Body of Evidence

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

August 13
KEY WEST

Dear M,

Thirty days have passed in measured shades of sunlit color and changes in the wind. I think too much and do not dream.

Most afternoons I'm at Louie's writing on the porch and looking out at the sea. The water is mottled emerald green over the mosaic of sandbars, and aqua as it deepens. The sky goes on forever, clouds white puffs always moving like smoke. A constant breeze washes out the sounds of people swimming and sailboats anchoring just beyond the reef. The porch is covered and when a sudden storm whips up, as it often does late afternoon, I stay at my table smelling the rain and watching it turn the water nappy

like fur rubbed the wrong way. Sometimes it pours and the sun shines at the same time.

Nobody bothers me. By now I am part of the restaurant's family, like Zulu, the black Lab who splashes after Frisbees, and the stray cats who silently wander up to politely wait for scraps. Louie's four-legged wards eat better than any human. It is a comfort to watch the world treat its creatures kindly. I cannot complain about my days.

It is the nights I dread.

When my thoughts creep back into dark crevices and spin their fearful webs I pitch myself into crowded Old Town streets, drawn to noisy bars like a moth to light. Walt and PJ have refined my nocturnal habits to an art. Walt returns to the rooming house first, at twilight because his silver jewelry business in Mallory Square grinds to a halt after dark. We open bottles of beer and wait for PJ. Then out we go, bar to bar, usually ending up at Sloppy Joe's. We are becoming inseparable. I hope the two of them will always be inseparable. Their love no longer seems out of the ordinary to me. Nothing does, except the death I see.

Men emaciated and wan, their eyes windows through which I see tormented souls. AIDS is a holocaust consuming the offerings of this small island. Odd I should feel at home with the exiled and the dying. I may be survived by all of them. When I lie awake at night listening to the whirring of the window fan I'm seized by images of how it will happen.

Every time I hear a telephone ring, I remember. Every time I hear someone walking behind me, I turn around. At

night I look in my closet, behind the curtain and under my bed, then prop a chair in front of the door.

Dear God, I don't want to go home.

Beryl

September 30
KEY WEST

Dear M,

Yesterday at Louie's, Brent came out to the porch and said the phone was for me. My heart raced as I went inside and was answered by long distance static and the line going dead.

The way that made me feel! I've been telling myself I'm too paranoid. He would have said something, and delighted in my fear. It's impossible he knows where I am, impossible he could have tracked me here. One of the waiters is named Stu. He recently broke off with a friend up north, then moved here. Maybe his friend called and the connection was bad. It sounded like he asked for "Straw" instead of "Stu," and then when I answered he hung up.

I wish I had never told anyone my nickname. I am Beryl. I am Straw. I am frightened.

The book isn't finished. But I'm almost out of money, and the weather has turned. This morning it's dark and there's a fierce wind. I've stayed in my room because if I tried to work at Louie's the pages would blow out to sea. Streetlights have blinked on. Palm trees are struggling

against the wind, fronds like inside-out umbrellas. The world moans outside my window like something wounded, and when the rain hits the glass it sounds as if a dark army has marched in and Key West is under siege.

I must leave soon. I will miss the island. I will miss PJ and Walt. They have made me feel cared for and safe. I don't know what I'll do when I get back to Richmond. Perhaps I should move right away, but I don't know where I will go.

Beryl

1

Returning the Key West letters to their manila folder, I got out a packet of surgical gloves, tucked it inside my black medical bag, and took the elevator down one floor to the morgue.

The tile hallway was damp from being mopped, the autopsy suite locked and closed for business. Diagonally across from the elevator was the stainless-steel refrigerator, and opening its massive door, I was greeted by the familiar blast of cold, foul air. I located the gurney inside without bothering to check toe tags, recognizing the slender foot protruding from a white sheet. I knew every inch of Beryl Madison.

Smoky-blue eyes stared dully from slitted lids, her face slack and marred with pale open cuts, most of them on the left side. Her neck was laid wide open to her spine, the strap muscles severed. Closely spaced over her left chest and breast were nine stab wounds spread open like large red buttonholes and almost perfectly vertical. They had

been inflicted in rapid succession, one right after the other, the force so violent there were hilt marks in her skin. Cuts to her forearms and hands ranged from a quarter of an inch to four and a half inches in length. Counting two on her back, and excluding her stab wounds and cut throat, there were twenty-seven cutting injuries, all of them inflicted while she was attempting to ward off the slashing of a wide, sharp blade.

I would not need photographs or body diagrams. When I closed my eyes I could see Beryl Madison's face. I could see in sickening detail the violence inflicted upon her body. Her left lung was punctured four times. Her carotid arteries were almost transected. Her aortic arch, pulmonary artery, heart, and pericardial sac were penetrated. She was, for all practical purposes, dead by the time the madman almost decapitated her.

I was trying to make sense of it. Someone had threatened to murder her. She fled to Key West. She was terrified beyond reason. She did not want to die. The night she returned to Richmond it happened.

Why did you let him into your house? Why in God's name did you?

Rearranging the sheet, I returned the gurney to the others bearing bodies against the refrigerator's back wall. By this time tomorrow her body would be cremated, her ashes en route to California. Beryl Madison would have turned thirty-four next month. She had no living relatives, no one in this world, it seemed, except a half sister in Fresno. The heavy door sucked shut.

The tarmac of the parking lot behind the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner was warm and reassuring

beneath my feet, and I could smell the creosote of nearby railroad trestles baking in the unseasonably warm sun. It was Halloween.

The bay door was open wide, one of my morgue assistants hosing off the concrete. He playfully arched water, slapping it close enough for me to feel mist around my ankles.

"Hey, Dr. Scarpetta, you keeping banker's hours now?" he called out.

It was a little past four-thirty. I rarely left the office before six.

"Need a lift somewhere?" he added.

"I've got a ride. Thanks," I answered.

I was born in Miami. I was no stranger to the part of the world where Beryl had hidden during the summer. When I closed my eyes I saw the colors of Key West. I saw bright greens and blues and sunsets so gaudy only God can get away with them. Beryl Madison should never have come home.

A brand-new LTD Crown Victoria, shining like black glass, slowly pulled into the lot. Expecting the familiar beat-up Plymouth, I was startled when the new Ford's window hummed open. "You waiting for the bus or what?" Mirrored shades reflected my surprised face. Lieutenant Pete Marino was trying to look blasé as electronic locks opened with a firm click.

"I'm impressed," I said, settling into the plush interior.

"Went with my promotion." He revved the engine. "Not bad, huh?"

After years of broken-down dray horses, Marino had finally gotten himself a stallion.

I noticed the hole in the dash as I got out my cigarettes.

"You been plugging in your bubble light or just your electric razor?"

"Oh, hell," he complained. "Some drone swiped my lighter. At the car wash. I mean, I'd only had the car a day, you believe it? I take her in, right? Was too busy bitching after the fact, the brushes broke off the antenna, was giving the drones holy hell about that . . ."

Sometimes Marino reminded me of my mother.

". . . wasn't until later I noticed the damn lighter gone." He paused, digging in his pocket as I rummaged through my purse for matches.

"Yo, Chief, thought you was gonna quit smoking," he said rather sarcastically, dropping a Bic lighter in my lap.

"I am," I muttered. "Tomorrow."

The night Beryl Madison was murdered I was out enduring an overblown opera followed by drinks in an overrated English pub with a retired judge who became something less than honorable as the evening progressed. I wasn't wearing my pager. Unable to reach me, the police had summoned Fielding, my deputy chief, to the scene. This would be the first time I had been inside the slain author's house.

Windsor Farms was not the sort of neighborhood where one would expect anything so hideous to happen. Homes were large and set back from the street on impeccably landscaped lots. Most had burglar alarm systems, and all featured central air, eliminating the need for open windows. Money can't buy eternity, but it can buy a certain degree of security. I had never had a homicide case from the Farms.

"Obviously she had money from somewhere," I observed as Marino halted at a stop sign.

A snowy-haired woman walking her snowy Maltese squinted at us as the dog sniffed a tuft of grass, which was followed by the inevitable.

"What a worthless fuzz ball," he said, staring disdainfully at the woman and the dog moving on. "Hate mutts like that. Yap their damn heads off and piss all over the place. Gonna have a dog, ought to be something with teeth."

"Some people simply want company," I said.

"Yeah." He paused, then picked up on my earlier statement. "Beryl Madison had money, most of it tied up in her crib. Apparently whatever savings she had, she blew the dough down there in Queer West. We're still sorting through her paperwork."

"Had any of it been gone through?"

"Don't look like it," he replied. "Found out she didn't do half bad as a writer – bucks-wise. Appears she used several pen names. Adair Wilds, Emily Stratton, Edith Montague." The mirrored shades turned my way again.

None of the names were familiar except Stratton. I said, "Her middle name is Stratton."

"Maybe accounting for her nickname, Straw."

"That and her blond hair," I remarked.

Beryl's hair was honey blond streaked gold by the sun. She was petite, with even, refined features. She may have been striking in life. It was hard to say. The only photograph from life I had seen was the one on her driver's license.

"When I talked to her half sister," Marino was

explaining, "I found out Beryl was called Straw by the people she was close to. Whoever she was writing down there in the Keys, this person was aware of her nickname. That's the impression I get." He adjusted the visor. "Can't figure why she Xeroxed those letters. Been chewing on that. I mean, how many people do you know who make photocopies of personal letters they write?"

"You've indicated she was an inveterate record keeper," I reminded him.

"Right. That's bugging me, too. Supposedly the squirrel's been threatening her for months. What'd he do? What'd he say? Don't know, because she didn't tape his calls or write nothing down. The lady makes photocopies of personal letters but don't keep a record when someone's threatening to whack her. Tell me if that makes sense."

"Not everybody thinks the way we do."

"Well, some people don't *think* because they're in the middle of something they don't want nobody to know about," he argued.

Pulling into a drive, he parked in front of the garage door. The grass was badly overgrown and spangled with tall dandelions swaying in the breeze, and there was a FOR SALE sign planted near the mailbox. Still tacked across the gray front door was a ribbon of yellow crime-scene tape.

"Her ride's inside the garage," Marino said as we got out. "A nice black Honda Accord EX. Some details about it you might find interesting."

We stood on the drive and looked around. The slanted rays of the sun were warm on the back of my shoulders and neck. The air was cool, the pervasive hum of autumn

insects the only sound. I took a slow, deep breath. I was suddenly very tired.

Her house was International style, modern and starkly simplistic with a horizontal frontage of large windows supported by ground-floor piers, bringing to mind a ship with an open lower deck. Built of fieldstone and gray-stained wood, it was the sort of house a wealthy young couple might build – big rooms, high ceilings, a lot of expensive and wasted space. Windham Drive dead-ended at her lot, which explained why no one had heard or seen anything until it was too late. The house was cloistered by oaks and pines on two sides, drawing a curtain of foliage between Beryl and her nearest neighbors. In back, the yard sharply dropped off into a ravine of underbrush and boulders, leveling out into an expanse of virgin timber stretching as far as I could see.

"Damn. Bet she had deer," Marino said as we wandered around back. "Something, huh? You look out your windows, think you got the world to yourself. Bet the view's something when it snows. Me, I'd love a crib like this. Build a nice fire in the winter, pour yourself a little bourbon, and just look out at the woods. Must be nice to be rich."

"Especially if you're alive to enjoy it."

"Ain't that the truth," he said.

Fall leaves crackled beneath our shoes as we rounded the west wing. The front door was level with the patio, and I noted the peephole. It stared at me like a tiny empty eye. Marino flicked a cigarette butt, sent it sailing into the grass, then dug in a pocket of his powder-blue trousers. His jacket was off, his big belly hanging over his belt, his

short-sleeved white shirt open at the neck and wrinkled around his shoulder holster.

He produced a key attached to a yellow evidence tag, and as I watched him open the dead-bolt lock I was startled anew by the size of his hands. Tan and tough, they reminded me of baseball mitts. He would never have made a musician or a dentist. Somewhere in his early fifties, with thinning gray hair and a face as shopworn as his suits, he was still formidable enough to give most people pause. Big cops like him rarely get in fights. The street punks take one look and sit on their bravado.

We stood in a rectangle of sunlight inside the foyer and worked on pairs of gloves. The house smelled stale and dusty, the way houses smell when they have been shut up for a while. Though the Richmond police department's Identification Unit, or ID, had thoroughly processed the scene, nothing had been moved. Marino had assured me the house would look exactly as it had when Beryl's body was found two nights earlier. He shut the door and flipped on a light.

"As you can see," his voice echoed, "she had to have let the guy in. No sign of forcible entry, and the joint's got a triple A burglar alarm." He directed my attention to the panel of buttons by the door, adding, "Deactivated at the moment. But it was in working order when we got here, screaming bloody murder, which is why we found her so fast to begin with."

He went on to remind me the homicide was originally called in as an audible alarm. At shortly after eleven P.M., one of Beryl's neighbors dialed 911 after the alarm had been going for nearly thirty minutes. A

patrol unit responded and the officer found the front door ajar. Minutes later he was on his radio requesting backups.

The living room was in shambles, the glass coffee table on its side. Magazines, a crystal ashtray, several art deco bowls and a flower vase were strewn over the dhurrie rug. A pale blue leather wingchair was overturned, a cushion from the matching sectional sofa nearby. On the white-washed wall left of a door leading into a hallway were dark spatters of dried blood.

"Does her alarm have a time delay?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. You open the door and the alarm hums about fifteen seconds, long enough for you to punch in your code before it goes off."

"Then she must have opened the door, deactivated the alarm, let the person in, and then reset the alarm while he was still here. Otherwise, it would never have gone off later, when he left. Interesting."

"Yeah," Marino replied, "interesting as shit."

We were inside the living room, standing near the overturned coffee table. It was sooty with dusting powder. The magazines on the floor were news and literary publications, all of them several months old.

"Did you find any recent newspapers or magazines?" I asked. "If she bought a paper locally, it could be important. Anywhere she went after getting off the plane is worth checking."

I saw his jaw muscles flex. Marino hated it when he assumed I was telling him how to do his job.

He said, "There were a couple of things upstairs in her bedroom where her briefcase and bags was. A Miami

Herald and something called the *Keynoter*, has mostly real estate listings for the Keys. Maybe she was thinking of moving down there? Both papers came out Monday. She must've bought them, maybe picked them up in the airport on her way back to Richmond."

"I'd be interested in what her realtor has to say . . ."

"Nothing, that's what he has to say," he interrupted. "Has no idea where Beryl was and only showed her house once while she was gone. Some young couple. Decided the price was too high. Beryl was asking three hundred Gs for the joint." He looked around, his face impervious. "Guess someone could get a deal now."

"Beryl took a taxi home from the airport the night she got in." I doggedly pursued the details.

He got out a cigarette and pointed with it. "Found the receipt in the foyer there, on that little table by the door. Already checked out the driver, a guy named Woodrow Hunnel. Dumb as a bag of hammers. Said he was waiting in the line of cabs at the airport. She flagged him down. This was close to eight, it was raining cats and dogs. He let her out here at the house maybe forty minutes later, said he carried her two suitcases to the door, then split. The fare was twenty-six bucks, including the tip. He was back at the airport about half an hour later picking up another fare."

"You're sure, or is this what he told you?"

"Sure as I'm damn standing here." He tapped the cigarette on his knuckle and began fingering the filtered tip with his thumb. "We checked out the story. Hunnel was shooting straight with us. He didn't touch the lady. There wasn't time."