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The Murderers' Club

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

A few weeks ago

BlackWidow has entered the room.
AmericanPsycho: Welcome, BlackWidow, you're the last of our little group…and the only woman.
BlackWidow: Sorry I'm late. Have I missed anything?
AmericanPsycho: No. We've only been online for a minute or so.
BlackWidow: Good.
DialM: So, how do we start?
NeverCaught: Yeah, let's get down to the good stuff.
AmericanPsycho: Today is mostly orientation.
NeverCaught: Okay, shoot.
AmericanPsycho: First up is security. I've set the system up for our protection, but I need to know you've followed my security demands. Did you all follow the instructions in your member packs?
DialM: Certainly.
NeverCaught: Sure.

BlackWidow: Yes.
AmericanPsycho: Great. That's the first line of our defense—your laptops are all specially fitted out.
NeverCaught: Yup, the instructions are clear.
AmericanPsycho: The rest of the security I've handled from my end. We can never be too careful.
NeverCaught: Good. I want to stay *never caught*.
AmericanPsycho: I've also set up a filter program that will pick up certain words, like your occupations, all of your real names, cities, states, etc. and replace any suspect text with a random number of ***. There's a two-second delay to accommodate the censoring.
NeverCaught: Awesome.
AmericanPsycho: Secrecy must be our paramount concern AT ALL TIMES. No talking, no bragging, nothing, to anyone but us, online. Here you are safe. Here you can say whatever you want. Feel free to indulge your darkest fantasies in the safety of our select group. All contact must be via this chat room. Never try to contact me, or each other, by any other means, including the other chat rooms we frequent. I'll keep posting news and the site's also got the online profiles. Plus of course the main feature, video streaming. Questions?
DialM: Thank you, AmericanPsycho. That seems clear enough.
BlackWidow: What about the FBI and this site?
AmericanPsycho: The site uses the latest in data security and encryption and it will be almost impossible for anyone, including the FBI, to hack into it…at least not without me getting an alert. But nothing's impenetrable. If it comes to that, I've got all sorts of security backups. And don't forget—if something is up, follow the emergency instructions in your pack.
NeverCaught: Gotcha.

AmericanPsycho: Okay, that's the boring part done. Now we just have to wait…only a few weeks to go. The construction is nearly finished.
NeverCaught: Excellent.
AmericanPsycho: Any other questions? Comments?
NeverCaught: Yes. One. YOU know our names!
AmericanPsycho: Yes, me, and only me. But your secrets are safe with me. I am the President of the Club.

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I hold my Smith & Wesson 9mm semiautomatic in front of me, legs shoulder-width apart, and line up the gun's sights, aiming at his chest—the heart to be precise. The middle sight is pointed squarely at the target, and the outer sights are horizontally level. I take a breath, hold it and squeeze the trigger. The gun recoils, but after each backward motion I readjust my aim and fire again. I empty my whole magazine—eight shots—and revel in the muffled yet rhythmic click…click…click as my shells are thrown onto the ground near my feet.

"Nice grouping, Anderson."

I jump slightly, instinctively tightening the already firm grip on my gun. My rational mind wins out over my impulses and I resist the temptation to swing the gun around and point it. I turn to see Andy Rivers, the head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit, standing next to me. I relax my grip. Rivers's dark, wiry hair is offset by patches of gray at his temples, the only sign that time—or perhaps stress—is catching up with him. In his midforties, he's been the head of the unit for nearly ten years, and I don't imagine he'll be leaving any time soon. He's too good at his job. I take off my earmuffs and goggles and the muffled world returns to normal.

"Hi, boss." I look back at my target and the bullet holes clustered around the heart. "Thanks."

I'm standing in booth twelve of one of the FBI's firing ranges at Quantico, Virginia. Our unit is part of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes—NCAVC—and we get to share the FBI Academy's three hundred and eighty-five acres with new recruits and several other active units. The impressive complex includes three dormitories, a dining room, a library, an auditorium, a chapel, a gym, a large running track, a defensive-driving track, several firing ranges and the famous Hogan's Alley—a simulated town. Over the past year, since I started with the Bureau, I've spent a lot of time here. . . it's home now.

I push the button in my booth that initiates the pulley system and the target sails toward me. The range consists of fifteen booths, each with a pulley system to move the targets backward and forward—from the booth to the twenty-five or fifty-yard mark. When I first came to the States I was constantly converting to metric, but now I'm used to the American way. The targets contain the impression of a person, an outline of someone's upper body in black ink. My paper target arrives and I take a closer look. I've emptied three rounds into the paper and the heart region is just one large hole where bullets have penetrated it again and again.

I was always one for firing practice—and not just in the few weeks before our yearly firearms test like some of the agents. But since one especially intense case I worked, I've been coming here a lot. An awful lot. Sometimes I spend hours in a trancelike state, my gun pulsating as I fire over and over again.

Rivers smiles for an instant before staring at the target. "Anyone we know?" he asks quietly. I know what he's hinting at, but I don't want to talk about it. My compulsory fortnightly sessions with the Bureau psychologist Dr. Amanda Rosen are bad enough. It's been six months; I should be over it.

I shrug. "Just practicing." I'm lying and he knows it, but we both leave it. I bite my lip and reload, distracting myself with the repetitive motion of forcing bullets into the gun's magazine.

Rivers watches my hands. "Practicing," he says with a hint of disbelief.

I release my lower lip from my teeth and consciously alter my body language, acting for my boss. "You know me, I'm a perfectionist." I force a light tone into my voice.

He pushes his gold-framed glasses higher onto his nose, masking his dark brown eyes. "That's why I wanted you in my team."

I nod and smile genuinely, still humbled by the fact that Rivers handpicked me to work as a profiler in his team. The Victorian police sent me out here for the Bureau's six-week International Program and I wound up with a job offer. Funny how things work out.

"Anyway, I better get to it. I've got my firearms test coming up." He gives me a wink and moves into the booth next to me.

"You don't fool me. I know you come down here more than once a year."

"Maybe. But keep it to yourself, Anderson."

I laugh, put my earmuffs and goggles back on and attach a fresh target to the clips. Once the target is back at the fifty-yard mark, I raise my gun and let him have it.

Today, Dr. Amanda Rosen wears her pinstripe pantsuit—straight, classy pants and a plain white blouse that pulls slightly across her chest. The white shirt highlights her olive complexion, making it seem even richer, darker. Hanging on her chair is the suit's matching jacket, a short, bolero-style number. She's covering old ground, crossing her Ts and dotting her Is. The case I was involved with six months ago got out of hand and she needs to know I've dealt with everything that happened.

Usually our expertise is requested for cases the police have been unable to solve. We do most of our work remotely, examining crime-scene photos and reports, which are sometimes months or even years old. Then we draft our profile of the perpetrator and send it to the cops. Occasionally we work in the field, in the thick of it, and

this case was one of those times. It was a big case, pursuing a killer dubbed the DC Slasher, and two profilers were assigned to the task force. But things turned bad when the killer targeted the Bureau… and me.

Dr. Rosen's eyes fix on me, trying to read my body language, trying to break through my defenses. If my plan's working, she thinks she's in. Her dark brown hair is cut so it falls around her face in wisps, but today she wears it swept back in a French roll. Small strands have broken free and arc across her face. Her full lips are pursed, waiting for my response, and her dark brown eyes are sympathetic. Her eyes are her most powerful weapon. Sometimes when she looks at me I feel stripped bare as if she can see right through me, through the charade.

"Yes, it's going well," I say.

I haven't told her what disturbed me most about the case, and I never will. I can't tell the Bureau shrink that I had dreams and waking visions that came true. Hell, I can hardly believe it myself, especially given I haven't had any psychic episodes since.

"So you feel you've put the case behind you now, Sophie."

I take a breath, careful not to answer too quickly. Desperation could give me away. "It's hard, of course, but I love my job. I like being part of the fight."

"Yes—" she studies her notepad and then looks up "—the fight. You've clocked up a lot of time on the range and in the gym recently."

I shrug. "I'm keeping busy." A half truth. "I'm not the kinda gal who likes to sit around and watch TV."

"No. That doesn't match your personality profile. But maybe there are other reasons too?"

She leaves the conversation open, prompting me for the response. I know what she's looking for and decide it might be in my best interests to give it to her.

I nod. "It's true. I am more—" I search for the right word "—security conscious these days."

"Does it give you a sense of control?"

"Yes." I answer slowly, pretending to think about what I'm say-

ing. "Being physically fit, strong and a proficient marksperson make me feel safer."

"How much gym time are you doing?"

I know the summary's right in front of her. We have to swipe our ID card every time we enter and exit the gym, and that data is automatically compiled. Same for the firing range.

I shrug, pretending I'm not overtly aware or conscious of my movements. After a respectable pause I say, "Probably an hour a day." I keep my mouth shut about the morning runs and the midnight excursions to my apartment's gym. I haven't told her much about my sleeping problems either…and I don't intend to.

"Sounds like a lot."

I shrug again. "Not really. It's about routine. And keeping in shape." I smile, a forced smile. "Besides, gotta keep those calories off." I pat my stomach, even though I'm in the best shape of my life. My daily routine includes kung fu exercises and even body conditioning so I can take punches and block harder. Nobody's going to get to me.

I close my eyes and for an instant I see *him* standing over me. Memory's a bitch.

AmericanPsycho: These are the last two.
DialM: Susie Dean and Jonathan Cantor.
AmericanPsycho: Yup. We'll get to know them and the other six real well in the next eight weeks.
DialM: Eight people, eight weeks.
AmericanPsycho: Exactly.
DialM: Very equitable. Two each.
NeverCaught: I can't wait.
BlackWidow: But there are three men—Jonathan, Danny and Malcolm—that makes three for me!
NeverCaught: She's right. What's up with that?
AmericanPsycho: Six girls and two men might have looked suspicious.

DialM: You're very erudite, Psycho.
NeverCaught: ***ing big words.
NeverCaught: What the…
AmericanPsycho: My censorship extends to language, Never.
NeverCaught: Whatever.
AmericanPsycho: Back to business. Have you checked out the bios?
DialM: Yes.
NeverCaught: Yup. And man am I loving it. We've got Cindy the Vegas showgirl, Malcolm the hunk, Danny the macho *****head, Brigitte the exotic sexpot, Ling the shy one, Clair the singer, Susie the loser actress and Jonathan the geek.
BlackWidow: Jonathan's cute.
DialM: I like them all. All good choices. You really are spoiling us, Psycho.
AmericanPsycho: I told you it was pure genius.
BlackWidow: Yes, well done. This is so self-indulgent.
NeverCaught: Much more fun than stalking.
DialM: Their ignorance is our bliss.
NeverCaught: Yes. Can't wait for the first kill.

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