

chain of deceit

HELP



episode one

THE CORRIDOR KILLER

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Episode One
The Corridor Killer

“We are only minutes away from the execution of one of the most prolific serial killers of this century,” Wendy Adams of Channel 4 News said into the microphone in her hand. “As expected, a crowd has gathered this evening. Some are protesting the execution, while others have gathered to celebrate the death of what the media coined the Corridor Killer. It seemed like only weeks ago that the young man was arrested by Federal Agents in the process of dumping his last victim, but to those that lost loved ones at the hands of this deranged mind this day couldn’t come soon enough. All but one of the Corridor Killer’s alleged victims were accounted for; FBI Special Agent Ryan-Knight. If the execution is carried out as planned, it will give closure to the families of his victims, and they can finally move on knowing the Corridor Killer will never hurt anyone else.”

The crowd was divided in half with barricades separating the two sides, allowing for a guard-lined walkway that lead to the prison entrance from the parking lot. Loud protesters held signs with their respective positions clearly shown: support of the death penalty or their belief that all creatures deserve to live. Irony considering the one being put to death, at his request, took the lives of forty innocent people. Signs with the names and pictures of the Corridor Killer’s victims were displayed on poster boards and propped up so those protesting the killer’s right to live saw the faces of each of his victims.

Standing back in the parking lot, leaning against the side of his car, watching the spectacle, was the last person that should have been there but he wouldn’t miss this for anything. He lit the cigarette dangling from between his lips before checking his watch.

“Thirty minutes to show time,” he grumbled under his breath, the cigarette bouncing with each mumbled word, and he shoved his hands in his jacket pockets then sulked across the parking lot.

Wendy reached out with her microphone, hurrying towards him. “Agent Quinn, do you have a comment?” she asked when he approached.

He didn’t stay anything and kept walking.

“Do you think he’ll tell you where her body is?” she called out after him.

Kian stopped and he looked over his shoulder.

The look he gave her caused the reporter to lower the microphone and step back.

The curtain was pulled back and those gathered to bear witness shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. For some it was a struggle to stay seated, and for others it was an uncomfortable end to a reign of unfathomable terror that couldn’t come soon enough.

For some, it was the first time seeing the man outside of newspaper articles and on TV. For others, the last time they saw him was in the courtroom while they gave victim statements to a bored defendant that simply didn’t care.

But for one it was their last chance to get him to talk so he could have closure.

Robert Daniel Park, born June 19th, 1983, in Aurora, Nebraska, to Daniel and Sandra Park, would die by lethal injection at the age thirty-five care of the State of Virginia.

To the media and public, he was known as the Corridor Killer, but to his parents he was their little boy Robbie that they couldn’t figure out where they went wrong.

Evil has many faces, as the media outlets repeatedly used as a lead-in to each story about him and every exposé, but the face of the Corridor Killer wasn’t evil in the least. He was a regular thirty-something from the Heartland of America; neither handsome nor unattractive, but was nice enough looking to not have a problem picking someone up. He was educated, well spoken, went to church, took care of his aging parents, and was liked in his community.

According to his parents he was always an inquisitive child, wanted to know how everything worked, was quiet and reflective, and was an avid reader.

That boy next door without even a parking ticket is what caused his crimes to go unconnected and left the killer without a face throughout his reign of terror.

When a string of bodies turned up along Interstate 80, crossing state lines, it caused the FBI to take over the investigation. Eventually they caught the bastard responsible, but not before losing one of their own in the process.

It was the loss of their Agent that filled in the blanks and tied Robert Daniel Park to the crimes, and that gave him a face and name, and secured a death penalty conviction in record time. It should have been closure to those in the Bureau, but it wasn't for Special Agent Kian Quinn.

It was Kian's partner that was one of the last victims of Robert Daniel Park; their body was the only one not recovered.

Special Agent Freddie Ryan-Knight deserved to have a proper burial and a flag draped over her casket in honor. Her family deserved closure, and her husband and daughter shouldn't be visiting and putting flowers on an empty grave every year on her birthday as they had for more than three years.

No one deserved that, but in Special Agent Quinn's opinion his partner didn't deserve it most of all.

Kian slipped into the witness room and took the empty seat at the end of the front row.

The man smelled legally drunk, cigarette smoke permeated every fiber of his clothing, black hair was disheveled more so than usual and stood up in every direction, the dark stubble shadowing the lower half of his pale face was four days' worth of lack of hygiene, and icy green eyes were bloodshot from going over every report, statement, and all the evidence that sentenced the condemned to death for the past month. Kian was trying to find something, anything, a foolish shred of hope even, that Robert Daniel Park would clear his conscience in the end, a chance for forgiveness by the Lord if you will, and give up the location of his partner's body before he feels the feathery caress of death.

It was a long shot, especially since the Corridor Killer had yet to show remorse and refused to file an appeal.

Hell, the bastard requested the death penalty, wanted it fast tracked, and represented himself in court.

Surprisingly, he did an impressive job representing himself. He got evidence thrown out when it pertained to the death of Agent Ryan-Knight, and got himself acquitted of her death.

In the end, Robert Daniel Park didn't ask for religious guidance with his last meal. He merely wanted a novella to read while he waited until it was time.

The normality of the man was what made him so difficult to catch.

"I knew you wouldn't miss it," Director Wilson commented under his breath, cleaning his glasses with a glass cloth.

"Aye, I was trying to figure out how to get in there with that bastard," Kian admitted, making a face, irritated he had to turnover his sidearm with the guards before they'd let him in.

Wilson nodded. "I know. That's why I had them triple the guards in order to keep you out," he said. "We all want answers, Quinn. We both want closure for Freddie, to finally give Thomas and Keela, and the rest of her family, the answers that we weren't able to find. I get it, Boy, but it isn't what Freddie would have wanted. She wouldn't want you burying your nose in case files that have been stamped CLOSED, or have you sifting through thousands of pages from forensic reports, or re-interviewing witnesses, watching hours and hours of video from his confession, or subjecting yourself to hours of M.E. recordings at autopsies. When was the last time you showered or shaved? You look how you did when she picked your ass up from Langley all those years ago, minus the blood and tampons."

Kian wouldn't deny it; he looked dodgy as fuck.

Fifteen years ago he had a little too much to drink on a flight from Dublin to Langley when sent stateside in order to represent the IIA in a joint task force with the FBI. He had gotten a little mouthy, in typical drunken Irishman fashion, and was detained by TSA until his handler from the Bureau retrieved him. That handler was Probationary Agent Freddie Ryan; she pulled the short straw, in a manner of speaking, because her last name was of Irish origins and she was fresh out of the academy.

Joke was on them because she was adopted and hadn't a clue how to speak Leprechaun, as she called it.

When they arrived to Quantico, Kian had tampons sticking out of his nose, blood all over his shirt, darkening under his eyes from the broken nose she gave him, and was in the trunk of the car handcuffed.

He was a slow learner when it came to American women, especially Freddie Ryan.

It was a love hate relationship between the agent from the IIA and the Feds. The only person the stubborn Irishman would listen and not mouth off to was Freddie, and that came after she popped him in the face with a quick jab when he mouthed off the first time.

Once that joint venture was wrapped, six months later, Kian requested reassignment stateside as an IIA liaison then signed with the FBI once that assignment was finalized a year later. In the field his means might have been unconventional, his inability to do paperwork was criminal, adhering to protocol was a very, very gray area in his opinion, but you couldn't argue the results. When the two were partnered and rose in the ranks together, they were unstoppable.

Freddie was the only family Kian had in the end; she was his best friend, and he loved her fiercely. Without her, Kian had nothing, and contemplated going back to Ireland. If it weren't for his Goddaughter, Keela, Freddie's only child, he would have put a bullet in Robert Daniel Park's head when he was in custody and called it a day.

"Accept this as closure, Quinn," Wilson said. "Harboring the guilt you are, it's not healthy. You look like shit."

Kian made a face. "You are bang on, but you don't have to eat the head off me. The only thing that was keeping me from doing something I'd regret was Fred. If it weren't for her chiseler, I would have done something daft and been on a boat home."

"I know, Boy," Wilson said, reassuringly patting him on the back. "You need to lay off the bottle though. You sound like a leprechaun when you drink."

"Aye," Kian quietly agreed, wiping away the moisture that gathered in the corners of his eyes.

That's what his partner used to tell him whenever he had a bit too much to drink; when sober it was easier to reel the Irishman in.

"I'm not the full shilling. Watching this bastard fry won't give me closure," he said.

Wilson chuckled. "It's lethal injection, not the electric chair. We are slightly more civilized than that."

"Uh huh," Kian said, looking around, trying to look at anything other than the guards hooking the prisoner up to monitors for his vitals and strapping him down. "Thomas not coming?" he asked, looking to the seat on the other side of the Director.

That was disappointing, but he expected no less from the coward.

Wilson shook his head. "I doubt it. He's found closure, in his mind, and is focusing on helping their daughter through this. Park's death will be their daughter's needed closure."

Kian looked away from the seat; that wouldn't bring closure to Keela in the least. The stubborn, hard headed girl was her mother's child after all, and wouldn't be so easily appeased with the death of the serial killer that took her mother from her, especially since she doesn't believe her mother is dead.

The Warden looked from the three clocks on the wall to his wristwatch then went over to the wall mounted speaker and pressed the button, turning on the intercom.

"Robert Daniel Park, you have been sentenced to death by lethal injection by the State of Virginia. You were

tried and found guilty by a group your peers. You have declined to appeal the sentence that will be carried out at 12:01 AM. Does the condemned have a statement to make?" he asked.

Robert Daniel Park smiled, looking to those gathered to witness his death. "Thank you, Warden. Good evening. I'm touched so many came out for my death. I'm honored, I truly am," he said. "There is very little I regret in my life. I had a good childhood with loving parents and a supportive family. There is no logical reason for what I've done, nothing to be noted in textbooks or psychology papers as to why I took the lives of thirty-nine people or why I have no remorse over it. It is not something those with limited intelligence and a delusional grasp on reality could possibly comprehend. I don't regret it, and I don't regret getting caught. If you must know," he mused, looking to the narrow, light green-bloodshot eyes of Agent Quinn, "I was growing rather bored with it all. I'd like to thank the FBI for finally assisting with local law enforcement and putting together the pieces I left for you, and for ultimately apprehending me. You didn't catch me. I turned myself in, but not before making it count. Speaking of the FBI, you look like shit, very special Agent Quinn. I was hoping to say you look better than your partner, but I can't. You seriously look like death warmed over!" he said before laughing maniacally.

Kian got to his feet, pulling away from Director Wilson when he tried to pull him back down. "Fuck you, you fucking cunt! My only regret is not being there to escort you to the devil myself."

The prisoner smiled wide. "Funny, that's exactly what she told me you'd regret. You two truly are cut from the same, questionable cloth. Poor taste on her part, but what do you expect from a Fed with a taste for sleeping with badges? Actually, come to think of it, I do regret something, and that is I won't be there to see the look on your face when you see her again."

"Where is she?" Kian demanded.

"Does wearing a badge and upholding the laws you choose to uphold make you a saint, very special Agent Quinn?" he asked. "Picking and choosing. Picking and choosing. Just like I did with my victims? I picked and chose who I was going to play with, who I was going to kill, and who I was going to be God, Jury, and Executioner for. Or does your little badge simply balance out the fact you were shipped to the States by the IIA because you slept with your commanding officer's wife?"

Kian cocked an eyebrow.

"Prior to that you had a short stint in Scotland Yard until you fucked, literally, that one up. Before that you were shuffled about as a detective because you couldn't keep it in your pants and slept with your partner's baby sister and his husband. Prior to that if was your commanding officer you slept with while deployed... Did the record repeat itself with your precious partner in America? What was her name again?"

"Don't you fucking say her name," Kian warned.

"Did you ever stop to think that possibly Freddie was the penance you had to pay for all of the sins you've committed?" he mused.

Kian continued to glare at him. "I know what I am, and I know that I'll be heading home tonight and you'll be headed to the fucking morgue. With or without knowing where you buried her."

Robert Daniel Park chuckled. "I know what I am as well, Special Agent Kian Shannon Quinn," he taunted with a smirk. "The sands slipping through the hourglass which is my life are nearly through, but how many will you allow to slip through hers? Time is ticking. Ticking. Ticking. Ticking," he mocked.

Kian looked at him dumbfounded; none of this was making sense.

It was as if a stranger was conversing with him.

This type of behavior was beneath the Corridor Killer.

In all of his interviews he was the picture of intelligence and maturity. Never once did he act like a petulant child or speak so brazenly.

In fact, never once had he used profanity in any of the hundreds of hours of recordings.

“Tick tock, tick tock,” Robert Daniel Park continued. “You are running out of time. But she is running out even faster.”

Director Wilson motioned for the Warden to get on with it since it was past the deadline for the Governor’s pardon, and 12:01 had passed by many minutes. This was nothing more than a means for the condemned to mentally and emotionally torture Agent Quinn, making him feel as if he had somehow failed his partner.

The Warden nodded and motioned with his chin for the executioner to start the process.

“Wait!” Robert Daniel Park shouted. “I wasn’t done. Misery loves company, very special Agent Kian Shannon Quinn, but it makes for an amusing island for one,” he scathingly informed him. “The look on your face when you make a wish in the end... I can only imagine the look on your face when you look down upon her, alive and waiting for you, that is if you find her in time. Oh how disappointed she’ll be that it took you so long, that you gave up and moved on with your life like her moronic husband had, the disappointment she will be flooded with in the end. Only her precious daughter held out hope that she was alive. I suppose I have her to thank for all of this... Don’t get me wrong, I am very, very happy I left her alive. Little Keela was so, so brave and strong, and kept her promise to me. She never told you, never told anyone what we talked about, did she? What a fun piece she will prove to be.”

Kian’s eyes widened and the witnesses started whispering amongst themselves.

“I suppose it won’t nearly be as amusing as the look of disappointment and panic on his face when you all discovers she’s alive! Don’t worry, I will wait for you in Hell at the gates, you Irish bastard. That I promise you. Until then, forty-two. Fifty-four. Eighty-six. Eleven,” he taunted as the first of three chemicals snaked down his IVs.

“No!” Kian shouted, pounding on the glass. “No! Where is she?! Where’s Fred!” he demanded. “Where’s my fucking partner?!”

Robert Daniel Park’s eyes fluttered. “Seventy-point-seventy-nine. Eighty. Fifty-six,” he slurred. “Oh the look on his face will make it all worth it...” his words trailed off as unconsciousness washed over him.

Director Wilson was on his phone, calling the Governor, trying to stop the execution, but those gathered knew it was too late.

The prisoner’s vital signs had flat lined before the second chemical was even introduced into his
bloodstream.****

Kian tore through prisoner’s cell, checking for anything that would hint Robert Daniel Park had a partner or that he was telling the truth.

When they apprehended the suspected, he never denied any of the crimes they had enough evidence to present to the D.A.; he actually admitted to other murders that they hadn’t linked to him. The cocky bastard even led them to bodies they had yet to discover, corrected the investigation when it was going off the tracks or was reaching, and helped them prepare an airtight case against him.

With that said, the one death he never took credit for was that of Special Agent Freddie Ryan-Knight; it was the one death he defended himself against in court, and successfully. He claimed responsibility for her disappearance, and found much amusement in the fact he was able to take out a Fed with very little effort, in front of her own home and child even, but never did he admit to killing her. Admittance of violating Virginia State code 18.2-47 was the least of his concerns. The blood found on his discarded clothing and in his truck was hers—Virginia code 18.2-51.1—and he admitted to and took responsibility for the injuries that resulted in the extreme blood loss, but he refused to take credit for her death.

Kian didn’t want to believe his partner was dead, but the M.E. testified the amount of blood recovered from the scene and on the suspect’s clothing that he had on when he took her was more than the human body could withstand losing.

Death would be imminent.

But what if the bastard was telling the truth all along? And he didn't kill Agent Ryan-Knight, and instead somehow managed to keep her alive this entire time?!

But how?

It's been over two-years since his arrest, and over three years since her abduction. The only way to keep someone alive that long would have been to have a partner, but nothing in any of the reports, interviews, or confessions so much as hinted to an accomplice or partner being involved.

Robert Daniel Park was a narcissist that constantly had to prove he was the smartest person in the room.

"Fuck!" Kian yelled, throwing the thin mattress against the wall.

There was nothing of use in the cell.

Director Wilson stood back, watching. "A team is going through everything that was boxed up from his other cell. This one was only a short stop before he was dead man walking."

"How did he know any of that?" Kian demanded. "My personnel file is sealed. What I did, the many fuck ups of my past, all of it was sealed. How did that cunt know?!"

The Director shrugged. "I was unaware of some of it myself."

"He knew my full-bloody-name! How? It isn't even in my file. It just has a letter for the middle name."

Wilson shook his head; he didn't know either. "It's something to look into later. Right now I'm more concerned with what he was saying about Freddie and Keela. They were *both* supposed to die?"

Kian nearly doubled over at the thought and braced himself against the wall.

Losing his best friend was one thing, but the thought of losing that little girl that was everything good her parents struggled to be was unfathomable.

"Breathe, Quinn. From what the guards said, Park didn't talk much, but was always very cordial when he did, said thank you and please, refused religious enlightenment and last rite, and instead read while waiting for his walk. From what the Warden said, the last meal was the hardest of his requests."

Kian looked at him. "What did he request?"

Director Wilson flipped through his pocket notebook at his notes. "A book, a novella; *Belfagor Arcidiavolo* by Niccolò Machiavelli. His meal was more troublesome, but it was what it was. The Governor said since he didn't tie up the judicial system with redundant appeals, and keeping with the agreement I made with him for the locations of the bodies he took responsibility for, we would let him order whatever he wanted and have it catered in," he explained, continuing to flip through the notes until he found the menu. "Southwest chicken and corn chowder. Mussels in a lemon and white wine sauce. Baked Gloucester lemon haddock with a loaded twice baked potato. Pub style fish and chips. Seared scallops served over corn, bacon, asparagus and sweet potato risotto--"

"With a bloody pomegranate reduction," Kian interrupted, pushing his hand through his hair.

"How did you know that?" Wilson asked.

"And for dessert key lime pie with a coconut graham cracker crust and caramel topping, and a pint of spiced tea."

"How did you know? What aren't you telling me, Quinn?" Wilson demanded.

Kian shook his head. "The first victim we were called in on was a waitress from a small restaurant in Beverly Farms, Mass. That was when Fred and I got the case dropped on our desks. We interviewed the staff and owners, her limited family and friends all came out to give bloody statements, and by the time we were done it was past dinner time and there was nothing open out there. The kitchen stayed open for us and that is the meal we had, exactly that. The bastard saw us... But he couldn't have. He was five states away when we were called in. The timeline confirmed it, witness statements confirmed it. But how did he know that's what we ate? It was a comp'd meal so

there wasn't a ticket and no expense report. We didn't even order, they just made us the local favorites and something they thought I'd like, mistaking me for bloody Feb."

Director Wilson joined him in the cell. "Quinn, you have to think. Park chose that meal for a reason. Maybe he's telling us where we can find Freddie, even if it's just her body. Nothing Park has done and said hasn't been without a purpose. What is he telling us now?"

Kian shook his head. "Not a bloody clue! That was five years ago. I only remember what we ate because it gave me the shits like you wouldn't believe. I swore off seafood after that. Fred walked the assumed abduction site with local law the next day and did a few more interviews. I stayed in and puked my guts out and shit off my ass off at the B&B the next town over in Manchester by the Sea. The old broad there threatened to throw me out or a call priest for an exorcism if I didn't stop cussing. That bloody bastard better have gotten the shits like I did."

That didn't surprise Directory Wilson in the least... The threat of an exorcism aspect of it.

Special Agent Kian Quinn was an acquired taste, one that very few had, but Freddie was able to handle and keep him in line. The two were impressive together, inseparable, and their case closure rate was the best in their field office. When Freddie went missing, and, ultimately, was declared dead without a body, Kian had been working on his own and doing a lot of clerical and administrative work that should have, in theory, kept him out of trouble.

It didn't.

Trouble should have been Kian Quinn's middle name.

Director Wilson actually enjoyed the mouthy Irishman; he reminded him of the son he lost in Iraq twelve-years ago.

"I have the helicopter on standby," Wilson said. "Only thing I can think of is to go where Park is pointing us. I'll forward the recording from the execution to your phone. Don't let the bastard get the last laugh, Quinn. Let's bring Freddie home where she belongs."

Thomas Knight stood in the living room looking down at the sleeping girl curled up with a blanket and book on the couch. He arrived over an hour ago and sent the nanny home, but he hadn't managed to take his daughter upstairs to her room yet.

Every night was the same since Freddie was taken; Thomas found his daughter sleeping on the couch, waiting for her mother to come home. The therapists said that the trauma of witnessing her mother being abducted wasn't something the young girl would get over so readily. Keela was stubborn, hardheaded, and refused to believe her mother was dead without a body; that was to be expected of the daughter of two members of law enforcement. And much as Thomas hated to think it, he wished Freddie's body would have turned up in order to give their daughter and family closure.

One therapist suggested to get the girl out of the house that her mother was taken from. Thomas agreed and sold the house, to Keela's protests, boxed up all of Freddie's things, and bought a new house in a new town. He stayed on with the force and hired a nanny that was retired military and proficient with a gun to stay with his daughter when needed. The therapist made house calls weekly to sit down and talk with Keela, and she stayed busy with school and sports.

But every night was the same; she fell asleep on the couch with a book and blanket, looking out the window, waiting for her mother to come home even though Freddie wouldn't know where they were.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he whispered before pulling his sleeping daughter into his arms and carried her from the living room.

Thomas would have been home sooner, but he stopped by the bar to get a drink after work.

Tonight the man that took his wife from them would be put to death. He was supposed to go and watch him take

his last breath, but he decided to work late and drink instead.

It was how he spent nearly every night since his wife was taken.

Keela was almost twelve, no longer was she a little girl, and understood that Daddy was working late in order to prevent other mommies from being taken from their families like hers was. It didn't make it easier, but Keela always had a stronger relationship with her mother compared to that with her father.

Thomas Knight was a Detective with local law enforcement and five years ago ended up losing one of his cases to his FBI agent wife, and with it the promotion that would have accompanied catching the killer. As much grief as the rest of the force gave him for his wife carrying a bigger badge than he did, he was just happy to have the monster behind bars and sentenced to death.

Never did he imagine before that happened the case would come knocking on their front door and destroy their home and family in the process.

Thomas carried Keela up the stairs to her room and laid her in bed. Tenderly he caressed her long, black hair back from her face; her pale ivory skin making the masking of freckles under her eyes and along her sculpted nose stand out, and her overly full pale pink lips looked at is they were constantly in a pout. On the nightstand next to the bed was the last picture Keela had with her mother; it was taken the week before she disappeared: they were sitting on the porch, hugging and smiling wide. They looked so much alike, aside from their eyes and hair, and Thomas was hard pressed to see any of him in their daughter, but he was grateful for that; he would have made an ugly woman.

"Dad?" Keela whispered, stealing his attention from the picture.

"Hey Sweetheart," Thomas said, offering her a smile. "You fell asleep on the couch again."

"I was waiting for Mom to come home, you know that. Are you okay?" she asked, wiping away the tear that rolled down his cheek for him.

He nodded, looking at her glassy, light green eyes. "The man that hurt Mommy is dead. The court's sentence of death by lethal injection was carried out at midnight. He can't hurt anyone else."

Keela's pouty lips started trembling and she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him and she cried.

"I know, Sweetheart," he whispered, caressing her head. "I know. I miss her, too."

The weather wasn't the best for flying, but the rain matched his mood so it was fitting in Kian's opinion. He sat in the back next to Director Wilson with his eyes closed while he listened to the replay of Robert Daniel Park's execution. In his hand was the book he took from the cell; he had briefly fanned through it looking for pieces of paper or notes that might have been smuggled in or meant to be smuggled out, but there wasn't anything of use in it that he could find, but he walked out with it in hand without thinking about it. Over and over he replayed the Robert Daniel Park's last words as the helicopter took them from Sussex State Prison in Virginia to Beverly, Massachusetts, where a team from the Boston field office was waiting for them.

It didn't make sense.

None of it did.

What Robert Daniel Park had said wasn't anything that he had mentioned before in any of the numerous confessions and interviews he gave. Never had he so much as mentioned Special Agent Quinn or shown hatred or disdain towards him, both of which he had with his final words.

That had to mean something, but Kian didn't know what.

Robert Daniel Park was a genius with an IQ that was off the charts, and that caused extreme boredom and disconnect from those considered his peers in the small farming community he grew up in. Unlike most textbook homicidal psychopaths, he didn't start by killing animals or experimenting before graduating to homicide. Murder

came ridiculously easy and didn't prove to be a challenge. After the seventh victim, and the police weren't knocking on his door, he grew bored and was disappointed. That was when he decided to up the ante and to make them take notice of him and to connect the trail of bodies he was leaving strung down the Interstate. He would redress his previous victim with the clothing, jewelry, and identification of his most recent, which were alive and forced to watch so they were hyperaware of their own impending demise and fate.

The body of the last victim, of Charlotte May was found nine months after Agent Ryan-Knight was abducted in front of her daughter in their driveway. The police sketch from the only witness, a terrified child, pointed the investigation towards a suspect, and that suspect was found disposing of Charlotte May that was dressed in the clothing of Agent Freddie Ryan-Knight; blouse, slacks, boots, bullet proof vest, field jacket, and sidearm and backup weapon. Unlike the other victims, her wedding ring and necklace, the only pieces of jewelry the woman wore, weren't on Charlotte May's person when her body was found.

The necklace was in possession of her daughter, Keela said her mother gave it to her earlier that day, but the wedding band was never recovered.

Calling it *disposing* of Charlotte May's body was a misuse of the word; Robert Daniel Park was sitting on the side of the road, covered in blood, with a sign in hand that read *I'm the Killer you're looking for*.

Thirteen different people stopped to take selfies with him thinking it was a joke before a local cop called it in.

The span of time between Agent Ryan-Knight and the previous victim was longer than usual, but the theatrical way he disposed of the body made up for his temporary absence according to Robert Daniel Park. Boredom and time to kill, no pun intended, was the reason why the young co-ed Charlotte May was found strung up in a tree with her entrails pulled through her prominent joints; they were attached to deer antlers as if she were a marionette.

Robert Daniel Park called her a puppet and a shadowy puppeteer was pulling the strings.

It was theatrical to say the least.

But never had he so much as said Agent Quinn's name or even addressed him.

When the Irishman was in the interrogation room, the suspect remained silent. When he wasn't in the room, you couldn't shut Robert Daniel Park up. That caused Director Wilson to force Kian back from the investigation since he would only compromise it.

Emotionally he was too vested in it.

Now Kian was starting to think that might have been Robert Daniel Park's plan all along. To keep him segregated and away from him and the investigation as much as possible in order to play his final hand in the end. But why? Nothing he said Kian could give context to. It sounded as if he was maniacal almost, which wasn't like the Corridor Killer in the least.

Director Wilson knocked into Kian to steal his attention. "Is that the restaurant?" he shouted, pointing towards a barely illuminated speck in the darkness that the flashing lights from police vehicles that were in the parking lot.

Kian shrugged. "There isn't much out here," he shouted in return. "Give me a map and I'll be able to tell ya'."

The co-pilot handed back a folded map in a plastic sleeve with a black marker.

Kian was old school when it came to certain things; he didn't put faith in technology when it could be corrupted, hacked, falsified, and those that were tethers to a machine grated on his nerves. Growing up in the slums of North Ireland kept fancy electronics out of reach and forced him to figure things out the old fashion way.

"The B&B is here," he said, marking it on the map before flipping it over to the other side. "The restaurant is there. There's a petrol station right around there, and a great coffee shop with amazing biscuits and hot waitresses across from it." He marked them all out. "It is nothing more than a tourist area without a point of interest to attract anyone to. I couldn't figure out how the bastard even came across *that* victim; it was out of his way and out what we were assuming were his hunting grounds."

Wilson nodded his understanding. “Do you know if Freddie went adventuring while you were indisposed?” he asked, curious.

It wasn't that unusual of a question when Agent Ryan-Knight was involved. Many agents would explore the area they were in if it was a smaller town and they wrapped up early since many small towns only offered bars, if you were lucky, as nightlife. Kian was known for hitting up a bar or two, but Freddie would find something involving nature or the arts.

Kian shrugged. “Not a clue. That bloody Betty loves nature and the great outdoors. I swear she's part fish. I hate bloody nature. Keela is just like her mother; you can't keep her out of the water or away from the great outdoors. She placed first at nationals last month in three events. If she were here, she'd beg to go adventuring to the most remote and obscure place bloody possible. Like there,” he said, making a face and circled a small island that was in the middle of nowhere on intersecting lines on the map.

Wilson chuckled. “Keela will make a great park ranger or game warden one day, or possibly an activist if she follows in the anti-government footsteps of her Godfather.”

Kian made a face; he wasn't entirely anti-government, he was simply Irish.

“Most likely we'll have to call her in to find you if you get lost in the woods. You have no sense of direction when trees are involved,” Wilson teased.

“Don't remind me... Wait,” Kian said, opening up the map. “Hey, what do you need for coordinates to map a location?” he asked the co-pilot, something just registering with him.

“Longitude and latitude,” Nate, the co-pilot, called back.

“No, what would someone use to throw off or confuse someone that *knows* how to use longitude and latitude on a fucking map?”

Nate shrugged.

“What do tethered to electronic cunts use?” Kian clarified.

“Geo URI scheme,” the pilot, Jack, called back to them. “It's an identifier of a physical location in a two- or three-dimensional coordinate reference system. They use it with GPS and computer based mapping. If you have numbers, search for it on your phone and see what comes up. Might have to put a negative in front of one of the sets of numbers though.”

Wilson pulled his cell phone out to do as instructed. “What numbers?”

Kian looked to the map then the notes he had written from Robert Daniel Park's last words. “The numbers he gave us, aye?” he offered, showing him the numbers he jotted down.

The rain came down in impenetrable sheets that reduced visibility to inches.

There was no light overhead, no stars or moon. It was black as death, fitting to be sure, but not the desired setting for the end.

The trickling of water when the rain started was nothing more than an annoying sprinkle but it would soon turn into torrents coming in from all sides. The deep hole would rapidly fill with water; the rain would turn into mud that would roll over the stone edging from the flooded creek beds on the higher elevation. The smooth stone walls would offer no handholds, no place to grab onto...

And that was the point.

Though, they supposed even if they could find a way to climb out it wouldn't have helped since they were tethered by a thick manacle around their ankle that was attached to a heavy length of chain, securing them to the bottom.

Even if they could climb out of the pooling water, it was only a matter of time before it rose over their head,

drowning them. Pulling on the chain was useless; it was solid and they barely had the strength to stand on their own two feet, let alone invoke super human strength and break iron.

Of all the things they had survived, it was going to be a flash flood that killed them.

The broad shoulder man offered him his hand and he shook it. “Director, I’m Commander Mitchell of the Department of Fish and Game. I have my team and thirty-five volunteers, fire and rescue are standing by, as well as regiment from the Massachusetts National Guard that were doing training exercises in the area,” he said, escorting the two from the helicopter to the staging area that was set up in the local grange hall. “Those from the FBI field office arrived an hour ago and are updating the others as much as possible.”

Director Wilson nodded his thanks then slipped out of his jacket before shaking it out to get the water from it before ducking inside.

Kian didn’t bother; they were losing time.

“How do we get to the bloody island?” he asked.

Mitchell went over to the table that was covered with maps and surrounded by team leads from nearly each group there. “The only way to Misery Island Reservation is by boat. There’s no clearing or places to land any type of air craft. A ferry or boat is the only way to get to the island and back. In this weather, only the ferry or a larger fishing vessel would be safe enough to traverse the waters,” he explained. “From experience, with rain like this it causes flash flooding of the streams and will make it very dangerous.”

“What I’m about to brief you on isn’t public knowledge and won’t be,” Wilson warned. “If anyone here can’t keep their mouths shut, get out. I don’t want someone going to the media and giving them a hot story and have the media knock on her daughter’s door, giving her false hope that her mother might be coming home.”

The others looked between each other.

“All of you out,” an interloper, that was standing back, ordered.

Most of those filling the grange exited, leaving only the highest ranking and useful behind.

“Thank you,” Director Wilson said. “And you are?”

“Captain Janes, Virginia State Patrol,” he said. “Those remaining can be briefed and know discretion.”

Mitchell wasn’t happy to be getting undermined by someone that shouldn’t even have been there. “Are you certain your Agent is out there? We’d be risking the lives of everyone that is volunteering to assist.”

Kian glared at him. “That bastard said she’s alive but won’t be for long. Even if it’s only her body we find, Fred deserves to go home. Her daughter deserves to know where her mother is and to finally mourn her death. If you’re too fucking scared of a little rain and mud, stay here. I’ll fucking go myself.”

Mitchell gave him a look, not entirely sure what he was going on about.

Wilson motioned for Kian to hold off on the one-man expedition into the wild. “You’ll have to excuse Special Agent Quinn. It’s his partner and it’s the only chance we might have to save her. The man that took her was put to death after midnight. With his last words he told us where to find her. Perhaps he’s lying about her being alive, and most likely he is, but if he’s giving us the location of her body that will give closure to her daughter and husband, to her partner and best friend...” his words trailed off and he shook his head; he knew it was a losing endeavor but he wanted closure as well. “The risk is great, but we wouldn’t leave any of you or your men behind if the situation was reversed.”

Mitchell shook his head. “You mean the Corridor Killer?” he scoffed. “You think she’s still alive after, what, three years?”

Captain Janes rolled his neck, stealing Mitchell’s attention, and the Game Warden quickly looked away from him.

Kian pulled his badge out and slipped a picture from under his photo ID then tossed it on the table. "You tell that little girl that she isn't worth the risk," he said, pointing to the picture of the smiling girl in the arms of her smiling mother. "You tell her that neither of them are worth the risk," he whispered before heading from the grange hall, the door slamming shut behind him.

Director Wilson sighed, picking up the picture. "Sorry about that. With or without support, Quinn will get on that island and most likely die trying to save her, trying to find her. Strangely enough for being ex-military, he isn't an outdoorsman, and he isn't a people person either, obviously, but the only two people in the world he loves are Freddie and Keela. You all know the island better than anyone. Where would someone hide a person if they were alive?" he asked.

Mitchell pushed his hand through his hair. "There's a couple of historic buildings out there that might house someone. Long term housing? No. Tourist and nature enthusiasts visit daily and they would have reported seeing a person being held out there. Why do you think your Agent's on the island?"

Wilson blew out a breath. "The Corridor Killer, with his final breath, gave us the location of the island. He warned that Agent Ryan-Knight was alive, but time was running out."

That caused those remaining to shift uncomfortably.

"What if he was just causing you to chase your tail in essence? A way to get back at her partner for some reason?" Janes asked, curious, motioning for the woman next to him to hear him out.

Wilson shrugged. "But what if he wasn't?" he retorted. "It's dangerous, I get it. But that woman doesn't deserve to die out there if she is alive, especially when we were so close to saving her."

"Don't shush me again," the woman Janes was trying to quiet warned before she pushed her way through the gathered men at the table. "What else did that bastard say?" she asked.

"Monica," Wilson greeted. "I didn't know you were here."

"I'm the Fire Chief," she reminded him. "And I brought the only people that might actually be of use on this adventure." She motioned towards Janes and he nodded his agreement.

Monica was the big sister of the local victim that brought the case into the FBI.

"I wasn't allowed to watch that sonuvabitch die," Monica explained. "It was a pool of tickets, since he had so many victims, one I didn't win. Freddie is good people and she didn't deserve to die, if she did, at that monster's hands. My baby sister didn't deserve it either, and it's because of Freddie and that Irish smokestack outside that the monster that took my sister from me was put down like the dog he was. So, I ask again, what else did he say? It might help to point us in a direction. The island isn't overly large, but at night and in this weather, it'll take hours to search it. The ferry will be here soon to take us to the island, maybe that bastard gave us an area to land."

The Director shouldn't have done it. It was against protocol, but his conscience would never forgive him if he didn't do everything he could to bring Agent Ryan-Knight home, even if it just for a proper burial.

He played the recording from the execution.

The room was eerily quiet.

They listened intently, trying to read between the lines or find context to what most would consider malicious ranting.

"Wait," Janes said. "Play that part back."

Deputy Wilson did as asked.

"The look on your face when you make a wish in the end... I can only imagine the look on your face when you look down upon her, alive and waiting for you, that is if you find her in time."

"Stop," Monica said. "Make a wish in the end? When you look down upon her..." her words trailed off and she looked over the map.

Janes looked at her. "You know that island better than anyone, Mon. Where is she?"

She smirked. "Compliments will only get you laid. Widow's Well on *Little Misery Island*."

"Shit," Janes hissed.

"I know," Monica agreed.

Wilson looked between the two. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Monica shook her head. "In this weather, in this season, it's dangerous. Very dangerous. That's why the island is off-limits. There's a deep well, just under two-hundred feet deep, located on the island that was used for questionable witch hunts back in the day. More recently it was sealed off with a barred metal grate cover that would allow for water to flow through but not let anyone in. Because of the change in topography over the years, when it rains like this it causes flooding of the creeks and it all goes towards the well. That's specifically how it was designed."

Janes whistled loudly to get the attention of those waiting outside.

Once they filed back into the room, they stood at attention.

"Listen up! We have an S&R that might prove to be the most difficult of any of your careers. We'll split into teams," Janes instructed, taking command. "This isn't like a regular, textbook, this is what they prepared you for at the academy, search and rescue. There are many variables that we don't know, it could be a trap, or it could be a body we're recovering. We don't know. But what we do know is that we will try, we will risk our lives and safety, in order to follow up on this lead. Whether we bring a victim or a body home, all that matters is that we tried."

Those gathered nodded they agreement.

"Since we don't have an approximation of where the victim is, we will do a full cover search in teams. The four main island teams will meet in the middle; wait until the others get there before returning to the ferry for transport. Strength in numbers. The most experienced climbers and outdoorsmen, the Horsemen, will take the little island: Alpha Team. Dave with Fire and Rescue will lead Charlie Team. Agent Carter will lead Foxtrot. Shane and Barb will head up Kilo. Grace and Mitchell will oversee Bravo Team. Partner up two from each division, evenly disperse your numbers and talents so everyone is covered: trackers, medical, rangers, Feds. Four corners and meet in the middle. We have four tracking dogs that we'll split between the groups on the main island: Tango, Echo, Delta, and Whisky. Tango and Whisky are cadaver dogs, Echo and Delta trackers. Xaos will go with Alpha Team unless any of you are stupid enough to try to wrangle that hellhound. The ferry will arrive soon and will take Charlie, Foxtrot, Kilo, and Bravo to the larger island. Hank will take Alpha Team with medical personnel, if they are required, to the small island. The remaining medics will stay on the ferry and another team on with Hank. The ferry team will coordinate radio communication between the teams; the ferry will dock to the south. Martin will outfit each of you with a radio with GSP so no one is lost or left behind. Gear up. We head out in five."

Monica shook her head. "Fucking Marines," she grumbled under her breath.

Janes looked over at her. "Keep it in your pants, Chief," he warned with a wink, causing her to blush.

Kian stood on the stern of the fishing boat with a cigarette hanging from between his lips; smoke rolled from his nose, his pale skin looked ghostly white from the cold, and his eyes were even more bloodshot then they were before.

The rain helped to hide the tears that kept rolling down his cheeks.

He was an emotional wreck, one that shouldn't be going out there with the others that are much more skilled than he is in wilderness survival and search and rescue.

Most likely they'll be searching for him before the night is through.

But he wouldn't be left behind.

“Those things will kill you, you know,” Monica said, joining him.

Kian nodded. “So I’ve heard.”

“Come on, let’s get you out of those wet clothes and into something more appropriate for the weather,” she said, taking his hand and pulled him around to the privacy and protection of the standing shelter.

Kian just didn’t have it in him to fight her.

“You look like a drown rat, and you’re going to get sick if you go out like this,” she scolded, sliding her hands up his chest to his shoulders then slipped his jacket off, dropping it to the deck behind him. “Most likely you’ll end up dead and it’ll be your body we’re recovering, and that I won’t permit on my watch.”

Absently he nodded, watching her undress him.

Normally, a few drinks were required for this type of thing, and his cock would be hard, but he was numb, in more ways than one. He was scared they wouldn’t get out there in time. The ferry was slower and had more room for the other teams, but the larger island was closer to where they departed from. Hank, a volunteer with a commercial fishing boat, was braving the violent waters and racing towards the small island as fast as he could with Alpha Team. The wind had picked up and the rain wasn’t letting up. The helicopter was grounded; the weather was too severe to attempt a flyover. And they were, especially, going out there blind and possibly into an ambush.

“You got new ink,” Monica commented when she took his holster off before slipping his wet dress shirt off his shoulders. “I like that one,” she mumbled, looking at the gray and vintage rose flowers on the front of his shoulder on the left. “Only you’d have a damn flower with a skull hidden in it on your muscular, manly body,” she teased, caressing his chest.

Kian nodded. “Aye. It has meaning though, you know that. Many bad decisions, and a few good ones, commemorated in ink,” he said, smoke rolling from his nose. His entire supper body, front and back, and arms down to his knuckles, was covered in detailed tattoos that told the story of his life; bad times, the good, family, those he loved and lost, and those he didn’t want to forget, were commemorated in ink that made up a unique canvas that was rather impressive.

He took the thermal she pulled from her backpack then pulled it over his head.

“The one in charge, you trust him?” he asked.

Monica made a face. “Yeah, I trust him. I suppose I better since I’m sleeping with him.”

Kian gave her a look, putting his shoulder holster back on, then slipped into the jacket she offered him. “You giving off some mixed signals, Mon,” he informed her. “You just undressed me, caressed me body-”

Monica rolled his eyes. “It was sympathy sex, decent sex, but just sex in the backroom of a bar, Quinn,” she reminded him. “I was in a bad place, you were there, and you’re nice to look at. Cock wasn’t as impressive as your stamina, but I’m in a better place now mentally and emotionally. Janes is good people,” she explained, watching him slip out of his soggy shoes then his pants. “We grew up together, and after high school he signed with the Marines. Back to back to back tours finally wrapped his career after fifteen years and an IED that took half his leg. It doesn’t slow him down though. Troop A Captain and commander of SERT; if you want her found, if she’s alive, Janes and the Horsemen will find her.”

Kian put on the pair of pants Monica tossed him; they were a little big, but they were dry, made of thicker canvas that was water resistant, and were designed for the outdoors. “You’re shaggin’ a one-legged Marine?” he asked, slightly amused.

“He’s a fantastic fuck,” Monica assured him. “Stamina of a porn star without a stunt cock, and you don’t even want to get me started on his cock,” she sighed dramatically for his amusement, and he laughed.

It was the first time in years he had laughed, genuinely laughed.

“Fucking amazing,” she promised him. “Seriously though, Quinn, if anyone can find her out there it is Janes.”

“He better,” Kian warned, putting on two pairs of dry wool socks then slipped into the boots she provided.

Monica softly smacked him. “Don’t threaten the only person that can help both of us right now, okay? You’re not the only one armed, and unlike the rest of them, I know where to hide a body on the island, but it’ll be yours. Understand?” she warned with a smile.

Kian sighed. “You are so bloody hot when threatening to kill me, again.”

“I know, and you know I’m serious when I say it.”

“Aye, one of the things I liked best about you, even if it was just a couple of shags in a back storeroom.”

Little Misery Island was completely dark.

There were no visitor centers on the smaller island. No buildings that offered protection from the weather. And no trails.

The island was a protected reserve that was off limits to tourists, hunters, fishermen, and only the occasional biologist ventured to the island for research purposes.

The fishing boat had floodlights that it turned on to illuminate the darkened island as much as it could. It illuminated a portion of it, but the light struggled to break through the thick boughs and only illuminated the immediate shore and flooded banks.

The 87-acre island, in the dark, seemed infinite in all directions.

Alpha Team loaded into *Futura Commando* boats and raced towards the island.

Suddenly have an ex-Marine leading the team wasn’t such a bad idea.

“Reaper, survey the terrain,” Janes instructed. “The well isn’t clearly notated on any map, only a general vicinity from historical data, and in this darkness Mon can only give us general direction.”

“Oorah,” Reaper barked out then hurried down the shore with a case in hand, splashing through the violent waters slamming into the beach and crumbling shoreline.

Kian pulled the hood of the jacket up and rubbed his hands together, trying to heat them up through the gloves he was wearing, but they were completely numb. He wanted to run as fast as he could to the well, but he didn’t know where it was, and in the darkness he would most likely end up injured or dead if he ran off like he was tempted to do. Kian trusted Monica and her judgement, and if she said Janes was the right person to lead this joint rescue mission, then the one-legged Marine was.

“What are we waiting for?” he asked when Monica joined him with a mangy looking one-eyed dog wearing a canvas rain jacket: *Xaos* was a retired Marine bomb dog with an attitude.

Monica motioned towards the floating red lights zipping in and out of the trees not far from them. “Reaper is one of the best drone pilots ever commissioned by the government. PTSD from dropping bombs on villages without insurgences ended his career; body count was over ten-thousand before he threw in the towel. That’s why they call him Reaper. Now, the little tech geek freelances and helps with rescue missions and whatever else they call him in for. In this wind he’s the only one that would be able to fly something... It’s tech, something you stubborn Irishmen hate.”

Kian nodded his agreement. “This isn’t a normal group, is it?” he asked, eyeing the dog that was seemingly glaring at him.

Monica chuckled, scratching behind what remained of *Xaos*’ right ear. “No, not at all. This mean one-eyed bastard is one of the best bomb dogs there are. If that prick put any types of explosives out here in order to get a body count after the grave, *Xaos* will find them.”

Kian made a face; he hated animals.

“Did that bastard flail or feel pain?”

He shook his head. “No, he died before they even introduced the chemicals to kill him... That isn’t normal.”

She growled under her breath and Xaos growled as well. “Something to look into next,” she said, slightly composed. “I want to sit in on the autopsy.”

“So you can stab the fuck out of him while on the slab?” Kian asked, knowingly.

Monica blushed. “Am I so transparent?”

“Like-minded emotional messes,” he explained and she chuckled.

“Stop hitting on me,” Monica scolded under her breath when he winked.

Reaper joined the others, his attention on the screen mounted between the controls in his hands. “Sarge, there’s no heat signatures and night vision isn’t helping. What I can decipher, there’s rushing water from multiple points, but all heading towards the same location. Hundred yards east by southeast, if that. Give me five and I’ll have two up with lights; in this weather I’ll only be able to keep them lighting the way for fifteen at most. This wind will kill the batteries,” he said, the drones racing back towards shore where the others waited.

Janes nodded. “Understood. Light the sky, Reaper,” he instructed. “Listen up!” he called out. “We have less than fifteen minutes of light available. Illuminate with sticks, tag to trees as you go in order to light this place up. Reserve the backup headlamps for our destination. Remember, the terrain is slick, muddy, there’s lots of rocks, trees, and the area is unforgiving. Partner up, one to one. If your partner goes down, you pick them up, appraise their condition and stay put if injured then radio in, and mark the surrounding trees with *red* sticks. Uninjured, continue on but don’t try to catch up. Work at a safe pace. There’s enough of us that we can spread out without risking our safety. Quinn, do we need to look for trip wires, explosive devices, or claymores?”

Kian shook his head. “That isn’t his style,” he said. “He was all about one on one; one victim against his genius, but this is different. I don’t think we’re the ones he wants to piss off. I don’t think I am even. My gut tells me this is different, he’s trying to get the attention of someone else, someone we fucking overlooked.”

Janes looked to Monica and she nodded it was okay to proceed. “Very well. Xaos will take the lead just in case the Irishman’s gut is wrong. Break the greens and remove the filter from the moon beam. Headlamps pointed towards the ground in front of you so you can see the tripwires before you trip them. Reaper, where’s our guides?” he called out as everyone partnered up and Xaos was itching to take off to make sure it was clear for his team.

In response, two drones lifted off the ground; Reaper had switched out their attachments before deploying them. The two raced towards them, the lights on the underside of their bodies illuminating the ground below them, making them appear like UFOs, and they stayed lower, barely clearing the tallest of the bunch’s head.

“Let’s play capture the flag,” Janes instructed, tightening the chest and waist straps to his oversized backpack before following Xaos as he gave chase, and the others followed.

Frantically their hands searched the water below them, looking for something, anything that they could use to get out or free themselves from the thick iron biting into their ankle. The floor below them was a metal grate that was secured with large bolts to keep it in place. Below that, sharp rocks and debris that would kill anyone that was unfortunate enough to fall on them from above. The grate would break their fall, but also their body.

From what they could tell, they didn’t fall.

They were placed there, but why?

What was the reason behind it?

It didn’t make sense.

None of it made sense.

This wasn’t his M.O.

Wells, being held captive in iron chains, slow drowning...

That wasn't his M.O. in the least!

Why now? What changed?

Why was this strangely familiar?

Their fingers brushed against something. It was a plastic bag attached with twine to the grate bottom next to their foot. Whatever it contained was too heavy to float, but whoever put it there wanted to make sure it wasn't lost or kicked around so they tied it down.

Running out of breath, they used the smooth wall to guide them to the surface and they gasped when their head broke before the chain tugged them back down. They used what little strength they had to pull themselves to the surface and they took a deep breath before using the very thing anchoring them to a certain death to pull themselves back down to the bottom.

Director Wilson sat with Jefferson in wheelhouse acting as the communications liaison on the ferry. They were docked just off the southern end of the larger island, and monitored the reports that came in. All of the buildings on the main island were clear with no signs of disturbance. The rain was making it very difficult to navigate the trails cut around the larger island and through the thick trees, and they lost one to a possible fractured ankle already; he hobbled back with the assistance of two other Game Wardens and was elevating and icing his injury, helping log incoming radio transmissions from the teams. Despite the rain and conditions, the four teams were making decent time and progress.

That wasn't leaving Director Wilson with a good feeling in the pit of his stomach.

As instructed, each team was checking in...

Each team but Alpha Team.

They were silent.

That concerned Wilson, but he trusted Kian wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the mission, and he also knew the stubborn man wouldn't leave the island until he found her.

"Are their GSP devices still tracking?" he asked.

Jefferson nodded. "They are approaching what I assume is the target area. Alpha Team is canvassing the entire island in a line, shoulder to shoulder, so nothing is missed. You couldn't have gotten a better C.O. out there than Captain Janes... Everyone calls him Sarge because of his rank in the military before retirement. He's the best in the state, possibly even the country, when it comes to search and rescue. They tried to keep him with the Marines to train others, he was that good, but he wanted to come home. Sarge and the Chief were supposed to be headed to the cabin in Maine for some R&R now that the monster that took her baby sister was put down. His military buddies, the Horsemen as they are called, were going to make an outing of it, but they overheard the call and suited up."

Wilson smiled; that explained why there were so many volunteers, and had gathered as quickly as they had. It was as if it were a military operation that had only minutes to organize. Each person knew their roles, didn't question Janes' directive, and understood what was at stake even if they didn't know Agent Ryan-Knight personally or the truth behind the information that led them there that night.

"You all got lucky," he continued. "You have, by far, the best search and rescue team in the country taking point. If anyone can bring her back, it's the Horsemen."

"I truly appreciate each and every one of you that have volunteered to help bring her home," Wilson humbly said. "Even if it's only a body, her remains, that is something and more than we had before. Her little girl will no longer stay up night after night waiting for her mom to come home."

Jefferson looked at him. "All these years she's waited?" he whispered.

Wilson nodded, looking at the picture Kian had tossed on the table earlier when making a stand. "Freddie was

taken in front of her daughter. That little girl was so brave, so calm, and was able to give us a description and that lead to a DMV match and a suspect. If it wasn't for Keela, we might have never caught that monster. The least we can do is give her a chance to finally say goodbye." He unfolded the picture and fought against the tears flooding his eyes; sitting on the other side of Keela, with her arm around their waist, pulling him into them, was Kian. The three were smiling, laughing at something Wilson suspected, and the happiness was so very clear in their faces that it caused his chest to tighten.

Perhaps there was more to Robert Daniel Park's accusations than he initially thought.

The injured Game Warden huffed, scratching his head. "This doesn't make sense," he said. "Wasn't all of the Corridor Killer's victims left along the interstate?" he asked.

Director Wilson nodded, folding the picture and slipped it in his inside jacket pocket for safe keeping. "None of them were like Agent Ryan-Knight either; she was taken in front of a witness that was left alive, was law enforcement, and considered an exceptionally high profile victim because she was the lead on the case. We didn't think the two were related until we brought Robert Daniel Park in for the abduction and he confessed to the murders. The cocky bastard was sitting on the side of the road with a sign saying he was the killer we were looking for. This isn't his M.O. in the least, but it's the only lead we've been given in where Agent Ryan-Knight is."

"He had a partner?" he pressed.

"Nothing hints that he has one," Wilson admitted; he wasn't sure what to make of these events, and it was the very last thing he thought he'd be doing tonight. "If Freddie is alive, that means he has a partner, or someone that was keeping her alive. Why? I don't know. I don't know why they'd want the one person that was responsible for catching him left alive for all these years, but it has to mean something. What? I don't know, and that's what we need to find out."

"Sir," Jefferson said, "Alpha Team has reached target location and are gathering. I hope this isn't a trick to get as many in law enforcement and first responders in one place to take out as many as possible at once."

"You and me both," Wilson whispered.

"That's the last one," Reaper called out, retrieving his second drone when its lights dimmed and it dropped to the brush.

"Hold the line!" Janes barked out. "What did you see?"

Reaper shook his head. "There's something the water is flowing around and over, but I can't clearly see what. There's no heat signature and I'm blindly translating what my toys saw before they crashed. Whatever it is isn't secure, that I can confirm. Uneven and structurally unsound. If it's the well, you'll have to do a straight drop in. The sides won't support any weight or ropes; they'll collapse, causing a chain reaction that will collapse the well in on itself. A straight drop will keep rescue from landing on whatever is on the bottom."

Janes nodded. "Understood."

Monica didn't like the idea Janes blind dropping into the well, but she knew Reaper was right and the well wasn't structurally sound enough to hold his weight and a rope, or any weight; installing the grate nearly caused a collapse on one side. "When kids started falling down wells on the news a few decades ago, it was decided to cover this one," she explained, digging through her bag. "The bottom is uneven and filled with jagged rocks; the good people of Salem used the well to test if someone was a witch or not. They'd lower them down and dangle them over the rocks then wait for the rain. That's why the creeks are flowing towards it; they were designed to. When the well flooded and the 'witch' drowned, they were considered innocent and went to Heaven. If they survived the flooding, and survived being dropped to the rocks once flooding failed, they were pulled out and burned at the stake for being a witch. You got to love the church," she said with a humorless chuckle. "Because historians raised a stink, the State

couldn't fill the well and seal it off, so they made it less dangerous. There's a grate over the rocks at the bottom; eight to ten feet above them. If someone was put there, the top grate would have been compromised in order to do it."

Janes nodded his agreement; he hadn't been to the island in over a decade, but his woman had.

Monica broke a handful of two-foot long glow sticks and shook them. Once they were glowing bright green, she handed the stack to Kian and made him hold them for her.

"What in bloody hell are you doing?" Kian asked.

"Lighting the darkness," she said, hurling one of the glow sticks as if it were a javelin in the direction Reaper motioned towards.

Monica repeated with the next and the next; not aiming, rather she was adjusting for the wind with each throw until she corrected it enough that they were going where she needed them to. Some of the sticks landed in the rushing water and were carried away from them. Others stuck in the swaying trees, hanging like lanterns, illuminating area slightly. A few floated along before disappearing over what appeared to be a darkened rock formation that was barely visible.

"Gotcha," Monica mused, hurling the next as hard as she could and it stuck between the rocks and stayed there. "Target marked!" she called out. "State champion, and nationally ranked in college," she said when Kian started to ask. "I'm not just a pretty face with a fantastic ass. I actually have a purpose."

Janes smirked. "Your purpose is the most significant of all of us," he reminded her with a wink. "That's our target!" he shouted to the others. "The current is too strong to risk wading through so we have to go over it; straight drop. Tiny and Hound, see if you can redirect the water to the east to clear us a path along the western side of the well. We need a more stable place to work."

The two nodded and broke off from the group and headed north, following the flow of water.

"Snake, Trigger, take to the heavens and set up for a suspended single person rappel for five-hundred."

The two nodded and pulled their packs from their backs and went to work.

"Everyone else, setup to the north, tether to a tree, make sure your harness is tight and your lines don't cross," Janes instructed. "I'll take point, Trench and Monica will handle belaying and lowering and coordinate... Irishman, try not to get yourself killed. Tether to a tree and let us work. This is what we do," he said. "Don't make me sic Xaos on you."

The dog growled.

Kian nodded, watching as the darkness started to illuminate as more and more glow sticks were thrown into the trees. If he were to try this by himself, he would have been killed before reaching shore; he was extremely out of his element.

Trench tightened Kian's waist harness, startling him, securing him to the rope around the tree she set up for him. "We got this. Don't worry. If she's down there, we'll get her," he promised.

Kian offered a small smile that fell before it started. "I'd get lost if I tried this and would most certainly die. I haven't seen precision like this since my deployment, and even that was a cluster fuck compared to the one-legged Marine and his Horsemen. It's bloody impressive," he commented, watching Trigger and Snake effortlessly climb up two trees.

Trench chuckled, nodded his agreement then turned Kian over to Monica.

"You crashed a military get together headed to Maine," she said with a chuckle. "I was going to join them; make sure they were fed, didn't get too out of control, and would enjoy some outdoor activities with them; paintball, climbing, cliff diving, long distance sniping, animalistic sex...with one of them anyway. The boys would play then I'd play with my Marine when we turned in. It was supposed to help since that bastard is dead now-"

“This is taking that closure from you?” Kian interrupted.

“Yes and no. In a strange way, *this* is giving me closure,” she admitted. “Don’t get me wrong, when all is said and done I’ll be fucking Janes’ brains out until I can’t remember my name, but this little side adventure might actually be the closure I thought that bastard’s death would have given me.”

It might have been closure for Monica, but it wasn’t for Kian. If anything, it was making him feel just how he did when he got the call from Keela when Freddie was taken.

Strength he didn’t know he possessed kept him moving forward, but the hope that his best friend and partner was still alive was slipping farther and farther away from him with each second that passed...

But Freddie deserved more, she deserved his all, and Keela deserved to know that every last lead possible was followed up on and every attempt to find her mother was made before they finally had to say goodbye.

Snake’s spiked shoe slipped; he lost his footing and smashed against the tree with a grunt.

“You okay?” Trigger asked, securing himself to the tree. “Racked your nuts again?”

“I hate the fucking rain,” Snake grumbled, regaining his footing. “This wasn’t what I had planned on doing today. I was supposed to be in a fox hole getting my hole played with.”

Trigger chuckled, setting a metal three-pronged hook into a loader. “It’s the same thing we would have been doing in Maine this weekend, and your hole will still get played with. Celebratory or unable to deal with loss in a healthy way sex, either way you’ll get played with. Admit it, you’re liking the idea of getting fucked as a hero when all is said and done.”

Snake rolled his eyes. “Your bedside manner sucks balls.”

“It’ll be your balls I’m sucking, Babe. On the plus side, we get to officially test these bad boys in the field!” he beamed, aiming the T.A.I.L. handheld unit that he was designing for the U.S. Navy. “Fire in the hole!” he yelled then pulled the trigger.

The grappling hook shot across the clearing, over the well, and wrapped around the targeted tree on the opposite side. He wrapped it around the tree he was anchored to then pressed a button and it activated the small, motorized reel in the bottom of the unit and it wound the wire-line-rope, pulling it tight before locking.

“Nice,” Snake said, taking aim. “Compensate for wind?”

Trigger shook his head, hooking up the required rigging then slid it down the rope. “There’s enough pressure sending it off that the wind can’t touch it. I have to admit, I impressed myself with this one.”

The unamused man shook his head then took aim and fired.

“Okay, I’m impressed,” he conceded when the intended target was hit and the rope wrapped and secured as designed.

Once secured, he attached the magnetic rigging that’d snap to the other and sent it sliding down the rope. The rope in his hand that was attached to the rigging slid through his hand before he anchored it to the tree, dropping the rest to the ground below.

“That’s got to be record time,” Snake said. “Now let’s see what kind of party favors you packed.”

Trigger smirked. “Fire in the hole, Baby,” he said, wagging his brows.

Their lungs burned from holding their breath. Body was completely numb and they were starting to lose feeling in it. Frozen, stiff fingers were wrapped as tight as possible around the only thing keeping them alive...

For now.

It held only so much that would sustain them. Even rationing the precious substance wouldn’t only draw out the inevitable.

For a passing moment, they contemplating just letting go and inhaling.

It was freshwater, not saltwater. When aspirated it would be inhaled into the lungs; being freshwater it would pass into the bloodstream through osmosis. They knew it only took sixty to ninety seconds from someone that wasn't trained or experienced with holding their breath to drown. In someone more experienced in the water, it takes even longer to die, and they would remain conscious longer than a novice would. They knew that when the blood is so radically diluted, cells burst, leading to organ failure; the entire process takes two to three minutes.

It would take longer in them.

Too many years of swimming and diving, not to mention specialized training, would allow for them to survive longer, but to what end?

The near freezing water should have caused cold shock response.

It didn't.

The most common cause of death from immersion in very cold water is due to involuntary inhalation, resulting in drowning. Not to mention, the risk of heart attack from vasoconstriction was great.

Whoever put them there was prepared for drowning, but they neglected to anticipate the temperature. Hypothermia would kill them before drowning could.

It was basic biology.

After ten-minutes, simple muscle function declines substantially; the body protectively cuts off blood flow to non-essential muscles, prolonging the inevitable.

Psychological conditioning is what was keeping them alive.

With a trained mind, their mental ability to focus on something, a point of hope and a reason to fight until the end, was what kept them from shivering and delayed the metabolic shutdown that would ultimately kill them.

But that point of hope was starting to fade.

The flashes of light in their vision could only be from the cells in the retina no longer sending information to the brain from lack of oxygen.

But they had to fight...

They had to survive for their daughter!

Monica forced Kian's head down moments before the unmistakable sound of small explosions ripped through the night air.

"If that bastard and his little toys cause my man to have an episode I'm going to kick his ass," she warned, looking from the trees where Snake and Trigger were to Janes; he was shaking his head, finishing tightening his harness.

All around them, floating on the water and through the air, sticking to the swaying tree branches, and coating each of those that were with them, were countless glowing dots. The darkness was illuminated in a rainbow of colors; the rushing water was swirling with light and it clearly showed the outline of the well.

"Not funny!" Monica called out. "It looks like we're in the middle of a goddamn Jackson Pollock circle-jerk."

Trigger smiled wide. "Repurposed IED tech with plastic bags with mixed Phenyl oxalate and fluorescent dye, and hydrogen peroxide taped to them. Chemiluminescence!" he beamed.

Snake shook his head. "Dude, you're getting hard going all Bill Nye on us," he complained. "I feel as if I'm the third-wheel."

"Wear the glasses and pocket protector I got you and you wouldn't feel like that," Trigger retorted, shooting another device into the air. "Fire in the hole!" he shouted before it exploded, raining down glowing liquid all around them.

“Asshole,” Monica complained. “Help me with the lines. In this weather more on the line the better. Crash, Pest, hook up on those trees to help us lower his big ass down there.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” they said in unison and went to work.

Janes secured his pack to a tree and stashed his jacket in it. He looked to his watch. “Thirty-five minutes from landing to now. Decent time considering the conditions and that we went out blind, essentially. We’re almost home,” he called out, securing the wrist straps on the pair of dry climbing gloves he put on. “Communication will be limited, so keep it down and wait for orders from Trench or Mon.”

“Ooh!” Reaper said, excitably.

Janes looked over at the short man tearing through his bag in search of something. “I’m scared to ask,” he commented.

“As you should be,” Snake called out from above them. “He packed stuff he isn’t supposed to have in the field just yet.”

Reaper flipped him off. “You’re just jealous Sarge is getting to use them first instead of you for your freaky geek foreplay.”

Trigger smooched his lips at him in a single-sided kiss.

Kian looked to Monica; he felt like the sixth-wheel in a bad Rom Com, and that they were wasting time Freddie didn’t have.

Monica reassuringly patted him on the back. “Did I neglect to mention they are R&D geeks?”

“You might have bloody forgot to mention that,” he said, now understanding the unconventional equipment they were using.

“That’s enough,” Janes warned; court-martials they’ll worry about later. He unzipped the lower half of his left pant leg and pulled the fabric free, revealing his metal and fiberglass prosthetic appliance. After pulling some LED waterproof headlamps from his bag, he used zip-ties to secure them to his appliance; he saved them for the well because he wanted their batteries at full strength.

Reaper joined Janes and handed him pair of goggles.

“Do I even want to know?” Janes asked.

He smirked, shaking his head. “Plausible deniability, Sarge. They are waterproof and have 12,000 lumens lights so you’ll be able to see; the shield pieces around the eyes of the goggles will allow for you to see and not be blinded by the lights... Trigger learned the hard way the eyes needed shielding. There’s a small camera built into them so I’ll see what you do. Use hand command and I’ll relay to Mon and Trench. Bring her home, Sarge,” he said with a forced smile then turned and headed back over to set up video monitoring. “Irishman, I’ll babysit you,” he said, stopping to look at Kian. “Tech isn’t your thing, but getting caught in the ropes will only complicate the mission. Tether next to me and help relay orders,” he said.

Janes nodded his approval—the Fed was the biggest complication the mission had at the moment—and finished prepping.

“Marine,” Kian called out.

Janes looked at him.

“If she’s down there, so she doesn’t kill you,” he said, tossing him his shield.

“Of course,” Janes said, catching it then secured the FBI shield next to his own on a silver ball-chain then pulled it over his head.

“Main Island is clear,” Jefferson relayed. “The teams are returning to the ferry as we speak. No injuries and no evidence on site that would suggest anyone has been there that shouldn’t have been. The dogs didn’t pick up any

scents either.”

Director Wilson nodded. “Any word from Alpha Team?”

“No Sir,” he said. “Maintaining radio silence, which is to be expected. They’ll only radio in when package is secured or support services are required for extraction. They are the best, Sir. Give them a little more time. What they are doing isn’t something that can be done quickly. The little island is off-limits because of how dangerous it is. Chief... Monica was the one that deemed it unsafe for tourists and ended all services and tours to the little island. She knows that island better than anyone, even in the dark. They’ll get there in one piece and they’ll find her, Sir.”

Wilson nodded, wiping the tear from the corner of his eyes. “I pray they do.”

Trench grunted, his hold on the line firm. “I don’t remember his ass weighing so much,” he complained. “When he said set up for five-hundred pounds, I didn’t think he meant it was because he got that fat! You’d think a dude that lost half a leg would have lost some weight because of it.”

“Blame Mon’s cooking,” Pest said, the thick, corded muscles of his upper body straining as he carefully lowered the man dangling over the mouth of the well down.

“Uh huh. I better get some damn cookies or one of those pecan pies Sarge is always hording,” Trench complained.

Monica rolled her eyes. “Your diabetic ass would kill over from a pecan pie. I’ll make you something that won’t kill you. If you drop my man, I won’t require sugar in order to kill you. I’ll do it the old fashion way with an axe, and I’ll hide your body where no one will find you.”

Trench smooched his lips at her. “I love it when you talk dirty, Mon.”

“No,” Kian gasped, his hand covering his mouth, attention on the monitor in Reaper’s hands.

Reaper made a face; it wasn’t good. “Mon, we have a problem.”

Janes slowed his breathing, his attention on the cold, muddy, dark water he was being lowered into. Each deep, deliberate breath he took would allow for him to hold his breath longer before having to use the rebreather attached to a retractable cable on his chest harness.

It’d give him twenty-breaths.

For an experienced diver like Janes, it’d give him twenty-minutes or more of air before he’d have to be pulled up to the surface. From what Monica said, the grate bottom was raised off the bottom and allowed for drainage to Salam Harbor. He had been lowered nearly one-hundred feet down and the water was just under his chin.

Janes motioned in front of the small camera mounted between the eyes of the goggles for them to lower him faster, to do a dead man’s drop.

There was no way Agent Ryan-Knight was down there.

It wasn’t possible.

Unless she was able to breathe water or had a scuba tank with her, she’d be dead.

They were too late.

It took too long to get there.

Perhaps the monster that put her in that well, if she were actually there, hadn’t anticipated it was rainy season or that the Farmer’s Almanac predicted record rain that month.

In the end, it wouldn’t matter.

They weren’t fast enough to save her.

The tug on his rope warned they were counting down before releasing him.

Janes took a deep breath then crossed his arms over his chest and angled his feet downward in a point seconds

before he dropped completely into the water.

“Reaper, report!” Monica called out. “You better not lose that rope!”

“We got it,” Trench promised. “There’s enough rope for over three-hundred feet. Unless you were lying about how deep that hole is...” his words trailed off and he looked behind him then around the area. “Chief, they redirected the creek runoff.”

“Of course we did,” Hound said, joining them. “We’re the brawns of the operation.”

Tiny followed; his hulking, six-eight frame was massive and eclipsed the light as he went; the others attached their headlamps to the trees to use as floodlights. “Took out five smaller trees and used them as a dam and redirected the overflow to the east. I’ll need an icepack or two later.”

Monica glared at the smug woman.

Hound smirked, looking up to no good. “The big bastard used his shoulder and hip to knock them down,” she explained, tattling on the big guy that was like a brother to her. “Shallow roots but middle-aged. Took a hell of a hit or ten to get each down. We didn’t pack chainsaws, I was told I couldn’t, remember? What we setup should hold for now since the rain is waning. We’ll stabilize the ground around the well that we cleared because it’ll be the only place to pull them out from.”

Tiny nodded and hurried over to a tree and starting breaking branches off that had full needles. Hound joined him to hold what he pulled down him while he reached the higher up ones she couldn’t reach.

“How’s it looking Reaper?” Monica asked again, looking over to the side, and her face fell.

Tears stained Kian’s cheeks, and his hand was covering his mouth as if trying to keep from throwing up.

Reaper didn’t look up from the video feed he was watching, waiting to relay commands to the others, but he shook his head.

It wasn’t looking good.

The smooth stone walls of the well offered very little handholds. It was too dangerous to go head first, so Janes was essentially climbing down into the water. It wasn’t easy going. Rain, mud, and creek water was coming in from one side now, and visibility was practically non-existent. The well wasn’t overly wide, just under four-feet across, but visibility was only inches even with the bright lights from the goggles. Debris floated throughout the water, hindering visibility even more, and the force he was exerting against his body that was naturally trying to float up from the oxygen in his system, was using up that same oxygen.

In his heart he knew it was too late to save Agent Ryan-Knight, and most likely her partner is watching and has come to the same conclusion, but Janes had to reach the bottom to confirm. If he had a daughter he’d want her having closure and not left wondering night after night if he was truly gone or not. Personal experience from each deployment there was a constant fear that left families wondering and waiting for word that those they love were safe and heading home or if they were dead.

Janes never wanted children or a wife so they wouldn’t be left wondering every night if he was coming home or not. It would have been too much for him, and having to do next of kin notifications firmly cemented that opinion in his mind.

Agent Ryan-Knight deserved to have a proper burial, and her family deserved closure.

Janes pulled the rebreather up and put it in his mouth then exhaled before inhaling.

One down, nineteen to go.

This was it.

The end.

Surprisingly there was a bright light, it had to be the light at the end of the tunnel, but they didn't want to go to it. They needed to be strong, to try and hold on for their daughter, but they ran out of time...

And breath.

Kian could barely see through the tears flooding his eyes.

It was stupid and foolish to think Freddie was alive.

There was no way it was possible.

Freddie's been gone for years, the bastard that took her was working alone and had been locked up for years. It wasn't possible that she was alive, that she was placed in the bottom of a well alive for Kian to find...

"How could I have been so daft?" he stammered, tears staining his cheeks.

"Hope is what keeps us fighting," Reaper said. "Without it, what's the purpose of living or loving? Nothing that monster did was normal, was it? This isn't normal. It's out of the scope of normality for him. Maybe it's something different for a reason, something that was planned out with all of these variables taken into consideration?"

Kian shook his head. "If she's there, we're too late. There's over thirty-meters of water that he's diving down."

Reaper shrugged. "Perhaps it isn't your partner down there, and instead is a clue as to where she is."

That, Kian hadn't thought of.

"Or not," Reaper whispered when Janes reached the bottom grate. "I'm sorry."

"No," Kian sobbed. "No, no, no, Fred," he stammered when a pale face flooded the screen. "No!" he cried out.

Janes knew it was too late.

If only they would have been quicker.

If they would have ran to the well instead of cautiously hurried.

If only they would have done...

What?

He didn't know.

They weren't even supposed to be there.

They were loaded up and heading north for a long weekend. It was supposed to be a means to help the woman he loved, had always loved since 5th grade, process the closure that should have accompanied the death of Robert Daniel Park.

Instead, they suited up and gave false hope to someone that was as much as victim to Robert Daniel Park as Monica was, and it made Kian a victim to a monster all over again.

Janes reached out and caressed the floating long hair back from the pale face of the woman. Her skin was transparently white, dark circles were under her eyes, lips were lurid blue, and she was unhealthily underweight. Her thin limbs were skeletal, one arm floating away from her. Scratched into the wall behind her was one word, one that would haunt him to no end he knew, but there truly wasn't anything he could have done.

HELP

'I'm so sorry,' he mouthed before pulling free the strap dangling from his belt. He started to pull it around her waist to secure her body to his harness for extraction when the woman's eyes snapped open. She slammed him back against the side of the well, using the last of her strength to attack who she thought put her there, the stick in her free hand she tried to slam into the side of his neck.

Janes' eyes were wide, and instincts took over and he blocked what would have been a fatal hit and grabbed her wrist. He spun her around and into him, crossing her arms over her chest to keep her from attacking him.

With his free hand, he ripped the ball chain free from his neck and held the FBI and State Patrol shields up to show her, so close they touched her nose.

He loosened his hold on her when she stopped struggling against him, understanding registering with her, he hoped.

With a trembling hand she took the FBI badge, her numb fingers caressing over the raised metal eagle along the top.

She couldn't see clearly; lack of oxygen had hindered her eyesight, and she was starting to lose consciousness.

Janes took the rebreather and put in his mouth and exhaled then put it in her mouth and she inhaled, taking a couple of deep breaths before relinquishing it to him so he could use it.

He motioned with his hand to the camera before unhooking the breathing device from his harness then secured the extension tether to her wrist so she wouldn't lose it since her motor functions were starting to falter.

Freddie took it, both of her hands wrapping around the rebreather.

Janes secured her to his body with the strap then motioned for Reaper to relay to pull them up.

She shook her head then pointed down.

He signaled for those above ground to hold.

Janes used the wall to go deeper in the water, using Freddie's leg as a guide, his fingers caressing along it he went until he found what she was trying to tell him. The metal manacle around her ankle was solid with a bolts firmly securing the two pieces together. They hadn't packed the tools required to loosen it, if possible, and Janes knew that Reaper wouldn't have anything that large packed for his toys.

They were delicate and with small parts.

Possibly Janes could break the weld that was anchoring her to the grate.

Janes used the chain to pull himself down to the bottom.

The thick metal grate and the welds were sound; there wouldn't be a way to break the chain securing her to a watery grave.

Reaper shook his head. "I don't have a means to weld underwater in this pack!" he said in a panic, looking from the video to Monica. "The rebreather was a questionable request, but I knew better than to ask when you and Sarge are involved. I'm the only one out of the bunch without a questionable and borderline felonious sense of romance."

Monica shook her head and rubbed Kian's back; he was completely losing it.

She sent the fastest Horsemen back to the boat to see if Hank had anything on the boat they could use.

"That can't be possible," Reaper said, looking closer at the video feed. "No. That isn't possible."

"What is it?" Monica demanded.

"The lock... I know that lock," he stammered, looking from Monica to Snake and Trigger. "There's no way it can be doing that... Shit!"

Janes picked up the out of place tungsten lock that was securing the chain to the grate and his eyes widened.

On the body of the thin metal lock were red glowing numbers that were rapidly counting down.

Janes swam back up, pulling Freddie into his arms then kicked as hard as he could, the chain pulling tight. He pushed her back against the wall of the well and protectively shielded her with his large body.

The illuminated numbers continued to count down.

Ticking.

Ticking.

Ticking down.

Just as Robert Daniel Park said it would.

Pulling his knees up, Janes forced Freddie into a protective ball, and waited for the detonation.

It most likely wouldn't help, but Janes would do his best to protect her from the blast, even if it killed him.

When the numbers on the lock reached zero, they blinked rapidly before dimming.

"Faster!" Monica barked out.

The others pulled the rope, hand-over-hand, trying to get them out of there as fast as they could.

An over the side recovery wasn't an option anymore. The stone had started to crumble and breakaway with the instability of the ground from all of the foot traffic.

When the two came into view, the others pulled even harder; they'd need to raise them up to the very top in order to suicide swing them away from danger.

"Hold!" Monica called out when Janes and Freddie were pulled to the top of the ropes across from where Snake and Trigger were hanging in the trees.

The thin, pale body Janes was wrapped around hung lifeless from his large form; the thick strap securing her to his harness stood out against her nearly white skin. Her arms dangled, hair clung to her face and skin, rebreather had fallen out of her mouth and rested between them, and clenched in her hand was Kian's shield.

Freddie succumbed to exhaustion before they were even clear of the water.

"Sarge, we'll remotely release the magnetic rigging, simultaneously releasing the ropes, when you're ready," Trigger called out.

Janes nodded his understanding and adjusted his hold on Freddie, hoisting her up more and wrapped his legs and arms around lithe body. "Ready," he called out.

Snake nodded and counted down.

"Hope you packed a loin cloth, Sarge," Trigger said when Snake reached zero; he remotely deactivated the magnet rigging just as Snake released the lock on the rope.

Janes and Freddie dropped, swinging through the air and over the well. As they swung, he used the quick drop belay device in his hand to lower them as they went.

The speed of the descent was too great, even with breaking, and if they hit the trees they were racing towards it would severely damage one, if not both, of them.

As the trees approached, Tiny intercepted them, taking the full brunt of the force, knocking all three to the ground in a tangle of flesh.

Jefferson's eyes widened and he turned the volume dial up on his receiver. "Please repeat that?" he said, looking to Director Wilson.

"What is it?" Wilson asked.

"They... Alpha Team found her. Alive! They are heading back to shore now and require immediate medical attention."

Tears flooded Wilson's eyes. "It isn't possible."

Jefferson smiled. "They found her, Sir. Your Agent is hypothermic and unresponsive, and Captain Janes has mild hypothermia, other than that there are no reported injuries. They are requesting medical transport as soon as they land."

Wilson nodded. "Call it in, but keep the identity as only a Doe, a lost hiker until her family can be notified."

"Yes, Sir," he said and called for medical support.

Janes slipped into the dry clothing they had left on the fishing boat, his attention on the woman that was violently convulsing on the bed below deck. The others had changed out of their wet clothing, and were watching and waiting as well. There weren't enough blankets on board to heat Freddie up, and the fishing vessel didn't have a shower or an abundance of hot water on board to aid either.

It was over thirty-minutes back to shore.

"Irishman," Janes called out. "We need to heat her up, but the only way I can think to do that, with the limited means we have, is direct body heat. You are the closest thing she has to family that can give consent, do you give it? It only needs to be one if she lays out on them with blankets on top of her."

Kian nodded; he was thinking much the same. "Put Fred on her side and have her spoon someone and someone else spoon her from behind. That growling mutt can flop on top for all I bloody care. You have consent," he whispered, holding Freddie's ice cold hand against his lips. "Stay with me, Fred. Keela needs you."

Janes looked to his men and they all turned to Tiny.

"Understood," the hulking man said, and pulled his shirt off then slipped out of his sweatpants. "Trench, join us."

Trench made a face. "If you get me shanked by my old lady, I will cut you," he warned, pulling his long sleeve shirt off.

Tiny shook his head. "You have broader shoulders and thicker thighs, not to mention a round ass. More real estate to heat her up with."

"The joys of being Puerto Rican, huh?" Trench beamed with a face-consuming smile.

Hound took a bite of the candy bar in her hand. "You pay extra for this in Bangkok," she mused.

"Keep it in your pants," Trigger warned, smacking her in the arm so she punched him back.

Reaper popped his head in the doorway. "Sarge, a moment?"

Janes nodded and left Monica to oversee the patient; she had medical training, not as much as Hound, but enough that between the two of them with a field triage kit they'd be able to handle whatever came up.

Reaper ducked into galley area where his laptop was set up. "We have a problem, Sarge."

"I think she'll be okay. We're making good time and it was close but--"

"That isn't what I mean," he interrupted. "You thought that lock was a bomb and that's why you shielded her."

Janes nodded; in his experience if something is counting down it usually means it's going to explode.

Reaper licked his chapped lips. "We have a potential National Security issue, Sarge," he said, turning the laptop around to show him.

On the screen was a still from the video the goggles transmitted. It was of the locking device that was securing Freddie to the bottom.

"I remember it," Janes said. "Why the look and concern, Reaper?"

"I made the lock," Reaper said, and Janes gave him a look. "There'd be no way to break it, even plastic explosives would be hard pressed to put a dent in it. We were working on a lock that is designed to be unbreakable, unpickable, and, essentially, discreet. The numbers only illuminate when triggered. Remotely to open or to explode."

"You made little bombs?"

"No, I just made them multifunctional," Reaper said, making a face. "The blast isn't designed to kill, it's designed to destroy whatever it's securing: briefcase, footlocker, gun case, and evidence, whatever. If they are holding whatever, yeah, they'll feel it and most likely die. The one in the hole wasn't used in that purpose, or perhaps it misfired," he said with a shrug. "That's what Trigger was working on fixing... They were for CIA and US Government use only. It was proprietary hardware that very few had even seen, and those that had held clearance

levels that were blackened out, Sarge.”

Janes pushed his hand through his hair. “Okay, so you’re thinking the partner is military?”

Reaper shook his head. “Sarge, they were shelved,” he said. “They are expensive, really expensive, and the patent blacked out.”

“What you’re saying-” Janes started.

“I know,” Reaper agreed, not having to say it aloud. “This is a much bigger problem than an unknown partner and a barely alive Fed. I hate to say it, but you’re going to have to call the Old Man and give him the heads up. The site needs sanitized, lock and your shield recovered, and any other evidence that might point *us* to a person of interest.”

He nodded his understanding.

“You have to do it before a forensics team get there,” Reaper said, handing him a secure satellite phone. “That wasn’t a stick she nearly severed your carotid artery with,” he said, pulling up another picture that slowly played the video of the grate; under the metal were white rocks, at least Janes thought they were rocks at first glance. “It was a human bone, a fibula I think. Whoever put her there, didn’t just use top secret government tech, he put in a damn graveyard. Those are skulls.”

“Fuck,” Janes hissed; this just got more complicated.

“Sarge, I can’t go back there,” he said in a panic.

“I’ll protect you,” Janes promised. “Never will you see another hole. I swear it on my life. What do you need me to do?”

“You need to sweep the site, sanitize it, but not bring the well down. If those aren’t the victims of the Salem trials, they are victims just like Mon’s sister and the Fed was. You’re going to have to get there before the Feds do, and there’s only one way I know how to do that.”

Janes sighed, powering on the phone.

He’d rather be deployed in the middle of a war zone than have to call the Old Man, but he hadn’t the choice. Court Martials and jail, or a black site, would await three of his men if Janes didn’t get in front of this now.

“I won’t let them take you again, Reaper,” Janes promised and made the call.

Kian pulled Director Wilson to the side. “Sir, I need you to tell Keela,” he said, watching as the paramedics got Freddie ready for transport in the back of the ambulance. “Tell Thomas if you like, but *you* tell that little girl her mother is alive. Text me before you knock to make sure there isn’t a change in her condition, but you need to tell her. I’ll be with Fred.”

Wilson didn’t like the idea of stepping on Thomas’ toes when it came to the well-being of his daughter, but he knew just how passionately Keela believed in her heart that her mother was alive.

“I’ll check in before knocking,” Wilson conceded.

Kian hugged him before he could stop himself, surprising both of them, before he hurried to the ambulance and crawled up in back. He took Freddie’s hand in his and tenderly kissed it and caressed her head.

The doors closed and the ambulance pulled away.

“Did you need medical attention?” he asked Janes when he approached.

Janes shook his head. “I’ll get checked out in a bit. We’ll debrief and provide you with official reports by tomorrow night. We have to warm up and get some rest. Is there anything you need from us until then?”

Wilson shook his head. “No. Your team has done more than enough already. It was as if the Horsemen put there to help find Agent Ryan-Knight. The Lord works in mysterious ways,” he said with a smile. “I can never thank you enough. I’ll have a team onsite to process the little island once the weather lets up and it’s safe to process. Will one

of your team have an issue with helping lead the forensics team with retracing your steps and where they'll find the well?"

Janes shook his head. "Of course not, Sir. We'll do everything we can to help. Let us know how she's doing and when she's ready for visitors. I know the boys would like to check on her."

"Of course, thank you," Wilson said.

"Sir," Nate said, joining them. "We're cleared for takeoff. Will we be returning you home?"

Director Wilson shook his head. "Sorry, Boys. We have a little girl pick up in Langley before bringing her to her mother."

Nate nodded. "Understood, Sir. We're ready to go when you are."

Janes watched Wilson head off with the co-pilot.

Hound joined him. "We have a problem, don't we?" she asked.

He didn't say anything.

"The last time Reaper was in wild-eye fear it was when we were committing, what suits in D.C., consider treason," she commented.

Janes nodded his agreement. "Have the boys readied for deployment in ten," he instructed. "Air support will be here in fifteen and we'll only have ninety minutes to sanitize the site before our cover will be blown by the sun."

"Hoorah," Hound said then went to do as ordered.

Wilson looked at this cell phone and smiled.

The doctors just got her settled. Exam is complete, results they won't share until the broad in records can find a copy of Fred's next of kin consent form. It's my bloody name on there.

Wilson shook his head; he was starting to question if Freddie and Kian should have been partnered together for as long as they had because it was apparent their bond went beyond partners.

We're in a secure ward in Boston. Guards are posted and staff is keeping an eye out for bloody reporters in case some bastard talked. Get Keela here as soon as you can. The first thing Fred should see when she wakes up is her little girl.

That Wilson couldn't argue with.

The door opened for him and Wilson stepped out of the car.

"Leave it running," he told the driver then headed to the front door of the modern three-story home.

He rang the doorbell and waited.

It was four in the morning, a bit early for Keela to be up for school, but she needed to know the truth.

Wilson rang the bell again before pounding on the door.

Inside, through the large windows covering the front of the modern-contemporary home, lights clicked on one by one and illuminated the inside. Down the stairs a man with a gun in hand cautiously walked, rubbing his eyes with his free hand to wipe the sleep from them.

At the top of the stairs, Keela stood in her pajamas.

When Wilson knocked again, the door was jerked open and Thomas lowered his service weapon.

"Director Wilson," Thomas said, not happy to be woken up by a Fed. "It's a little early don't you think for a confirmation that the bastard is dead? I heard it on the news already."

Wilson gave him a look. "That isn't why I'm here, Thomas. Is Keela around?"

"No," Thomas said in a clipped tone. "It's four in the morning."

The unmistakable sound of feet hurrying down the steps made Wilson chuckle.

"I'm awake!" Keela called out, running to the door and ducked around her dad. "Director, you bring news?!" she

asked with a smile consuming her face and tears flooding her eyes. “You found her, didn’t you?”

Thomas groaned and tried to pull his daughter back, but she shook him off. “For years I’ve tolerated this, the therapists told me to let you mourn in your own way, but I expect more from you,” he sneered, glaring at Director Wilson.

That wasn’t the response he expected.

“Keela,” Wilson said, speaking to her instead of Thomas, “we found her. We found your mother.”

Thomas eyes widened. “You found her body?” he wanted to clarify.

“No. She’s alive, Keela,” Wilson told the shaking little girl. “Your mother is alive!”

“No,” Thomas stammered, bracing himself against the doorframe. “It isn’t possible.”

Wilson looked at him curiously; the color had drained from Thomas’ face, he broke out in a cold sweat, and looked faint.

Keela squealed with excitement and threw herself at Director Wilson and hugged him tight. “I knew it! I knew Robbie would keep his promise, that’s why I kept mine!” she said.

Wilson’s eyes widened. “What did you just say?” he stammered, pushing her back at arm’s length.

Episode Two Coming Soon