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Opening Extract from...

Pray for Silence

Written by Linda Castillo

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pray for **silence**

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Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.

– Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack*

ONE

Officer Chuck 'Skid' Skidmore wished he hadn't indulged in that last cup of coffee. If it wasn't for the new waitress at the diner, he would have stopped at just one. But damn, she was cute. So he'd sat at the counter the entirety of his dinner break and sucked down caffeine like a ten-year-old gorging on Kool-Aid. Brandy obliged by keeping his mug full and entertaining him with her twenty-something chit-chat and a full two inches of jiggling cleavage.

He'd been eating at LaDonna's Diner every night for two months now, since the chief assigned him the graveyard shift. He hated working nights. He respected the chief, but he was going to have to have a talk with her about getting back on days.

Skid turned his cruiser onto Hogpath Road, a desolate stretch of asphalt bounded by Miller's Woods to the north and a cornfield on the south side. The cruiser's tyres crunched over gravel as he pulled onto the shoulder. He was reaching for the pack of Marlboro Lights in the glove box when his radio crackled.

'Three-two-four. Are you 10-8?'

Mona was the third-shift dispatcher and his sole source of entertainment – after the diner closed, anyway. She'd kept him from dying of boredom many a night. 'Roger that, Dispatch.'

‘So did you talk to her?’

‘That’s affirm.’

‘You ask her out?’

Throwing open his door to keep the smell of smoke out of the cruiser, Skid lit the Marlboro. ‘I don’t see how that’s any of your business.’

‘You’re the one who’s been talking about her for the last two months.’

‘She’s too young for me.’

‘Since when does that make a difference?’

‘You’re tying up the radio.’

Mona laughed. ‘You’re chicken.’

Wishing he’d never told her about his crush on Brandy, he drew on the cigarette. ‘Whatever.’

‘Are you *smoking*?’

He mouthed the word *Shit*.

‘You said you were going to quit.’

‘I said I was going to either quit drinking or smoking. I sure as hell ain’t going to do both in the same week.’ He sucked in a mouthful of smoke. ‘Especially when I’m stuck working nights.’

‘Maybe the chief’s still pissed about that old lady you roughed up.’

‘I didn’t rough her up. That old goat was drunk out of her mind.’

‘She was sixty-two years old—’

‘And naked as a jaybird.’

Mona giggled. ‘You get all the good calls.’

‘Don’t remind me. The sight of her wrinkled ass has damaged me for life.’ He sighed, his bladder reminding him why he’d stopped in the first place. ‘I gotta take a piss.’

‘Like I need to know that.’ She disconnected.

Grinning, Skid got out of the cruiser. The crickets went

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silent as he walked around to the bar ditch. Dry corn stalks crackled in a light breeze. Beyond, a harvest moon cast yellow light onto the tall grain silo and barn roof of an Amish farm. It was so quiet he could hear the cacophony of frogs from Wildcat Creek a quarter-mile to the south. Skid relieved himself and tried not to think about the long night ahead. Yeah, he was going to have a talk with the chief. Get back on days. He'd had enough of this vampire-hours shit.

He was zipping up when a distant sound snagged his attention. At first he thought maybe a calf was bawling for its cow. Or maybe a dog had been hit by a car. But when the sound came again, he realized it wasn't either of those things. It was a man's scream. Looking out across the cornfield, he felt the hairs at his nape stand straight up.

Skid rested his hand on the .38 strapped to his hip. He scanned the field beyond where the corn whispered and sighed. Another scream sent a chill scraping up his spine. 'What the hell?'

Yanking open the door of the cruiser, he leaned in and flicked on the strobes, then pulsed the siren a couple of times. He hit his lapel mike. 'Mona, I'm out here at the Plank farm. I've got a 10-88.' They used the ten-code radio system at the Painters Mill PD. Ten-eighty-eight was the code for suspicious activity.

'What's going on?'

'Some crazy shit's screaming his head off.'

'Well, that's strange.' She went silent for a moment. 'Who is it?'

'I don't know, but I think it's coming from the house. I'm going to check it out.'

'Roger that.'

Back in his cruiser, Skid turned into the long gravel lane that would take him to the house. The Planks were Amish.

Generally, the Amish community was quiet and kept to itself. Most were up before the sun and in bed before most folks finished their supper. Skid couldn't figure one of them out at this time of night, raising hell. Either some teenager on *rum-springa* – their 'running around' time before joining the church – was drunk out of his head, or there'd been an accident.

He was midway down the lane when a figure rushed from the shadows. Skid braked hard. The cruiser slid sideways, missing a man by inches. 'Holy shit!'

The man scrambled around the front of the cruiser, hands on the hood, eyes as big as baseballs. Skid didn't recognize him, but the full beard and flat-brimmed hat told him the guy was Amish. Setting his hand on his .38, Skid rammed the shifter into Park and got out of the cruiser. 'What the hell are you doing? I almost hit you.'

The man was breathing hard, shaking harder. In the moonlight, Skid saw sweat glistening on his cheeks, despite the October chill, and he wondered if the guy was high on drugs. '*Mein Gott!*'

Skid didn't understand Pennsylvania Dutch, the Amish dialect, but he didn't need to be fluent to know the guy was terrified. He didn't know what he'd walked into. The one thing he was certain of was that he wasn't going to let this cagey-looking sumbitch get any closer. As far as he knew, the guy was on crack and armed with a machete. 'Stop right there, partner. Keep your hands where I can see them.'

The Amish man put his hands up. Even from ten feet away Skid could see his entire body trembling. His chest heaved. It was tears – not sweat – that glistened on his cheeks. 'What's your name?' Skid asked.

'Reuben Zimmerman!' he choked.

The Amish man's eyes met his. Within their depths, Skid

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saw fear and the sharp edge of panic. The man's mouth worked, but no words came.

'You need to calm down, sir. Tell me what happened.'

Zimmerman pointed towards the farmhouse, his hand shaking like a flag in a gale. 'Amos Plank. The children. There is blood. They are dead!'

The guy had to be out of his mind. 'How many people?'

'I do not know. I saw . . . Amos and the boys. On the floor. Dead. I ran.'

'Did you see anyone else?'

'No.'

Skid's gaze went to the darkened farmhouse. The place was silent and still. No lantern light in the windows. No movement. He hit his lapel mike. 'Mona, I've got a possible 10-16 out here.' A 10-16 was the code for a domestic problem. 'I'm going to take a look.'

'You still out at the Plank place?'

'That's affirm.'

'You want me to call the sheriff's office and get a deputy out there?'

'I'm going to check it out first. Will you run Reuben Zimmerman through LEADS for me?' LEADS was the acronym for the Law Enforcement Automated Data System that police departments used to check for outstanding warrants and BOLO, cop-speak for *Be on the lookout*.

'Roger that.' Computer keys clicked. 'Be careful, will you?'

'You got that right.'

Anxious to get to the scene, Skid approached the Amish man. 'Turn around and put your hands against the car, partner.'

Zimmerman looked bewildered. 'I did not do anything wrong.'

‘It’s procedure. I’m going to pat you down. The handcuffs are for your protection and mine. All right?’

As if realizing he didn’t have a choice, Zimmerman turned and set his hands against the cruiser. Quickly Skid ran his hands over the man, checking pockets, socks, even his crotch. Then he snapped the cuffs into place. ‘What are you doing here at this time of night?’

‘I help with the milking. Work begins at four a.m.’

‘And I thought I had bad hours.’

The Amish man blinked.

‘Never mind.’ Opening the cruiser door, Skid ushered him into the back seat. ‘Let’s go.’

Sliding behind the wheel, he put the cruiser in gear and started towards the house. In the rear-view mirror, dust billowed in the red glow of the tail lights. Ahead, a massive barn and silo stood in silhouette against the pre-dawn sky. The postcard-perfect farm was the last place Skid expected any kind of trouble. He’d lived in Painters Mill for going on four years now. Aside from a few minor infractions – like that time two teenage boys got caught racing their buggies down Main Street – the Amish were damn near perfect citizens. But Skid had been a cop long enough to know there was always an exception to the rule.

He parked behind a buggy, his headlights reflecting off the slow-moving-vehicle sign mounted at the rear. To his right, the house stood in shadows; it didn’t look like anyone was up yet. Turning, he made eye contact with Zimmerman. ‘How did you get in?’

‘The back door is unlocked,’ the Amish man said.

Grabbing his Maglite, Skid left the cruiser. He slid his .38 from its sheath as he started down the sidewalk. Stepping onto the stoop, he banged on the door with the flashlight. ‘This is the police,’ he called out. ‘Open up.’

That was when he noticed the dark smear on the jamb. He

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shifted the flashlight beam and squinted. It looked like blood. A handprint. Skid shone the light down on the concrete porch. More blood. Black droplets glittering in the moonlight. Bloody footprints trailed down the steps to the sidewalk that led to the barn.

‘Shit.’ Skid twisted the knob and opened the door. His heart rate kicked as he entered the kitchen. He could feel the burn of adrenaline in his midsection. Nerves running like hot wires beneath his skin. ‘This is the police,’ he called out. ‘Mr and Mrs Plank?’

The house was as silent and dark as a 1920s film noir. Skid wished for a light switch and cursed the Amish people’s aversion to modern conveniences. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. Grey light from the moon bled in through the window above the sink, revealing plain wood cabinets, a bench table draped with a blue and white checked tablecloth. A lantern sat cold and dark in its centre.

‘Hello? This is the police. Anyone home?’ Midway through the kitchen, he noticed the unpleasant odour. Not spoiled food or garbage or pet smells. It was more like the plumbing in the bathroom had backed up.

Skid entered the living room. The stench grew stronger, pervasive. A chill crept up his spine when his beam illuminated the body. An Amish man wearing a blue work shirt, trousers and braces lay face down in a pool of blood the size of a dinner plate.

‘Holy shit!’

Skid couldn’t look away. The dead man had a horrific wound at the back of his head. Blood oozed from his left ear, into his full beard, and then trickled down to pool on the floor. His mouth was open and his bloody tongue protruded like a fat slug.

He hoped Zimmerman was wrong about the number of

victims. He hoped the other lumps on the floor were piles of clothing in need of mending, or maybe feed bags someone had brought in from the barn. That hope was dashed when the beam of his flashlight revealed two more bodies. A teenage boy wearing dark trousers with suspenders. A little red-haired boy encircled by more blood than could possibly fit into his small body. Both boys had gunshot wounds to the head. Both had their hands bound behind their backs. Skid knew without checking that they were dead.

He'd been a cop for going on ten years, first in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and now here in Painters Mill. He'd seen death before. Traffic accidents. Shootings. Stabbings. None of those things prepared him for this.

'Holy Christ.' He fumbled for his lapel mike, surprised when his hand shook. 'Mona, I'm 10-23 at the Plank place. Call the chief. Tell her I've got a major fuckin' crime scene out here. Multiple vics. Fatalities.' His voice broke. 'Shit!'

'Do you need an ambulance?'

He looked down at the staring eyes and the ocean of blood, and he knew he'd be seeing that image for a very long time to come. 'Just send the coroner, Mona. It's too late to save any of these people.'

TWO

I'm caught in that weird twilight between wakefulness and slumber when the phone on my night table jangles. The last time I looked at the clock, it was just after three a.m. A glance at those glowing red numbers tells me it's now four-thirty. I feel lucky to have gotten a full hour and a half of sleep.

'Burkholder,' I rasp.

'Chief, it's Mona. Skid says there's been a shooting out at the Plank farm.'

The words jolt me upright. 'Anyone hurt?' I envision an accidental shooting; someone putting a bullet in his foot while cleaning his .30-06.

'He said it was a major crime scene with multiple fatalities.'
Multiple fatalities.

For an instant I think I've misunderstood. Then my brain clicks into place and I get to my feet. 'He get the shooter?'

'I don't know. Skid sounded pretty shook up.'

Four full-time officers comprise my small police force; Skid is one of my most experienced. He's not the sensitive type, nor is he easily rattled, so I know it's got to be bad. 'Get an ambulance out there, will you?'

'Sure. And I called Doc Coblentz.'

'Good.' Dr Ludwig Coblentz is a local paediatrician and

acting coroner for Holmes County. ‘Tell him I’ll meet him out there.’

My mind spins through possible scenarios as I cross to the closet and yank my uniform off a hanger. The Planks are Amish. I know many Amish families keep rifles on hand for hunting and livestock slaughter. They are a peaceable, pacifistic society; violent crime is rare. I can’t get my mind around the fact that there are multiple victims. Maybe because that tells me the shooting was no accident.

Painters Mill is a small town located in the heart of Ohio’s farm country. About a third of the 5,300 residents are Amish. I myself was born Amish in this very town just over thirty years ago. Though 80 per cent of Amish children join the church at the age of eighteen, I was one of the few who chose not to be baptized. But roots run deep, especially if you’re Amish, and it was those roots that brought me back.

I’ve been the chief of police for nearly three years now. It’s a good job. Painters Mill is a good place to live. A wholesome town in which to raise a family. I want to believe major crime doesn’t happen here, but experience has taught me that even small, idyllic towns are not immune to violence.

I’m acquainted with most of the local families, both Amish and English. I’m fluent in Pennsylvania Dutch, the Amish dialect. Though I no longer live my life according to *Gelassenheit* – the foundation of Amish values – I have great respect for the culture. It’s a respect born of genuine understanding, not only of the people, but of the Plain life in general, and the religion that is so integral to both.

As I drive towards the Plank farm, it strikes me that I don’t know much about Bonnie or Amos Plank. I search my memory and recall that they’re new to the area, having relocated from

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Lancaster County about a year ago. They have several children and run a small dairy operation. As I start down the gravel lane, I wonder what problems might have followed them here from Pennsylvania.

I arrive to find Skid's cruiser parked behind a buggy. The emergency strobes cast red and blue light onto the house and out-buildings, giving the farm the countenance of some weird rock video. Grabbing my Maglite, I get out, draw my .38 revolver and start towards the back door. I'm midway there when my beam illuminates a bloody handprint on the jamb. A quiver of unease goes through me when I spot the shiny black droplets on the concrete porch and sidewalk. Shoving open the door, I step into a large kitchen.

Moonlight slants through the window above the sink, but it's not enough to cut through the shadows. 'Skid!' I call out.

'In here!'

The stench of blood fills my nostrils as I traverse the kitchen. I go through the doorway into the next room. The first thing I see is the yellow-white slash of Skid's flashlight beam. We're standing in a large room backlit by two tall, narrow windows. I make a 360-degree sweep with my flashlight. 'What happened?'

Even as I ask the question, my beam lands on the first body. A middle-aged Amish male lies face down in the centre of the room.

'We got two more over there.' Skid's voice seems to come from a great distance.

My hand threatens to shake as I run my beam along the floor, but I hold it steady as the light reveals two more bodies. My vision tunnels when I realize the victims are children. The first is a teenage boy. Gangly arms and legs. Bad haircut. Lying prone, he wears a faded work shirt, suspenders and trousers

that are slightly too short from a recent growth spurt. His hands are bound behind his back. I see the black shimmer of blood at the back of his head.

A few feet away, a younger boy lies on his side in an ocean of blood, some of which has soaked into a home-made rug. I guess him to be nine or ten years old. He's wearing a nightshirt. Like the other boy, his hands are bound. The soles of his feet are dirty, and I know that just scant hours before he'd run barefoot and carefree through this house. From the pale oval of his face, cloudy eyes seem to stare right at me. I see blood on his cheek and realize the bullet exited through his mouth, tearing through his lips, blowing out several teeth.

It's a surreal scene and for the span of several heartbeats, I can't get my mind around it. Shock is like a battering ram, assaulting my brain. *Dead kids*, I think, and a hot bloom of outrage burgeons in my chest. The urge to go to them, perform CPR, try to save them, is powerful. But I know they're gone. The last thing I want to do is contaminate the scene.

I shift my beam back to the adult. A hole the size of my fist mars the back of his head. I see bone fragments, flecks of brain matter and blood in his hair. *Exit wound*, I think, and realize he was shot from the front.

'Did you check for survivors?' I hear myself ask.

Skid's silhouette looms against the window. Even in the near-darkness I see him shake his head. 'I checked pulses. They're DOA.'

I look around, and it strikes me that the son of a bitch who did this could still be in the house. 'You clear the place?'

'Not yet.'

I hit my radio. 'This is 235. Mona, I'm 10-23.'

'What's going on out there, Chief?'

'I need you to call Glock and Pickles at home. Get them out here 10-18.'

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‘Roger that,’ Mona says.

‘Use your cell, in case some insomniac has his scanner on. Tell Glock we need a generator and some work lights, will you?’

‘Got it, Chief.’

I look at Skid. ‘Let’s clear the rest of the house.’

I start towards the hall. I hear Skid behind me, and I know he’s got my back. Our feet are silent on the oak floor as we move towards the bedrooms. In the back of my mind, I wonder if there are more victims. If anyone survived. I wonder what kind of a monster could kill innocent children . . .

I reach the bathroom and shove the door open with my foot. My .38 leading the way, I enter, drop low and sweep the room. I see an old-fashioned claw-foot tub. A single window, closed and locked. A porcelain sink. I check the tub. ‘Clear.’

I turn to see Skid start down the hall. I bring up the rear this time, watching his back. He sidles into the first bedroom. I follow close behind, my every sense honed on our surroundings. I see two twin-size beds. Two windows, closed. A chest of drawers. A pair of ice skates tossed in the corner. Skid shifts his weapon, yanks open the closet door. I move in, but the small space is empty. I go to the beds, drop to my knees and look beneath them.

‘No one here,’ Skid says.

‘Let’s check the upstairs.’

‘There a cellar?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know. Probably.’

It takes us ten minutes to clear the rest of the house, which includes the basement, the second-level bedrooms and the small attic. I’m comfortable working with Skid; I trust his instincts as a cop, and we work well as a team. In the end, our efforts are in vain. The house is vacant.

We end up in the living room. For a moment, neither of us

speaks. We don't look at the bodies, and I get the sense that we're both struggling to comprehend the cold brutality of the crime.

'What do you think happened?' Skid asks after a moment.

'Hard to say.' I glance down at the dead boy at my feet. So young and innocent. I look at the father, and for the first time it strikes me that his hands aren't bound. As a cop, I know things aren't always as they appear at first glance. Preconceived notions are a dangerous thing when you walk into a crime scene, so I strive to avoid making snap judgements. But as I stare down at the dead man, all I can think is: *why aren't your hands bound, too?*

'You find a weapon?' I ask.

'Handgun there.'

My eyes follow his beam. Sure enough, protruding from beneath the man's right hand is the blue barrel of a semi-automatic handgun. 'Looks like a Beretta.'

'I didn't know the Amish kept handguns.'

'They don't, usually, especially a semi-auto,' I reply. 'Rifles for hunting.'

'His hands aren't tied,' Skid comments.

'That wound at the back of his head looks like an exit.'

Skid's gaze meets mine. 'You think he did this?'

I don't want to acknowledge the ugly suspicions knocking at my brain. That this man snapped, murdered his two sons and then turned the gun on himself. The scenario goes against every conviction most Amish hold dear. I know it's a generalization. But murder is extremely rare in Amish society. Suicide is almost as uncommon. *It is the one sin for which there is no redemption.*

'I don't know.' I look around. 'Any sign of the mother?'

'No.'

'I think they have more kids,' I say. 'Girls.' I recall the

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bloody handprint on the back porch, and I'm disheartened by the possibilities crowding my brain. 'Let's check the yard and outbuildings.'

Best-case scenario, we'll find mom and the girls hiding and frightened, but alive. The knot in my gut tells me that hope is optimistic.

Without holstering our weapons, we pass through the kitchen and go out through the back door. We glance briefly at the bloody print.

'Could be a woman's,' Skid says.

'Or a teenager's.' If my memory serves me, the two girls are in their teens.

His beam illuminates droplets of blood and a single bloody footprint on the concrete. 'Looks like someone ran out of the house.'

'Towards the barn.'

After being inside the house, the moonlight seems inordinately bright. My shadow keeps pace with me as I move down the sidewalk. We've gone about ten yards when I spot the body. A mature female wearing a plain dress, an apron and white *kapp* lies face down in the grass. But it is the sight of the dead infant in her arms that rocks me.

'Jesus Christ!' Skid scrapes a hand over his face. 'A fuckin' baby.'

The grey skin and glazed eyes tell me both mother and child are deceased. Blood clings to the grass like a spill of motor oil. I see a hole the size of a dime in the fabric between the woman's shoulder blades. 'Looks like the bullet went right through her and into the baby.'

'Shot her in the back.'

'While she was running away.'

'Chief, who the hell would do something like this?'

'A monster.' Hoping the look I give him doesn't reveal the

dark emotions thrashing inside me, I motion towards the barn. 'Let's hope he left someone alive to tell us.'

The barn is a massive structure with a stone foundation and rusty tin roof. A cupola and weathervane jut two storeys into the night sky. Lower, half a dozen small windows watch us like old, sorrowful eyes. Like many of the barns in the area, the building is well over a hundred years old.

Skid and I move down the sidewalk in silence. The chorus of crickets seems unduly loud, but I know it's because my senses are hyper-aware. Somewhere in the near distance I hear cattle bawling. Having spent many a pre-dawn morning pulling teats, I recognize the sound. The animals' udders are full, and they're waiting to be milked.

I reach the barn first and push open the door with my foot. 'Try not to touch anything,' I whisper.

The hinges creak as the door rolls open. The earthy smells of livestock, hay and manure waft out on a breeze. The barn is pitch-black inside. Holding my Maglite in my left hand, my weapon in my right, I step in and quickly sweep the area. I'm aware of Skid behind me, his beam cutting through the darkness to my left. I can hear his quickened breaths rushing between his teeth.

'This is the police!' I call out. 'Put your hands up and come out! *Now!*'

We move deeper into the barn. The rush of blood through my veins is deafening. If someone were to ambush us, I wouldn't hear them coming. I nearly jump out of my skin when I see movement ahead. I straighten my gun arm, snug my finger against the trigger. It takes a second for my brain to process the sight of a dozen or so Jersey cows standing in stanchions, waiting to be fed and milked.

'Glad I didn't plug a cow,' I mutter.

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‘Some goddamn light would be nice.’

‘There’s probably a lantern around here somewhere.’

I see the outline of livestock stalls to the left. Straight ahead lies the milking area; from where I stand I discern the curdled-milk stink common to dairy operations. I see the brick and concrete floor upon which stanchions and hay racks were built. Though many Amish have begun using modern milking machines powered by either diesel or gasoline generators, I see no such machinery here, telling me the Planks still milk by hand.

Catching Skid’s eye, I motion him left. I go right and enter a wide aisle with a hard-packed dirt floor. Ahead is a large equipment area. I see a steel-wheeled plough with hit-or-miss shares. A buggy missing a wheel sits propped up on a hand jack. A wood-and-steel manure spreader gathers dust beneath a moonlit window. To my right I spot yet another door. It’s closed. The proximity to the stalls and equipment area tells me it’s probably a tack room, where harnesses for the horses, grooming supplies, halters and veterinary medicines are stored. Seeing no movement in the aisle, I cross to the door, twist the knob and shove it open.

The beam of my flashlight illuminates a large room with rough-hewn walls and a wooden plank floor. High ceilings transected by beams as thick as a man’s waist. A rush of adrenaline burns through me when I spot the girl. On instinct, I bring up my weapon. At first glance she appears to be standing with her arms stretched over her head. Then I realize her wrists are bound and tied to an overhead beam.

For a second, I’m so shocked I can’t speak or move, or even think. Then my cop’s mind switches on and the horrific details of what I’m seeing slam into my brain. The victim is young and female. Nude except for a *kapp*, she hangs limply from the overhead beam. Her head lolls forward so that her chin rests on her chest. I see dried blood, where it ran between her breasts

and down her abdomen. Her knees have buckled, but the rope holds her upright.

‘My God,’ I hear myself say.

I shift my light, scan the rest of the room. I hear myself gasp when my beam illuminates a second victim. A female, slightly older. Also nude, but for her *kapp*. Like the other victim, she hangs suspended from an overhead beam.

In the course of my law-enforcement career, I’ve seen death more times than I care to think about. I’ve seen terrible traffic accidents. Death from natural causes, heart attacks and strokes. A drowning occurred just two months ago out on Miller’s Pond. I’ve seen murder in all its execrable forms. But I will never get used to it.

My hands tremble as I reach for my lapel mike. ‘Skid . . . I got two more.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Tack room. Just down the aisle.’

‘I’m on my way.’

I train my flashlight beam on the nearest victim. I can smell the blood now. Dark and metallic, with the sickening undertone of methane gas. I’m not unduly squeamish, but my stomach quivers uneasily as I draw close. I can’t imagine what happened here. I sure as hell don’t want to think about the horrors these girls must have endured.

‘Aw, man.’

I nearly drop my Maglite at the sound of Skid’s voice. I turn to see him standing in the doorway. He holds his revolver in his right hand, his flashlight in his left. His eyes are fastened on the two bodies.

‘Jesus Christ, Chief.’ He steps into the room, his voice little more than a whisper. ‘What the hell happened?’

Skid is usually pretty laid-back. He’s cocky with a dry sense

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of humour, a quick wit, and has never been overly sensitive to some of the things cops are forced to deal with. As he takes in the carnage before us, his brash facade falls away. His expression relays the same horror and disbelief that I feel burgeoning in my chest.

He moves closer to me.

‘Watch for footprints,’ I tell him.

His beam illuminates the plank floor, sweeps left and right. As if of its own accord, my beam paints the nearest body with terrible light. Dozens of bruises, contusions and abrasions mar the dead girl’s torso, arms and legs. Small patches of skin are bright red. Other areas are nearly black. At some point, she’d vomited. I can smell the sour stink of it from where I stand.

‘I got a footprint,’ Skid calls out.

‘Mark it.’ I don’t take my eyes off the corpse. ‘Looks like they were tortured.’

‘Someone tied them up and just went to fuckin’ town on them,’ Skid says after a moment.

He lowers his flashlight and, in that instant of light, I notice two small marks on the floor. ‘Wait,’ I say. ‘What’s that?’

I squat next to the marks. Upon closer inspection I can see there are actually three of them. They look like scuff marks in a thin layer of dust. If I were to connect them, they’d form a perfect triangle.

‘What the fuck?’ Skid whispers in a baffled tone.

‘Mark them, will you?’

‘Sure thing.’

‘Keep your eye out for more footprints.’

‘You bet.’

I shine my beam around the room. A few feet from where we stand, a propane torch, a small wooden club, a knife smeared with blood, and a foot-long skewer-like instrument sit neatly

atop a workbench. Not the kinds of things you'd find in an Amish barn, and I know that whoever did this left them behind. 'We might be able to lift some prints off those . . . tools.'

'Yeah.' Skid's beam joins mine, and he makes a sound of disgust. 'How the hell could someone do this? I mean, for chrissake, a couple of Amish girls?'

I have no answers. I have no words at all. For a moment the only sound comes from the stirring of the cows down the aisle and the muted song of the crickets outside.

'You think the *father* did this?' Skid asks.

I hear doubt in his voice and shake my head because I can't imagine. 'I don't know.'

He shifts his beam back to the nearest victim. 'Were they shot?' he asks. 'Stabbed?'

Taking a deep breath, I train my beam on the victim nearest me. I see pale flesh speckled with blood. My beam stops on the black, gaping hole just below her navel.

'What the hell is that?' Skid's voice comes from behind me.

'Knife wounds?' My voice is steady, but my beam quivers as a tremor of revulsion moves through my body.

'Jesus Christ. It looks like someone cut her open.'

I move the beam lower. A lot of blood now. Caked in her pubic hair. Dark rivulets that ran down the insides of both legs. I look for evidence of a bullet wound, but see nothing. In the back of my mind I wonder if she was alive when they did this to her.

The thought makes me sick. The terribleness of it frightens me on a level so deep that for a moment I can't catch my breath. I've never been a crier, but I feel the burn of tears at the backs of my eyes.

'Chief? You okay?'

I choke back a sound I don't recognize. A sound that echoes the barrage of emotions banging around inside me. For a full

PRAY FOR SILENCE

minute, I don't respond. When I'm finally able to speak, my voice is level. 'Call Glock and Pickles again. Tell them we need those lights and generator yesterday.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Tell Mona to notify the sheriff's office. Let them know what's going on and get some patrols out. Tell her to brief T.J., get him out patrolling. Until we figure out what happened here, we've got to assume there's a cold-blooded son of a bitch out there with a gun.'

As Skid speaks into his radio, I look at the two dead girls, and I feel the crushing weight of my responsibility to them settle onto my shoulders. I've heard veteran cops talk about life-altering cases. Cases that haunt a cop long after they're closed. I've had cases like that myself. Cases that fundamentally changed me. Changed the way I view people. The way I perceive my job as a cop. The way I see myself.

Standing there with the stench of death filling my nostrils, I know this is going to be one of those cases. It's going to take its toll. Not only on me, but on this town I love, and on a community that's already seen more than its share of violence.