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Opening Extract from...

Silent Scream

Written by Karen Rose

Published by Headline

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KAREN
ROSE

SILENT SCREAM

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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 0 7553 4656 1
Trade paperback ISBN 978 0 7553 4657 8

Typeset in Palatino by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Prologue

Minneapolis, Minnesota, Monday, September 20, 12:00 A.M.

They'd shown up. He had to admit he was surprised. He didn't think they'd had the cojones, especially the girl. Of all of them, he hadn't thought she'd follow through.

Four college kids, all dressed in black. Four college kids with way too much time. Two of them with way too much of their daddy's money. If all went according to plan, a great deal of their daddy's money would soon belong to him.

It was rule number one of his world – if people didn't want to be blackmailed, they shouldn't do bad things. Rule number two – if they did bad things, they should be smart enough not to get caught. The four college kids weren't very smart.

From the cover of the trees the condo developer had taken such pains to preserve, he watched the four approach, while he filmed every step they took. Their faces were plainly visible in the moonlight, and although he'd bet their daddy's money they believed they were being stealthy, they moved with enough noise to wake the dead.

'Wait.' One of the four stopped. His name was Joel, and of the three young men, he had been the most enthusiastic proponent of their plan. 'Let's think this through.'

Interesting. Conflict always added a little excitement. Unseen, he kept filming.

'No waiting,' the girl said. Her name was Mary, and she was a bitch. 'We agreed. All of us, Joel. This condo has got to go. We have to send a message.'

'She's right.' This from Eric, the so-called brains of the group. As if. 'This is our one chance to make a difference to these wetlands. If we do nothing, this whole lake will be nothing but condos.' He turned to the large brute standing behind him. 'The guard will be doing his outside sweep in two minutes. He'll exit the building from the service door in the back. You know what to do. Come on, people. Let's roll.'

The brute was Albert, pronounced without the *t*. French Canadian, he was at the university on a hockey scholarship. Right wing. Hell of a checker. Albert set off around the building, obediently. His research had revealed that Albert had been quite the juvenile delinquent, back in the day. He was quite certain Albert would know exactly what to do.

The show was about to begin. *Hurry*, he told himself, taking his second camera from his pack. This was his stationary camera and was attached to a small tripod which he stuck into the soft ground, positioning the lens just in time to capture Mary, Eric, and Joel entering a stairwell door on the east side of the condo.

The door had been propped open with a rock, probably by a construction worker who'd wanted to save a little time and effort. The best security system in the world could be neutralized by lazy workers. Apparently the College Four had done their homework and knew exactly which door would be open. Kudos to them.

Leaving his stationary camera running, he moved the way Albert had gone, arriving just as the guard exited, right on schedule. Five seconds later the guard lay unconscious on the ground. A satisfied Albert slid a small club back into his pocket.

All caught on my tape. Albert's family was dirt poor, so there was no money now, but there was a good chance that Albert would someday have an NHL salary ending in lots of zeroes. *I can wait*. Eric and Joel both had daddies rich enough to fill his bank accounts for now. As for Mary's daddy . . . some paybacks didn't require a dollar sign.

Some paybacks are personal.

Within another minute, Mary emerged from the side entrance and joined Albert. Both stared up at the windows, waiting.

He waited with them, from a safe distance away. He saw the first wisps of smoke rise in the upper floors. Mary threw her fist in the air with a whispered, '*Yes*.'

Minutes later there was lots of smoke, on every floor. But the side door had not opened again. Mary took a step forward, the triumph on her face turned to concern, but Albert stopped her, his beefy hand closing around her arm.

'They're still inside,' she said, yanking at her arm. 'Let me go.'

Albert shook his head. 'Give them another minute.'

And then the door burst open, both Eric and Joel gasping for breath. Mary and Albert ran to the wheezing boys, pulling them away from the building.

'Goddamn idiot,' Eric snarled, jerking in huge breaths. 'You nearly got us killed.'

Joel fell to his knees, spasms of coughing shaking his body. He looked up, his eyes terrified, desperate. 'She'll die.'

Mary and Albert shared shocked looks. 'Who will die?' Albert asked carefully.

Joel scrambled to his feet. 'A girl. She's trapped. We have to get her out.' He started to run. 'Dammit,' he cried when Eric and Albert dragged him back. 'Let me go.'

Mary grabbed Joel's face. 'There's somebody in there?' She flashed a panicked glare at Eric. 'You said nobody would be in there. You said it was safe.'

'Nobody's supposed to be in there,' Eric gritted through clenched teeth. 'Joel didn't see anything. Let's go before somebody sees the smoke and calls 911.'

'She's in there,' Joel insisted, hysterical now. 'I saw her. Look!'

As a group they looked up and he followed suit, pointing his lens upward as a collective gasp rose from the group. In that moment, he saw her, too. A girl, her fists banging on the window that had been designed to provide a view of the lake, not an escape. She was young, a teenager maybe, her mouth opened on a terrified cry they could not hear. Her fists pounded weakly now, her face pressed to the glass. Then her hands flattened against the window as she slid from their sight.

Joel gave a final, desperate yank. 'She's going to die. Don't you care? Nobody was supposed to get hurt. Let me go. I've got to get her out.'

Mary grabbed his hair. 'Stop it. You go back in there and you'll both be dead.'

Joel was sobbing now. 'Then call 911. Please. Dammit, please.'

'Listen to me,' Mary said, her voice low and urgent. 'If we call 911, we all go to prison. Prison, Joel. That's not going to happen. Stop this, right now.'

But Joel wasn't listening. He thrashed, trying to escape their grip like a man possessed. Behind his head, Eric gave Albert a grim nod. Albert pulled the club from his pocket and a second later Joel collapsed, just as the guard had done.

'Let's go,' Eric said tersely and he and Albert picked Joel up and carried him through the woods to where their car was parked.

Mary gave a final look back, up at the now-empty window. 'Shit,' she hissed, then turned and ran, passing the struggling boys to pull at the chain-link fence they'd cut on their way in. 'Hurry. Shove him through.'

Well. He lowered his camera, watching as the taillights from their car disappeared. That had been a lot more exciting than he'd thought it would be. A simple arson would have been good for years of blackmailing fun. But murder trumped arson and just about anything else. He had several clients who would agree to that.

He quickly packed his two cameras and the tripod. Smoke was billowing into the sky and he heard the pop of glass as windows began to burst. The authorities would soon be here. *And I will be long gone*. Hefting his backpack, he jogged around the building to the lakeside where he'd left his boat tied to the dock.

'You there. Stop.' It was a thin, ragged cry, but he heard it. Spinning around, he found himself face-to-face with the security guard, who staggered forward, dazed. Blood oozed from the open wound on his head. Albert hadn't hit him hard enough. The man held his radio in one bloody hand, a gun in the other. 'Stop or I'll shoot. I will.'

Not today, Pops. Calmly he drew his own gun and fired. The guard's mouth fell open in shock. He dropped to his knees, then collapsed for the second time that night.

'Shoulda stayed down, Pops,' he muttered. He ran to his boat and dropped his pack inside. With a quiet roar, the motor engaged. Quickly he pulled off the ski mask he wore. If anyone saw him now he could claim he'd seen the smoke and was coming to help, versus trying to flee. But nobody saw him. Nobody ever did.

Which made listening to their whispered secrets so much easier. He patted the cameras in his pack. Which made taking their money so much easier still. *I love my job*.

Oh my God oh my God oh my God. From behind the tree where he'd hidden, Austin Dent watched the small boat speed away, his hands pressed to his mouth. The guard was dead. That man had shot him. *Dead*.

They'll say I did it. Run. I have to run. He took a few unsteady steps backward, lifting his eyes to the burning building once again.

Tracey. She'd been behind him as they'd run from the building. But when he got out, she wasn't behind him anymore. And when he'd turned back . . . All he could see was smoke. A sob of anguish rose up in his chest. *Tracey*.

In the distance he could see the lights flashing. They were coming. The cops were coming. *They'll take me away. Put me in a cage. No. Not again. I can't do that again*. He stumbled back a few more steps, then turned and started to run.

Chapter One

Minneapolis, Minnesota, Monday, September 20, 12:40 A.M.

'Higher, Zell,' David Hunter said into his radio, his voice muffled by the mask covering his face. He turned his shoulder into the wind that blew the acrid smoke into the night sky. Suspended four stories up, the bucket in which he stood held firm. The belt anchored him to the apparatus, but his legs still clenched as he held his position.

'Going up.' Jeff Zoellner, his partner, operated the lift from the base of the ladder.

David adjusted the angle of the nozzle mounted on the bucket as he rose, aiming at the flames that had consumed the lower two floors of the structure before they'd arrived. None of them had gone in. Too dangerous. Their only hope was to control this fire so that it didn't spread to the trees surrounding what had been a six-story luxury condo.

Thank God this place isn't finished. In a few weeks there would have been people inside. *There may be one*. The guard was missing. If he'd been on one of the lower floors, he was dead. If he'd made it a little higher, there was still a chance of saving him.

Arson. David's jaw clenched as the platform rose. Had to be. He'd seen it before, up close and way too personally. The wind shifted again and he flinched when the flames lurched his way. For a split second he lost his footing. *Focus, boy. Stay alive*.

'David?' Jeff's voice was urgent amid the crackling. 'You okay?'

'Yeah.' The platform rose a few more feet, lifting him alongside

a large picture window. Every condo on the upper floors had them. He saw no flames, but smoke billowed from the smaller windows which had already burst from the heat.

But all the picture windows were intact. Made of impact-resistant glass, they didn't burst. They also didn't open. They were for the view of the lake. Not for escape.

And then he saw them. His heart began to race faster.

'Stop.' He leaned over the edge of the bucket in which he stood, so he could get closer to the window. It couldn't be. *Nobody's supposed to be inside*. But it was.

'What is it?' The platform lurched as Jeff hit the brakes.

Handprints. The faint outline of small handprints that somehow . . . shimmered in the light from his spotlight. *What the hell?* 'Handprints.' And streaks, made from fingers clawing at the window, trying to escape. 'Somebody's in there. We have to go in.'

'Hunter?' Captain Tyson Casey's voice cut through the static. 'Do you see a body?'

Using the controls mounted in the bucket, David edged closer until the platform bumped the wall. Straining to see through the smoke, his racing heart sank. 'I see arms.' Thin, bare arms and a slim back. Long blond hair. Not the missing guard, a man in his fifties. 'It's a woman. Appears unconscious. Window is impact-resistant.'

'Hold your position,' Casey told him. 'Sheridan, cut the nozzle. Zell's on his way up with the saw.'

David felt the pressure in the line lessen as firefighter Gabe Sheridan closed off the valve from the ground. He looked down to see Jeff steadily climbing the ladder. *Hurry*, he wanted to hiss, but knew Jeff was doing it right. Doing it safe. For a moment he considered taking his own ax to the window, but knew the power saw would do the job on the impact-resistant glass a lot faster than he could, so he conserved his energy.

He glanced back through the window at the woman inside. She hadn't moved.

She was probably dead. *Don't be dead*. He peered through the glass, wondering if anyone else was in the room. Wondering if she could have set the fire.

Jeff climbed into the bucket, power saw in hand. David pointed to the far edge of the glass, away from the victim and her handprints, blocking out the mental picture of how terrified she must have been as she pounded and clawed, trying to escape. She might have set this fire. They needed to preserve her prints on the glass for the cops.

His air can was almost empty so he switched it while Jeff forced the saw through the nearly impenetrable glass until the hole was big enough for David to push through.

Jeff grabbed his shoulder. 'She could have done this,' he shouted. 'Be careful.'

'I will,' he shouted back. He climbed through, landing as close to the wall as possible in case the floor was weak. He crouched low and searched the room for anyone else.

But there was no one. *Go. Get her out and go*. She was light, her weight barely registering when he hefted her over his shoulder. He handed her to Jeff, then climbed back through the window and radioed Gabe Sheridan to take them down.

The platform backed away from the building, away from the flames that were still licking at the second floor. The paramedic was waiting on the ground to take the victim.

David pulled off his mask the moment his feet hit the dirt, Jeff doing the same. For a moment David closed his eyes, letting the air cool his face. The night air that would have been otherwise brisk was still hot all around them, but compared to wearing that damn mask it was like stepping into A/C. Medic Scotty Schooner looked up, grim.

David knew. 'She's dead?'

Scotty nodded. 'Yeah.'

Jeff's hand clasped his shoulder. 'Sorry, buddy.'

'Me too.' David remembered the handprints on the window. 'Check her hands.'

Scotty knelt next to the gurney holding the body of a girl David could now see was no more than a teenager wearing ratty jeans and a thin T-shirt. *What a waste*.

Scotty was frowning at the girl's hands. 'They're covered in some kind of gel.'

David's captain and two uniformed cops joined them, the three of them bending over the gurney to see her hands.

'What is this shit on her hands?' one of the cops asked.

'I don't know, but whatever it is, it reflects light. I saw her handprints on the window,' David told him. 'My light hit the glass and the prints shone. Fire investigator's going to want to sample it. If she set this fire, she got stuck up there and panicked. There were lots of fist-sized prints, like she pounded, trying to get out.'

'If she didn't do this fire, it's murder,' the other cop said. 'I'll make the call.'

'Tell them it's a double,' a female voice said behind them. Carrie Jackson stood behind them. Her engine team had been spraying the west side of the structure, next to the lake. 'I was laying line and nearly tripped over the guard. He was shot in chest.'

Scotty stood up. 'I'll go check him out.'

Carrie shrugged. 'Go ahead. But he's definitely dead. Has been for a while.'

'I believe you,' Scotty said. 'But it's regs. Show me where he is.' Together, Scotty and Carrie set off around the building with the first cop.

The second cop straightened with a sigh. 'I'll get Homicide, the ME, and CSU out here. They'll want to talk to all of you. Especially Hunter, since he brought her out.'

Homicide. David's throat closed as the word left the cop's mouth and for a moment another thought scrambled to the top of his mind. There were lots of detectives in Homicide. Odds were it wouldn't be her. And if it was? *I'll cross that bridge when I get there*. He cleared his throat harshly and nodded. 'Of course. Whatever they need.'

'As soon as we're done,' Captain Casey added. 'We've got to get the second floor under control. Hunter, you and Zell go back in. Search the upper floors. Find out if anyone else was where they shouldn't have been, and make sure we got no fire in the walls.'

'Will do,' Jeff said.

David pushed homicide detectives from his mind and took a last look at the girl on the gurney. What the hell was she doing in there? *Why wasn't someone taking care of you?* But he knew all too well that life wasn't nearly that idyllic. 'I'll check where I found her, see if I can find some ID. She's just a kid. She's got to belong to somebody.'

'Don't touch anything,' the cop said and David fought the urge to roll his eyes. Cops treated them like damn kindergartners sometimes. 'Got it?'

'Don't worry. I got it.'

Monday, September 20, 1:15 A.M.

Homicide detective Olivia Sutherland flashed her badge at the uniform guarding the condo's construction entrance and drove through the gate, past the news vans and cameramen, acutely aware of all the flashing bulbs at her back. By the questions the press were shouting, they'd already correctly concluded it was arson.

Her churning gut tightened further. Just by being here she'd stirred up their recent collective memory. Amid their shouted arson questions were targeted references to her last big case. It was inevitable, she knew. Didn't mean she had to like it.

'How've you been, Detective?' A reporter she knew and at one time hadn't despised ran alongside her car until the uniform stopped him cold. 'Are you over the Body Pit yet?' the reporter shouted at her back. 'Still seeing the department shrink?'

Olivia gritted her teeth. She'd been to the shrink three department-mandated times and this guy made it sound like she had a standing appointment with a couch.

With a cold glare Olivia raised her window, not slowing down until she reached the bank of parked official vehicles and rolled to a stop next to her partner's Ford. A piece of her settled. Kane was here. *He'll know what to do*.

The thought startled her. 'And so do I,' she said aloud. Firmly. 'Get a grip.' But she was afraid she couldn't. Because her breathing was changing, hitching up in her lungs and her heart was racing. Because the three department-mandated visits to the shrink hadn't helped. She still wasn't over the body pit, the mass burial pit they'd discovered in the basement of a serial killer seven months before.

In four years on the homicide squad she'd seen a lot of bodies, but nothing could compare to the serial killer they'd chased last February. Dubbed the 'Red Dress Killer' by the press for the way he'd dressed his final victims, he'd been quietly murdering for thirty years and burying his victims in a lime pit in his basement. It wasn't until he'd stepped up his pace that he'd made mistakes and they'd caught him, discovering his grisly secret.

And it had fallen to Olivia and her partner, Kane, to process the dead. There had been blocks of days when she hadn't slept, hadn't eaten, hadn't done anything but process the dead, inform their families, and return to the pit for more. Lime was not kind to human flesh. She didn't need nightmares. The reality was plenty bad enough.

The press could call him what they wished. In her mind he was 'Pit-Guy,' because it was the pit that ruled her dreams – dark, bottomless, and filled with the dead.

She kneaded her steering wheel, taking deep breaths, trying to will the panic away. Because seven months and dozens of bodies later, she froze every time she knew a new victim waited. *A wee bit of a problem for a homicide detective*, she thought bitterly.

'Get out of the car,' she muttered. 'Do your job.' Clenching her jaw, she pushed her door open and forced her feet to move, her lungs to take one more breath. Then forced her face to look like she didn't harbor a thought that didn't have to do with this scene. This night. These two victims. A middle-aged guard and a teenaged girl.

Think about them. Think about justice for them. Do your damn job.

She drew another breath, grimacing at the stench of smoke. It had been a bad fire. Two companies had responded to the scene –

two pumpers, an aerial tower truck, and the two rescue squads they wouldn't be needing after all.

Only the morgue rig would be transporting tonight.

As her feet moved, she found herself searching the fire trucks for station numbers, another habit she'd picked up in the last seven months, one she found nearly as distasteful as her new fear of dead bodies. That she even knew which truck was his was completely humiliating. Like she should care if he was here or not. But of course she did. *How pathetic am I? Pretty damn*.

She winced when she saw the L21 painted on the side of the tower truck with its aerial platform. He was here. Or his firehouse was, at least. *Don't let him be on duty tonight. Just find Kane. Do your job*.

She easily found Kane in the crowd. Her partner was a big man, even compared to the firefighters and cops, standing head and shoulders above everyone else. He was also the only one in the crowd wearing a black fedora. It was his fire fedora, she knew, the one he always wore when he knew he'd be going to an arson. It smelled like stale smoke, and his wife Jennie made him keep it in their garage.

All of his other fedoras were kept with care on Styrofoam heads in their guest room. Every man in the homicide division wore fedoras on the job, a nice tradition someone had started long before her time. It was a symbol, a connection to detectives past, and now it was part of local lore. Homicide was known around town as the 'Hat Squad.'

New detectives, on solving their first homicide, were presented with their first fedora by the squad, their peers. Kane had presented Olivia's to her, but she'd felt a little silly wearing it. Her hat sat on her desk back at the office, adorning the head of a Grecian goddess bust she'd found at a yard sale.

But Kane, he liked his hats. He must have had a dozen. Kane liked to look good.

At the moment, Kane looked perplexed. Olivia made her way up the hill to where he stood over a gurney, a uniformed cop at his side. The ME crouched next to the body, bagging the victim's hands,

and Olivia's heart started to pound, her stomach lurching dangerously. *Not again. Not again*.

Look at her, she told herself harshly. *She'll be . . . whole*. Olivia drew a steadying breath, forced her eyes down, then let the breath out as relief washed over her. The victim was indeed intact. Flesh covered her bones. All of her bones.

The worst was over. *Now I can do my job*. The girl looked about sixteen. Her waxen face and long blond hair were streaked with soot and grime, as was the faded, thin T-shirt she wore. Her jeans were tattered, by design versus genuine wear. Her feet were bare, her soles burned badly. Her toenails were painted bright orange.

Fighting the shakes that always seemed to follow the relief, Olivia waited until she could trust her voice not to tremble. 'What do we have?'

'Caucasian female,' the uniform said. 'No ID. Was found on the fourth floor. She was already dead when the firefighter got to her.'

'Cause?' she asked.

Isaac Londo, the ME tech, looked up from bagging the victim's hands. 'Probably smoke inhalation. I didn't see any recent injuries. She's got older ones, though.'

'Where and what?' Kane asked.

'Finger appears to be fractured, and there's a twist burn on the right forearm.'

Olivia's eyes narrowed. The last vestiges of her panic were receding, replaced by cold fury. *Runaway*, her instincts told her. She'd made working with runaways a personal mission over the last few years, since meeting her two half sisters. Mia was a decorated cop, but Kelsey was a convict, having been a runaway first. The signs were crystal clear. 'Someone put their hands on her.'

'That's my guess.' Londo sat back on his heels. 'Your other guy? Different story. The guard took a blow to the head with a blunt instrument, then a slug to the chest.'

'Where is he?' Olivia asked.

'On the other side of the building, by the lake. Dale and Mick are over there now.'

Dale was Londo's partner and Micki Ridgewell was the CSU leader. 'And that guy?' She pointed to a fortyish man in a jogging suit who paced behind the crime scene tape looking very worried.

'Sammy Sothberg,' the uniform said. 'He's the construction manager. Sothberg said the guard's name was Henry Weems, age fifty-seven. He's local.'

'You talk to him yet?' she asked Kane.

'Yeah,' Kane said. 'Briefly. He's shaken. Has an alibi. We'll have to check it out. He gave us Henry Weems's personnel info. We'll need to inform Mrs Weems.'

And what fun that always is. Olivia looked way up and saw a large hole with jagged edges in one of the picture windows on the fourth floor. 'She came from up there?'

'Yeah.' This answer came from Micah Barlow, the police department's arson investigator, who'd walked up to join them. Immediately Olivia's hackles rose and she had to choke back what would have been a hiss.

'Hell,' Kane muttered, loud enough for Barlow to hear. 'Not him.'

'Kane,' Olivia rebuked under her breath and was rewarded by Kane's long-suffering sigh. She and Micah Barlow had gone through the academy together. They'd been friends once. Now, not so much. Because Barlow was a meddling, arrogant bastard.

Barlow looked from Olivia to Kane, then shook his head with exaggerated patience. 'Let's just get this done, okay? The firefighters saw her handprints on the glass. It's impact-resistant, so they had to cut their way in. The guy that brought her out made sure they cut the far side of the window. He wanted to leave her prints intact for you.'

'Forward-thinking of him,' Olivia said mildly. 'We'll want to talk to him.'

'He's still inside. I'll bring him to you when he comes out.'

'Fine,' Olivia said, shrugging off the annoyance she felt every time she was subjected to Barlow's presence. 'How did the arsonist set the fire?'

'From what we can see, they opened several cans of carpet-padding adhesive, spread them on the first and second floors. Sprinklers were rendered inoperable. Somebody cut the chain on the OS and Y and closed the valve.'

The OS&Y was the outside screw and yoke valve on the line that brought city water to the sprinklers, Olivia knew. 'Are any bolt cutters missing from the toolshed?'

'Don't seem to be. We'll get a full inventory, but it looks like they brought their own.'

'They came prepared then. Incendiary devices?' Kane asked.

'Nothing yet, but we haven't really been able to start looking. I don't think they used a simple match. After dumping an entire can of adhesive, the fumes would have already been hanging in the air. If they'd dropped a match, they wouldn't have made it to the door. That stuff is incredibly flammable.'

'Had the carpet been laid?' Olivia asked.

'No, the construction manager said that was going to be done tomorrow. Well, today, now. The carpet, padding, and cans of adhesive had been staged on the first three floors. Floors four through six have mostly hardwood floors and were finished.'

'Somebody knew those materials were there,' Kane mused. 'Surveillance tapes?'

Barlow frowned. 'Cameras were rendered inoperable five minutes before midnight. The guard would have come outside on his normal beat at five after twelve.'

'Inside job,' Olivia said. 'Or at least inside information.'

Barlow nodded. 'We're getting the personnel list.'

'Where's the control room?' Kane asked.

Barlow pointed to the closer of two construction trailers. 'Up until last month, they had a man in the trailer, monitoring the camera feeds. Budget overruns cut staff. They were down to one guard per shift. The trailer was always the night guy's first stop.'

'You're sending the used adhesive cans to the lab for prints?' Olivia asked.

'Already gave them to CSU,' Barlow answered. 'The manager

seems pretty ripped up. Weems was his friend, and he was working two jobs to send his kid to college.'

Olivia sighed. 'We'll check his financials anyway. Somebody profits from the insurance. Maybe nobody was supposed to get hurt.' She looked down at the gurney, at the girl's lifeless body. 'I guess something went wrong.'

'Check out her hands, Liv,' Kane said. 'Some kind of gel.'

ME tech Londo held up the victim's left hand and Olivia could see that whatever covered the girl's palms had already smeared the plastic bag. 'Accelerant?' she asked.

'No,' Barlow said. 'We ran a sniffer over her. The gel didn't register. Nothing on her clothes either, so if she was involved in spreading the carpet-pad adhesive, she was careful enough not to splash any on herself.'

The sniffer measured the hydrocarbons in accelerants, so Barlow was most likely right. 'Did the firefighters find anything with her?'

'Nothing yet. They just finished knocking the fire down a half hour ago. They're up there now, checking for any other vics. We'll give you and CSU the go-ahead as soon we know it's safe.' And he would. Obnoxious as he was on a personal level, Micah Barlow did his job. *As do we. So do yours. Look at her, Liv. Really look.*

'Thanks,' she said to Barlow, then crouched next to the gurney, studying the hand Londo had bagged. The polish was the same bright orange as the girl had used on her toenails. 'You done with her, Londo?' When he nodded, she hesitated only a moment before taking the victim's hand and lifting it to the light. 'Look at the decals on her nails. She's not from around here.'

'G-A-T-O-R,' Kane read, then checked the right hand. 'S-R-U-L-E. Gators Rule.'

'It's an unfortunate truth,' Londo muttered. 'I lost a bundle on last week's game.'

'University of Florida Gators,' Olivia mused. 'She doesn't look old enough to be in college. Maybe she lived in Florida.'

'Maybe she was just a fan,' Kane cautioned and Olivia shrugged.

'Gotta start someplace. We'll run her prints. If she's got a record, hopefully it's not sealed. If she's missing, somebody may have filed an Amber Alert or reported her to the Center for Missing and Exploited Children.'

'If she ran away, chances are good they haven't reported her missing,' Kane said.

'I know. But her jeans are pretty new, and they're not cheap. She hasn't been on the run long. We'll get her photo out there and maybe we'll get lucky.' Olivia placed the girl's hand carefully at her side, then rose and looked down at the girl's face, pity stirring. *So young*. 'Do we have any idea what she was doing up there?'

Barlow shook his head. 'So far we haven't found any evidence that there was anyone with her. As soon as the firefighters come out, I'll send them over to you.'

'If you're done, I'll take her to the morgue,' Londo said, and Kane nodded.

'Liv, let's check out the guard.' He waited until they'd broken away from the group before murmuring, 'You okay, kid? You looked a little green getting out of your car.'

Olivia's cheeks heated. 'Yes,' she said curtly, embarrassed she'd let it show, even in front of Kane. 'Let's just get this done.' Except it was never done. There would always be another kid in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another kid with bruises. Another runaway. Another guy with a bullet whose wife they had to inform. It stuck in her throat, choking her. 'Come on. We've got one more body to process tonight.'

Monday, September 20, 1:20 A.M.

'Anything?' Jeff asked. They'd strapped their masks on and changed air tanks. The fumes generated by building materials were often toxic, and David knew too many veteran firefighters with lung damage. He hated the mask, but he liked his lungs.

'No.' David swept the thermal camera over the central wall. Behind it was the ventilating shaft, a prime spot for hidden fire.