Say Goodbye

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

"In the U.S., the dangerous spiders include the Widows and the Recluse Spiders."

FROM *Spiders and Their Kin,*
BY HERBERT W. AND LORNA R. LEVI, A GOLDEN GUIDE
FROM ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 2002

HE WAS MOANING, A GUTTURAL SOUND IN THE BACK of his throat as his fingers tightened their grip in her hair. She curled her lips over her teeth, applying more pressure. His hips surged and he started with the usual stream of nonsense boys liked to murmur during a time like this:

"Sweet Jesus . . . oh God. Don't stop. You're so beautiful. OhmyGod, ohmyGod. You are the best! Oh, Ginny, Ginny, Ginny. Sweet Ginny . . ."

She wondered if he could hear himself speak, if he had any idea of what he said. That sometimes he compared her to saints. That he told her she was gorgeous, beautiful, a dark Georgian rose. That once, he'd even told her he loved her.

A guy would say anything at a time like this.

The gearshift was digging into her hip, starting to hurt. She moved her right hand to the top of his jeans and worked them lower on his thighs. Another small shift here, the boy now made a gurgling sound as if he were dying.

"Holy mother of God! Jesus, Ginny. Beautiful, beautiful, Ginny. Sweet . . . mother . . . pretty . . . lovely . . . are killing me! You are killing me! YOU ARE KILLING ME!"

Oh, for heaven's sake, she thought, *get on with it.* A bit more

maneuvering, a bit more pressure applied by her mouth, followed by a bit more pressure applied by her hand . . .

Tommy was a panting, happy boy.

And little Ginny would finally get a treat.

She retreated to the other side of the truck, turning her head slightly so he wouldn't see her wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. Bottle of Jim Beam was where they'd left it, rolling on the floor beneath her feet. She picked it up, took a swig, passed it to Tommy.

He still had his pants tangled around his legs and a dazed look on his captain-of-the-varsity-football-team face.

"Shit, Ginny, now you *are* trying to kill me."

She laughed, took another swig herself, so big her eyes burned, and she told herself it was the whiskey and nothing else.

Tommy went to work on his clothing. Pulled up tighty-whities first, followed by his jeans, then buckled his belt. He did it matter-of-factly, with none of the awkwardness girls generally felt. It's why Ginny preferred front-seat blow jobs to backseat sex. Sex took longer and involved more logistics. Blow jobs, on the other hand, kept things simple and, with most boys, quick.

Tommy wanted the sour mash now. She handed him the bottle. Watched his Adam's apple bob above the collar of his letterman's jacket as he drank. He dragged his hand over his mouth, then handed the bottle back to her.

"Sex and whiskey. Doesn't get any better than this!" he said with a grin.

"Not bad for a Tuesday night," she granted.

He reached over, stealing his hand beneath her shirt, cupping her breast. His fingers found her left nipple, squeezing experimentally.

"You're sure . . . ?"

She batted his hand away. "Can't. Gotta get home. Mama said if I broke curfew one more time, she was locking me out."

"Your mama? Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

Ginny let that comment pass. " 'Sides, don't you gotta catch up with your posse? Or maybe swing by *Darlene's*? She probably can't sleep without one last glimpse of Loverboy."

She started the comment playfully, ended with an edge. Just because you knew your place in the world didn't mean you had to be happy about it.

Beside her, Tommy had grown quiet. He reached over, stroked her cheek with his thumb. It was a strange gesture coming from him. Almost tender.

"I got something for you," he said abruptly, withdrawing his hand, going to work in his front denim pocket.

Ginny frowned at him. Of course he had something for her. That's how these things worked. White-trash girl fucks the brains out of rich, handsome quarterback, and in return he gives her pretty sparkling gifts. Because all boys had needs, but not all boys could get what they needed from their uptight girlfriends.

Tommy was staring at her. Ginny looked down belatedly at his offered hand and realized with genuine shock that he was holding out his class ring.

"What the hell is that?" she blurted out.

Tommy recoiled, but quickly caught himself. "I know you're surprised . . ."

"Darlene will carve out your heart with a spoon if she sees me wearing that."

"Darlene doesn't matter anymore."

"Since when?"

"Since Saturday night, when I broke up with her."

Ginny stared at him. "Why the hell would you do such a stupidass move like that?"

Tommy's face darkened. He clearly hadn't anticipated this reaction, but once again he forged ahead. "Ginny darlin', I don't think you understand . . ."

"Oh, I understand just fine. Darlene is beautiful. Darlene has pretty clothes and her daddy's money and perfect lipstick, which

naturally she doesn't want to smudge going down on her hunky boyfriend."

"You don't need to put it that way," Tommy said tightly.

"Put it what way? That precious little Darlene won't swallow? So now you've convinced yourself you're in love with Little Miss White Trash?"

"Don't say that—"

"Say what? The truth? I know who I am. Only one with shit for brains in this truck is you. Now, I wanted a gold necklace and you promised me!"

"So that's it? It's all about the necklace?"

" 'Course it is."

He studied her, working his jaw. "You know, Trace tried to warn me about you. He said you had a mean streak, the soul of a snake. I told him he was wrong. You're not your mother, Ginny. You could be . . . you are someone special. At least"—he squared his shoulders—"to me."

"What the fuck is wrong with you!" She couldn't stand it anymore. She popped open the door, hopped out of the truck. She heard him scrambling to get out the other side, maybe thinking he'd better stop her before she did something stupid.

They were parked off a logging road in the woods, the area deserted, the ground hard and uneven beneath her feet. For one impulsive moment, she wanted to run. She'd just take off, racing down the long blue tunnel spinning out between the tall Georgia pines.

She was young and strong. Girl like her could run a long time. God knows, she'd had the practice.

"Ginny, talk to me."

Tommy's voice from behind her. Still earnest, but giving her space. Heaven help her, the boy had probably taken a poetry class, or started listening to Sarah McLachlan, or some such shit. Everyone wanted everyone to have depth these days. Didn't they realize that clichés were much easier to manage?

She took a deep breath, tilted her head up, stared at the stars.

When life gives you lemons, she thought, *make lemonade.* The pure absurdity of the thought made her want to laugh, or maybe it was cry. So she did what she did best. She fisted her hands and worked the angles. Despite what people thought, a girl like her couldn't afford to be cheap.

"Well, Tommy," she announced, "I gotta be honest: You've taken me by surprise."

"Well, yeah. Took myself by surprise, too. Wasn't like I *meant* this to happen."

"This'll hurt you, you know. I wear that ring, kids at school, they'll say some awful things."

"Let 'em."

"Four more months, you graduate, you're done. Come on, Tommy, you don't need this shit."

"Ginny—" he started urgently again.

She placed her finger over his lips. "I'll take your ring, Tommy."

"You will?" Hopeful now. Earnest. Goddamn Sarah McLachlan.

"Did you bring the necklace?"

"Well, I did, just in case, but—"

"Gimme the necklace. I'll wear the ring on it, beneath my shirt. It'll be our secret, something just the two of us know, at least until school is out. I don't need a big show to know you care. Already, this moment, what you've managed to do . . ." Her voice was growing edgy again. She forced herself to finish more brightly: "It means so much that you thought to do this."

Tommy's face lit up. He dug around in his pocket, finally producing a tiny ziplock bag containing the necklace. He'd probably bought it at Wal-Mart. Fourteen carat: It would turn the skin on her neck green.

Damn, all that for this?

She took the chain, looped it through the band of the ring, gave him a reassuring smile.

He grabbed her for a hard kiss. She let him. But then he started fondling her again, obviously intending to cement their new relationship with a rut in the woods.

Christ, she was tired.

With a bit of effort, she pushed him back, having to strain against one hundred and eighty pounds of testosterone. "Tommy," she admonished, panting. "Curfew, remember? Let's not start our new relationship with me grounded."

He grinned, his color high. "Yeah, okay, guess not. But Lord, Ginny . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Back in the truck, big boy. Let's see how fast you can drive."

Tommy could drive fast. But they still didn't make it to her house until ten minutes after eleven. Front porch light was on, but nothing moved behind the shades.

With luck, her mother was out and would never know. After the night she'd had, Ginny felt she deserved a break.

Tommy wanted to watch until she was safe inside her house. She assured him that would make it worse, her mom might come out, make a scene. More coaxing. The cost of five valuable minutes, he finally drove off.

Her hero, she thought ironically, and turned toward her home.

It was small and gray, with no excuse for a lawn. Dull outside, even duller inside. But hey, as the saying went, it was home. At least it wasn't a trailer park. See, once Ginny'd had a dad. And he'd been tall and handsome, with this big booming laugh and thick strong arms he'd use to swing her up into the air as he walked through the door after a long day at work.

Her daddy had died one day. Coming home from a dry-walling job, catching his front tires on black ice. Insurance money had paid for the house.

Her mother had turned to other activities to pay for the rest.

Ginny tried the door. It was locked. She shrugged philosophically, headed round the back. It was locked, too. She tried the windows, but already knew they wouldn't budge. Her mom liked to lock up tight. Maybe their neighborhood had been blue collar once, but that had been about ten years and one economic class ago.

Ginny knocked on the door. Rang the doorbell. Not even a shade twitched.

Her mama had done it. Ginny had broken curfew, and her damn mama, who seemed convinced Ginny could do better if she'd just straighten up her act, had locked her out.

Fuck it. She'd go for a walk. Maybe in an hour or two, her mother would decide she'd made her point.

Ginny headed down her dark street, passing tiny home after tiny home. Folks who used to make a living. A lot who didn't anymore.

She'd just hit the intersection with the rural road when the black SUV zipped by. She saw the brake lights flare up, dragon eyes, as the SUV screeched to a halt twenty yards away. A head poked out the driver's side, too dark to see much other than the outline of a baseball cap. A heavy male baritone inquired, "Need a lift?"

It took Ginny only a moment to decide. The vehicle looked expensive, the voice sounded deep. It appeared that her night was finally looking up.

Ginny realized her mistake five minutes later. After she'd climbed into the throaty SUV, running her hand over the soft, tanned leather. After she'd giggled and told the man, middle-aged, trim, that her car had run out of gas. After, with another giggle, she had suggested he could give her a ride around the block.

He didn't say much. Just took another left, another right, before abruptly pulling behind the giant self-storage warehouse and killing the engine.

Ginny felt the first shiver then. With a total stranger, there was always that initial moment when you were almost afraid. Before you remembered you didn't have to be scared anymore because there wasn't anything some asshole could take that you hadn't already given away.

But then he turned and she found herself staring into a flat,

unsmiling face. Hard square jaw, tight lips, eyes oversized pools of unending black.

And then, almost as if he knew how she would react, as if he wanted to savor the moment the expression crossed her face, he slowly pushed up the brim of his baseball cap and showed her his forehead.

Inside the pocket of her denim jacket, Ginny's fingers wrapped tight around Tommy's ring. For she only needed one look at what the man had done to reach several realizations at once: Her mother wouldn't have to worry about curfew anymore. And young, lustful Tommy would never need to be embarrassed in front of his friends.

Because this man was never, ever letting her go home.

Some girls were smart. Some girls were fast. Some girls were strong. Ginny, poor Ginny Jones, had already learned four years ago, when her mother's boyfriend first appeared in her bedroom, that she had only one way of saving herself.

"All right," she said briskly. "Let's cut to the chase: Why don't you tell me exactly what you want me to do, and I'll start stripping off clothes."

ONE

THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT NO ONE TELLS YOU, THAT YOU must experience in order to learn:

It only hurts the first few times. You scream. You scream and you scream and you scream until your throat is raw and your eyes swollen and you taste a curious substance in the back of your throat that is like bile and vomit and tears all rolled into one. You cry for your mother. You beg for God. You don't understand what is happening. You can't believe it is happening.

And yet, it is happening.

And so, bit by bit, you fall silent.

Terror doesn't last forever. It can't. It takes too much energy to sustain. And in truth, terror occurs when you are confronted with the unknown. But once it has happened enough, you have been systematically violated, beaten, cowed, it's not unknown, is it? The same act that once shocked you, hurt you, shamed you with its perversity, becomes the norm. This is your day now. This is the life you lead. This is who you have become.

A specimen in the collection.

TWO

"Spiders are always on the lookout for prey, but predators are also on the lookout for spiders. Clever disguises and quick getaways help keep spiders out of trouble."

FROM *Spiders and Their Kin,*
BY HERBERT W. AND LORNA R. LEVI, A GOLDEN GUIDE
FROM ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 2002

"WE GOT A PROBLEM."

"No kidding. Widespread production of methamphetamines, a middle class that keeps falling further and further behind, not to mention all the ruckus over global warming . . ."

"No, no, no. A *real* problem."

Kimberly sighed. They'd been working this crime scene for three days now. Long enough that she no longer noticed the smell of burning jet fuel and charcoaled bodies. She was cold, dehydrated, and had a stitch in her side. It would take a lot, in her opinion, to qualify as a real problem at this point.

She finished up the last swig of bottled water, then turned away from the tent city that currently comprised command central, and faced her teammate. "All right, Harold. What's the problem?"

"Uh-uh. Gotta see it to believe it."

Harold didn't wait for her answer, but set off at a half-jog, leaving Kimberly no choice but to follow. He trotted along the outside of the crime scene perimeter that surrounded what had once been a bucolic green field bordered by thick woodlands. Now half the treetops had been sheared off, while the pasture contained a deep,

jagged scar of earth that ended in a blackened fuselage, crumpled John Deere tractor, and twisted right wing.

As crime scenes went, plane crashes were particularly messy. Sprawling in size, contaminated with biohazards, booby-trapped with jagged bits of metal and shattered glass. The kind of scene that threatened to overwhelm even the most seasoned evidence collector. Mid afternoon of day three, Kimberly's team had finally passed the holy-crap-where-to-begin stage and was now cruising into the job-well-done-be-home-tomorrow-night-for-dinner phase of the documenting process. Everyone was popping less Advil, enjoying longer lunch breaks.

None of which explained why Harold was currently leading Kimberly away from command central, the hum of the generator, the bustle of dozens of investigators simultaneously working a scene . . .

Harold continued to lope along a straight line. Fifty yards, a hundred yards. Half a mile down . . .

"Harold, what the hell?"

"Five more minutes. You can do it."

Harold increased his pace. Kimberly, never one to cry uncle, gritted her teeth and followed. They hit the end of the crime scene perimeter, and Harold turned right into the small grove of trees that had started the whole mess, the taller ones forming jagged white spikes pricking the overcast winter sky.

"Better be good, Harold."

"Yep."

"If this is to show me some kind of rare moss or endangered grass species, I will kill you."

"I don't doubt it."

Harold dashed and ducked around shattered trees. Bobbed and weaved through the thick underbrush. When he finally stopped, Kimberly nearly ran into his back.

"Look up," Harold ordered.

Kimberly looked up. "Ah shit. We have a problem."

* * *

FBI Special Agent Kimberly Quincy was the total package—beautiful, brainy, and pedigreed, right down to a legendary former FBI profiler father whose name was linked to the likes of Douglas and Ressler in Academy halls. She had shoulder-length dusky blond hair, bright blue eyes, and fine patrician features—a gift from her dead mother, who was the source of the second set of rumors that would follow Kimberly for the rest of her career.

At five foot six, with a thin, athletic build, Kimberly was known for her physical endurance, proficiency with firearms, and intense dislike of personal touch. She was not one of those teammates who inspired love at first sight, but she certainly commanded respect.

Now entering her fourth year at the Atlanta Field Office of the FBI, finally assigned to Violent Crimes (VC) and team leader to one of Atlanta's three Evidence Response Teams (ERTs), her career was firmly on track—or at least had been until five months ago. Though that wasn't entirely true, either. She no longer participated in firearms training, but other than that, it was business as usual. After all, today's Bureau considered itself to be an enlightened government organization. All about equity and fairness and gender rights. Or, as the agents liked to quip, it wasn't your father's FBI anymore.

At the moment, Kimberly had larger problems to consider. Starting with the severed leg dangling in a giant rhododendron bush ten feet *outside* their crime scene perimeter.

"How the hell did you even *see* that?" Kimberly asked now, as she and Harold Foster hustled back to command central.

"Birds," Harold said. "Kept seeing a flock of them startle from that grove. Which made me think a predator had to be around. Which made me think, what would attract a predator to such an area? And then . . ." He shrugged. "You know how it goes."

Kimberly nodded, though being a city girl herself, she didn't really know how it went. Harold, on the other hand, had grown up

in a log cabin and used to work for the Forestry Service. He could track a bobcat, skin a deer, and forecast the weather based on the moss patterns on a tree. At six one and one hundred seventy pounds, he resembled a telephone pole more than a lumberjack, but he considered twenty miles a day hike, and when the Atlanta ERTs had worked the Rudolph crime scene—the Atlanta Olympic Park bomber—Harold had made it to the remote campsite an hour ahead of the rest of the crew, which had still been struggling up the densely wooded, forty-five-degree incline.

"You gonna tell Rachel?" Harold was asking now. "Or do I have to?"

"Oh, I think you should take all the credit."

"No, no, really, you're the team leader. Besides, she won't hurt you."

He stressed the last sentence more than he needed to. Kimberly understood what he meant. And of course he was right.

She rubbed her side, and pretended she didn't resent it.

The problem had started on Saturday, when a 727 had taken off from the Charlotte, North Carolina, airport at 6:05 a.m. With three crew members and a belly full of mail, it was due to arrive in Atlanta at 7:20 a.m. Conditions were damp and foggy, with potential for ice.

What exactly had gone wrong was left for the NTSB to sort out. But shortly after 7:15 a.m., during the initial approach to the runway, the 727 had descended, clipped the right wing on the top of a dense grove of trees, and careened into a farmer's field, where it did an aviator's version of a cartwheel, nailing one combine, two trucks, and a tractor, while raining metallic debris down a half-mile-long skid that ended with the fuselage bursting into flame.

By the time emergency vehicles had arrived, the crew members had perished and all that was left was the minor detail of processing a mile-long debris field that involved three human remains,

one plane, four pieces of farming equipment, and a blizzard's worth of U.S. mail. The NTSB moved in to manage the scene. And per the "Memorandum of Understanding" between the NTSB and the FBI, Atlanta's three ERTs were mobilized to assist with evidence collection.

First thing FBI Senior Team Leader Rachel Childs had done was establish the perimeter. Rule of thumb for explosions and airline crashes—perimeter is set up fifty percent of the distance from the scene of the primary explosion to the farthest piece of evidence. So if the final piece of evidence is a hundred yards out, the perimeter is one hundred and fifty yards out. Or, in this case, the perimeter stretched two and a half miles long and half a mile wide. Not your normal the-butler-did-it-in-the-library-with-a-candlestick-leaving-behind-one-chalk-outline crime scene.

And absolutely perfect for the FBI's latest and greatest toy, the Total Station.

Modified from the standard surveyor's tool used by road crews, the Total Station was a laser-sighted gun, linked to special crime scene software. It turned data collection into literally a pull of a trigger, while spitting out up-to-the-minute 3-D models for death investigators to pore over at the end of each shift.

The process was relatively simple, but labor intensive. First, dozens of crime scene technicians worked the scene, flagging each piece of evidence, then classifying it—plane part, human remain, personal effect. Next, a designated "rod man" placed a glass reflector on each piece of tagged evidence. Finally, the "gun operator" homed in on the reflector and pulled the trigger, entering the evidence into the software's database from distances up to three miles away, while the "spotter/recorder" oversaw the operation, detailing and numbering each item entered into evidence.

Everyone worked hard, and next thing you knew, a sprawling chaos of wreckage had been reduced into a neat computer model that almost made sense out of the vagaries of fate. It was enough to make any anal-retentive control freak happy, and Kimberly was

guilty on both counts. She loved being rod man, though this time out, she'd had to content herself with recording duties instead.

The command center came into view. Kimberly spotted a cluster of white shirts and navy blue suits—the NTSB officials, poring over a huge blueprint of the original 727; then a pool of Windex blue—half a dozen crime scene techs, still wearing their hazmat gear; and finally, a pinprick of burnished copper. Rachel Childs, redhead, ERT senior team leader, and rabid perfectionist.

Kimberly and Harold ducked beneath the crime scene tape.

Harold whispered, "Good luck."

Supervisory Special Agent Childs had set out to become a famous Chicago architect. At the last minute, she'd decided to join the FBI instead. She ended up assisting one of Chicago's finest evidence gurus, and that was that, Rachel had found her calling in life. Her attention to detail, ability to sketch to scale, and obsession with paperwork had proven much more valuable to evidence documentation than it had to the further beautification of Chicago's skyline.

That had been fifteen years ago, and she'd never looked back. At five foot nothing, one hundred and four pounds, she was one small, dedicated, hell-on-wheels Nancy Drew. Who was about to commit her first murder.

"How the hell could you have missed something as major as *a human leg*?" she roared.

She, Kimberly, and Harold had stepped away from the gathered masses to the relative shelter of a noisy generator. Rachel only dressed down her team members in private. Her team was her family. She could know they were fuckups. She could tell them they were fuckups. It was no one's business, however, but their own.

"Well, the leg's in a bush," Harold ventured finally. "Beneath a tree. It's not that easy to see."

"It's February. Leaves are long gone. It should've been visible."

"It's in a grove of pine," Kimberly said. "Harold led me straight

to it. I still couldn't see anything until he pointed it out. Frankly, I'm impressed he saw it at all."

Harold shot her a grateful look. Kimberly shrugged. He'd been right, Rachel wouldn't go too hard on Kimberly. She might as well spread the magic around.

"Crap," Rachel grumbled. "Day three, we should be wrapping up this mess, not restarting our efforts. Of all the stupid, amateurish . . ."

"It happens. Oklahoma City, the Nashville crash. These big scenes, it's amazing we can wrap our arms around them at all." Kimberly again.

"Still . . ."

"We adjust the perimeter. We refocus our search on the western side. It'll cost us another day, but with any luck, one random leg is all we missed."

Now, however, Rachel's frown had deepened. "Wait a minute, you're sure it's a human leg?"

"I've seen legs before," Harold said.

"Me, too," Kimberly agreed.

But Rachel was suddenly holding her temples. "Ah crap! We're not missing any body parts! We recovered three sets of human remains from the intact cockpit just this morning. And since I oversaw the effort, I know for a fact we had all six legs."

Harold looked at both of them. "Told you we had a problem."

They took a camera, flashlights, gloves, a rake, and a tarp. A mini evidence kit. Rachel wanted to see the "leg" for herself. Maybe they'd get lucky—it would turn out to be a scrap of fabric, or the torn arm from a life-size dummy, or better yet, the back hock of a deer some hunter had dressed up in clothing just to be funny. In Georgia, stranger things had happened.

With only two hours of daylight left, they moved quickly but efficiently through the copse of trees.

They combed the ground first to make sure they didn't step on anything obvious. Then, adjusting slightly, Harold and Kimberly caught the item in the combined beams of their flashlights, illuminating it within the shadows of the overgrown bushes. Rachel knocked out half a dozen digital photos. Next came the tape measure and compass, recording the approximate size of the bush, relationship to the nearest fixed point, distance from their current perimeter.

Finally, when they had documented everything but the hoot of a barn owl and the way the wind tickled the backs of their necks, like a shiver waiting to slide beneath their Tyvek coveralls, Harold reached up and carefully eased the item onto the cradling teeth of his rake. Rachel quickly unfolded the tarp. Harold lowered his find into the middle of a sea of blue plastic. They studied it.

"Crap," Rachel said.

It was definitely a leg, sheared off above the knee with the top of the femur bone glinting white against the blue tarp. From the size of it, probably male, clad in blue denim.

"You're sure all three remains were intact?" Kimberly asked. She hadn't gotten to do any evidence collection this time out. She liked to think it didn't irk her, but it did. Especially now, when it seemed something obvious had been overlooked. "I mean, the cockpit was badly burned, the condition of the bodies couldn't have been great."

"Actually, the cockpit had separated from the main fuselage. It was scorched, but not annihilated; didn't get splashed with enough jet fuel to burn that hot."

"It's not a pilot," Harold said. "Pilots don't wear blue jeans."

"Farmer? Hired hand?" Kimberly asked. "Maybe when the plane hit the tractor . . . ?" But she knew she was wrong the minute she said it. The farmer in question had already come by to study the wreckage and mourn his equipment. If he'd been missing a hired hand, they would've heard about it by now.

"I don't get it." Rachel was backing up, studying the woods

around them. "We're in the trees where the plane first hit. Look there." She pointed at the sharp white tips of shattered trees just twenty feet south of them. "First impact with the wingtip. The right wing is yanked down, the plane bobbles, but the pilot corrects. In fact, he overcorrects because one hundred yards over there"—she swiveled, pointing at a target too far away to be seen—"we have the deep gouge in the earth at the edges of the farmer's field from the left wingtip coming down, digging in . . ."

"Sending it into the fatal spin," Kimberly finished for her. "Meaning, at this moment, in this place . . ."

"Plane shouldn't be spinning yet, nor crew members' legs falling out of the air. Think about it: We're a mile from the cockpit. Even if the damn plane blew up—which we know it didn't—how'd we get a leg clear back here?"

Harold was walking a little circle, studying the ground. So Kimberly did the next logical thing: She moved back, angled up her head, and studied the trees.

As luck would have it, she found it first. Just fifteen feet away, nearly eye level, so she was proud of the fact that she didn't scream. The smell had warned her—rusty, pungent. Then she spotted the first bit of fluorescent orange. Then another, and another. Until finally . . .

The head was gone. So was the left arm and leg, leaving behind a strange, hunched-over shape, still dangling from the limbs of a tree.

"I don't think we're going home tomorrow," Kimberly said, as Rachel and Harold joined her.

"A hunter?" Rachel asked incredulously. "But deer season ended months ago. . . ."

"Deer season ended beginning of January," Harold supplied helpfully. "But small game goes until the end of February. Then there are feral boars, bears, alligators. Hey, it's Georgia. You can always shoot something."

"Poor son of a bitch," Kimberly murmured. "Can you imagine? Sitting up in a tree, looking out for . . ."

"Possum, grouse, quail, rabbit, squirrel," Harold filled in.

"Only to lose his head to a seven-twenty-seven. What are the odds?"

"When your time comes, your time comes," Harold agreed.

Rachel still looked seriously pissed off. One final sigh, however, and she pulled it together. "All right, we got about an hour of daylight left. Let's not waste it."

Turned out, the NTSB wasn't so interested in a leg in the woods. A dead hunter amounted to collateral damage in the aviation world; the FBI could have it.

Rachel made a few calls, ordering up a fresh crime scene van and enough experienced agents and law enforcement volunteers to conduct a line search. Fifteen minutes later, a crowd of county deputies and FBI agents were dutifully gathered in the woods. Harold passed out thin probes to each volunteer, then briefed them all on the importance of looking up and down. As the line monitor, he would do his best to keep everyone in a row, which often got tricky in this kind of terrain.

According to the local sheriff, one Ronald "Ronnie" Danvers had been reported missing just this morning. Twenty years old, Ronnie had set out to go hunting three days ago. When he didn't return home, his girlfriend assumed he'd gone to visit some friends. This morning, when she called over to bawl him out, she finally realized her mistake.

"It took her three days to realize he was missing?" Fellow agent Tony Coble wanted to know. "Feel that love."

"Sounds like they'd been having some problems," Harold reported. "Girlfriend's pregnant and apparently moody."

Harold absolutely did not look at Kimberly when he said that. So, of course, everyone else did.

"Hey, I am not moody," Kimberly said. "I've always been a bitch." The cramp in her left side had finally eased, leaving behind an entirely different sensation, like a little hiccup beneath her lowest rib.

The sensation was still new and miraculous to her. Her hand remained curved around her lower abdomen, a singularly motherly gesture, but she couldn't help herself.

The rest of her team was grinning at her. They'd already posted a stork on the wall above her desk. Last week, she'd returned from lunch to discover her in-box filled with pacifiers. G-men were supposed to be tough; lately, all she had to do was sigh heavily and someone was rushing to fetch her a glass of water, a chair, a dill pickle. Bunch of softies. Heaven help her, she loved each and every one of them, even know-it-all Harold.

"Here's the deal." Rachel spoke up. "We thought we'd have the luxury of going home tonight, or for those of us who never go home, at least visit the office to tend our current cases; that ain't gonna happen. We have one hour, maybe two. We gotta map this scene, then collect the evidence and get it back to command central, where we can document it under the outdoor floodlights. In other words, you can thank me once again for showing y'all a good time."

The volunteers groaned.

Rachel simply smiled. "All right, people. Find me Ronnie's head."