

# MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

# CHAPTER

# 1

If it was a good day, she'd soon be looking at a corpse that had been rotting in the ground for over two years.

FBI Special Agent Cynthia Strode shook her head at what now passed for a “good day.” The bar was getting lower by the week.

It was a rainy morning in Southern California, and she was part of a twelve-car caravan driving down a remote two-lane road east of the San Diego burb of Pine Valley. The FBI agents, local cops, and two corrections officers were escorting serial killer James Michael Barrett to the body of his first victim, twenty-four-year-old U.S. Foreign Service employee Dayna Voyles. Barrett had just completed the third week of his murder trial when he obviously realized that the witness testimony and forensic evidence was too much for his defense team to overcome. In his quickly negotiated plea deal, Barrett agreed to reveal the location of his victim's body in exchange for having the death penalty taken off the table.

FBI Special Agent Roland Metcalf sat in the passenger seat next to Cynthia. He'd just turned thirty, and the Barrett investigation had been one of his first big cases. They'd worked it together, and she was impressed by his intelligence and instinctive ability to separate

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the relevant from the irrelevant, the truth from the bullshit. Metcalf had impressed a lot of people at the Bureau, and she was sure he would be impressing many more in the years to come.

Strode knew this was probably one of her last big cases, at least as far as media attention went. Although she was still two years from the Bureau's mandatory retirement age of fifty-seven, she'd been getting none-too-subtle inquiries ever since she passed her qualifying twenty-five years of service a while back. Nothing like a gentle shove out the door just when you think you've found your groove.

Metcalf turned toward her. "Have you ever been on one of these?"

"A perp-led body hunt? Once before, when I was still working out of the Dallas office. A guy showed us where he'd hidden his high school math teacher's body." She upped the speed on the windshield wipers. "But I'll tell you, it was a lot nicer day than this one. How about you, Metcalf?"

"Nope. Never had a perp so accommodating. I've been on two body digs, but Stan and Ollie led the way each time."

She smiled. "I love those boys."

Stan and Ollie were cadaver dogs employed by their team.

"I'm surprised Barrett agreed to this," Metcalf said. "I visited him in jail three times in the last few months, and he was never interested in a deal."

"I guess he thought he was going to beat it."

Metcalf shook his head. "I don't think so."

"What makes you say that?"

"You remember when we brought him in? He seemed like he was glad to be caught."

"He did. But that didn't stop him from hiring the best lawyers his daddy's money could buy to try to beat the charge."

Metcalf furrowed his brow. "I know. But every time I talked to him, he seemed . . . resigned. Like he knew he was never getting out."

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“But this isn’t about getting out. It’s about avoiding a lethal injection. Maybe he didn’t like how the jury was looking at him.”

“Maybe.”

The lead car pulled over to the side of the road, and the others followed. One by one, the cast of characters emerged. Half a dozen forensics team members pulled shovels and a pair of dirt sifters from the back of a police van. A photographer and videographer jumped from their cars with cameras already in their hands. Four uniformed cops placed traffic cones and signs on the slick road, directing passing cars around the parked convoy. A few detectives were also there, with no real purpose other than to be on hand when they finally recovered Dayna Voyles from her lonely grave.

Strode couldn’t blame them; there was no way in hell she’d miss this, after years of assuring the grieving parents that they’d never stop looking for their daughter.

She and Metcalf climbed out of the car just in time to see two officers emerging from the department of corrections van with killer James Michael Barrett, adorned in an orange jumpsuit, handcuffs, and leg irons. Barrett looked different than he had when they caught him; his round, bearded face was now clean-shaven, and his long hair was now cut and in an attractive conservative style. A classic defense attorney makeover.

Barrett smiled. “Strode and Metcalf. All the big guns are here.”

Strode shook her head. “You’re the big gun here today, Barrett.”

“You flatter me.”

“Never.”

The corrections officers pulled Barrett across the tall wet grass bordering the road, toward a clump of trees that looked remarkably like the sketch he’d drawn the morning he entered his plea.

The group was strangely silent, Strode thought, probably sobered by what they knew was waiting for them just ahead. It wouldn’t last;

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she'd visited enough crime scenes to know that the wisecracks would soon start flying. If called on it, the cops and agents would trot out that old canard about their jokes being a defense mechanism. She never bought that. Some of those guys were just sick assholes.

The rain had settled into a fine mist, giving the group's slickers and ponchos a wet sheen as they trudged into the woods. Less than twenty yards in, Barrett stopped and pointed to the ground.

Within minutes, a waterproof canopy had been erected over the spot, and the group circled around. Barrett was still staring at the ground.

One of the forensics officers stepped forward with his shovel. "About two feet down, right?"

"Yeah," Barrett replied. He looked with uncertainty at the barren patch of earth. "But it looks . . . different."

"It's been over two years," Strode said. "The ground's probably settled."

"Well, it was definitely here, right between that boulder and these two trees."

Metcalf's phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out, looked at the screen, and stepped away to take the call.

One of the forensics specialists plunged his shovel into the soft earth and emptied the blade's contents onto the wire mesh sifter. He swung the shovel down again, and it hit the ground with a metallic clang.

The digger looked up at Barrett. "Is there something metal down there?"

Barrett just stared at the ground. Before he could reply, the other digger swung his shovel down. There was another metallic clang, and . . .

**BOOM!**

*A terrific explosion rocked the woods!*

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A fireball erupted from the earth. The shock wave threw Strode and the other officers back over a dozen feet as a deafening roar overtook them.

Her body crumpled at the base of a tree. Her face stung, and blood gushed over her eyes. Her eardrums were blown, and the odor of gunpowder was thick in her nasal cavity.

She tried to wipe the blood from her eyes and only then realized that most of her left arm was gone.

She could see, she realized, but just barely. Fire everywhere, all around her. And mangled bodies, some writhing in pain, but most just still.

Next to her, Barrett was bloody and wheezing, his orange prison uniform burned and tattered.

“You . . . son of a bitch,” she whispered.

He didn’t react. He was now dead, like the others.

As a dark fog crept over her, she realized she would soon be joining them.

# CHAPTER

# 2

SHARP GROSSMONT HOSPITAL  
LA MESA, CALIFORNIA

**K**endra Michaels pulled open the stairwell door, took a glance to see if the coast was clear, and then ran down the surgical floor's wide hallway.

"Ma'am . . . Ma'am?" The nurse ran after her.

"Where is he?"

"Ma'am, you can't be back here."

Kendra turned toward her. "Too late. Half the law-enforcement community of Southern California and their families are downstairs. No one is telling us anything. I need some answers."

"I understand. And as soon as we have those answers, a doctor will be down to fill you in. Until then, I have to ask you to—"

"*Please*. Isn't there something you can tell me?"

The nurse cocked her head. "I think I've seen you here before."

Kendra half smiled. "I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing." She looked at the ID card around the nurse's neck. "Which is it, Holly?"

The woman froze. "You're Kendra Michaels."

"Guilty. Still not sure if it's a good thing."

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“I was working at Scripps Mercy the night you brought in the Conway kids. They’d been kidnapped. You saved all three of them.”

Kendra’s smile faded. There was a fourth she *couldn’t* save, but there was no need to relive that awful memory. “Yes.”

“But you aren’t with the police or FBI at all, are you? You’re some kind of music teacher?”

“A music therapist. I assist law-enforcement agencies from time to time.”

Holly nodded. “I remember. You grew up as a blind person, right?”

Kendra didn’t feel like going through her entire bio with the nurse, but every minute she wasn’t being forcibly ejected was a good thing. “I was blind for the first twenty years of my life. Now that I have my sight, I guess I don’t take anything I see for granted. And like most blind people, I used my other senses—hearing, smell, touch, and taste—to make my way in the world. That has stuck with me. My senses aren’t better than anyone else’s. I just pay more attention. I’ve helped out the FBI and several police departments on some of their cases.”

“I saw you talking to the police that night. You knew so much about that sicko kidnapper just by looking at him. One of the doctors thought you were psychic.”

“Nope. I just pay attention. People tell me about themselves without even realizing it.”

“What am I telling you about myself?”

Kendra sighed. At the moment, the last thing she wanted to do was perform her damn party trick. But if she could use it to gain a little trust and perhaps a sense of obligation . . .

“You live close to work. Close enough to ride your bike, which you did today.”

Holly’s eyes widened.



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“You’re an active person in general. You play tennis.”

Holly smiled. “Yes.”

“I’ve never played, but a lot of my friends have taken up pickleball. They can’t get enough of it. Anyway, on the way in today, you bought a drink from that Starbucks across the street. Pumpkin spice latte. You order from there often.”

“You saw me there.”

“No. You like to travel, and you’ve seen a lot of the world. You want to see more. You’ve recently been to New Zealand. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Stunning.” Holly shook her head. “But how—?”

“I’ll tell you how.” She added persuasively, “But first you need to tell me about the blast victims.”

Holly looked around to make sure no one else was within earshot. “We have four in surgery right now. Three San Diego PD, one FBI. Two of the cops look like they’ll make it. I’m not sure about the other two.” She looked at Kendra’s tense face. “When you came in here, you said, ‘Where is he?’ Is there someone in particular you want to know about?”

“The FBI agent. Roland Metcalf. He’s a good friend.”

“They’re working on him. I don’t believe his burns were as severe as the others, but he has several serious impact wounds. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

Kendra closed her eyes for an instant. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Sure.” She put her hand on Kendra’s arm. “I’m sorry.”

Kendra was silent for a long moment. Keep her talking. Do the party trick and ease her into telling Kendra more. Finally, she said hoarsely, “Your right pant leg is wrinkled.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s because it’s been rolled up over your calf, so it won’t get caught in your bicycle chain. You rode your bike to work.”

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“That’s right. How did you know I stopped at Starbucks?”

“Coffee breath.”

“Ooh.” Holly covered her mouth. “Sorry.”

“It isn’t offensive, but that pumpkin odor is distinctive. And I happen to know Starbucks brought back their pumpkin spice drinks last week. The flavoring syrup is the same, but for some reason it smells different in hot drinks than in cold. It’s stronger. You had the latte. You’ve been drinking it from a thermal cup over there at the nurses’ station. The cup is decorated with the logo for the Lake Murray Tennis Club. It’s a city-owned club, isn’t it? I figure you probably play there.”

“How do you know the cup is mine? There are other nurses here.”

“The lipstick on the rim matches yours. No one else’s.”

Holly shook her head in amazement. “You’re right. That is my cup, and I do play there. I used to work at the pro shop sometimes. And I do love to travel. How did you know?”

“You’re wearing a hairpin. It’s jade, which could mean it’s from Asia. But there’s a Māori-style twist at the end, which means New Zealand. I saw them for sale there in a few places. You don’t really see them anywhere else.”

“I got mine at the Auckland Museum.”

“As lovely as New Zealand is, it’s several notches down on the list of travel destinations for Americans. You most likely visited several European countries before going there. You’re well traveled.”

“Right again. I’m going to Thailand next winter.”

Kendra didn’t know how much longer she could go on with this. She wasn’t sure if the nurse could tell her anything more and she realized that this idiotic “party trick” wasn’t distracting her from the awful thought that Metcalf could be dying in one of those surgery suites beyond the nurses’ station. And she’d only just begun to

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process the fact that Cynthia Strode was already dead. Her body was probably still with the others in that bomb-cratered crime scene.

“I’m sorry,” Holly said.

She must have looked more upset than she’d thought. “Thanks.”

“No, I mean . . .” She gestured behind Kendra, where a uniformed security guard appeared from the stairwell door. “I had the floor assistant call security when you first came up here. You should really go back to the waiting room with the others. The doctor will let you know when we know more.” She shrugged. “But like we tell everyone . . .”

“ . . . no news is good news,” Kendra finished for her.

“It’s true.”

Kendra turned and walked toward the elevator. She couldn’t tell Holly that she didn’t belong down with those other friends and relatives. They’d closed her out, even though she was feeling the same horror and pain that they were. She couldn’t go back to that waiting room. That’s why she’d bolted up here to get information.

But now that was another closed door.

So, she just had to get the hell out of here.



Kendra’s hands clenched on the steering wheel as she sat looking at the hospital after she got into the driver’s seat of her Toyota 4Runner. She felt so damn helpless. There had to be something she could do. What? It was obvious Cassalas had wanted to get rid of her. He’d been very respectful, but she wasn’t FBI and therefore she was an outsider. That waiting room had been crowded with friends and relations of those victims who had been brutally killed and injured. It didn’t matter that one of those victims lying at death’s door was her friend, or that she had known and admired many of the dead.

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She didn't belong to the club. She was in the way. She couldn't even go to the crime scene and try to get them answers and closure. All she could do was tell the ones who had been left behind how sorry she was that a monster had decided to take down their loved ones to make his own death more spectacular, she thought bitterly. No, she couldn't even do that, because she didn't have all the facts yet. She had to wait for the FBI to get through with taking care of their own. Lord, how she hated the thought—

Her phone chimed, and she looked to see it was a text from her friend Olivia. It was a simple message: SEE ME WHEN YOU GET BACK.

Kendra felt an immediate rush of relief. She didn't even think twice as she started her car and drove out of the parking lot. Olivia would understand because she'd realize how it was to be closed out and isolated when you wanted to reach out. Besides being Kendra's best friend, they had shared blindness for most of their childhood and young adulthood, and that was a bond that was unbreakable. Even when Kendra had gotten her sight through an operation when she was twenty the closeness and friendship had remained. Olivia was totally brilliant and so was her website *Outasite*, a popular site for the vision-impaired, featuring articles, product reviews, and discussion boards, all accessible by integrated audio screen-reading apps. It was constantly changing and improving and was now a business that generated more than six figures.

Twenty minutes later Kendra parked her Toyota in the condo parking garage. She got on the elevator and pressed the button for Olivia's condo, which was on the floor below her own.

She heard Olivia's dog, Harley, barking as she got off the elevator. Olivia opened the door on the first ring, but Harley got to Kendra before she did. The big, adorable mutt's paws were on Kendra's shoulders, and he gave her ear a slurp before she could push him down. "How's his training coming?" she asked Olivia.

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“Splendid,” Olivia said. “But he never appears to realize which one of us is in training. I’m working on it.”

“I suspected that was what was happening.” She gave Harley a pat before she smiled at Olivia. “Well, here I am. Want to go out to dinner?”

“Hell, no.” Olivia took a step back. “Get in here.” She pulled her into the foyer and gave her a hug. “I can tell you’re about to crack any minute. How bad was it at the hospital?”

“Terrible. I couldn’t *do* anything.”

“How’s Metcalf?”

“I don’t know. It could go either way. He could die tonight, Olivia.”

“Or he could live. You said it could go either way.”

“It could. I know he’s your friend, too, Olivia. I don’t mean to be pessimistic.”

“I’ve been thinking about him ever since I heard.” She gestured to the couch. “Sit down. I’ll get you a drink.” She went over to the bar. “Maybe after a brandy or two you’ll be more positive.”

“I hope so.” She curled up in a corner of the couch and reached out to pat Harley again. He was looking up at her soulfully, which was peculiar because one eye was blue, the other brown, but he managed to pull it off. “I’m having trouble with positive right now. Did I tell you that I knew one of the agents who was killed? It was Cynthia Strode, and she was always friendly and eager to learn. She’d ask dozens of questions when I’d come up with a deduction. She wanted to go back to Quantico and study forensics. She was a brand-new grandmother, and she was always joking about going back to school when she might be retiring before she could graduate. She was . . . nice.”

“You’re tearing up. Drink your brandy.” Olivia sat down beside her and sipped her own drink. “It was all pretty crazy, wasn’t it?”

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Barrett had to be nuts. You weren't involved with catching him, were you?"

Kendra shook her head. "It wasn't one of my cases. I'm glad I wasn't involved. I'd feel guilty if I hadn't been able to guess what he was going to do." She took a swallow of her brandy. "And of course he was nuts. No one knows exactly how many people he killed. The guesses run anywhere from twenty-eight to thirty-five. It might be even more. He's never given anyone a definite number. He's just teased the FBI occasionally with the location of a body when he wanted something from them."

"And they gave it to him?"

"Closure," she said flatly. "It means everything to a victim's family when a victim has been missing for a long time. It can be agony not to be certain."

"That was what happened out in Pine Valley?" Olivia paused. "Do you want to talk about this? If you don't, tell me to shut up."

"I'll talk about it. I'll be going out to Pine Valley tomorrow morning with Dean Cassalas, the agent in charge of the scene, anyway. Maybe it will help me to get my head straight before I have to examine the crime scene." She smiled lopsidedly. "Though that hasn't happened yet. I guess you'd have to be mentally unstable to be able to think like James Barrett."

"He's a serial killer himself, and he committed suicide?" Olivia asked.

"That's what the FBI think happened," Kendra said. "They had enough evidence against him to convict on several counts. Since California has been ambivalent about capital punishment there was always a chance that they'd still give him the death sentence." Kendra added bitterly, "He'd be first in line. Since he was definitely unstable and hated both the FBI and the prison system with a passion, he probably decided that he wouldn't wait. He'd take the decision into

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his own hands and bring down as many law-enforcement officers with him as he could.” She had to take another sip of brandy for what was to follow. “His trial was under way downtown, and he abruptly decided to plead out and show them where the body of Dayna Voyles was buried. Her abduction was probably the one that attracted the most attention from the media. She was twenty-four years old and very pretty, just the kind of young woman that would appeal to the general public and local politicians. Barrett said if they took the death penalty off the table, he’d show them where he buried her. It turned out he’d buried an explosive device with her.” Her lips curled sardonically. “He had to have been planning this for a long time. He’s been in prison for over two years.”

“Vicious,” Olivia murmured.

“He got what he wanted. Eleven died with him,” Kendra said grimly. “Seven more wounded. Two critical. Metcalf was there with Cynthia Strode, an agent I worked with a couple of times. They played the biggest part in catching Barrett. Cynthia testified in his trial last week, and Metcalf was just about to take the stand when Barrett decided to plead his case out.

“Is Metcalf’s family with him?”

“His mother should be there anytime now. She’s flying down from San Francisco. Maybe I can stop by and see her before I go out to the valley tomorrow.” She made a face. “I’m thinking positive. Everything is going to go well tonight.”

“Sure it is.” Olivia got up, went back to the bar, and got the decanter. “And I’m going to give you one more drink to relax you, and then we’re going to eat the wonderful salad I made for us. Want to spend the night with me and Harley?”

“Nope. I’ve imposed enough on you.”

“It’s no imposition.” Olivia smiled. “You know, I was just remembering that it was Metcalf who discovered how much Harley loves

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HGTV. That dog still loves *House Hunters*, but lately he's been wild about *Property Brothers*."

"I remember. But seriously, I don't need anyone holding my hand." She reached out and took Olivia's hand anyway. "Though maybe I did a bit earlier. It was very sad at the hospital tonight."

"Someone to hold your hand is sometimes an excellent thing." Olivia grinned. "Have you heard from Lynch lately?"

"Last week. He called me from Johannesburg. He checks in every now and then." She shrugged. "I don't know why. Actually, he's too busy saving the world to bother with relationships."

"That wasn't my impression," Olivia said. "And I know why. Since you're even more skittish than he is, he's probably playing it cool. And no one can play that game better than Lynch. It's no wonder the Justice Department pulled him out of black ops and sends him out to do damage control all over the world." She topped off Kendra's drink. "But since you're lacking a Lynch, I'll lend you Harley to keep you company tonight."

"Heaven help me."

"He's wonderful. Don't you dare malign him. After all, you're the one who talked me into accepting Harley into my home. It's not as if I needed a Seeing Eye dog."

"We all knew that," Kendra said with a grin. "You rule your world all by yourself, but it made me feel better that you had Harley to protect you in case a burglar tried to break in."

"His idea of protection would be to try to lick the burglar to the point of asphyxiation," Olivia said dryly. "But if they didn't know him, he's big enough to make anyone think twice about attacking me. So, it all works out." She reached down and Harley affectionately nuzzled her hand. "And what he does with the utmost talent and skill is give comfort and remind everyone that there's still goodness and love out there in the world when all you can see is the cold and



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violence.” She added gently, “And I think you might have a little use for that talent tonight. I won’t take no for an answer. After dinner you and Harley will go up to your condo. He’ll run around and try to get in your shower with you, and then probably steal your towel and jump on your lap when you’re trying to dry your hair. Then he’ll try to persuade you to watch HGTV while you’re relaxing before bed.”

“And those are all supposed to be selling points? I don’t think so.”

“Nah, that comes when you go to bed, and he jumps up beside you and you feel his heart beating and the love he radiates. Then you remember that’s what life’s really all about, and you might actually sleep tonight.” She headed for the kitchen. “Now I’ll get your salad. You should go to bed. You’ll want to get up early to bring Harley back and have a bite of breakfast before you start out for Pine Valley.”

“Any other orders?” Kendra asked.

“Only one. But it bears repeating.” She opened the refrigerator. “Think positive!”

8:35 A.M.

NEXT DAY

PINE VALLEY

Kendra inhaled sharply as she stopped and gazed in horror down at the huge crater-like cavity at the bottom of the hill. Even though it was early, there were several agents in FBI windbreakers moving carefully about the destruction area. There were dozens of plastic evidence markers and areas of interest cordoned off by yellow crime scene tape. No one had updated her on their findings overnight,

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but why would they? she thought in frustration. She wasn't FBI. She was only someone trying desperately to help find out what had happened here that had taken so many lives.

"Pretty grim, isn't it?" Kendra turned and saw Special Agent Michael Griffin coming down the hill behind her. She hadn't expected to see him here. As head of the San Diego FBI field office, he'd been at the hospital when she'd left last night talking to media and relatives of the injured. She'd thought then that he was doing a fairly decent job of it, considering that she'd never considered Griffin to be particularly warm and sympathetic. He was smart and tough and had the experience needed to do what he had to do under usual circumstances. But anyone would have been out of his depth with what had happened here at Pine Valley. He'd been curt to her last night, and he was scowling now. "It's even worse than it looks," he said. "I had to walk on eggs when I was talking to those reporters last night."

"I saw all the forensic and medical vans parked on the hill." She nodded down at the crater. "And the markers. Your team has been busy."

Griffin nodded. "Special Agent Dean Cassalas has been in charge of the scene. He's been out here all night. He wasn't crazy about having you out here, but I let him know how helpful you've been on some of our cases in the past. He wanted to keep it strictly within the Bureau."

"I got that impression." She waved a dismissive hand. "But then so did all the other agents. The FBI can be like an exclusive private club when it closes ranks. I could understand it. I just wanted to help."

"Metcalf? You worked with him on cases frequently." He shook his head. "I didn't think it was professional that he seemed to be that friendly with someone who wasn't in the Bureau. But I liked him, so I let it go." He gazed at her for a moment. "Was it more than . . . friendship?"

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“No.” Griffin’s curiosity might be harmless, but she didn’t intend to trust it. That FBI mentality was too ingrained. “Metcalf and I are just friends. Have you heard anything new? I called the hospital before I left my condo and they said there was no change yet.”

He shook his head. “The other agent in ICU died last night but Metcalf had a fair night. He still has a chance.”

“I didn’t expect to see you out here today.”

“It’s my job. This is the crime scene. It didn’t seem right to be pushing papers back at the office when we lost so many good people here yesterday. This case has already attracted worldwide attention, and people want answers.”

“I understand,” Kendra said. “People are already wondering how our best and brightest walked into a two-year-old trap that a serial killer set for them.”

Griffin shook his head. “How could they have known?”

“I’m not blaming anyone. If I’d worked this case, I probably would have been standing right next to them. That’s why I want to find out exactly how this happened.”

“That’s why I told Cassalas to bring you today. You have a sterling reputation, and the media will believe everything you say. I can throw a dozen forensics specialists at them, and it won’t mean nearly as much as an interview with you.”

“Even though it means I’ll be talking to those same experts to get my information?” She met Griffin’s eyes. “Because I have no intention of sugarcoating your ‘mess.’ I’m going to do the job I usually do. I’ll find answers and the truth however I can.”

“That’s all I ask,” Griffin said. “This is my career; do you believe I’d not be honest in protecting it? I just want you to assure me that you won’t let the media influence you into hinting that this investigation isn’t entirely aboveboard. They do like sensationalism.”

“They won’t get it from me,” she said flatly. “But I do want to

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see everything to do with the investigation. I have no desire to get in your way, but, if you're using me, be prepared to have me do the same."

"No problem." Griffin was looking up the hill at a tall, lean, thirtyish man who was hurrying toward them. "And here comes Cassalas. I've told him to cooperate fully with you, so that we can get this investigation wrapped up."

"He wasn't cooperating with me last night when I wanted to come out here and look around," she said wryly. "Though he had a lot of seemingly good reasons."

"One of them was me." Griffin's tone was faintly mocking. "But that was last night." He waved at Cassalas. "And everything he told you was the truth. The only thing I told him to skip was that I didn't want you to see all the body parts we kept finding at this site. It was dreadful. I was keeping that from everyone because I didn't want the stories of gore and blood to appear on Fox News."

"I can understand why." She tried to force herself not to shiver. "But I would have come anyway. It would have been my duty to those agents who had died."

"And to Metcalf?"

"Of course." She turned to Special Agent Dean Cassalas, who was now a few yards away.

He gave her a wary glance. "Good morning, Dr. Michaels."

"Good morning. I've just been talking to Griffin, and he seems to have thought I'd be scared off by this crime scene. I want you to know that I'll respect it, but it won't intimidate me." She told him quietly, "I'm ready when you are. I'm not going to promise you anything. Let's just see what we can do to find out why those good friends of yours died here yesterday."

He gave her a long look, and then nodded soberly. He gestured toward the crater. "After you, Dr. Michaels."

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“Kendra,” she corrected. “And you should go first, because you’re going to get me a good many interviews with the tech people who are going to answer my questions. Okay?”

He smiled and nodded. “Okay.” He preceded her down the hill.

She started after him and then looked over her shoulder at Griffin. “I got this. I’m sure you have other things to do here.”

“Thank you,” he said sardonically. “I know when I’m being dismissed. But I’ll be around on the off chance you need anything.”

“Fine. But please remember that I don’t like to be used. And that I hate the idea that a terrible tragedy could ever be referred to as a ‘mess.’”

She turned and followed Cassalas down the hill.

Although the corpses and body parts had already been photographed, tagged, and removed, the stench of death still hung in the air. Dozens of trees still standing on the perimeter were singed and stained with blood.

“Are you okay?” Cassalas asked.

“Yes. More than anything, I’m just . . . angry.”

“We all are.” He motioned toward the dozen or so evidence collection techs still working the scene. “We knew these people. They were family.” He consulted a clipboard and pointed to the base of a tree, where a yellow marker rested with a bold black “9” on its face. “That’s where we found Cynthia Strode.”

Kendra looked at the bloodstained tree root. Damn. She gazed around, realizing that the yellow plastic markers scattered around the scene represented the location of corpses.

Cassalas pointed to another marker just six feet away. “Barrett was there.”

Kendra turned. Farther from the blast crater, she saw half a dozen blue plastic markers scattered around the scene. “What are those?”

“Survivors.”

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She shook her head. “I’m amazed anyone could have lived through this.”

“Well, two of these people didn’t make it to the hospital. And, as you know, another didn’t make it out of surgery.”

“Where was Metcalf?”

Cassalas consulted his clipboard and stepped back a few feet. He pointed toward a blue marker. “Here. Number five.”

Kendra crouched next to the marker. “I know he arrived down here with Cynthia, but the nurse told me he was somehow spared the burns that the others had.” She looked at the distance separating Metcalf’s and Cynthia’s markers. “I wonder how that happened.”

“It might have been the phone call,” Cassalas said.

Kendra’s head lifted sharply. “*What* phone call?”

“A lab tech had just called Metcalf with test results from another case he was working. He was still on the phone with her when the bomb went off.”

Kendra stood up. “That could explain it. He may have stepped away to take the call, which saved his life.” She continued around the crater and looked at the surviving trees. Pieces of clothing and hair still hung from the higher branches, along with shreds of what she suspected was human skin.

She turned and looked at the sea of markers, which looked almost like tombstones. She pointed to a red marker in the middle of the blast site. “What’s that?”

“It’s to mark what was left of his victim who was buried here.”

“You have a positive ID?”

“Not yet, but we’re assuming it was Dayna Voyles, just as he promised. There wasn’t much left of her even before the explosion, but we recovered clothing fragments that match what she was wearing when she was abducted.”

Kendra turned away. Poor Dayna Voyles had become an after-

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thought in the wake of the horror that had been unleashed at her grave site. “Who was left to call it in?”

“Uniformed officers at the road. They were directing traffic around the cars parked up there. They came down here to help, but there wasn’t much they could do. I talked to one of them last night, and he was pretty shaken up.”

Kendra nodded. “I can imagine.”

An agent called out from the clump of trees behind them. “I got something here!”

Kendra and Cassalas joined the agent, whom she vaguely remembered from a previous case. She believed his name was Kollar. He was holding a long telescoping pole attached to a net, which he was using to try to snare something caught in the tree.

“What is it?” Cassalas asked.

“Not sure,” Kollar said, still trying to capture the object. “It looks like metal of some kind.” He tried to use the rim of the net to pull it free of the branches.

“Can you extend the net any further?” Cassalas asked.

“No dice. I’m already all the way out. Eighteen feet.” He concentrated on the object, then finally pulled the trigger on his pole. The net zipped closed. “Got it!”

He lowered the net and pushed the trigger to unzip the net’s rim. Cassalas, who had already slipped on a pair of plastic evidence gloves, reached in and pulled out the metallic object.

“What is it?” Kendra asked.

Cassalas showed her. “A video camera. More accurately, *half* a video camera. We had a videographer and a still photographer here. Neither survived.” He turned the device over in his hands. “Fortunately, I think this is the half with the data card.” He pried open the cover to reveal the SD card.

He looked up at Kendra. “We have a tech van parked on the road. Wanna see a movie?”