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Written by Noah Boyd

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LAST CHANCE TO DIE

NOAH BOYD

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For my wife, Patti,
who has always grown stronger the more impossible things become

BEFORE

KATE BANNON THOUGHT SHE WAS HAVING A NIGHTMARE, BUT ACTUALLY SHE WAS dying.

Only her nagging self-awareness, even in this somnolent state, was forcing her to remember that she didn't have nightmares. The frightening images had always been there—people shooting at her, falling endlessly from towering buildings, running through thicker and thicker sand to escape something unknown—but her reaction to them had always been as an indifferent observer, curious and analytical. If the "danger" persisted, she would simply tell herself it was a dream and wake up. And that's what she had to do now, wake up and find out what was causing the chaotic images in her head.

She sat up and felt dizzy, the blood pounding in the top of her head. It hurt too much to be a dream. She felt nauseous and remembered driving home after the Thanksgiving Eve get-together at one of the local FBI watering holes with a large group of people from headquarters. She remembered having a glass of wine, and then a good-looking guy she didn't know brought her a small glass of—what did he say it

was?—Drambuie. She had never tasted it before and took a mouthful. Finding it too bitter for her liking, she set it down and didn't touch it again. It must have been strong, because she soon started feeling woozy and decided to leave.

Throwing her legs over the side of the bed, she worked her feet into slippers and stood up. As soon as she was fully upright, she felt lightheaded and had trouble balancing herself. With a hand on the wall, she started toward the kitchen. Walking left her short of breath. That couldn't be from alcohol. That's when she heard the low rumbling. She continued to the kitchen and saw that the door to the garage was open. Now she could clearly hear her car running.

Without warning, her knees started to buckle, and she realized that she was not suffering from what she had drunk but from carbon monoxide poisoning. Carefully, she stepped down the three stairs into the garage, which was filled with the haze of exhaust fumes. The car door was locked, and she could see the keys in the ignition.

The garage's outside door was only a few feet away, and she lurched to it. Taking hold of the knob, she tried to turn it, but her grip failed her. She pushed on the door clumsily with her body weight but couldn't rotate the knob far enough to open it. Even using both hands, she couldn't get it to release. Next to the door, in a holder fastened to the wall, was a remote-control unit for the overhead door. She pressed the button, but nothing happened.

Beginning to panic now, she pressed it repeatedly, but still the door didn't rise. She tried to remember the last time she had changed the battery, but her mind refused to focus on anything requiring memory. All at once she crashed to the floor, knocking over her small gardening caddy and scattering tools in every direction.

She tried to get up but could only manage to roll over on her back. *Is this it?* she asked herself. After all she'd been through as an agent, this was how she was going to die? Then she saw a white light coming

from the six-inch-square window in the door and wondered if it was what so many people who approached death had reported. She fell back and let her eyes slide shut. Even with her mouth closed, she could taste the thick fumes in her throat.

The actual source of the light was a small flashlight held by a man standing outside, dressed in black. When she collapsed, he turned it off and pulled the two wedges from under the door that had jammed it closed against her efforts. Then he went to the front door of the residence and removed two more. Calmly, he put his hands in his pockets and walked back to a waiting SUV.

Lying there felt pleasant, euphoric, but then it occurred to Kate that the light was gone. Shouldn't it be inside her head, too? She opened her eyes, and it was still gone. Did that mean the death sentence had been revoked, or at least delayed? Whatever it meant, she decided that she was going down swinging.

Next to her was a rake, its wooden handle thick and straight. Pushing up on all fours, she crawled to the rear of the car, dragging the rake behind her. The fumes were completely suffocating. She peeled off one of her slippers with its thin rubber sole and crammed it into the tailpipe. She was familiar enough with cars to know that the obstruction alone wouldn't stop the engine as the movies depicted but would eventually be blown out by mounting pressure. So she stuck the rake's handle into the tailpipe, forcing the slipper even farther into the exhaust.

Then she maneuvered the wooden shaft, finally wedging the steel raking tines against one of the patterned grooves in the overhead garage door, which was a foot and a half away. One of two things would happen now: Either the pressure would build up and kill the engine or the rake would blow a hole in the door and provide fresh air. One or the other could save her. Of course, it was more likely that the handle of the rake would simply snap. She reached up and held the rake in place before crumpling to the floor to wait.

Something with a sharp edge was underneath her. She realized it was a gardening trowel that had been knocked across the floor when she first fell. Inching closer to the garage door, she shoved it under the rubber cleat that sealed the entire length of the door and, using both hands, turned it up on edge to make a small triangular opening. Placing her mouth as close to it as possible, she breathed in the sweet, cold, late-autumn air.

Just before she passed out, her hand slipped off the rake and she thought she heard the car's engine sputter and die.

AFTER CLIMBING INTO THE BACKSEAT OF THE SUV, the man in black nodded to the two men in the front that it was done.

The driver, in his early fifties, was tall and slender, his suit expensive and American. His hair was full and carefully cut. His face might have been described as elegant if it weren't for the splayed, crooked nose, which gave his appearance a vague warning of violence. He looked over at the man sitting next to him to see if he was satisfied.

The passenger reached over and turned off the radio-signal device that had jammed Kate's remote-control door opener, the limited markings on it written in Cyrillic. He, too, was tall but powerfully built, and his age was difficult to estimate; he could have been in his fifties or in his sixties. His hands were thick and crisscrossed with dozens of thin white scars. His face was drawn and slightly exhausted, his eyes irreparably sad. Although his skin appeared a permanent gray, his lips were thick and an unusual shade of dark red. He looked back at the driver with eyes that never seemed to move from side to side. It was as if they were frozen in their sockets, making whomever he was talking to feel that turning away would be perceived as evasive, even when telling the truth. He searched the driver's face for any indication that he and his

man hadn't been successful and then leaned his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes. The SUV pulled away from the curb.

KATE BANNON OPENED HER EYES and wondered if she was dreaming again. Bob Lasker, the director of the FBI, sat next to her hospital bed. Struggling to recall what had happened, she wasn't sure she really could. "Am I dreaming?" she asked loudly, almost as if trying to determine if she was actually awake. She went to scratch her nose but then realized that an oxygen tube was pinching her nostrils.

"This is real, Kate." The director smiled warmly. "You gave us a scare, though. But you're going to be all right."

"I remember being in the garage and not being able to get out."

"One of your neighbors was taking his dog for a late-night walk, and I guess in the cool air he smelled the exhaust from the opening you made. He dragged his owner closer, and then the guy broke in, dragged you out, and called 911. Any idea how you left your car on?"

She told him about being bought a drink and not feeling well, then waking up to find her car running and not being able to get out of the garage. "I can't imagine doing that. And then locking the car door with the keys in the ignition? Who locks a car that's in a locked garage?"

"And this guy who bought you the drink, you never saw him before."

"Not that I remember. I would have remembered him from headquarters. He was nice-looking."

"Maybe he was just someone at the bar and saw a pretty girl."

"Maybe," she said vaguely, her mind searching for other possibilities.

Lasker stared at her as though there were some question he wasn't asking.

"What?" she demanded.

"Kate, don't take this the wrong way, but have you been feeling okay lately?"

She gave a short laugh. "Wait a minute—are you asking me if I've been depressed?"

"Yes."

She thought for a moment. "You think I tried to kill myself?"

The question was asked with such self-assurance that Lasker couldn't help but say, "No, I don't."

"But others do?"

"A deputy assistant director almost dies, there are questions that have to be considered."

"Meaning what?"

"OPR is going to look into it. Very routine, very low-key."

"I didn't try to commit suicide."

"You know I can't call off procedure. I wouldn't for any other agent, and since everyone knows how much I think of you, I can't in this instance either." He smiled. "Please cooperate and try not to shoot any of them. As soon as you feel well enough to get out of here, you'll be returned to full duty while they conduct their investigation."

"This is ridiculous."

"I know it is. If it does get to be too much, come and see me." Lasker patted her on the arm. "For now, get well. Everything else will take care of itself."

She was staring down at her hands but finally looked at him. "I guess I should be thanking you instead of arguing."

"Just get better, Kate."

Soon after the director left the room, an agent whom Kate recognized as being from the Office of Professional Responsibility came in. "Hi, Kate. I'm Roger Daniels from OPR. How are you feeling?"

"Nonsuicidal."

He laughed. "I know this is a lot coming at you all at once. I can wait to take your statement."

Kate sat up and took a sip of water from a cup on the table next to her bed. "Don't be *too* offended, but the sooner we get started, the sooner I'll have OPR out of my life."

The agent chuckled. "Well, that carbon monoxide didn't damage your sense of humor."

"Who said I was trying to be funny? Roger, I'm sure you're a very capable agent, and maybe even a nice guy, but I did a stint at OPR, so please don't waste any of the artificial sweeteners on me. Just ask me your questions, and I'll give you my best answers."

"Fair enough, Kate." He opened his notebook. "Did you attempt suicide?" His tone was noticeably less friendly.

"I'm the one who stopped the car engine and wedged a trowel under the door to save myself. Does that sound like I was trying to commit suicide?"

"It's not uncommon during a suicide attempt for people to have a change of heart. They take pills and then call 911. Move the gun at the last moment and just wound themselves. It happens more frequently than you think."

"Yeah, well, I happen to like my life quite a bit."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but some people do it for attention."

"How could I possibly take that the wrong way?" she said, sounding more than a little sarcastic. She took a moment and then said, "If you knew me, you'd know I really don't care what people think. Why would I want to get their attention?"

"Not people—*person,*" he said.

"Person? Who?"

The agent flipped back to another page in his notes. "Steve Vail?"

"Where did you get that?"

"Answers, Kate, remember?"

"Okay, what do you know about him? And me?"

"We know that he was fired as an agent more than five years ago. That the director brought him back to work on the Rubaco Pentad case in Los Angeles—with you—and that you guys have dated. Recently it ended abruptly."

"Sounds like you got a running start on this while I was still unconscious. Okay, I'll tell you about Vail on one condition—that you don't contact him."

"If you're forthcoming, there'll be no need to."

"One of the hardest things I've had to do in my life was tell him I didn't want him in it. If you've read the Pentad file, you know he was responsible for solving that case almost single-handedly. He would be an incredible agent, but he cannot conform to anything, and that includes a relationship with me. We've seen each other three times since L.A. The first time was—I hate to use the word, but it was—pretty much perfect. The last two were absolutely awful. So I told him it would be best if we didn't see each other again. And that was a week ago. So no, I wasn't trying to get his attention."

"Trying to find out exactly who he was, I ran his name through some of our contacts at other agencies and got a hit with the State Department. Seems you and he are going to the Irish ambassador's reception on New Year's Eve."

"Boy, you have been busy. But you'd better check with them again. It should show that my escort is now Eamon Walsh."

"So you changed it."

"What's today?"

"Wednesday."

"I spoke with him Monday. He's with the Irish embassy and was the one who called me originally with the invitation. When I phoned him back to tell him Vail wasn't coming, he asked if I'd do him the

honor. I didn't want to go alone, so I said yes. Maybe he hasn't gotten around to changing it officially yet. You can call him."

Daniels was making notes. "So it's definitely over between you and Vail. You told him not to come for New Year's Eve."

"Not in so many words, but I think 'We shouldn't see each other again' carries that assumption."

"That's helpful about Vail. It gives you one less reason to . . . you know."

"Off myself."

"Tell me what you remember about the night that this happened to you," Daniels said.

She repeated what she'd told the director about the stranger's buying her a drink that didn't settle well with her, then her coming home and going to bed. Then waking up and trying to get out of the garage.

He asked, "You said he told you it was Drambuie?"

"Yes."

"Hmm," Daniels said more to himself than to her.

"What?"

"I've had Drambuie, and it has a definite strong sweetness to it."

The OPR agent started making additional notes that she guessed were more than just about Kate's response. As she watched him, she remembered her time in OPR, how investigations were not about the incident but about the employee's involvement in it. They weren't criminal investigators, they were personnel investigators. As Daniels looked up from his pad ready to ask the next question, she knew that he was not going to get to the bottom of this. If anyone was going to find out what had happened, it would have to be her. "If that guy did put something in the drink, maybe he had some other intentions, and when he saw I drank only one sip of it, he got scared and took off."

"Your blood didn't show any kind of drug in it, but if you didn't drink much, maybe it dissipated before you got here."

"Are you going to try to track him down?" she asked, trying to judge just how far he was going to pursue what had happened to her.

"I'll have to see where everything takes me."

Right, she said to herself, becoming lost in thought. There was just something about a near-death experience that brought Vail to mind. And she couldn't decide whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. She knew that he would never just "see where everything takes me." A small smile creased her lips.

"What is it, Kate?"

"Oh, no, nothing. Did you need anything else?"

"That's enough for now." Daniels stood up. "Take care."

He closed the door, and after a moment her smile disappeared.

She was sure she was never going to see Vail again.

ONE

KATE BANNON OPENED HER DOOR. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

With mock surprise on his face, Steve Vail recoiled slightly at the level of protest in her voice. He stepped inside, setting down his suitcase and, for the briefest moment, allowed his eyes to trace the flawless symmetry of her face. "I've got the right day, don't I? This is New Year's Eve. Is it the wrong year?"

"After that last time, when I told you this wasn't going to work, I assumed you understood that included tonight."

He smiled crookedly. "Come on, Kate, it's the twenty-first century. What woman wants to have to admit that she's never been stalked? It's become an accoutrement, like Italian shoes or one of those little purse-size dogs."

"We tried, Steve. Three times. And the last two, if you remember, were not pretty."

"That means statistically we're due."

Kate shook her head slowly. She really couldn't believe he was standing there. "You know as well as I do that we're a disaster. We're

too different. Or too much alike. I don't know. Every time we try to get close, we wind up driving each other crazy. You don't know how much I wanted it to work, but it can't."

Vail looked at her dress. "I guess you were planning to go to whatever this was tonight without me. Why don't we go together and see what happens? What's the worst that can happen? So I ruin your career. That would probably be the best thing that could happen to us."

"I have to go to this. It's a command performance. And you know exactly what it is—an ambassador's reception. Why else would you have a suit on? Even though the proper dress is a tuxedo. Which I'm going to guess was your way of letting all the *phonies* in the room know that you're a lowly bricklayer."

"A man has to seek amusement wherever he can."

"I'll never understand you. You could be whatever you want. You have advanced degrees. The director has offered you complete autonomy if you'll come back to the Bureau, but instead you choose physical labor just so you won't have to take orders. If that's who you are, fine, but you don't get to rub everyone else's face in it simply because they're not like you." She looked at him sternly. "It's called hypocrisy." She could see that her words had stung him, but she couldn't find anything inaccurate in what she'd said.

He reached up and traced the small L-shaped scar high on her cheekbone and then smiled gently. "You don't have to wonder anymore, Kate, whether we're too much alike. There was a time, and not very long ago, that you would have thought they were phonies, too," he said. "But you're right, I've been a phony myself. The only defense I can offer is that you make my compass go haywire. The only reason I'm doing any of this is you."

He turned and opened the door. "Like you said, we gave it a shot," he said. "When it was right, it was like nothing I've ever experienced. That's why I had to try one last time."

"You can't just walk out like that. Not after everything we've been through."

"*This* is the best way to leave it. Then we won't have any lingering doubts."

"At least let me drive you to the airport. It's freezing out."

"I live in Chicago, remember? This isn't cold."

"I'll feel better about this if I can take you. It'll give us a chance to talk a little more. Right now I feel like we're supposed to hate each other."

"It'll be fine, Kate. I'll get a taxi."

"It's New Year's Eve—you'll never find one."

"You're probably right." He picked up his suitcase. "Okay, I'll take a ride, but only if we don't talk. I don't want to say anything that'll make this worse."

For the briefest moment, she considered telling him about the night before Thanksgiving and asking him what he thought about the guy in the bar. The day she got home from the hospital, she'd gone into her garage to change the battery in the remote for the overhead door. But it had worked fine. She thought that maybe she'd just pushed the wrong part of it in her semiconscious state. But three days ago she'd realized that it had been over a month and she hadn't heard anything from OPR. So she'd gone back into the garage and retraced the events from that night as best she could. That's when she realized that she couldn't have opened the inside door to her condominium if her keys were locked in the car.

Then she'd bought a bottle of Drambuie and tasted it. It had a honey-sweet taste to it, nothing like what she remembered from the bar.

The next day she'd checked with the Metropolitan Police, and they'd said they hadn't had any recent drug-facilitated rapes reported. Since she was sneaking around behind OPR's back, she didn't want to start asking questions of people who were at the bar and have it get

back to Daniels. Vail, who saw these things on a different level, would have been the perfect person to ask. But under the circumstances, giving him a reason to stay would be counterproductive.

"If that's the way you want to leave this," she said.

The phone rang. "You'd better get that," he said. "The Bureau probably thought we actually had a date and needed to ruin it one last time."

"That isn't fair."

"Probably not, but you can't say it's inaccurate."

"This is exactly why it would never work between us. Not everyone who takes orders for a living is a mortal enemy of Steven Vail."

Vail held up his hands in apology. "I told you I'd say something that would make it worse."

As she walked to the phone, she decided to lighten the mood and try to initiate some sort of interim peace. "I know it's been a while since the FBI fired you, but nobody gets called out on Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year's Eve. It's in our latest contract." She picked up the receiver. "Kate Bannon. Oh, hi, Tim. Happy New Year." She listened and after a few seconds turned her back to Vail.

He sat down on his suitcase and waited for the inevitable change of plans.

She hung up and said, "A seven-year-old boy was abducted in Reston, Virginia, which is two towns over from here."

When she didn't offer any other details, he said, "The FBI doesn't have jurisdiction for twenty-four hours in an abduction. Why did they call you?"

"The Reston chief is a retired agent from the Washington Field Office. We go back a lot of years. He's a good guy, but something like this, he's probably in over his head. His entire career was working applicant cases, asking the same handful of questions about character and loyalty. Would you mind if we stopped there on the way? It

shouldn't take long. He just needs some reassurance—you know, what help the Bureau can give him. Maybe a little direction."

In a cryptic tone, Vail said, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You wouldn't miss what?" she asked suspiciously.

"You pretending not to get involved to prove to me, and yourself, that your career isn't what's come between us."

"If you're trying to ensure that there'll be no talking on the way, congratulations." She handed him her keys. "There's one more call I have to make, would you mind warming up the car?"

Vail gave her an inquiring look and then started laughing. "No wonder you're able to resist my charms. You have a date."

"It's not actually a—"

Vail held up his hands. "Kate, it's fine. I was hoping you weren't serious about it being over. That's why I came. Obviously I was wrong. I'll go start the car."

Five minutes later Kate walked into the garage and climbed behind the wheel. As soon as they pulled out, Vail asked, "How long has the boy been gone?"

"So we *are* going to talk."

"I'm just trying to establish the parameters of your *momentary* detour."

"Why?"

"So I'll be able to mark the exact second you violated the estimate of your involvement."

"You really think you've got me figured out, don't you?"

"Not that it matters anymore, but oh yeah," Vail answered.

She turned to him, wanting to look indignant but knowing she couldn't pull it off. Then she told him, "Tim said about five hours."

"You do understand that the chances of him being found alive are not good."

"Then I guess you do understand that's why I have to go."

Vail stared straight ahead for a moment. "I do."

KATE FLASHED HER CREDENTIALS at the police officer behind the glass, and he opened the door for her and Vail. They were led to a small conference room where more than a dozen police officers and detectives sat crowded around a conference table designed for half that number.

The chief, Tim Mallon, rose anxiously and shook hands with her. She introduced him to Vail. One of the officers got up so Kate could sit down and Vail backed up against the closest wall.

Mallon handed Kate a sheet of paper and a photo. "That's the boy, Joey Walton, and the BOLO we put out along with the Amber Alert. He and his parents were at a local New Year's Eve 5K run. It also had a half-mile race for the kids. The parents watched the start, and by the time they got to the finish line, he was gone. No one's seen him since."

Kate said, "Okay, Tim, what can the Bureau do for you?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. Obviously, we could use a profiler and anything else along those lines you can think of."

"As soon as we're done here, I'll make some calls. I assume you're looking into registered sex offenders in the area."

The chief nodded at a detective sitting halfway around the table, who said, "I'm expecting a list any minute."

"I guess that's going to be the best lead for now."

"What else?" Mallon asked.

"Put out a plea to the media, along with the boy's photo."

"That's been done, Kate. And we have the parents doing interviews, trying to personalize the boy for whoever took him," Mallon said. "Isn't there anything else we can do?"

"Sometimes you just have to give the public some time to respond. There's a chance somebody knows who did this."

"I'm sorry, I don't want to sit and wait. There must be something we can do to be more proactive. What would you do if it were a Bureau case?"

She hesitated a moment, glancing back at Vail. "Tim, I'm sorry. I've never worked kidnappings, but I can make some calls and see if we can get someone out here from the Washington Field Office."

Mallon looked confused. "Kate, I spent twenty years at WFO. If I thought someone there had the answer, I wouldn't have called you." He looked around the men at the table, hoping someone would offer an idea of what to do next.

Kate said, "I misjudged what you needed, Tim." Then she got up and, with an apologetic grin to him, handed Vail the photo and the BOLO. "How about it, Steve? Can you give them a hand?"

Somewhat surprised, the chief said, "I'm sorry, Steve, are you with the Bureau?"

"Actually, I'm a bricklayer. From Chicago." He handed the items back to Kate. "In fact, I'm on my way back there now."

Mallon shot a confused look at Kate. "Steve's a former agent who has helped us in the past. Take my word, right now you want him in the room."

"Sorry, Steve," Mallon said. "You're both dressed up. I thought you were just Kate's date."

Vail smiled disarmingly. "Funny how easy it is to make that assumption."

Sensing some rift between the two of them, the chief said, "Steve, if you can help, we'd be grateful. This is a seven-year-old boy's life we're talking about."

Vail pushed himself off the wall with obvious reluctance, his eyes locked onto Kate's, purposely without emotion. "Sure." Vail looked around the table. "Any of you ever work a child kidnapping by a stranger before?" One older uniformed officer raised his hand unconvincingly.

Vail took a moment to consider something. "Chief, I'd recontact all the media outlets and have them put out a plea for help from anyone at the race. It being a kids' run, a lot of people are going to be taking pictures with both their cameras and their cell phones. Ask everyone to immediately e-mail all their photos to the station. Every one of them, whether they think they're connected or not." Kate watched as Vail became silent, lost in some other thought. "I assume that race officials also took photos. Have them do the same, including those from the adult race. Have you gotten a list of runners from them?"

The chief pointed at one of the detectives, who said, "They're supposed to be forwarding it."

"You'll want that right now. Also from the kids' race," Vail said. "That it's a holiday and twice as hard for the police to get anything done may not be a coincidence. Whoever's responsible for this may have learned by past mistakes. As in *convicted* child molester. Which, as Kate suggested, makes the sex-offenders list a top priority."

"What else?" Mallon asked.

Vail stepped forward to better engage the men around the table. "I know everybody is trying to think positive, but after this amount of time, statistically, there's only a slightly better-than-even chance that the boy is still alive. Not a pleasant thought, but you're police officers—you're paid to approach things from a clinical and, maybe more important, a cynical perspective. There's also a fifty-percent chance the boy's been sexually assaulted. And the longer this goes, the worse those odds become. So if cars are stopped or your instinct tells you to search someplace, don't get it in your mind that you're going to hear the victim pounding on doors or walls to be freed. Assume you're looking for a body. And remember, in a situation like this—I'm sorry, Chief—it's better to do something that's wrong than it is to do nothing at all. If someone won't allow you access, politely search anyway. Just remem-

ber: Be polite and explain the situation. Whoever took the boy is one of the few people who won't cooperate in an instance like this."

Mallon stood up and addressed his officers. "Don't any of you worry about liability. Like Steve said, explain, be polite, and then do what you have to do. All the heat is on me." To Kate and Vail, he said, "We've already got more than thirty tips. The media has been running the story every half hour. Each time they do, we get more. We're going to start chasing them down." He turned back to the officers and detectives around the table. "Any questions?" There were none. "Okay, I'll be here. If you run into anyone who's reluctant to help, and there's time, call me and I'll make the decision." The officers got up and started filing out. "Kate, you can use my office to make those calls."

"Okay."

"Steve, can I ask you to give us a hand with the tips? Sounds like you know what to look for. Maybe you'll see something we're missing."

"If I can get one of your people to run me to the airport when we're through. Kate's already late for something she needs to get to."

"Sure." Mallon glanced at her. "Kate, if you need to go, I'll understand."

Kate could tell that Vail hadn't said it maliciously. "It's nothing that can't wait, Tim. And if I don't make it, it's not a big deal. I'm here because we're friends. I'll stay until you don't need me any longer."

Vail said, "Chief, if you have a desk somewhere with a computer, I'll start on those tips. And a map of the area if you have one."

"Great. And I'll make sure you get copies of anything new that comes in."

Kate said, "Tim, could you give us a minute?"

"Sure." Mallon walked out and shut the door.

She put her hand on his arm. "I appreciate your keeping me from looking like a fool."

"No use both of us feeling that way."

She started to say something, and he placed his hand over hers. "It's okay, Bannon." He leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "I really do hate New Year's Eve parties."

He turned to go, and she said, "And don't think you can sneak out of here without saying good-bye."

Vail gave her a silent but formal salute.

While Kate started making phone calls, trying to track down agents from the Behavioral Science Unit and the Washington Field Office, the chief led Vail to a detective's desk and showed him how to access the department's different databases. He settled in and started reading the tips.

Unlike the officers and detectives, Vail had the luxury of looking at them from a different perspective. The Reston Police Department had to investigate all the tips offered. Vail didn't. So he was able to start making judgments about the callers and the individuals they were reporting on.

He checked each suspect's name in the computer to see if there were any previous contacts with the department. He also checked the callers' names—if they gave one—to see if they were chronic complaint makers, which could lessen the priority of their information. After reading all the tips, he hadn't found any he considered worthwhile. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Tips were a double-edged sword. While they frequently solved a case, a false lead that looked promising could be distracting, take the entire department in the wrong direction, and burn precious time. A uniformed officer walked in and asked, "You Vail?"

He stood up and shook hands. "Steve, yes."

The policeman put three more tips on the pile. "These are from the last half hour. We're also starting to get photos from the races e-mailed in. Do you want me to forward them to this computer?"

"I'd appreciate it." Vail picked up the newest tips. "Anything interesting?"

"Nothing we'll need lights and sirens for."

Vail continued searching the names through the computer. Still nothing jumped out at him. When he finished, he got up and wandered around until he found someone who directed him to a coffeepot. He filled two cups and went looking for Kate.

The chief's office was small but well ordered. Bureau memorabilia neatly lined the wall behind the desk. Kate was on the phone, so Vail placed the cup in front of her and sat down.

She rolled her eyes as she listened to the latest excuse as to why nothing could be done tonight, taking a sip of coffee. He watched her and was reminded of one of the things that he liked most about her: She thrived on work. The more difficult the case, the more focused she became. He listened as she urged cooperation. Her tone was compelling, and Vail couldn't tell whether it was actually cajoling or threatening or both. Finally she hung up midsentence. "Come January second, there'll be a number of Bureau employees who are going to be at least as unhappy as I am right now."

"Makes me almost sorry I won't be here."

She gave him a small, sad smile through pursed lips and leaned back in her chair. "Anything in the tips?"

"Not so far. The photos are starting to come in, though."

"Do you actually think we'd get that lucky?"

"I just thought it would be better to have them than not. You never know, something could come up later that a photo might help with," Vail said. "And the pendulum is due to swing the other way."

"What pendulum?"

"What most people call luck. To me it's nothing more than a temporary statistical aberration. So far tonight I've had an unbelievable amount of bad luck, so maybe I'm due."