to the Medical Examiner.”

“Ride with me and I will take you to both sites.”

* * * *

Elena stood in the taped off area. Pines towered above her. Tree branches of a large oak overshadowed her. Dead pine needles and leaves covered the forest floor. “This is where Katelyn Spencer was found,” said Sheriff Anderson.

“I’ve seen enough. Lets go to the second one.”

It looked a lot like the first. One thing she noted at both sites was the lack of blood. They were killed somewhere else and dumped in the woods. “Who found them?”

Katelyn was found unfortunately by the landowners teenage Grandsons. Mark was found by hunters.”

“I’m ready to go see the Medical Examiner.”

“That will be easy. The morgue is across the street from the office.”

* * * *

Elena and Sheriff Anderson stood in the morgue with the Medical Examiner Lisa Olbert. Lisa’s long strawberry blonde hair was pulled back in a pony tail. “Lisa, this is Elena Aldridge, FBI.”

“Nice to meet you, Elena.”

“You too.”

“Would you like to see the victims?”

“Yes, I would.”

They both put on a pair of gloves. Lisa opened the first door on the second row and pulled out the body. “This is Katelyn Spencer. She was the first. She is missing her right Radius bone. It’s not pretty.” She pulled back the sheet. Elena’s eyes widened. Seeing the picture did not prepare her for the real thing. Without the Radius, half the arm caved in and went flat while the other half held its shape with the support of the Ulna. “Look at the incision, so precise and deliberate with very little blood loss. There is only one thing I know that can cut like that. An Electrocauderic Scalpel. It cauterizes at the same time it cuts,” said Lisa.

“Are you sure they were conscious during the removal of the bone?”

“Absolutely. The chem test showed high levels of Adrenaline, Endorphins, and Bradykins, and other proteins.”

“Your report said that there was an unknown chemical in the body.”

“Yes I don’t know what that is yet. I sent a sample off to the lab. They are a little backed up. The next victim is Mark Collinger, missing two ribs.”

A sickly sweet stench came from the wound. Two large flaps of muscle was pulled back revealing the two missing ribs. Through the gap she could see part of a brown and green hued lung. “How is it possible for someone to go through such excruciating pain and not pass out?”

“I’m not sure but I believe it has something to do with that chemical I found.”

“I’m done here. Thank you, Lisa. When that lab report comes in let me know.”

“I will. If you need anything else from me let me know.”

“Thanks.”

Sheriff Anderson went back inside. He promised to email her Katelyn's and Mark's family information. Elena headed back to the Inn. The person she was looking for was not just a doctor but a surgeon. The cuts were too precise. That only makes this case more disturbing. She's after someone that could be a pillar of the community. This will rock the town to it's foundations. She contemplated if she was going to have to kill him or if he would surrender. She didn't like killing. She would if she had to. It's just that she didn't see herself as Judge, Jury, and especially Executioner. Back in her room she opened her lap top and checked her email. There is was as promised, Jack and Margo Spencer, Katelyn's parents. Tabitha Collinger, Mark's sister. It was getting late and she still had other work to do. She decided to pay them a visit tomorrow morning.

Chapter 5

The Rusty Spur sits on the outskirts of town. It is a classic country bar with a rugged nostalgic charm. Three wagon wheels turned into chandeliers hang from the wooden beams. The walls are adorned with vintage cowboy hats, old horseshoes, a saddle or two, and pictures of time gone by. The bar itself is a long, polished slab of dark oak lined with stools made of repurposed tractor seats. Behind the bar is a wide selection of whiskey, bourbon, rum, and tequila. The shelving made from old barn wood. In one corner is a stage for live bands. Saw dust covered the dance floor. Loretta Lynn echos through the speakers from the jukebox.

Sam lined up on the eight ball. He was about to bank it and lay it to rest when his brother interrupted him. "Twenty says you can't put it in the side pocket off of two banks," said Terry.

"Your on. I just made twenty bucks." Sam eyed the table using his pool stick as a guide to calculate the angle. Once he had his calculation he looked at Terry and smiled, "easy money." He took the shot. The eight ball flew with a loud clack. It hit the side wall bounced back and off the other side wall to sink into the side pocket. Sam stood there smiling. Terry paid him.

"You were lucky," said Terry

"Luck has nothing to do with it. It's a game of geometry. Know how to calculate your angles and you will sink it every time." Sam finished his beer. "I got to be going."

"You still coming over tomorrow, right?"

"Hell yes."

"Good, Derek will be there."

“Really? Now that is one funny guy. See you tomorrow.”

“Later.”

Heading to the side of the bar where he parked, Sam came to a dead stop. “Oh hell no. Damn it.” The drivers side rear tire was flat. Grumbling, he unlocked the trunk. He reached for the jack, the handle, and the lug wrench. He never saw the person coming up from behind him. But he did feel the needle in his neck, then he felt nothing.

Sam tried to sit up but found his wrists were strapped down. He strained but to no avail. He tried to call for help but found he could only grunt and moan around the ball gag. He begin to tremble as fear set in. Sweat formed on his face. Soft piano music started playing. Sam turned his head to the music. He saw that his captor wore pale green scrubs and a surgical mask. “Hello, Sam. I’m sorry we have to meet like this.” Picking up the syringe, he injected the medication. “A little something to keep you conscious. I cant have you fainting on me. I’m sorry, I can not give you any pain medication. It is paramount that you feel what I am going to do. Your body will be producing certain chemicals that I must harvest.” The nonchalant voice made it all the more terrifying. “I’m going to remove your Tibia. If it is any consolation, you are furthering the research to save someone’s life. This is going to be very excruciating so try and concentrate on the music and go to your happy place. Let’s proceed, shall we?”

The doctor moved with purpose, his shadow flickering in the surgical lamp. Sam struggled, his eyes open wide in terror for he knew now that he laid before The Bone Thief. With a steady hand he picked up the Electrocauderic Scalpel, his gaze cold and detached. Even the gag ball couldn’t hold back Sam’s screams as the doctor cut deep below the knee

and continued to the ankle. With veins cauterized there was very little bleeding. The skin parts with a wet sound.

Next he trimmed away muscles, tendons, and ligaments away from the Tibia. He set the scalpel aside and grabbed the retractors to spread open the wound then he finished peeling away muscle from the bone. Next he picked up the bone saw. Pleading for mercy, Sam grunted and shook his head no. "I'm almost done. It will be over soon." He placed the saw blade against the bone and turned it on. The teeth of the blade bit into the bone, creating a grating, sickening sound. Blood spurted onto the doctor's gloves and scrubs. Sam's cries grew more frantic. Finally, with a wrenching snap, the Tibia broke free. He picked up a regular scalpel and walked to the head of the table. "You did very well. You can rest now." The doctor sliced through the carotid artery.

Chapter 6

The Muffin bakery and coffee shop, nestled on the cobblestone street in the square delivers warmth and charm. Its exterior is painted in pastel colors with windows framed by white shutters. Fresh baked goods and coffee waft through the air. The front door a deep burgundy with a brass handle welcomes customers inside with a tinkle of a little bell. The interior though modern, still gives that cozy vibe. Wooden tables and chairs are scattered about or if you prefer to sit outside there are three tables to choose from. A glass display case with an oak top showcases a wide variety of baked goods. A chalk board offers different types of coffees and teas. Elena just finished her breakfast of a moist blueberry muffin and two cups of coffee. The coffee was really good. If she wasn't working for the FBI she could see herself running a place like this in a small town. She was leaving to talk to the victim's families when her phone rang. "Hello?"

"It's Sheriff Anderson. Another body has been found."

"Where?"

"181 east. Head north out of town and take the first left. Keep going till you see the deputy's patrol cars. I'm on my way."

"Heading there now."

* * * *

Elena stumbled through the thick undergrowth of the woods. It's been a week since the last killing. She's been in town for what? Two days? This guy wasn't playing. The voices of the deputies broke the silence. She pushed her way through a thicket. What she saw made her stomach churn. The sickly odor of death hung in the air. The man's leg is a ghastly sight

to behold. The flesh sags unnaturally where the Tibia used to be creating a disturbing concave void in the lower leg. His skin pale and mottled with purplish bruising stretches taught over the knee and ankle. Jagged muscles and vessels protrude from the wound. It is grotesquely misshaped. The area was taped off and the deputies stood back. A man in his 70's wearing blue jeans and a black and red checkered long leave shirt carrying a .22 rifle stood off to the side. Elena stepped in for a closer look. She couldn't believe her eyes. Is that a footprint? It is. She would guess about a size 10 which would put the killer at least 6 ft. She took out her phone and took a picture of it. Sheriff Anderson walked up. "Good God Almighty. That's Sam Bennett."

"You know him?"

"Everyone knows him. He's the High School Principle."

"I got a footprint. Can't tell what kind of shoe but from the size I would say our suspect is about 6 ft."

"Terry is going to loose his shit."

"Terry?"

"Terry Bennett, Sam's brother. They were close."

She made a mental note of that. They walked over to the old man. "You found the body?" asked Sheriff Anderson.

"Yes, I was rabbit hunting when I came across Sam's body. Poor shame."

"What 's your name?"

"Marvin. Marvin Hall."

"Did you happen to see anyone else out here?"

"Nope, not a soul."

“You can go, sir.”

“I’m going to go too. I got some interviews to do.”

“Do me a favor. Leave Terry alone till tomorrow. He’s gonna take this really hard.”

“Of course I understand.”

“Thanks.”

Sam’s death was the monkey wrench in the gears. Everyone knew him. She would need to wait and see how the interview goes to determine how Sam fit in all this. If they don’t turn up anything then she will be back at square one. She pulled up to the Spencer residence. It was a stately colonial with a wraparound porch. On either side of a table sat two rocking chairs that was used for early morning coffee. Roses bloomed in the front length of the porch. She rang the doorbell and a middle aged woman answered. “Can I help you?”

“I’m Elena Aldridge FBI Special Agent. I would like to talk to you about your daughter, Katelyn Spencer.”

“Please come in.” Marge led her through the foyer into the living room where a graying haired man sat reading. “Henry, dear. This is Elena, she is an FBI Agent. She’s come to talk about Katelyn.”

“Oh. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

Marge sat next to her husband on the couch. “I’m trying to make a connection between the victims. Did she know Mark Collinger?”

“No, she didn’t,” said Henry.

“Can you tell me about her daily routine?”

"She would go to the gym in the morning then come back and get ready for work," said Marge.

"Where did she work?"

"La Fem Boutique. She was the store manager," said Marge

"Boyfriend, Fiance?"

"No one," said Henry.

"Do you know of anyone that would have anything against her?"

"Not at all. She got along with everyone."

"Does she have a laptop?"

"She does," said Marge.

"May I have forensics take a look at it?"

"Of course, let me go get it," said Marge.

"Do you know any of her friends?"

"She only had a few she hung out with."

"Can you write them down for me?" She handed Henry the legal pad and pen. Marge came back with the laptop and Henry finished writing down the names. She thanked them for their time and left. The interview didn't turn up anything. Hopefully the laptop will yield some information.

Her next stop was at Tabitha's, Mark's sister. She sat in the living room. Tabitha was in tears. "He was such a kind person. Always willing to help someone out when he could. There were a few times he would fix a car for free or let them make payments when they could."

"Does any of these names on this list look familiar?"

Tabitha took a long look. "No, not unless they were customer's. But as for friends, no."

"What was his daily routine like. What did he do when he got up for example?"

"He would run for a couple of miles and use his weight machine and a stair climber."

"And you have no idea if anyone had a grudge against him?"

"No, no one."

"Thank you, Tabitha. That's all I have to ask."

She was no closer to finding a commonality than she was before. She couldn't see anything linking them together. How many more must die before she finds the pattern. The only one that was known by everyone was Sam. She needed to talk to Terry. But first she needed to get this computer back to forensics so she decided to go ahead and head back home. She could spend the night at home and come back in the morning and talk to Terry.

* * * *

She pulled into the FBI parking lot and went straight to forensics. They said they will get on the computer right away. Next she stopped at Tom's office. "Hey, how's the case going?"

"I just dropped off a victim's computer to be looked at and beside the connection of the time of deaths I cant seem to find a connection to the victims. It's as if they are being picked randomly."

"Make a list of names side by side. Under each name put down what you know about them. Then compare each column."

"One more thing, a mysterious drug has been injected into each one. It was sent off to a lab but they are taking forever with it."

"Whats the name of the lab?"

“I really don’t know. Hang on, I can find out.” She called Lisa and got the name of the lab they use. “It’s called Aegis Laboratory.”

“Good. Let me give them a call and see what I can do.”

“Thank you. I have a feeling knowing what that chemical is will lead me to the killer.”

“You have an idea of who you’re dealing with?”

“Yes I do, a surgeon.”

“Very good. You have a lead, though a small one it is an important one. Stick with it.”

“I will.”

* * * *

Elena should go back but she can’t pass up the time to see her family. Besides she can’t do anything else till she talks with Terry and that can’t be till tomorrow. It will be nice to be back home if only for a day. She just wished it was under better circumstances. She pulled into the drive way next to Logan’s truck. She knew her family would be glad to see her. Unlocking the door she stepped in. Chelsea was at the coffee table drawing with her drafting set. “Mom.” She got up and ran to Elena and gave her a big hug. “Your home.”

“Only for tonight then I got to go back in the morning. Where’s your father?”

“In his office. Come on.” Chelsea practically dragged her. “Hey dad, look what I found. Can we keep her?”

“I don’t know. She’s kinda expensive.”

“Really?” said Elena.

Logan got up and gave her a big hug and kiss. “Solve the case?”

“No, I just had to come in and drop off a computer to forensics. I have to go back tomorrow.”

“How about a late lunch?”

“Capparelli’s,” said Chelsea

“Yeah, Capparelli’s,” chimed in Elena.

Chapter 7

Elena stopped at her room long enough to get Terry's address. It was a ten minute drive across town. She put it in the GPS. Once this interview was done she would do what Tom suggested and make the list. It was a good idea. Instead of shifting through pages back and forth she can see everything on one sheet at the same time. It's little tricks like this they don't teach you in the Academy. They should have a class called Tricks of the Trade. Little tidbits of information that will get you through rough spots in your career. She pulled up to the house and parked along the curb. He lived in a modest brick home. Knocking on the door a disheveled man answered. "Yeah, what do you want?"

"I'm Elena Aldridge, FBI."

"Glen said you may come by. Come on in. Can I get you something to drink? Bourbon, whiskey, beer?"

"No thanks. I'm fine."

"I'm not." He poured himself a glass of bourbon filling it up. "Is it true? The Bone Thief took his Tibia?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Why would he want someone's bones?"

"I have asked that many times myself. Do you recognize any of these names?"

"No, I don't. Who are they, suspects?"

"No, they are friends of the past victims. Would Sam have known any of them?"

"It's possible. Everyone knew Sam."

"Give me an idea of his daily routine."

“He would get up at 5:30 in the morning and bike five miles to the river and back. If school was in he would then go to work. If not then he would work in his wood shop.”

“Did he ever mention anyone he was having trouble with?”

“No, everyone liked Sam.”

“Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

On the way back to her room, she received a call from Lisa. “What you got for me?”

“The substance report came back. It’s a drug called Perceptol. It is used on patients who can’t take normal anesthesia. It keeps them awake to keep them from succumbing to the anesthesia relating to death. It is supposed to be used in tandem with Local anesthetics, pain killers, and epidurals.”

“So we are looking for a doctor.”

“Not just any doctor but an Orthopedic Surgeon.”

“Who manufacture's Perceptol?”

“The company is called Neuro Genix.”

“Thanks, Lisa.”

When she got back to the room, the first thing she did was to write down each victims name in a row and go over her notes and write down everything she knows about them. Then she compared what she had. That’s when she saw it. Under daily activities. They all had an exercise routine. They all were healthy. Healthy bodies, healthy bones. But that still didn’t answer why the Bone Thief needed fresh healthy bones. She needed to know who was receiving Perceptol. Elena looked up their customer service number and dialed it. Through the phone tree she got the sales department. “Thank you for calling Neuro Genix. How can I help you today?”

“This is Elena Aldridge, FBI. Do you handle a drug called Perceptol?”

“Yes we do.”

“A doctor in Pinecrest North Carolina ordered some and is abusing it. I need to know who placed that order and where it was shipped to.”

“Pinecrest, North Carolina. Let me have a look. Got it right here. A Dr. Andrew Devereaux. He ordered one case and it was sent to 3822 Rosedale.”

“How much comes in a case?”

“Forty-eight 10 ml vials.”

Next she called the Sheriff. “Sheriff Anderson. I need you to meet me at 3822 Rosedale with a search warrant.”

“What’s there?”

“The drug in the victim’s been identified as Perceptol. It is a drug that keeps the patient awake that can’t be put under with general anesthesia. It is supposed to be used along with other pain killers and epidurals.”

“Ok, I’ll meet you there.”

Elena stood outside the car waiting for the Sheriff. He finally pulled up. “You got it?” He waved it in the air. He banged on the door, “Search Warrant.” No one answered. They pulled their weapons. After the third hard kick the door flew inwards. They went in clearing the entire house only to find it vacant. “You sure this is the right address?”

“It’s what they had on file.”

“Under who’s name?”

“Doctor Andrew Devereaux.”

“You’ve been had or at least the pharmaceutical company has. He built the first hospital in Pinecrest back in 1840. Your chasing a ghost.”

“Damn it. Now I’m back to square one.”

“Hey don’t be hard on yourself. You didn’t know.”

Elena realized The Bone Thief wasn’t sick. He was something more dangerous. He was methodical, cunning. He knew exactly what he was doing.

* * * *

Back in her room she looked up Orthopedic Clinics in Pinecrest on her computer. There were five.

Denton Orthopedics – Dr. Oliver Mason

Sports and Ortho – Dr. Liam Carter

Orthopedics and Arthritis Center – Dr. Evelyn Blake

Pediatric Orthopedics – Dr. Amelia Foster

Mobility Ortho Care – Dr. Marcus Grant

Writing down the addresses, she decided to pay each one a visit. In doing so she came up with the same iron clad alibi from each one. All surgeries go through the Hospital Orthopedic Department. She was going to go there next but looking at the time the Admin offices would be closed so she decided to grab a bite to eat and then head back to her room. She will pay them a visit the next day.

Chapter 8

Paul typed in some numbers and pressed enter. A colored pie chart popped up. He imported it into the document and typed a brief description below it then went into greater detail in a new paragraph. He had three more graphs to go before he was done with the financial portfolio. He sat back and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He started this at four in the afternoon, and now it was eight-thirty at night, he had about two more hours to go. No time to relax at home either for he had an investment meeting in the morning dealing with this portfolio. His office phone rang breaking the silence causing Paul to jump. The caller ID said it was his wife. "Hey Hun," he answered.

"Hey babe, you ok?"

"Yeah, just tired."

"Come on home and finish it in the morning."

"I would love to do nothing more than that but I cant. I have a meeting with this first thing in the morning. I have to have it done tonight."

"How much longer? I miss you."

"About ten thirty and I miss you too."

"Ok, see you then. Love you."

"Love you too."

He was tempted to hit the vending machine. He could use the caffeine. Sitting for so long, it felt good to stand and stretch. He went to the vending machine and grabbed a bottle of coke then headed back. By the time ten came around he was finished. He printed the whole thing out and put it in a clear protector. Getting the account now would be easy once

the client sees what Paul has to present to them. The client's portfolio was failing because they diversified his investments too much. Once he saw what Paul put together including a safety net, there was no way the client would resist. Now it was finally time to go home.

When he reached his car in the above ground parking garage, he never saw the person sneak up from behind. One hand wrapped around his forehead and he felt a sharp prick to his neck. Then all he knew was blackness.

Paul's eyes bulged in sheer terror, darting around looking for an escape that didn't exist. Sweat poured from his forehead dripping down the sides of his face to mingle with silent tears. His breath came in shallow, rapid gasps muffled by the ball gag. His whimpers echoed off the walls. Every muscle strained against the straps that held him down. Wrists and ankles rubbed raw from his desperate attempt to escape. The Bone Thief walked in and stood over him. He patted the side of Paul's face. "Shhh. You will have plenty of time to scream soon enough." A cold shiver ran down Paul's spine. "Do you like Chopin? I find the music soothing as I perform surgery." He walked away and delicate piano music filled the room.

The Bone Thief picked up a syringe of light blue liquid. "I need you to be fully awake. This will help you do so." He administered the Perceptol to a vein in the neck. "Also one more thing. I will not be administering any kind of pain killers. I need you to feel everything. It excites the cells. Your probably wondering what I am going to do. Very simple. I am going to remove your Femur."

Paul's vision blurred as the doctor positioned the Electrocauderic Scalpel four inches below the hip. The anticipation of the coming incision was just as bad as the pain itself. The needle like tip touched skin, slicing through with great ease. Paul's muffled screams caught in his throat as the doctor cut down to two inches above the knee. The doctor kept cutting bone

deep then used the retractors to open up the space so he can start trimming muscle, tendon, and ligaments away from the bone with a regular scalpel.

Once he had the area clear, he picked up the bone saw, its teeth designed to cut through the hardest of bones. He placed the blade against the bone and turned it on. The high pitch whirring of the saw along with the grinding of bone was a symphony of horror. Vibrations from the saw cutting through bone sent waves of agony up and down Paul's leg. His screams matching that of the saw. The bone gave way with a grinding crunch. He set aside the saw and picked the scalpel back up and trimmed away muscle and sinew attached under the bone. Once clear he placed the femur on a stainless steel pan. Without a word, he walked to the head of the table and cut Paul's artery, letting him bleed out on the floor.

Chapter 9

Elena and Sheriff Anderson stood there in the woods near the hiking trail. Lisa knelt, examining the leg. The right leg, a grotesque scene of raw violence. The upper leg was a gaping jagged chasm, muscles cut and shredded. A hollow cavity where a Femur used to be. All that was left was three inches of bone below the hip and three inches of bone above the knee. “The Bone Thief took his Femur,” said Lisa.

“Damn it. I hate it when the media nicknames the serial killers. Its too humanizing,” said Sheriff Anderson

“I can’t imagine the agonizing pain he went through. This is the worst one yet.”

“What’s his full name?” asked Elena.

“Paul Winestead. He was a financial advisor at the bank,” said Sheriff Anderson.

“I bet he exercised.”

“How do you know that?”

“I found The Bone Thief’s pattern. He only kills those who are physically fit. I may not know who he is but I do know he is an Orthopedic Surgeon. The Ortho clinics refer all patients that need surgery to the Ortho Surgery team at the hospital. I’m headed there now.”

“Keep me posted.”

“I will.”

* * * *

At the hospital, Elena stopped at the information desk. “Who is the director of the hospital?”

“That would be Richard Dalton,” said the gentleman.

“And where can I find him?”

“All admin offices are on the fifth floor. Once you exit the elevator, take a right and you will find his office there.”

“Thank you.”

The elevator was crowded so she waited on another one. She felt like she was finally making headway in the case. She took the next elevator to the fifth floor and stepped out and headed down the hall to the right. She found the door that said Hospital Director. She opened the door and walked in. To her right was a couch. To her left was a glass table with magazines on it. She stepped up to the receptionist. “I’m Elena Aldridge FBI. I’m here to see Richard Dalton.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

She could see where this was going to go. “I don’t have time for this crap.” Elena bypassed the door that said files and went to the door at the back. She opened it up.

“Hey you can’t do that. I’ll call security.”

“Elena Aldridge, FBI.”

“It’s ok Marion, let her be. Please Agent Aldridge, have a seat. How may I be of service to you?”

“How many Orthopedic Surgeons do you have?”

“Five.”

“Can I have their names?”

“Sure. Victor Holloway, attendant. James Walker, attendant. Emma Richardson, Resident. Henry Mitchel, attendant. Alexander Brooks, Resident.”

Elena wrote down the names. "The Bone Thief is an Orthopedic surgeon, and I believe that one of your doctor's is The Bone Thief."

"I see."

"Does any of your doctors use the drug Perceptol?"

"No way. The hospital does not participate in experimental medicine. For anything that requires such procedures, they will have to go to a city based hospital."

"Then one of your doctor's is ordering for themselves because all the victim's autopsy chem test shows that Perceptol is in their system."

"Dear God, please tell me they had some form of anesthesia?"

"None at all."

"I will do anything I can to assist you. Our hospital prides itself on being a pain free environment. We go as far as we can to make each patient feel comfortable as possible."

"Are they on duty today?"

"Your lucky, each one has patient visitation today."

"What floors are they on?"

"Dr. Holloway and Dr. Walker are on the third floor. Dr. Richardson is on the fourth floor. Dr. Mitchel is on the fifth and Dr. Brooks is on the sixth. But you can eliminate Dr. Richardson, she is pregnant, and Dr. Mitchel does not do surgeries anymore. He is here as a consultant."

"Thank you for your help, Mr. Dalton."

She eliminated Dr. Richardson and Dr. Mitchel from her list. That left three suspects. First she went to see Dr. Alexander on the sixth floor. The nurses station called him over. He didn't fit the height requirements of what the foot print revealed being only around 5' 10" and he had an air tight alibi. He and his wife attended a black tie fundraiser for underprivileged

children. So that left Dr. Victor Holloway and Dr. James Walker on the third floor. She stopped at the nurses station and called Dr. Victor Holloway. Elena stood in the doorway to see a young girl around 12 laying in bed hooked up to machines and tubes. "That's my daughter, Adeline. She has Hyper-metabolic Senescence Syndrome. Her Mitochondria is working overtime causing her metabolism to go through the roof causing her organs to age prematurely. Being in a medical induced coma is the only way to slow down her metabolism."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You are Dr. Holloway?"

"That would be me, how may I been of service to you?"

"I'm FBI Agent Elena Aldridge. May I ask you some questions?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Where were you last night?"

"At home with my wife. Normally one of us would be here at all times but we both needed a break."

"And is your wife here today?"

"Yes, she is in the cafeteria I believe."

"Thank you Dr. Holloway. Could you send Dr. Walker over to me?"

"Yes I can."

She made a mental note of Dr. Holloway's 6ft height. Dr. James Walker who also appeared to be 6ft walked up. "I'm Dr. James Walker."

"I'm Elena Aldridge, FBI. Can you tell me where you were last night?"

"I ate at Sonic then went home. I don't live with anyone that can confirm that but I believe I still have the receipt in my car."

"About what time did you go to Sonic?"

“Around seven.”

“But after that no one can confirm your whereabouts? No phone calls that were made or received?”

“No.”

“Thank you for your honesty. I may have further questions.”

“Any time.”

As Dr. Walker left, a woman with blond hair entered Adeline’s room and sat down. “Excuse me, Mrs. Holloway?”

“Yes, and you are?”

“Elena Aldridge, FBI.”

“How can I help you?”

“Was your husband at home all night with you?”

“I assume he was. I mean I got up to go to the bathroom and he wasn’t in bed. He could have been somewhere else in the house.”

“You didn’t look for him?”

“It didn’t dawn on me to. I was still half asleep.”

“Do you know what time this was?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Thank you Mrs. Holloway.”

* * * *

While Elena was contemplating what she had learned today, her phone rang. It was the Forensics office. “Agent Aldridge.”

“We got done with your victim’s computer. There was nothing on it that would indicate someone was stalking her or anything like that.”

“Ok, thank you for your help.”

She had two suspects. One who didn’t have a reliable alibi but was eager to help and one who possibly lied about part of their alibi. Victor might have been home some of the night but he could have taken off. James could never have been home at all. Either one could have called themselves Andrew Devereaux and ordered Perceptol. But where does the vacant house come into play? Obviously they couldn’t send it to their own house even under an assumed name. Was the house picked randomly because it was empty? She didn’t think so. There had to be a connection between one of them. She looked up the number to the County Clerk’s office and called.

“County Clerks office this is Josh.”

“Josh, I’m Elena Aldridge FBI. I need to look up the owner of a house.”

“Whats the address?”

“3822 Rosedale.”

“Let’s take a look. The property belongs to a Jack and Betty Hanley. Both deceased.”

“It doesn’t say who owns it now?”

“No one has come forth to claim it. They had a year to do so. In a couple of month’s it goes up for auction.”

“Thank you, Josh.”

“Your welcome.”

Next she called Tom. “Hey Elena, what you got?”

"I've narrowed it down to two suspects. But to know which one all hinges on who owns a particular house. I need a genealogy report done on a Jack and Betty Hanley. I need to know their next of kin. Last known address is 3822 Rosedale."

"Go it. I'll have this as a priority. You're doing a great job. You'll have this wrapped up in no time."

"I hope so."

"Talk to you soon."

She felt like she had a 500 piece puzzle set and all of them fit together except one piece. The one piece that ties the whole thing together. She may not know the motive of The Bone Thief until the Bone Thief is caught. Another nagging question is where the Bone Thief is working from? Perhaps if she applies more pressure one of them will slip and make a mistake. She sat back, closed her eyes and pinched her nose. What she needed to do was get a fresh set of eyes on it. She couldn't make a move without that genealogy report so she decided to take a couple of days at home and regroup and come back at this a new.

Chapter 10

When Elena arrived home, her family was overjoyed to see her. She spent the entire day out with them. They went to the mall, did some shopping, ate lunch at the food court, more shopping, then took Chelsea to a park to play. That evening they had dinner at a nice restaurant. It was nice to put the case behind her for a few hours and spend some time with her family. It was a little after nine when they made it home. Chelsea said she was tired and went to her bedroom. Elena went to tuck her in. "Mom, I'm a little old to be tucked in, but I still like it. Don't tell anyone."

Elena smiled. "I won't."

She sat at the dinning room table with the file and her notes. She ran a background check on both doctors; local, state, and federal. They were as clean as a baby's bottom in a fresh diaper. Tomorrow she will call medical board and see what they have on them. Right now she felt frustrated. She pounded her fist on the table. "Damn it."

"Honey, step away, come with me and have a couple of glasses of wine."

She nodded. "Sounds like a good idea."

He poured two glasses of wine and she joined him on the couch. She talked about how much she missed him and Chelsea. She said she was thinking about retiring after this case. He told her how he would love for her to be here all the time but she would be miserable. "You love the thrill. You live for the chase."

"But not every case has a happy ending. And I feel like at times I'm dealing in life and death. And that is exactly what I'm doing. Before I can catch a killer there has to be a few

deaths even though it is my job to stop them before they kill again. But I can't stop every one."

"Still you would miss it. Your not ready to retire yet."

Elena new he was right. She poured herself more wine. There really was nothing else for her to do now. In the morning she would give the Medical Board a call and hope she can figure out which doctor was her true suspect. But it mostly will be hinging on the house. After her second glass of wine she put the file up and they went to bed.

The very next morning before Chelsea got up, Elena called the Medical Board. Neither doctor had any reports on them. Her phone rang. Her heart leaped. It was Tom. Hopefully he had what she was looking for. "Hey Tom, you got something for me?"

"Yeah I do. Jack and Betty Hanley are Dr. James Walker's grandparents."

"I'll be damn. This puts a whole new light on this now. Thanks Tom, I got to go."

It made sense that James didn't want to claim his grandparent's house. He couldn't order Percetol and use it as a drop point if he had. But even though she got a clear break there was a nagging feeling in the back of her mind. What if she was wrong about this? She could be putting an innocent man in prison or at the very least upending his life, especially once word gets out and in that small of a town it will. But then on the other hand what if her hunch is right? Only one way to find out. Get a search warrant for James' house. "Mom?"

"Oh, I'm sorry sweetie, I was lost in thought."

"I said I want to go to Capparelli's for lunch."

"That is a good idea. I could use a good Eggplant Parmesan."

On the following morning, Elena headed back to Pinecrest with renewed determination. She decided not to second guess herself and get the search warrant. All she needed was a

single vial, or even a shipping document, or a receipt. Anything that can link him to the Percetol order. If she finds it, she will arrest him on the spot and charge him with all the murders. What will she do if she is wrong? She decided that she will cross that bridge when she gets to it. She had to keep in mind at the same time that there was nothing simple in this case. As soon as she got to Pinecrest, she went straight to the Courthouse. At the last minute she decided to kill two birds with one stone. She would ask for two search warrants. One for Dr. Walker and the other for Dr. Holloway. This way she didn't have to worry about second guessing herself. She presented what she knew to the Judge and he approved both search warrants. Next, she went to see Sheriff Anderson. She needed at least four deputies.

"I need four deputies. Judge Morton gave me two search warrents, one for the Walker residence and the other for the Holloway residence."

"Do Dr. Walker's house first. Alice, get four deputies over to, whats the address?"

"5617 Wilmington."

"5617 Wilmington. I'm going to acompany you on both searches."

* * * *

Four Deputies were waiting at Dr. James Walker's home when she drove up followed by Sheriff Anderson. They joined the Deputies. "What we are looking for is any vials of Percetol, a box, a label, a shipping manifest, or even a receipt. Check drawers clothes pockets, everywhere that something small could be hidden. Don't leave any stone unturned. Let's go." When she got to the porch, James stepped out.

"What is this?"

"I have a search warrant for your house," said Elena

"For what?"

“Perceptol.”

“I told you I don’t use that stuff.”

“Yes, and you also told me you have no alibi. Step aside.” He did so. They all went in and begin the search. They checked every nook and cranny. Anywhere a small vial could be hidden. The search took about 45 minutes. They came up empty handed.

“Are you satisfied?” said James.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” replied Elena.

* * * *

Their next stop was at 7921 Wilshire, Victor’s house. Victor answered the door. He was more cooperative than James was. Almost to a fault. They searched everywhere but came up with nothing as well. Elena gave Sheriff Anderson a quick glance. Was that a look of satisfaction on his face?

* * * *

Elena sat at her table in her room feeling deflated. She was so sure that it was James since he had a connection to the house that the Perceptol was delivered. It did cross her mind that Victor might be trying to set up James or at least put all the focus on him. Unless she comes up with hard core indisputable evidence, there was no way she would get another search warrant. Victor could be lying about his alibi but James became very defensive. A complete change in emotion from the first interview they had at the hospital. Besides, James knew a lot about Perceptol. What she decided to do is to apply more pressure see who cracks. She can’t slack now. One of them will make a mistake sooner or later. No killer is perfect. She had only two days left before the next murder. She decided to start the pressure now and go to the Sheriff’s office and use one of the interrogation rooms.

First she called in Victor. They sat in a room across from one another. “Does the names Jack and Betty Hanley mean anything to you?”

“No.”

“What about the address 3822 Rosedale?”

“No, should it?”

“You tell me. Last month a shipment of Perceptol was sent there.”

“In who’s name?”

“I can’t divulge that information but you are a suspect in the case. You see, I have a feeling you are lying about your alibi. Your wife said she woke up to go to the bathroom and you weren’t in bed. Where did you go?”

“She wouldn’t have had to look far. I had a bad dream about our daughter. I dreamed that The Bone Thief had her and was removing her skeleton one bone at a time and she was blaming me for not keeping her safe. I spent the rest of the night in her room.”

“I don’t have any further questions for you for right now. Just don’t go anywhere.”

“I don’t plan on leaving my daughter.”

Next, she placed a call to Dr. James Walker. “Dr. Walker, this is Agent Aldridge. I need you to come down to the Sheriff’s office. I have a few more questions to ask you.”

“I’m sorry Agent Aldridge but I am on my way to check in with some patients.”

“Fine, then I’ll drag you out of the hospital in cuffs and charge you for impeding and investigation.”

“Give me an hour.”

“You have twenty minutes.” She hung up. She decided to play hardball on purpose. If she can get him upset or flat out mad there was a good chance that he would slip and make a

mistake and incriminate himself. Within twenty minutes he walked in. "This way," said Elena. He followed her to the interrogation room. They took a seat. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. I have two issues with you and I am putting you down as a suspect. Issue one, you have no alibi. Issue two depends on how you answer. Does the names Jack and Betty Hanley mean anything to you?"

"Yes, they are my grandparents. What do they have to do with this?"

"Last month a box of Percetol was delivered to 3822 Rosedale, your grandparent's house." She stood up and threw her chair across the room. "I want answers and I want them now. Why was Percetol sent to your grandmother's vacant house?"

"I have no idea. I don't know. I didn't order it."

"I have a theory. Because it is an unclaimed property, It couldn't be traced back to you. You can't use your own address for obvious reasons, you order Percetol and send it to their old house under an assumed name and go by and pick up the shipment. None was found at your house but you have it hidden somewhere. Where ever your performing the surgery's at."

"I am not The Bone Thief. I have never nor will I ever use Percetol."

"For someone who never used it you know a lot about it."

"I read the article in a medical journal about it. Am I under arrest?"

"No, not at the moment."

"Then this questioning is over. I have patients to see." He stood up and stormed out of the room.

* * * *

Elena paced the floor of her hotel room. Victor was calm, cool, collected while James was highly defensive. He could be a loose cannon. Yet on the other hand, Victor also fits the

description. Ted Bundy held a cool demeanor and was charming. The BTK killer was a family man and was involved in the community. Either doctor was a candidate for being The Bone Thief. Elena felt frustrated with a hint of self doubt. Despite narrowing it all down to two suspects, she can't seem to get a clear lead. The fact that James was defensive makes him suspicious. It could be a sign of guilt or fear of being wrongfully accused, which could tarnish his reputation as a doctor. But Victor on the other hand, his calmness could be a sign of his innocence or it could be his arrogance of being so positive of covering his tracks that he doesn't think he could be stopped. Considering the seriousness of the accusations he seemed too calm, just too controlled. If she went with her gut instinct she would say Victor was her prime suspect. If she went with evidence then she would have to say James is her prime suspect.

She sat down at the table. Everything in front of her, no alibi, the relationship to the owners of the house, the defensiveness, everything pointed to James. She really hoped she wasn't second guessing herself. Too many lives were in jeopardy for her to make a mistake. She took another long look at her notes, paying close attention to the little things. Forty-eight vials to a case. Four murders. Forty-four vials left. A thought came to her. She called the makers of Perceptol. "Yes ma'am, I have a question. Does Perceptol have to be refrigerated? It does, ok. One more question. What is the shelf life? One year. Ok thank you."

Beyond the need to simply inflict pain, The Bone Thief needed the person to remain awake and free from all types of pain killers for a reason. Lisa said that when someone feels pain, the body produces all types of proteins and chemicals. When it comes to human physiology she was out of her league. She needed to speak to an expert in Cellular Therapy. She

decided to call the only place she knew to get answers. On her computer she looked up the number to Duke University. “Thank you for calling Duke University, how may I help you?”

“I need to get in contact with your Medical department.”

“We have several areas that can fall into.”

“Cellular Biology.”

“Please hold.”

The phone rang three times then someone answered. “Department of Cellular Biology.”

“Hi, I’m Elena Aldridge FBI. I need to speak with your top doctor in Cellular Biology.”

“That would be Bridgett Johannes. Let me get her for you.”

“Thank you.” She flipped to a clean sheet in her legal pad to take notes.

“This is Dr. Johannes.”

“This is Elena Aldridge FBI. I’m working on a case and I need your help for expert information.”

“I’ll do my best to help.”

“How does Adrenaline, Bradykins, and Endorphins affect a damaged area?”

“Adrenaline restricts certain vessels to reduce bleeding, Bradykins are produced locally at the site of damage to help keep swelling down to a minimum. As for Endorphins, They are the body’s natural pain inhibitors. A person still feels pain, but not as bad as it could be.”

“How can stem cells be used to repair Mitochondria dysfunctions?”

“They can be used to replace damaged cells with good cells that contain healthy Mitochondria. A more common and faster way would be to use the Sendai virus. The Sendai virus is a replicating virus in rats and mice but not harmful to humans. Put in stem cells with

healthy Mitochondria the virus will attach itself to the host cell and replace it's host make up including Mitochondria."

"How long would I take to work?"

"Two maybe three days."

"Is it a viable solution?"

"Yes, we are experimenting taking stem cells and injecting them into the Sendai virus and injecting them into an area where there are cancer cells. They replenish the area with fresh cells killing off the cancer cells."

"Would Neuro Genix have this Sendai virus?"

"Yes they do, that is how we get ours."

"Thank you, Dr. Johannes."

"Your very welcome."

She called Neuro Genix back and got a hold of their sales department again. After identifying herself she asked about a shipment to 3822 Rosedale located in Pinecrest, North Carolina under the name Andrew Devereaux. They said that a shipment was sent last month along with a shipment of Perceptol. It did need to be refrigerated and held a shelf life of six months. She thanked them and hung up. It all started to make sense now, she knew who her true suspect is.

Chapter 11

Lloyd, owner of the Four Seasons Hunting and Outdoor store was ringing up his last customer of the evening. "That's one box of .22 stingers, two Real Tree camo shirts, and a pair of fingerless gloves. That comes to 51.84"

Frank handed him Sixty. "You hiking tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I am. I go every off day."

"Be careful, Clarence said he saw a black bear hanging around the trails."

"Thanks for letting me know. I'll take a bottle of bear gel with me. Probably the damn tourists feeding them thinking its cute."

"They won't think its so cute when the bear decides they are food."

"Ain't that the truth. Reminds me of this story in Back Country Bound magazine. This lady and her husband step out of a visitors guide building in Australia. In a Eucalyptus tree on a low branch is this Koala bear. Seeing how cute and cuddly it looked, she walks over and plucks it out of the tree. Damn thing tore her a new ass hole. All said and done she ended up with 73 stitches."

"Damn, some people have no sense at all."

"Here you go." Everything was bagged.

"I know what I forgot. I need a can of bear gel."

Lloyd picked up a can off the shelf behind him. "Here you go, on the house."

"Thanks, Lloyd. Mighty kind of you."

He walked Frank to the door. "Don't forget, got a store wide sale this Saturday. Got some new merchandise coming in and I need the shelf room."

“Oh I’m not going to forget. I’ll be one of the first ones standing in line waiting for you to open. The whole damn town looks forward to your yearly sale.”

“I greatly appreciate that. Spread the word that everyone will get a free can of bear gel.”

“Headed over to the Rusty Spur now. I’ll make an announcement. Good evening Lloyd.”

“You have a good one Frank.”

After he locked up and turned out the lights, he broke down the cash drawer. He made \$1,500 that day. Not too shabby. Come Saturday’s annual sale, he will rake in five times that much, maybe more. Every year at this time his shelves got pretty bare. He closes the store till he gets restocked, including a few of the latest gadgets. When he reopens he does so with a ten percent off sale for the day. Not once has he ever regretted quitting his VP position at the bank and going into business for himself. Besides, old man Baxter was an asshole. All he cared about was money. He didn’t care about the employees. The look on that old man’s face when he laid the hammer down on Baxter and told him exactly what he thought was priceless.

With all the days paperwork done and the cash drawer broken down, Lloyd headed out. Locking the back door, he didn’t see The Bone Thief standing in the shadows. He walked to his truck while whistling a happy tune when he felt a deep sting in his neck. At first he thought he got hit by a wasp but then his sight grew blurry and he felt very dizzy. Unable to stand any longer, his knees buckled and he went down into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Lloyd awoke to the clear smell of antiseptic mingling with the coppery scent of old blood. He started to struggle to only find his wrists and ankles were strapped down tight. Despite his struggles he knew there was no escape. He tried to call out but found the ball gag prevented

him from forming words. Turning his head to the left he saw a large tray of various operating instruments gleaming in the light of the surgical lamp. He knew exactly where he was. Deep seeded fear seeped in as he realized he was the next victim of The Bone Thief. Terror filled his eyes as the Bone Thief stepped out of the shadows. He picked up a syringe. "This is called Perceptol. It will keep you fully conscious during the procedure. Plus there will be no pain meds given. I need you to feel every cut, every slice." He pushed the needle into Lloyd's neck and pushed down the plunger. "I will be taking your left Humerus. That is the upper bone in the arm. Let's get started."

He made an incision from the shoulder down to the elbow. Lloyd cried out in pain. Starting back at the top he cut deeper into muscle and tendon, separating the tough tissue in half. Seeing a sliver of white bone, he grabbed the retractors and spread the arm open in squishy, tearing sounds. Lloyd's screams of agony drowned out the piano music. Next, he takes a regular scalpel and carefully separated muscle from bone. He couldn't get to the backside of the bone but this will do. He had enough room to use the bone saw. When the spinning teeth bit into bone the ball gag could not contain Lloyd's banshee like scream as he felt pain that could only have been born in hell. The upper part of the Humerus separated from the shoulder leaving behind an inch of bone. He then sawed through the lower end of the bone. Using forceps, he grabbed a hold and pulled up and out with a tearing, ripping, sound and one final scream. The Bone Thief placed the Humerus in the metal tray. Picking up the scalpel once again, he sent Lloyd into an eternal bliss.

Chapter 12

The arm was laid open and flattened out without any support. The inside was torn and shredded muscle and sinew. "Lloyd Evans. He owned the Four Seasons outdoor store," said Sheriff Anderson.

"I think I know who did this. At least one of two suspects."

"Who do you have?"

"A Dr. James Walker and a Dr. Victor Holloway. Do you know them?"

"Can't say that I do."

"They are both Orthopedic Surgeons that work out of the hospital."

"Which one are you leaning towards?"

"Victor."

"Why him over the other?"

"James was too emotional, too defensive to be a killer as if he is trying to profess his innocence. Victor on the other hand was way too calm, cool, and collected."

"Maybe that's because he doesn't have anything to hide. Where as James' defensiveness is born from him trying to hide something."

"I thought about that. All the evidence is pointing to James. But its all too easy, too obvious. I think Victor is setting him up. You see, I'm also qualified as a profiler and going down that road Victor fits the profile. Yeah, James is a text book case and that's why I don't think he is The Bone Thief. There is nothing textbook about The Bone Thief."

"I need you to go tell this to the Mayor. He is jumping my ass about all the deaths. He doesn't understand the process of catching a killer."

“I’ll head there now. Courthouse?”

“Yeah, fourth floor. His name is Daniel Rigsby.”

* * * *

The large pillared red brick Courthouse had two balconies and a spacious veranda. To the left was a large bulletin board that held announcements and information. A hall of black and white squared marble flooring stretched before her. The first floor held Public Records, Tax Office, County Clerk’s office, and Licenses. The second and third floor held courtrooms and the third were the city offices such as the city council and their individual offices. On the fourth floor to her right at the end of the hall was the Mayor’s Office. The secretary was very polite. “He will see you now, Mrs Aldridge.”

“Thank you.”

It was a modest yet comfortable office. A large oak desk, computer, Bookshelves to the right and a credenza to the left. Two padded leather chairs sat before the desk. “Please have a seat Agent Aldridge. Thank you for stopping by. Do you have any leads on who’s The Bone Thief?”

“I do. I have two suspects but I believe I know which one is The Bone Thief.”

“Then why not arrest them?”

“It’s not that simple. Actually nothing about this case is simple. Let me explain. When I first took the case, I knew the time frame of the killings, a week apart. But I couldn’t find a connection between the victims. They didn’t know each other, didn’t have the same circle of friends. After going over everything for the hundredth time I found it. It was so simple that it was easily overlooked. The connection between the victims is that they each had an exercise routine. The Bone Thief needed healthy victims. Dr. James walker had no alibi. The drug

Perceptol was delivered to his grandparent's house. Plus he became very defensive during the interrogation.”

“Sounds like you have your person.”

“No, not really. The reason for his defensiveness is because he is innocent. He’s worried about how this would destroy his life. I believe he is being set up by the actual Bone Thief. When I interviewed Victor Holloway, he was calm. Too calm. The reason why I believe it is him is because his daughter is sick. Something to do with her Mitochondria raising her metabolism so high that her organs are prematurely aging. I talked to a doctor at Duke and was told that there are certain cells in bone marrow that could be used to cure the condition.”

“And you can arrest him?”

“No, the evidence against him is less than circumstantial. The one mistake Victor made was telling me about his little girl. If I knew where he was performing the operations I could get hard evidence.”

“Have you tried the original hospital?”

“No, I thought it was long gone by now.”

“No, its still around, its just not used anymore and it is so decrepit that it is just left to fall apart on itself.”

“Where is it?”

“Head east about half a mile and you will come to an old dirt road. Follow that road. It will take you right to it.”

“Thank you Mayor, that is exactly what I needed.”

Chapter 13

Elena's heart raced as she stood before the decrepit faded green building, the old hospital looming like a specter from the forgotten past. The air was thick with anticipation, every nerve in her body electrified by the realization that she might have finally found the lair of the Bone Thief. For weeks she had been chasing shadows, each lead fizzling out into dead ends, but now, standing here it felt different, like every piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. Her mind buzzed with the excitement of the discovery. She could almost hear the walls telling of the Bone Thief's atrocities. After everything, the sleepless nights, the dead bodies, the frustration of chasing a ghost, she was finally here. The thrill of the hunt surged through her veins, a mixture of dread and exhilaration. She grabbed a few clear evidence bags from her trunk along with a flashlight. Turning on her flashlight and pulling her gun she stepped through the broken glass door. Chairs were overturned, papers scattered across the floor. In one corner sat an old wheelchair. On the wall was the directory. Surgery second floor. Surprising enough the elevator worked. Stepping inside she pressed the number two button.

Once there she followed the signs to double doors that said Authorized Personnel Only. She pushed open a door and went in. Here the lights were on. There was a total of six surgical rooms. The fourth was the only one that was closed. She opened it with great caution and entered the chamber of horrors. The pungent smell of blood hit her like a brick. In the center stood a blood stained operating table. Below a thick layer of coagulated blood covered the floor. Old rusted instruments and a box of large gloves. On a surgical table was a tray of new surgical instruments. She went to the fridge and opened it. Sure enough there were the bottles of Perceptol and the virus. She took a vial of each and put it in the evidence

bags. There was a strange smell in the air coming from the far side of the room. The closer she drew to the large trash container the worse it got. A gagging, putrid, rotting smell. She had to cover her nose with a hand. She opened the lid. Inside covered with maggots and flies were the decaying bones of the victims. She reeled back. It was time to leave.

Her mind, a storm of thoughts. The weight of the vial felt heavier than it should as if it came along with the burden of proof. She also took two of the scalpels just in case they might have been touched without gloves. The gloves. They were size large. Who ever wore size large was the Bone Thief, be it James who was ultra defensive or Victor who was unnervingly calm. But what if they both wore large gloves? So damn close. She didn't need another monkey wrench in the gears at this point. But she had to face that that could be a possibility. She couldn't stake the place out and see who shows up because it was just a single dirt road in and out. Nowhere to hide. Right now she needed to get these scalpels back to the office and have forensics check for finger prints.

Doubt gnawed at her. What if the scalpels come back clean? It was a possibility. She could be chasing ghosts again while the truth slips from her fingertips. Her instincts are screaming she is so close but she can't let emotion rule. She felt she was in the calm before the storm. And once it hits is she ready for what it brings? If the scalpels come back clean, then she will only have the gloves to rely on. One of them wore size large. What if they both wore the same size? She would have to cross that bridge when she gets to it.

It was around one in the afternoon when she arrived at the FBI office. She went to forensics and told them she needed the scalpels check for prints asap. And to put the bottle of Perceptol and virus as evidence. She said she would be in Tom's office. From there she went straight to see Tom. "Hey Tom."

“Hey Elena, how is it going?”

“I found the Bone Thief’s lair. It’s in the original, now abandoned hospital out in the woods. I brought back two scalpels and a bottle of Perceptol as evidence. Forensics is running the scalpels for prints.”

“Do you have it narrowed down to one suspect?”

“Yes, I believe it is Dr. Victor Holloway.”

“Great work on finding the killers location of operation.”

“Yeah but I still feel like I’m chasing ghosts. If they come back clean the only thing I have to go on is who wears large gloves. What I’m afraid of is what if they both do? I still don’t have enough to arrest either one.”

“My grandfather worked a case where he was chasing a ghost. The case was never solved. Tons of cryptic messages with only a handful deciphered but it wasn’t enough.”

“Wait, your talking about the Zodiac Killer. Your grandfather worked on that case?”

“He was one of the Agents, yes.”

“But this isn’t going to go away like that. He will keep on killing.”

“And he will make a mistake and you will be there to pick it up.”

“I need to stop it before the next victim. I don’t want anyone else to die.”

His phone rang. “It’s forensics.” He put it on speaker.

“Is Agent Aldridge there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“The results are negative. Gloves must have been worn.”

“Ok, thanks.”

“I’m sorry Elena. Whats your next move?”

The news was a crushing blow. It's like the ground under her is slipping away. She knew it was a possibility but it still shook her. This was a reminder that the Bone Thief is always one step ahead. It seems like he is never going to make a mistake. Like he thought of every possible scenario. Self doubt starts to seep in making her wonder if she really is the right person for this case. If she asked to be removed from this case, how many others will she ask to be removed from? No, she can't give up. Too many lives are depending on her. But the feeling of doubt was real. "In the place is a box of large gloves. Whoever wears large gloves is the killer. But I don't know what I will do if they both wear the same size. I'm going to head back right now. I need to go to the hospital and find out."

"You still think it's Victor?"

"Yeah, I do. His daughter is sick. Something to do with her Mitochondria. I asked a doctor at Duke if a case like hers can be cured. She said with cell therapy using stem cells and a type of virus it could. I think he is harvesting bones to find a cure for his daughter."

"So you know who is doing it and why."

"I have a gut feeling it's Victor but it could also be James. I will find out for sure at the hospital."

"What would James' reason be behind it?"

"They are friends. He could be doing it for Victor."

"Elena, go with what your feelings are telling you. Don't second guess yourself."

She hurried out of the office and to her car. There were no fingerprints because they wore gloves. The gloves will be their damning evidence. She was almost sure that James wore medium sized gloves. She also needed to see the Sheriff and let him know what she found but not before she confirmed if Victor was the Bone Thief. First the hospital then the Sheriff's

office. She felt guilty for coming this far and leaving immediately without seeing her family. But this was a priority that could not wait. Peoples lives were depending on it. Matter of fact why go there when she can just call the hospital right now. She called the main number and asked to be connected to the third floor nurses station. "Third floor nurses station."

"This is Elena Aldridge, FBI. Is Dr. James Walker there?"

"Yes he is."

"I need to talk to him. I have question."

"One minute, let me page him."

"This is Dr. Walker."

"This is Elena Aldridge. I have just one question for you. What size of exam gloves do you wear?"

"Medium, why?"

"Thank you, Dr." She hung up. Elena was ecstatic. She now knew without a doubt who the Bone Thief is. Dr. Victor Holloway. She decided to call Sheriff Anderson.

"Denton County Sheriff's Office," said the dispatcher.

"Is the Sheriff there? This is Elena Aldridge."

"No, he took off early today. He will be back in the morning."

"Thank you."

She headed for her room. There was nothing else she could do today. She had her killer. Dr. Victor Holloway is the Bone Thief. Even though everything in that surgical room is more than enough to convict him, she had to link him to it all. All she had was a box of gloves and the theory about his daughter. She was too wired to sit down and think so she paced the floor. What she would give for a bottle of wine right now. A box of gloves and a theory wasn't

enough to get an arrest warrant. She needed the Sheriff to go see what she had found. Maybe he see's something she doesn't. Speaking of Sheriff Anderson, one thing that did strike her as odd was his aloofness. He did seem at times too nonchalant about the case. Maybe he would be the type that being a local once the case was solved he would take credit for it, thereby not just boosting his position as a hero but solidifying himself as the Sheriff. She really didn't care. It's not like she lived here or had to come back here again. She just wish he would take his position a little more seriously. Sure, he is the one that called her in, but that didn't mean that everything had to be dumped on her to solve. Maybe it was just a small town attitude. She never really worked in a small town before.

She needed him to accompany her to the old hospital. He should be glad to put this behind him especially with the pressure the Mayor is putting on him. She knew fear gripped the town. No one was truly safe or at least if you exercised you weren't safe. But the towns people didn't know that. As far as they were concerned anyone and everyone was fair game. Especially with Paul's murder. That one rocked the town to it's core. That one still puzzled her. Why, out of all the people that exercised, why choose someone as prominent as Paul? Could it be a simple power trip for Victor? A message he was sending to the town that no one was safe? Poor Terry, he will never be the same. Her heart truly went out to him. From what she understood the two were practically inseparable. She couldn't rest yet. Too much of an adrenaline rush. She decided to call home and give Logan the good news.

"So, you are positive that this Victor is the Bone Thief."

"Absolutely. James is innocent. All I have to do now is get a warrant for his arrest. But getting one based solely on the evidence of a box of gloves is circumstantial but with the Perceptol being in his hands at the scene and that he lied about his alibi the Judge should go

ahead and issue the arrest warrant. Especially with the pull the Sheriff has. He would be able to do more than what I can.”

“No way he can get off on a technicality?”

“His lawyer will try and fight the idea about the box of gloves. That they could belong to anyone that wears large gloves. But because of him lying about his alibi, it won’t look good for him. I’m actually thinking of laying a trap for him.”

“How?”

“Wait till the week night of when it is time for another murder to take place. Have the Sheriff drop me off at the hospital and I can hide in one of the other operating rooms. When he brings in the next victim I can then pop in and catch him in the act. There isn’t no lawyer going to be able to circumvent that. More than likely he will plead not guilty do to reasons of mental instability due to his daughter’s condition. The defense will call for a change of venue on the grounds that Victor will not receive a fair trial. Which he won’t in his home town. So that will be a given.”

“And of course you will need to be there to testify.”

“Yes, and so will Sheriff Anderson. I’m going to let you go and get some sleep. I love you. See you soon.”

“Love you too. Can’t wait till your back.”

“Me too.”

“Celebratory dinner when you get back. York’s.”

“That would be wonderful. Good night.”

“Good night.”

The following morning, Elena walked into the Sheriff's office. "Sheriff Anderson, I need to talk to you."

"Have a seat. How did it go at the Mayor's office. He wasn't too rough on you I hope. Sometimes he can be a dick."

"Not at all. Matter of fact, he was very helpful. He directed me to the old hospital. I found the Bone Thief's lair. I took two scalpels and bottle of Perceptol back to Forensics. They couldn't find any prints on the scalpels. But I know who the Bone Thief is due to the size of a box of gloves I found at the scene. You see Dr. James Walker wears medium. But the box is size large. That means Dr. Victor Holloway is the Bone Thief."

He nodded. "Your going to need more than a box of gloves to get a conviction little only and arrest warrant. But this is still a very strong case. I don't want anything to screw this up and he slips through the cracks on a technicality. Show me where he is operating so I can have a look around and possibly get the arrest warrant. I will follow you there. If we can hold him for the next ninety-six hours and there is no murder that will convince the Grand Jury to continue with the trial. Do you know why it's him?"

"I believe it has to do with his sick daughter. I believe he is harvesting fresh bones for cell therapy to cure his daughter. I have an idea for a fool proof plan to catch him. You take me there on the night of the next time a victim is chosen. I'll be hiding in one of the operating rooms. When he comes in with the next victim, I can step in and catch him red handed. Then there will be no doubt for the Grand Jury."

"Now that sounds like a solid plan."

* * * *

They parked in the clearing before the hospital. Sheriff Anderson got out with his shotgun.

“Why didn’t you think of this place before?” asked Elena.

“Hell, I never thought the place had electricity little only still be standing. I thought the Bone Thief would be doing this in his basement.” They entered through the broken doors.

“Where to now?”

“Elevator, second floor.”

“You trust that damn thing after all these years?”

“The Bone Thief did.”

The double doors opened and they stepped inside. She pressed the number two button. With a Jerk and short whine, the elevator begin to move. “So help me, if we get stuck,” said Sheriff Anderson. The double doors opened and they stepped out. He followed her down the hall. It’s dim lights casting eerie shadows.

“Through here.” They went through the Personnel Only doors. “Just down here.”

“I feel like this old derelict is going to collapse on us any minute. I got to remember to get the city to demolish this death trap.”

She stood before the door. “You ready?”

“Yeah.”

She opened the door and they both went in. He gagged at the smell of death. “It’s the blood at the head of the table and the bones in the trash bin against the wall over there,” said Elena.

“God it stinks.”

“There’s the box of gloves over there on the counter. Size large.” Next to the box of gloves sat a record player. “If we can get prints off of those records it would place him here and we could easily get the warrant for his arrest.”

He walked over to her. “There’s just one problem.”

“What’s that.”

In one fluid motion he raised his shotgun and smashed the butt of it into the side of her head. She hit the floor unconscious. “Your getting too damn close.” Leaning his shotgun against the counter, he picked her up and strapped her down to the surgical table and then made a phone call. “Victor, you need to get down here at the old hospital right now. I have the FBI agent strapped down. She was getting too close. She discovered your working place thanks to the Mayor. She was very close to getting an arrest warrant for you.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Chapter 14

“Had to do it. She was about to pin you down like a bug,” said Sheriff Anderson

“How? I had all of the evidence pointing to James.”

“Your gloves. He wears medium. She saw that you wear large.”

“I’ll be damn. Never even crossed my mind.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I think she came poking her nose in the Bone Thief’s business and got caught. I will remove both her clavicles, cut her throat, and dump her in the woods. This will be the Bone Thief’s next victim.”

“How many more?”

“As many as it takes. I’m on the cusp of a cure.”

“You take care of her. I’ll see you later.”

Elena rolled her head side to side. Her eyes fluttered open and she squinted against the harsh surgical lamp. She felt dazed and confused and the side of her head ached. Elena tried to sit up but found she couldn’t. Moving her arms and legs, terror set in as she realized she was strapped down to the table. Then she remembered where she was, the Bone Thief’s lair. And then she remembered Sheriff Anderson. He must have hit her with his shotgun. Betrayed. Looking around she saw Victor putting on a pair of gloves “Victor Holloway.”

“Ah, Agent Aldridge. Finally awake.”

“You don’t want to do this, Victor.”

“You know, your right. I never intended to hurt you. Just keep you off my trail till the killings stopped. But now you give me no choice.”

“You can stop this madness and turn yourself in.”

“That would be a death sentence.”

“More likely you would be locked up in a psych ward.”

“You and I both know I am not insane. I did this for my daughter. Do you have any children Agent Aldridge?”

“Yes, a ten year old little girl.” She felt the right hand strap was looser than the left so she begin to work herself free.

“Then you should understand why I did what I did. If your daughter was balancing on a knife edge of life and death, how far would you go to save her? Would you forgo your oath to the law, do anything no matter what it takes? Because that is the definition of what it means to be a parent. Do anything at all to protect your child.”

He hit a nerve with Elena. What would she do to save Chelsea? “So your going to take her mother from her?”

“You leave me no choice in the matter. But don’t worry. As far as your husband will know, we were working closely together on figuring out who the Bone Thief could possibly be. And because of that I felt the loss of your life to be great. I will set up your daughter with a college fund that she will have a free ride no matter where she chooses to go.”

“How does Sheriff Anderson fit in all this?”

“Oh, that is easy. He’s my brother in law. Married to my sister. He understands the bond of family.”

She couldn’t call them crazy for they knew exactly what they were doing. Her hand was almost free. She needed to stall him a little longer. “Why did you even bother to call the FBI?”

“We were gaining state wide attention. Better to have one or two Agents here than a whole task force.” He picked up a syringe. “This is Perceptol. But you already know what it does.” Just as he was about to push the needle into her neck, her right hand came across and raked his eyes. Victor howled out and took a couple of steps back and dropped the syringe. Elena reached over and unlatched her left hand and sat up to work on her ankles. Victor recovered in time to stop her. As he grabbed her, she bent her right fingers into her palm and punched him hard in the throat then broke his nose with an elbow. He backed up with one hand on his throat and blood pouring down his face. This gave her time to undo her legs.

He came at her again, this time with a scalpel. She rolled off the operating table but not before he cut deep into her left arm. She hissed at the sting. Blood ran down her arm and dripped off her elbow. She saw her gun on the counter and went for it. Victor ran around the table right on her heels. Reaching her gun, she spun around and fired four rounds point blank into his chest stopping him in his tracks. He looked down at the blooming blood, took a couple of steps back and collapsed to the floor dead.

She leaned against the counter to catch her breath. This isn't what she wanted but he gave her no choice. Now she had one last person to contend with. Checking the cabinets, she found some sterile gauze and bandaged herself. This would require stitches. Grabbing her keys, she made her way out of the hospital to her car. Her mind a whirl of confusion and betrayal. Because Sheriff Anderson was Victor's brother in law, he helped to hide his crimes which made Anderson just as guilty. He was supposed to protect the people from harm, not perpetuate it. His indifference to her working the case, she should have seen something was off about him. But she was so caught up in stopping Victor that it never occurred to her that he would have help from the inside to hide his crimes. It all made sense now. Pincrest will

never be the same once the truth is out. But first she had to deal with Sheriff Anderson. She fully expected resistance.

She parked in front of the office and went in. Sheriff Anderson, get out here now.” She had her gun pulled. The Dispatcher’s face was one of pure shock. She was totally clueless of what was about to go down. Anderson walked out of his office not too surprised to see her. “My, my, aren’t you the resilient one. If your here then that means Victor is dead. You do realize you just killed that little girl in the hospital. Victor was her only hope of survival.”

“He gave me no choice. How many more have to die in pursuit of something that may never work in the first place?”

“As many as it takes. That little girl was his world. His everything. Now not only do you make a woman a widow but childless as well. She will die now. And that will be on your hands.”

“Your the one who called in the FBI. What, you didn’t think we would figure it out?”

“You never would have if I hadn’t sent you to that fool Mayor. I should have never sent you there. All he needed was one maybe two more and he would have had the cure. But I guess that’s all over now.”

“Yes it is. You are here by under arrest. Unbuckle your gun belt and place it over on that desk.” She had him dead in her sights. If he tried anything at all she would take him down. Betty cowered in the corner. Sheriff Anderson took off his gun belt but he let his right hand slip to the gun and fired through the holster hitting her in the left leg. Elena returned fire, pumping five rounds into Anderson’s chest jerking back with each hit, emptying her clip. He fell dead to the floor. She touched the bullet wound and her hand came back bloody. She backed up and leaned back against a desk. Betty called out that two officers down over the

radio. Then she called the fire department and told them she needed an ambulance at the Sheriff's office. When the Deputies arrived she explained what had happened and Anderson's connection to the Victor. They put her in the back of the Ambulance and drove her to the hospital.

The wound was clean all the way through. No arteries or bone hit. She would recover fully in due time. As Elena lay there in the hospital bed her leg throbbing, she couldn't help but let her mind wander. She had stopped a murderer, but at what cost? That little girl will likely die. Victor's actions were monstrous but his motivation was achingly human. She stared at the ceiling, the hum of the hospital blending with her thoughts. "Would I have done the same?" she whispered to an empty room. The thought of Chelsea, innocent and needing her twisted her heart. She could see herself in Victor's shoes, willing to break any law, cross any line to save the most precious part of her world. Tears welled up but not from the pain of her leg, but from the emotional weight. "How far would I go?" The question hung in silence. She knew there was no easy answer, only the harsh reality of decisions made in desperation. Elena realized she wasn't fighting against just monsters, but the darkness in herself. And in that moment, she understood the true cost of survival and love.

Epilogue

A month after Terry learned of Paul's death, he committed suicide. The death of his brother was too much to bear. With the news of Sheriff Anderson's involvement with Dr. Victor Holloway, Pinecrest was rocked to its core. Deputy Ken Hardy, with the backing of the people of Denton County, was assigned the position as Sheriff. Daniel Rigsby, Mayor of Pinecrest has declared June 16th as Remembrance Day in honor of the loss of all the friends and loved ones at the hand of The Bone Thief. It will take a long time for Pinecrest to recover from Dr. Victor Holloway's crimes. Without a cure, Adeline Holloway, Victor's daughter passed away in her coma from her Mitochondria disease. When Elena made it back home she was given twelve weeks off to heal from the gun shot wound. She had physical therapy three times a week. Plus she had to go through mandatory psychological evaluation which she was shown to be perfectly fine to continue to work. But of course she didn't tell them everything that was going on with her. Victor's words kept haunting her. How far would she go to protect her child? She spent as much time with Chelsea that she could while she was off for recovery. When she first got back, Logan kept his promise to her and they went out to York's for her celebration of solving the case. But she felt like it wasn't much to celebrate. So many needlessly lost their lives to Victor Holloway. All those lives lost and still no cure. Their deaths were in vain. A hollow victory. Not to mention them being betrayed by the one person who was supposed to keep them safe. She couldn't possibly understand what Victor's wife was going through. Not only did she lose a husband but a child as well. Was she even aware

of what Victor was doing? There were some questions that would never be answered. But she did know the answer to one. What would she do to protect Chelsea? Anything.