Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Kill Fee

Written by Owen Laukkanen

Published by Corvus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

KILL FEE

OWEN LAUKKANEN



First published in the United States in 2014 by G. P. Putnam's Sons, a division of the Penguin Group, part of the Penguin Random House Company.

First published in paperback in 2015 in Great Britain by Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Owen Laukkanen, 2014

The moral right of Owen Laukkanen to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

Book design by Gretchen Achilles

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

E-book ISBN: 978 1 78239 602 4
Paperback ISBN: 978 1 78239 601 7

Printed in Great Britain.

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

1

The billionaire picked a heck of a day to die.

It was a sunny Saturday in early April, a beautiful afternoon in downtown Saint Paul, the kind of day that seemed to chase away any memory of the long Minnesota winter just passed. It was not the kind of afternoon for a murder.

An hour before the billionaire met his end, a plain-looking man and a beautiful woman met for a greasy lunch at the old dining car on West 7th Street, and when they'd finished, dawdled slowly along St. Peter toward the Mississippi River.

They made an odd couple. He was paunchy and balding, pale and comfortably middle-aged. She was brown-skinned, statuesque, and maybe even a little severe, more than a decade his junior. And though they walked close beside each other, talked easily, and laughed quickly, there was a slight hesitation in their manner, an unresolved tension. They were something more than simply passing friends.

They reached 5th Street and turned west, walked past the stately old Saint Paul Hotel and into Rice Park, an oasis of calm amid the rush of the city. The day was sunny but still crisp, and the park was filled with families and other couples, native Minnesotans and tourists alike. The man and the woman walked aimlessly, took a leisurely tack past the Landmark Center, with its pink granite towers and turrets, and then crossed through the park toward the vast Central Library. They bought coffees inside the Saint Paul Hotel, and then wandered back out and found a bench in Rice Park. It was a Saturday afternoon, and neither Kirk Stevens nor Carla Windermere had anywhere else to be.

In truth, they looked forward to these meetings, Stevens and Windermere both. They weren't always so languid—work, the Minnesota weather, and the demands of Stevens's family made routines a fantasy—but they happened, a couple times a month, maybe, and that was almost enough.

Windermere sipped her coffee and tilted her head skyward, basking in the sun's warmth. "This is what I'm talking about, Stevens," she said. "This is what I've been waiting for. Sunlight. Warmth. Vitamin D."

Stevens grinned at her. "Summer's coming," he said. "You survived another winter. You're practically a Minnesotan now."

"Like hell." Windermere glanced at him sideways. "I'm a warm-weather girl, always will be. No matter how many snowstorms I live through."

"You like it up here, though," he said. "Kind of. Admit it."

"Maybe. It ain't the weather, though."

He cocked his head. "Then what is it?"

Windermere shook her head, the hint of a smile on her lips. She took another sip of coffee and set the cup down on the bench between them. Then she looked around the park.

People milled about, enjoying the sunshine, taking pictures of the fountain, the Landmark Center, the hotel, the statues of the characters from the comic strip *Peanuts*—homage to its creator, Charles Schulz, a Twin Cities native. Windermere watched a family crowd around Charlie Brown, all of them smiling wide, posing for the camera, laughing and jostling one another. She waited until the picture had been taken and the family had wandered off before she turned back to Stevens.

"It ain't you, either," she said. "So don't get any ideas. It's not the food, or the scenery, or the nightlife. Miami's got Minnesota beat every time."

"Then it must be the work," Stevens said. "Is that it?"

"The work." Windermere pursed her lips. "Yeah, I guess so, Stevens. It must be the work."

TWO AND A HALF YEARS EARLIER. Kirk Stevens had driven from Saint Paul to the FBI's regional headquarters in downtown Minneapolis, where he'd met a woman with bewitching eyes and a slight southern accent who'd sat him down in her cubicle in the Criminal Investigative Division and listened as he outlined a sensational theory about a group of nomadic young kidnappers. The woman was Windermere, and Stevens, a Special Agent with the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, needed her help tracking the kidnappers out of state.

He'd intended to drop the case in Windermere's lap and forget about it—he was, after all, just a state policeman—but Windermere had insisted he join her, put in a special request, and Stevens had found himself on a plane to Chicago less than a day later. It was the start of the roller-coaster ride of Stevens's career.

A year or so later, it happened again. Carter Tomlin, a wealthy Saint Paul accountant-turned-bank-robber, an acquaintance of Stevens's. Windermere sniffed him out. Stevens hadn't believed her. Neither had her FBI partner, or her superiors, not until Tomlin had started to kill. Not until he'd dragged Stevens and his family into the middle of his murderous spree.

They'd drifted apart after that first kidnapping case. The second time, after Tomlin, they stayed close. Even amid the awful terror and the adrenaline rush, the sickening race against time and Tomlin's dwindling sanity, Stevens had missed Agent Windermere. And though the FBI agent was about as prickly as a sea urchin, Stevens knew she felt the same.

So now here they were, a year after Carter Tomlin, sharing a park bench in downtown Saint Paul, drinking coffee and enjoying the sun, talking and laughing like lifelong friends. It was, Stevens thought as he looked around at the park, an almost perfect day.

ACROSS THE STREET, a silver Bentley sedan turned in to the driveway in front of the Saint Paul Hotel. Stevens watched it glide to a stop outside the building's ivy-covered façade. Windermere nudged him. "Check it out," she said. "Maybe it's Prince."

"I get it." Stevens shook his head. "Because this is Minnesota, right? Everybody in a nice car has to be Prince."

"Or F. Scott Fitzgerald. But I don't think he rolls in a Bentley."

"I don't think he rolls, period," said Stevens. "I figure at this point he's pretty much stationary."

They watched as the driver climbed out of the Bentley and circled around to open the rear passenger door. A short, white-haired man in an expensive suit stepped out to the pavement.

"Fitzgerald," said Windermere. "What did I tell you?"

Stevens squinted across the driveway. "He looks old enough, anyway."

The white-haired man leaned on a cane as he stepped away from the big sedan and started slowly toward the hotel's front doors. Windermere cast an eye at her companion. "Barely looks older than you, Stevens."

Stevens arched an eyebrow. Started to reply, but never got the words out. A shot cracked out from somewhere, cutting him off. Someone screamed. A split second later, the white-haired man collapsed to the pavement.

2

Windermere was on her feet before the white-haired man hit the ground. She ran across the cobblestone street and up the hotel driveway, dodging angry taxicabs as horns blared. Someone was still screaming. Bystanders ducked for cover.

The man was dead; Windermere knew it instantly. He'd taken the shot to the back of his head, just behind his right ear, and the results were not pretty. There was blood, lots of it. Bone, too. Gore spattered the driveway. Windermere dashed toward the hotel doors and ducked behind the big Bentley, wishing she'd brought her service Glock. *"Everybody stay down,"* she said. *"And someone call 9-1-1."*

Stevens crashed in beside her, breathing hard. Looked across at the white-haired man. "Shit," he said. "Where's the shooter?"

Windermere crouched low and played the scene back in her head. Heard the shot again; watched the white-haired man fall. Pictured the entry wound and tried to map the bullet's trajectory. "Sniper," she said.

Stevens got it immediately. He twisted around and peered across the back of the big sedan. Behind them, the Landmark Center loomed, its myriad turrets and towers excellent vantage points for any would-be killer with a rifle and a scope. Stevens nudged her. *"Up there."*

3

Lind dropped the rifle as soon as the target fell. He pulled the window closed and walked out of the room and onto the balcony surrounding the inner courtyard.

Already there were sirens outside. Word was spreading. People stood on the balcony, their office doors open, cell phones and paperwork still clutched in their hands. They shot quizzical looks in Lind's direction. He ignored them and walked along the balcony to the stairs.

The sirens grew louder as he descended to ground level. The stairwell was crowded. Clerks. Secretaries. Librarians and curators from the museums housed inside the center. Lind walked past a tour group and descended quickly to the main level, then crossed the courtyard to the building's front doors. He slipped around another group of confused workers and hurried out into daylight, passing a man and a woman on the front stairs, a black woman and an older white man, their jaws set, both of them moving quickly. Lind didn't slow down. He turned right on 5th Street, away from the swarm of police cars outside the hotel, and kept walking.

» » »

STEVENS AND WINDERMERE hurried into the Landmark Center, dodging scared civilians every step of the way. It was chaos inside, people everywhere. Stevens pushed through to the inner courtyard, Windermere right behind him. "The towers," Stevens said. "How do we get up there?"

Windermere searched the courtyard. Spotted a set of stairs. "Come on."

A woman flew out of the stairwell just as they approached. Nearly collided with Stevens, her eyes wide and wild. Windermere caught her. "Whoa," she said. "Slow down. What's the rush?"

The woman squirmed. Fought Windermere's grasp. *"Let me go,"* she said. "I have to find the police."

"We're police," Stevens told her. "BCA. FBI. What's the story?"

The woman looked at Windermere. Then at Stevens's badge. "Thank God," she said, pointing across the courtyard. "He went that way."

"Who?" said Windermere.

"*The shooter.* He went that way. I followed him down."

Windermere swapped glances with Stevens. "Describe him," she said.

"A smaller guy. Brown hair in a buzz cut. Young. Mid-twenties, maybe." She looked at them, her expression urgent. "He's getting *away*."

"We passed him," said Stevens. "On the steps. We walked right past him."

Windermere was already halfway across the courtyard. "You coming or what, Stevens?"

4

They left the woman in the Landmark Center and burst out onto 5th Street, Windermere in the lead, moving fast. She turned right and kept running. Stevens struggled to follow. He kept himself in decent shape, mostly, but Windermere was a heck of a lot younger. Plus she'd been some kind of track star back home in Mississippi.

Windermere reached the end of the block and slowed to look up and

down Washington. Then, just as Stevens caught up, she took off again. Stevens paused, caught his breath. Then he hurried after her.

» » »

LIND WALKED WEST down 5th Street, skirting the high, windowless brick walls of the stadium where the pro hockey team played. He walked quicker now on the empty sidewalks, the sirens and the chaos retreating into the background. He walked quicker, but he didn't run. Running would attract undue attention.

He circled the arena until he reached 7th Street, and then cut across the busy intersection, toward the bus station. Downtown was behind him now; the land here was vacant—event parking for the hockey arena, mostly. In the distance, he could see the spire of the Cathedral of Saint Paul.

Lind cut through a thin copse of trees lining 7th and came out into a half-empty parking lot. He walked across the dusty gravel until he reached his car, and was about to climb in when someone called out behind him.

Lind turned and saw the black woman from outside the Landmark Center hurrying toward him. Her companion followed, about thirty feet back, both of them running hard, their faces determined. Lind watched them approach.

» » »

"STOP!" Windermere called across the parking lot. The kid did as he was told. He straightened. Turned from his little hatchback and looked at her. Windermere met his gaze and felt a chill run through her.

He was a normal-looking guy, just as the woman at the Landmark Center had described. Probably five seven or five eight, he had close-cut brown hair and was dressed like your everyday rube. He looked normal. Except that he didn't. He didn't look normal at all.

It was his face. His *eyes*. It was his slack expression, the way he studied her with no hint of malice, no fear, barely any comprehension at all. Windermere slowed, involuntarily, wishing again that she'd remembered her Glock.

The kid looked at her for a couple seconds. Then he turned around—calm, deliberate. Slid into the car and turned the engine over and drove out of the lot.

5

Stevens caught up to Windermere. "Why'd you slow down?" he said. "You had him."

Ahead of them, the car reached the end of the parking lot and pulled out onto 7th Street. It drove fast, but not wild. Not out of control.

"Chevy, right?" Stevens said, pulling out his cell phone. "An Aveo, I think. You get the plates?"

"Yeah," Windermere said. "I got them."

Stevens had his phone to his ear. "Crowson," he said. "Get a pen. The shooting downtown, the Saint Paul Hotel. We make the shooter's ride."

He handed Windermere the phone. Windermere recited the plate number and handed the phone back to Stevens.

"Get that to Saint Paul PD," Stevens told Crowson. "It's a little Chevy hatchback, gray, an Aveo, most likely. Get them looking." Stevens ended the call and turned back to Windermere. "So what the hell happened?"

Windermere looked out to where the gray car had disappeared into traffic. Didn't answer a moment. "I just lost it, Stevens," she said finally. "The kid looked at me and I spooked."

"Spooked. What the heck do you mean?"

"I just lost it." She shrugged. "It's like I was a potted plant, the way he looked at me. A cloud or something, insignificant. Like I wasn't a cop and he wasn't a killer."

"You didn't show him your badge," said Stevens, "or your gun. Maybe he didn't make you for a cop."

Windermere shook her head. "It was more than that," she said. "He just murdered somebody. He was making his escape. And he looked at me like he was waiting for a bus."

She frowned, staring across the parking lot toward 7th Street, where the traffic slipped past, normal, like nothing had happened at all.

THEY WALKED BACK along 5th Street toward Rice Park and the Landmark Center and the Saint Paul Hotel. There were police everywhere now, and ambulances and the rest. TV news trucks. Bystanders. Like a movie scene.

Here we go again. Stevens flashed back to the kidnappers, Arthur Pender and his gang. Carter Tomlin and his team of bank robbers. He felt a brief twinge of excitement, and nursed it as long as he dared. Then he chased it from his mind.

Not your case, he thought. *Not Windermere's, either. This is Saint Paul PD all the way.*

They waded back into the mix. Showed their badges to the uniform holding the line outside the hotel's driveway. Then they walked up to the entrance, where the white-haired man's body still lay on the pavement.

Uniforms lurked at the margins. Forensic techs combed the body. A couple dour-faced men in rumpled suits stood by the Bentley, sipping coffee, watching the techs. Every now and then one of them would crack a joke and the other would laugh a little, grim. Homicide cops.

Windermere flashed her badge at them. "Windermere, FBI," she said. "Who's working point?"

The men glanced at each other. Then the older guy stepped forward. "Parent," he said. "Remember me?"

"The Tomlin case," Windermere said, nodding. "You worked that poker game, right? This one yours, too?"

"At least until the FBI takes it off my hands."

"No such luck. We're just witnesses, Detective. This one's yours." She introduced Stevens.

Parent looked at them both. "Witnesses, huh? The two of you together?"

"Interdepartmental bonding," said Stevens. "We saw the shooting from that bench over there. Got a look at your suspect and the plates off his car."

"No shit." Parent glanced back at the body. Then he pulled out a notepad. "Well, all right, witnesses," he said. "Tell me what you know."

6

Lind drove the speed limit southwest down 7th Street, trying to blend in with traffic. Trying to ignore the little pinprick of panic that had started to itch in his mind.

The black woman would have memorized his plates. She would have called them in to the police. Right now, the police would be looking for the car.

Remove yourself from the scene without being detected. Don't attract undue attention. Secondary objective.

Lind checked the road for police cars. Checked his rearview mirror, oncoming traffic, the parking lots that lined the road. He saw a couple cruisers. They didn't follow him. He kept driving.

He followed 7th Street until it merged with the highway and turned south to cross the Mississippi River, and he drove past the lakes and the grassland and forest until he reached the airport turnoff. He parked in the rental car lot and waited as a man scanned something off the windshield. The man grinned at Lind. "Enjoy your visit?"

Lind didn't answer. The man frowned and handed Lind a receipt, glanced back at him once before hurrying away. Lind was already walking to the terminal. He found a garbage can and tore up the receipt, just like he'd been taught. Then he rode the concourse tram to the main terminal building and found the Delta line.

The woman at the counter frowned when she read his alias off the computer. Lind felt the little niggle of panic return. "You're a frequent flier, you know," the woman said finally. "You could have skipped this whole line."

Lind relaxed. "Next time," he said. He took his ticket and walked to the security lineup. The guard waved him through. The metal detector didn't beep.

He boarded the plane with the frequent fliers and the first-class passengers in the priority lane. Sat in his window seat as the plane slowly filled, as it taxied from the gate, as it careened down the runway and reached a safe cruising altitude. He didn't look out the window. He didn't read the in-flight magazine. He sat in his seat and wondered if the black woman and her companion constituted undue attention.

Two and a half hours later, the plane landed in Philadelphia. It was dark outside, and raining. Lind walked off the plane and out through the terminal to the parking garage, where he retrieved his car and drove away from the airport.

He drove along Interstate 95 over the Schuylkill River and into downtown Philadelphia, navigated the busy, rainy streets, and parked in an underground garage and rode the elevator to the apartments above.

He stepped off the elevator to his apartment on the building's top floor. Kicked off his shoes and then moved from room to room, turning

on every light he could find. When the whole place was daytime bright, he went into the living area and turned on the television and turned up the volume. Took a TV dinner from the kitchen freezer and heated it in the microwave, brewed a strong pot of coffee, and brought the dinner and the coffee into the living area.

It was dark out, and rainy. The city's sounds were muted far below. Lind ate his dinner and drank from his coffee mug, sat on his couch in the middle of his bright living room, watching the television play an endless loop of movie previews. He sat on his couch all night, drinking coffee and watching the TV, praying his phone would ring again soon.

7

The dead man's name was Spenser Pyatt, and he was very rich.

"Media conglomerations," Detective Parent told Stevens and Windermere. "Satellite TV. Built an empire from a radio station out in the hinterlands."

"I've heard of him," Stevens said. "Fergus Falls. That's where he started." Windermere looked at him funny, and he shrugged. "Kind of a state treasure, I guess. Made a billion dollars with his own two hands."

"I get it," said Windermere. "This guy here's the state hero."

"Hero's a bit strong," said Parent. "He's just a good story."

Windermere looked across the driveway to where the Ramsey County medical examiner was loading Pyatt's body into the back of the van. "Not so much with the happy ending, though."

Stevens and Parent followed her gaze. Then Stevens cleared his throat. "You need anything else?" he asked Parent.

"Not unless the BCA wants to take this thing off my hands."

"Not on your life." Stevens shook the detective's hand. Turned to Windermere. "Guess I'll head home."

Windermere looked at him. "Really?"

"Told Nancy I'd be home for dinner. And JJ's got soccer tonight."

"It's not even four, Stevens. You don't want to see how this plays out?"

Stevens glanced back at Parent, at the medical examiner's van, at the big silver Bentley and the spattered blood on the sidewalk. He pictured the killer, saw the little Chevy slip away into traffic, and, yeah, maybe he wanted to stick around a little. But he shook his head. "Not our case, Carla."

"Maybe not technically," she said, "but we saw this guy, Stevens. We know what he looks like. We know who he is. Maybe we can help somehow." She caught his expression and laughed. "Don't even try to pretend you're not feeling this, partner. You're as pumped up about this whole thing as I am."

Stevens was trying to think up an answer, something diplomatic that wouldn't paint him as some boring has-been, when a uniform broke through the line and came running at Parent.

"Detective," she said, huffing and puffing, cheeks red. "Word from dispatch. They found the shooter's car."

Stevens swapped glances with Windermere. Turned to listen.

"A gray Chevy hatchback," the uniform told them, "as advertised. It's a rental, Liberty Cars. They found it at the airport."

Parent frowned. "They get a name off it?"

"Name, flight, everything. Guy took off out of state in a hell of a hurry."

Windermere grinned at Stevens. "Out of state, partner. You know what that means." She started back toward Parent, pulling her cell phone from her pocket. "Mathers," she told the phone. "Hold up one second."

She turned to Parent. "Maybe the FBI can help, after all, Detective. What's our shooter's name?" She raised her phone again before Parent

could answer. "Mathers," she said. "You there? What are the odds we ground every flight at MSP within the next fifteen minutes?"

She listened. "Yeah, well," she said. "Try it anyway. There's a killer on the loose."

She hung up the phone. Turned back to Parent. Parent opened his mouth. Windermere held up one finger. Turned back to Stevens, still grinning. "Sure you don't want to stick around?"

8

Parkerson took a late-afternoon break to check the news on his computer. He found what he was looking for and read with interest, a satisfied smile growing on his face. When he'd finished the article, he closed his Internet browser and reached for his phone. Then he paused.

He stood and walked to the door of his office, closed and locked it. It was Saturday afternoon; the plant was nearly empty. Still, you couldn't be too careful.

Satisfied, Parkerson sat down again and reached for the phone. He dialed the number by heart and waited.

A man picked up. "Is this line secure?"

"As it ever was," Parkerson told him. "The job's done."

There was a pause. "You're sure?"

"Check the news. The job's done."

"Okay." The man exhaled. "Okay."

"I'll be expecting payment," said Parkerson. "You know what to do."

"He's dead," the man said.

Parkerson sighed. "Dead and gone. Your wish came true. Now you pay me." There was another long pause. *"Okay?"*

"Okay," the man said. "Okay. I'll get you your money."

Parkerson hung up the phone. Opened a spreadsheet file and settled back in to work—or tried to, anyway. Within five minutes, the phone was ringing again. Parkerson answered. *"What?"*

"I killed him." The man moaned like a wounded animal. "Christ, they'll hang me for this."

"You didn't kill him," Parkerson said. "I told you, you're clean. No ties to the job whatsoever. You're safe. Now settle your tab." He hung up the phone again and sat in the stillness of his office for a minute or two. Stared at the phone, thinking.

An amateur, the guy was. A ticking time bomb. A liability. Parkerson studied the phone a minute longer. Then he picked up the handset again.

9

The visions came back. They always came back.

Lind stayed awake for as long as he could. He sat on the couch with every light on around him, the TV blaring movie previews until the neighbors beat on the walls. The rain drizzled down outside and the night slowly passed, and Lind sat on his couch and drank coffee and didn't move.

Morning came. The rain didn't stop. The sky turned light in the east and gradually the day came, a miserable, dripping, tarnished-steel day. Lind hardly noticed the bleak light. He waited for the phone to ring and prayed the visions wouldn't come back.

They came back. They always did.

He held them off as long as he could. Felt his eyelids grow heavy and, with the fatigue, the rising panic. He fought it. Drank more coffee. Stood

and paced the room. It didn't work. Nothing worked. The visions always came back.

He fell asleep around noon. Lay down on the couch and curled himself inward and surrendered, gave in. Then, just like that, he was out.

HE WAS THERE AGAIN. *Over there.* He was riding with Showtime and Hang Ten and the rest. The heat was unbearable; he was sweating through his gear, big, itchy drops of sweat trickling down to the small of his back. The truck barreled through the desert. The sun, high above, was relentless. The place was like hell without the fire.

He could hear the big engine rumbling. Could feel the vibrations. He could see Showtime beside him, at the wheel, laughing about something. Hang Ten's girlfriend, probably. She'd sent a picture that morning: a white sandy beach, a bikini. Showtime got a hold of it. *"Jee-sus,"* he said, laughing, fending off Hang Ten. "Why the hell'd you ever come over here, man?"

Hang Ten was up top, in the turret. Mini-Me and Slowpoke in the back. Through the front windshield, Lind could see Rambo's Humvee ahead, and he knew there was a third truck behind. There was a journalist back there, some wannabe hard-ass. A taste of the shit for all the readers back home. A routine patrol through the wasteland.

He could see it all. He could hear it. He was *there*. The trucks rumbled along, kicking up dust and sand, jostling over uneven terrain. The convoy motored past civilians, kids who stopped kicking soccer balls to run over and wave at the trucks, dark-eyed older men in white robes and head scarves—*ghatra*—who glared at the convoy, suspicious. The city shimmered in the heat in the distance.

They were halfway through the city when the world disappeared. On some narrow, misbegotten street. Showtime was still needling Hang Ten. Took one hand off the wheel and made a rude gesture. Hang Ten leaned down to see it. Lind was laughing despite the tension. Maybe *because* of

the tension, the whole goddamn scenario. Every damned patrol was the same, a 450-day game of Russian roulette.

Then it happened.

In the visions, it only came back in fragments. An explosion. Screaming. The truck shaking like a child's matchbox toy. Showtime holding up a stump of arm, laughing, manic. Fire, everywhere fire. An unbearable heat.

He felt himself dragged away from the truck. Someone grabbed him by the back and hauled him away on his ass. He watched his legs trail behind him, making twin tracks in the dirt. He watched the truck burn as other soldiers swarmed around it, Rambo pounding on Mini-Me's door, Hang Ten slumped over his turret.

He didn't feel any pain.

Then he was in another truck, rumbling back across the desert. Someone was yelling at him, shaking him. Rambo. The truck jostled. Rambo disappeared.

He was in a room somewhere. Doctors everywhere. They stared at him. Talked to him. He tried to reply. He still felt no pain.

They loaded him onto a plane, a big C-17. Wheeled him on board with seventy-five other soldiers, and he lay there and stared at the roof as the plane rumbled down the runway and took to the air. He stared at the roof until the plane landed somewhere, somewhere the air was cool and the sun wasn't so harsh, somewhere with more white rooms and more doctors. He stayed there for months, and every day they talked to him and asked questions and he didn't say much. They looked at him with concerned eyes and whispered to one another. Still, he didn't feel any pain.

Then he was on another plane. This time, he sat upright, in a jump seat, and stared at the jump seat across from him and saw the desert and Showtime and Hang Ten and Mini-Me burning, and he must have cried out or said something, because a medic came with a needle and then Showtime and Mini-Me and Hang Ten were gone. And then he wasn't there anymore, either.

He was in another room, a doctor's office inside a large hospital. Couches and comfortable chairs. A woman watched him from across a coffee table, her eyes friendly, concerned. She spoke to Lind, but Lind didn't hear her. She watched him stand, followed him to the door. She called out to him as he walked away.

There was a man waiting outside the hospital. He stood in the sunny parking lot in a blue baseball cap and sunglasses, and he straightened as Lind approached. Smiled at him. Talked to him. Took his arm and led him to a big gray car, buckled his seat belt and said something and laughed.

Lind went with the man. He tried to listen. He still hadn't felt any pain.

10

According to the Saint Paul Police Department, the suspect's name was Allen Bryce Salazar, and he had boarded a Delta regional flight to Omaha, Nebraska, just after the shooting. Windermere passed the information back to Derek Mathers in the FBI's Minneapolis field office, along with instructions to ground the plane, if possible. Mathers called back a few minutes later.

"No can do," he told Windermere. "Flight's in the air, and they won't turn around. I have agents in Omaha waiting on the tarmac."

"Shit," said Windermere. "Wanted to bring him down myself. Tell Omaha to ship him back our way so I can get my hands on him."

Mathers laughed. "I feel sorry for this guy already."

Windermere pocketed her phone and surveyed the crime scene. The crowd had diminished, now that the body was gone. The news trucks had

filed their reports. There were a few cops, and a few crime-scene techs, and the hotel's concierge peered out from the door. Windermere wondered how long it would take for business to return to normal. Before the whole tawdry affair was a tourist attraction. Stevens caught her eye. "Get your man?"

"Just about." She checked her watch. "Give it an hour or two. Then he's mine."

"Poor bastard."

Windermere cocked her head. "Mathers said the same thing, Stevens. Am I unpleasant to deal with or something?"

Stevens laughed. "You?" he said. "Nah."

STEVENS SURVEYED the Landmark Center from the crime scene. They'd found the suspect's rifle in an empty room overlooking 5th and Market Streets, a clear shot at the Saint Paul Hotel. The gun itself was unremarkable; a Remington 700 bolt-action hunting rifle with a scope, it would have had no trouble covering the eighty-yard range between window and target. Still, it was a skilled shot. Not exactly amateur work.

Windermere elbowed Stevens. "You're trying to figure out the why again, aren't you?"

Stevens glanced at her. Laughed. "Maybe," he said. "I mean, it's the most interesting part, isn't it?"

"You know how I feel about motive," she said.

"Sure do," Stevens said. "Heard it all before. We know the who and the how, so who cares about the why?"

"Exactly. I just want to catch the bastard, Stevens."

"I just think it's interesting." He gestured back at the empty Bentley. "This was a targeted killing. The shooter knew our man would be here. He camped out and waited and sniped him. Then he walked. Didn't run. He *walked* to his car, got in, and drove back to the airport. Boarded a flight home. Why?"

"Guess I'm going to find out." Windermere grinned at him. "You want I should keep you posted? Or maybe you'd like to come over and see the new headquarters. You can ask Salazar yourself why he done it."

Stevens shook his head. "Any chance you can get, huh?"

Windermere kept her smile pasted. Didn't say anything.

"I'm too old for your FBI work and you know it," he said. "I'm not G-man material."

"So you keep saying."

"So my wife keeps saying," Stevens said, and instantly regretted it. He sighed and checked his watch. "Speaking of which, I'd better go."

"I'll keep you posted." Windermere punched his arm. "First thing I'll ask Salazar is why."

STEVENS LEFT WINDERMERE and walked back through Saint Paul until he found his old Cherokee parked by a curb. He fired up the engine and drove west and out of the city center. His route took him past Rice Park again, a few blocks to the south, and he caught himself glancing up Market Street for another glimpse of the excitement.

Stevens had been a BCA agent for more than seventeen years now. Before that, he'd been a Duluth city cop. He liked police work, liked untying the knots, the impossible riddles. Mostly, he worked cold cases, spent his time in an office. It was a quiet existence, or it had been until Windermere came along.

That first kidnapping case with Windermere had been the most action Kirk Stevens had tasted in years, and though he was loath to admit it, he'd enjoyed the excitement. Hell, he'd even enjoyed some of the notoriety, the press attention that followed. It was nice to get a little recognition. An adrenaline rush. The whole case had been a heck of a lot of fun.

It had also been very dangerous.

Stevens knew Windermere thought he was wasting his talents at the BCA. "Come join the FBI," she told him after the Tomlin case was over.

"Work with me. We'll partner up. We'll eat takeout and chase bad guys full-time. You'll love it."

A part of him *would* love it, Stevens knew, as he piloted the Cherokee west along the interstate toward his home in Lexington-Hamline. A part of him longed for more of that excitement. It was the same part, maybe, that felt an electric little thrill whenever Windermere turned those big bewitching eyes on him. It was a dangerous urge to indulge.

Stevens turned off the interstate and navigated along the surface roads, the streets getting quieter and the rush of the city fading into the background. He slowed in front of a tidy green craftsman home and pulled into the slim driveway, climbed out of the Jeep and walked around his small patch of lawn, and surveyed the house before climbing the front steps to the door.

Stevens paused on the porch, his hand on the doorknob. Through the front window he could hear his daughter laughing with her friends in the kitchen. He could see his young son in the hallway, chasing his big German shepherd up the stairs. And he didn't need to look in the living room window to imagine his wife spread out on her favorite chair, brow furrowed as she worked through a mountain of paperwork, as pretty now as the day he'd married her.

This was the other part of his life. This was the part that didn't need the excitement, the adrenaline rush, the profiles in the *Star Tribune*. This was reality. This was what was important. Stevens paused at the front door, indulging the moment. Then he turned the doorknob and rejoined his family.