

# TED DEKKER

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BONEMAN'S DAUGHTERS*

## THE BRIDE COLLECTOR



## Copyright

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2010 by Ted Dekker

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Center Street  
Hachette Book Group  
237 Park Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

Visit our website at [www.HachetteBookGroup.com](http://www.HachetteBookGroup.com)  
[www.twitter.com/centerstreet](http://www.twitter.com/centerstreet)

Center Street is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.  
The Center Street name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

First eBook Edition: April 2010

ISBN: 978-1-59995-309-0

# Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[About the Author](#)

[A Preview of \*We call it our Underground.\*](#)

# 1

**“THANK YOU, DETECTIVE.** We’ll take it from here.”

FBI Special Agent Brad Raines stood in the small barn’s wide doorway and scanned the dimly lit interior. Dusk fell on an ancient wood floor covered in dust disturbed by numerous footprints. Shafts of light streamed from cracks in a sagging roof.

Long abandoned. A natural choice.

“With all due respect, Agent Raines, my team is here,” the detective replied. “They can work the scene.”

“But they won’t, Detective Lambert.”

Raines turned his head slowly, taking it all in.

One rectangular room roughly fifteen by forty, covered by a tin roof. Interior walls formed by six-inch graying wooden planks. Ten, twenty, thirty, thirty-two on the narrow side. Fifteen feet, as estimated. Two shovels and a pitchfork on the floor to his right. A single window with dirty, tinted panes, crowded by empty cobwebs.

A dust-covered wooden bucket rested in the corner, its rusted handle covered with filth. Several old rusted tin cans—GIANT brand peas with the label mostly missing, HEINZ canned hot dogs—scattered on the floor, left by campers long gone. An old plow blade lay against the near wall. An even older worktable sat to the left, near the far wall.

All unsurprising. All but what had brought Brad.

The woman’s body was glued to the wall to his left, arms wide, wrists limp. Like the other three.

“... Chief Lorenzo for clearance.” The detective’s voice edged in on his thoughts. Lambert was still here.

Brad looked over his left shoulder where Nikki Holden, a leading forensic psychologist, stood staring at the woman’s body with those wide blue eyes of hers. She caught his get-rid-of-the-cop glance and turned to face Detective Lambert. Brad returned his gaze to the shed’s interior as she spoke.

“I’m sorry, Detective,” she said in her most reasonable tone of voice, “but I’m sure you can appreciate our position here. Give my team a few hours. If this isn’t our guy, you’ll be the first to know. The police department’s been more than helpful.”

Brad looked up to mask his knowing grin. One of the rafters was cracked, and its gray husk revealed a lighter, tan core. Freshly broken.

“I don’t like it,” Lambert said. “For the record.”

Brad pulled his eyes from the crime scene and smiled at the detective. “Thank you, Detective. Noted. There’s quite a bit about this job not to like. If your men could secure the perimeter, that would be helpful. Our forensics team will be here any minute.”

Lambert held his gaze for a moment, then turned away and addressed a man behind him. “Okay, Larry, cancel the forensics, this is now an FBI investigation. Tell Bill to

secure and hold the perimeter.”

Larry muttered a curse and flicked away a bit of straw he'd taken from a pile of old bales. A white unmarked van rolled over the yellow perimeter tape and slowly crunched over the gravel driveway. It had taken the forensics team an hour to reach the scene, just south of West Dillon Road, from the Stout Street field office in downtown Denver. A farm had evidently once occupied this empty field in Louisville, twenty-plus miles northwest from Denver up the Denver-Boulder Turnpike.

Brad glanced at Nikki. “Tell them to start on the outside,” he said flatly. “Give us a minute. Bring Kim in when she arrives.”

Kim Peterson, the forensic pathologist, would determine what the body could tell them postmortem. Nikki headed for the van without comment.

Brad turned his attention back to the small barn. The shack. The farm shed. The killer's nest. The rest of the story was here, in the dark corners. The walls had watched the killer as he'd methodically ended a woman's life. The worktable had heard his words as he confessed his passions and fears in a world turned inside out by his compulsions. It had witnessed her pleas for mercy. Her dying moans.

Careful not to step on the exposed markings in the dust, Brad entered the room and approached the wall on which the woman was affixed. He stood still, filtering out the sounds of voices from a dozen law enforcement personnel outside. The hum of rubber on asphalt from the main road two hundred yards down the driveway settled in with the sound of his breathing. Both faded entirely as he brought his senses in line with the scene before him.

Her nude torso rose pale in the glow of a single light shaft. As though by magic, her body seemed perched on the wooden wall behind her, both arms stretched out on either side. Two round dowels that supported much of her weight protruded from the wall under her armpits. Her heels were together, each foot angled away from the other to form a V.

A white veil of translucent lace had been carefully arranged to cover her face, like a bride.

The outthrust posture sent a collage of art-history remnants cascading through his mind—the *Venus de Milo*, a thousand renditions of the Crucifixion, the Louvre's *Winged Victory* statue, her marble bosom jutting forward as if it belonged on the prow of an ancient ship plowing through a Mediterranean surf.

But this was no museum. It was a crime scene, and the mixture of cruelty and ostentation pouring from the garish exhibit filled him with a sudden wave of nausea.

Slowly, his analytical faculties began to reassert themselves.

She was naked except for thin cotton panties and the veil. Blond. White. Everything about the placement was symmetrical. Each hand was set in identical form, with thumb and forefinger touching, each shoulder, each hip had been carefully manipulated into perfect balance. All but her head.

Her head slumped gently to the left so that her long blond hair cascaded over her left shoulder before curling under her armpits. Through the veil he could see that her eyes were closed. No blemish, no sign of pain or suffering, no blood.

Only blessed peace and beauty. She could as easily be an angel painted by da Vinci or Michelangelo. The perfect bride.

Brian Jacobs, seventeen, had brought his girlfriend here after school for reasons

unrevealed and found the Bride Collector's fourth victim. Brad preferred to think of them as angels.

He peered closer and felt strange words of empathy well up inside of him.

*I cry with you, Angel. I weep for you. For every strand of hair that will never again blow in the wind, for every smile that will never brighten someone else's day, for every look of desire that will never quicken another man's pulse. I am so sorry.*

"She's beautiful," Nikki said behind him.

He felt a momentary stab of regret for having been pulled away from his connection with the woman on the wall. Nikki walked past him, eyes fixed on the woman, touching his arm gently with her fingers as she passed. Her breathing was steady, slightly thicker than usual. He knew the cause: the dark waters of the killer's mind, which she now probed by staring at his handiwork.

Like an avalanche, the poignancy of his relationship with Nikki crashed through his mind... and then was gone, replaced by the image of her standing next to the woman. A blond angel hovering over a brunette. One with arms stretched wide in complete resignation, the other with arms folded. One nearly naked, the other dressed in a blue silk blouse with a black jacket and skirt.

*She's beautiful,* he thought.

"What a shame." Kim Peterson's voice cut softly through the room, grasping what the other two were too proud to verbalize. The forensic pathologist stepped up next to Brad, withdrew a pair of white gloves from her bag then set it down. "What do we know?"

Brad would have preferred to spend more time alone with the victim, but the opportunity had passed. "No ID. Discovered an hour ago by two teenagers."

They stared in a moment of silence.

"She's beautiful," Kim said.

"Yes."

"This makes four."

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

The pathologist approached opposite Nikki, who remained quiet, lost in thought as she studied the body with searching eyes.

Kim sank to one heel and gently lifted the woman's toes for a better view under the foot. "Care to tell us how you think it happened before I begin my preliminary examination?"

He wasn't ready, of course, not yet, not without a complete analysis of evidence still to be gathered. But he'd been credited with an uncanny ability to accurately judge events from the thinnest of evidentiary threads. He'd cracked three major cases in the Four Corners region since leaving Miami and joining the Denver field office a year ago. At thirty-two years of age, he was on the fast track for high ground—much higher ground, according to his superiors.

But unlike them, his motivation had nothing to do with climbing an organizational ladder.

"Male, size eleven by the shoe prints. They were here for a while, maybe a day..."

"How so?" Nikki asked.

A distant murmur carried to him: an officer speaking to the curious driver of an approaching car outside, instructing him to head back to the main road. The roof over

their heads ticked as it began to cool in the late afternoon.

“That smell. It’s baked beans. He was hungry, so he ate. You won’t find the can. He wouldn’t leave any DNA evidence in here.”

“She was alive when he brought her here?”

“Yes. And he killed her like the others, by draining her blood from her heels. No struggle. A tarp under the table caught most of the trace evidence—bodily fluids, skin cells, hair. He was careful not to use too much force, keeping her on the edge of control and submission. She was lying prone, sedated, conscious and fully aware when he numbed her heels and drilled up into them. He was forced to clean up the blood on the table and floor where it ran off the tarp. Then he sealed the wounds, lifted her into position, held her long enough for the glue on her shoulder blades to cure on the wall, reopened the wounds on each heel, and watched her blood drain into a three-gallon bucket.”

All of this, Brad had guessed from the markings on the table and floor, the ring from the bucket beneath the woman’s heels, and the lack of bruising. The physical evidence had painted a picture in his mind as clearly as if he were staring at a Rembrandt.

“He did it out of respect, not rage,” Brad said.

“Love,” Nikki said.

He nodded, even willing to go that far. “Love.”

“Both heel wounds are plugged with the same fleshy putty we found on the other three,” Kim said, standing. “And what kind of love is this?”

“The groom’s love,” Brad said, savoring his response.

Special Agent Frank Closkey spoke from the door. “Sir?”

Brad held up his hand without looking back. “Give us a few more minutes, Frank.”

The agent retreated.

Kim continued her initial examination, gently prodding the woman’s flesh, checking her eyes, lifting her hair, inspecting the backs of her shoulders. But Brad already knew what she would find.

The question was, *Why?* What motivated the Bride Collector? How did he make his selections? What good or evil did he think he was doing? What had been done to him to motivate his taking of life in such a manner? Who had he decided to kill next? When would he take her?

Where was he now?

The questions spun through Brad’s mind as one, yet distinguishable. Some were clearer than others, but all whispered from beyond, tempting him to listen because each question already contained an answer. He simply had to find it and unpack it.

Nikki paced with one arm pressed against her belly, the other propping up her chin. It struck him that like her, two of the victims had been brunettes. Like her, all four had beautiful complexions.

What would enter the killer’s mind if he were staring at Nikki through a hole in the wall at this moment? Brad pushed back a fleeting impulse to check the wall behind them to see if there might indeed be a hole, filled with a single eye peering in at them.

Instead, he let his eyes wander over Nikki—her calves well defined beneath the hem of the black skirt. Her wavy long hair cascading on her shoulders, her eyes bright with question. Her forefinger absently brushing full lips. A perfectly symmetrical face.

Would the killer feel any desire?

No. No it wasn't desire, was it? She was beautiful, but beautiful women filled the world. Something else drew the Bride Collector, in the same way that something else was drawing Brad now, though he had a difficult time putting a finger on it.

Of the numerous women he'd dated over the past ten years, only four relationships had lasted two months or more, each ending sooner than the previous one. Nikki had once accused him of playing the role of bad boy. He thought *picky* was a better label. He had taste, after all.

After what he'd been through, he needed to be picky.

Nikki was thirty-one, married once at age nineteen, divorced six months later. She held her doctorate in psychology from CSU. Highly intelligent, witty, reduced to deep introspection by scenes that left most people heaving.

This would excite the killer, wouldn't it? And if Nikki came on to the killer, would that excite him?

No, Brad thought.

"He would like you," Brad said.

Nikki glanced back at him, arm still around her waist. "Excuse me?"

He caught himself. This was one of those frequent times when honesty might not be so wise.

"I was just thinking that he liked her. You. That is, speaking to the victim. He. *He* would like *you*, meaning he would like *her*."

Kim saved him. "Speaking to cadavers now, Brad? Don't worry, I do it all the time."

"You were looking at me when you said it," Nikki said.

"So I was. I tend to do that."

"What, stare at women? Or specifically at me?"

"Both, on occasion."

A faint smile turned the corners of her mouth up. She winked. Not a full wink, but the movement in her right eyelid was unmistakable. Or was it?

Nikki turned to face the wall, leaving Brad to feel somewhat dirty. In an attempt to help the woman on the wall, he'd somehow violated her privacy. Yet her story was still unknown and demanded respect.

Silence. Remorse. Shame.

"Sir?" Frank's voice intruded again.

Brad turned from the wall and walked to the door. "Bring the team in. Photograph every inch, dust every exposed surface. Blood, sweat, spittle, hair; bag and tag the air if you have to. I want preliminaries from the lab this evening."

"Um... It's getting late. I don't—"

"He's staring through a peephole at another woman already, Frank. We have less than a week to stop him from showing that woman his love. Preliminaries tonight."

Brad left the shack thinking he might have chosen better words to express the urgency burning across his nervous system.

## 2

**FBI FIELD OFFICE**, Stout Street, Denver, 9:00 PM.

Nikki Holden stood next to Brad beside the stainless-steel examination table in the basement morgue. Watching Kim gingerly turn the body onto its back, she noted the pathologist's care not to disturb the shoulder-blade skin they'd cut to release it from the wall.

The victim was a twenty-one-year-old named Caroline Redik. The name had surfaced when the lab ran her prints through the Automated Fingerprint Identification System, better known by its acronym, AFIS. The ever-expanding database now included anyone who'd applied for a passport, which Caroline had done before taking a trip to Paris one year earlier, for reasons yet unknown.

Calm and delicate, Kim labored with a plastic face shield in place. Not much could ruffle the forty-three-year-old. She was as comfortable dipping her hand into a bloody gunshot wound as, when it mattered, peeling back the layers of society's skin with a well-placed question. She kept her blond hair short. Easier to keep out of the way. If there was a mother in the office, it was Kim. Her manner created an interesting but somehow fitting contrast with her well-known love for a smorgasbord of men.

Nikki turned her attention back to the body. The skin was very pale, translucent, showing the blue veins beneath. She lay prone, looking like a dressmaker's dummy, displaying perfectly formed breasts, a flat belly, and well-defined hips. Nikki found her rather bony, actually. While affixed to the wall, her flesh had settled over her bones and given her a less emaciated appearance. On her back, however, she looked quite gaunt.

The eyes stared up at the ceiling, blue but lifeless. Her makeup was far more obvious under the bright halogen lights than it had been before the evidence team illuminated the shack. The eyeliner and eye shadow had been carefully applied, evidence of a steady, experienced hand. Was the killer a cosmetologist? Or a drag queen, even? Nikki could just see vertical streaks running down from the corners of her eyes and ruining the perfect surface, as if poor Caroline had cried before the final application.

Nikki recalled a memory of her father holding her shoulders when she was twelve. He'd knelt and brushed a tear from her right cheek, where a dime-size birthmark had once darkened her skin. "You are beautiful, Nikki, and your birthmark makes you even more beautiful. You don't need to cover it up. And if the boys don't see that, it's only because they're foolish, prepubescent puppets of the system." Then he'd kissed her on the cheek.

The memory still brought a tightness to her throat, maybe because his noble ideals hadn't really survived him. She'd had the brown mark surgically removed when she was eighteen.

If she had it to do over again, would she remove it today?

“... drugs in her system,” Kim was saying. “Benzodiazepine, the same psychoactive sedative he’s used on all four. More than enough to make her susceptible to suggestion.”

“No sign of sexual contact?” Brad said.

“None.”

Nikki caught Brad’s sharp look. “That doesn’t mean this wasn’t a sexual act,” she interjected.

He offered her a slight nod. Just that, a simple gesture of acknowledgment and appreciation for her input. Funny how he could lighten her mood without the slightest knowledge of his overall effect on her.

The other women in the office insisted he was a dead ringer for a blond-headed George Clooney, ten years younger, perhaps. She could see the similarities. The dark, perpetually smiling eyes, probing deep. The short hair, the soft boyish face, slightly elongated. The quintessential look of a perfect gentleman reinforced by his often thoughtful and polite demeanor.

But her closer working relationship had taught her that those qualities didn’t make Brad a soft or pliable man. If anything, his edges were rougher than they first appeared. Clean on the outside, giving great attention to detail, but confident enough to say what was on his mind whenever he saw fit.

His unapologetic talent for drawing women with his boyish good looks and strong conviction was tempered only by his notorious refusal to commit. Which, in turn, made him a considerable mystery.

To Nikki’s way of thinking, he carried all the markings of a man with a past so deeply scarred that he was compelled to build walls of self-preservation. Which was why she had resisted her own attraction to him for so long. Even if he was interested in her, as she suspected, she wasn’t sure *she* was interested in a man she couldn’t quite peg. As a psychologist, it was her job to analyze people down to their uttermost depths. The fact that she could not do so with Brad nagged her with an unshakable sense of wariness.

His eyes were soft and kind, but what lay hidden behind those eyes gave her pause. The unknown. She’d misjudged a man once before and wasn’t eager to do it again. Her training in behavioral science hadn’t made her any more trusting.

“He wouldn’t grow impatient,” she said. “He would relish his time with her.”

Another nod, this time looking at the cadaver. “He would.”

Kim looked up, then turned to the victim’s other side and dramatically ran her index finger over the foot, tracing each toe. Always one for theatrics when the opportunity presented itself.

“She took care of her feet. The toenail polish is fresh, applied in the last twenty-four hours. But she’s taken care of her feet, her whole body for that matter, for a long time.”

“He likes to apply makeup and give pedicures,” Nikki said.

A half-inch hole, now bloodless and black, ran up into the heel. “He used the same half-inch bit size, maybe the same bit. Ran it directly through the skin, the calcaneus bone, severing the peroneus longus tendon, and into the anterior tibial artery. Everything’s as it was with the other three, except for this.” Kim traced her finger

down to the victim's right heel. "This is what's new."

She picked up a small roll of bloody paper, maybe two inches long, and held it up between her thumb and forefinger. "This time he left this in the right heel."

Brad stepped forward. "Writing?"

"I can see some markings, yes. But I haven't unrolled it yet. I thought you would want a look before I sent it up to the lab."

Brad's face lightened a shade.

The killer had left them a message.

---

**SPECIAL AGENT IN Charge** James Temple sat against the edge of the secretary desk on the conference room's north end and gazed at them with brown, glassy eyes, hands folded up by his chin. Nikki leaned against the wall, arms crossed, fixated on the enlarged photograph of the Bride Collector's note on the screen. Two other agents, Miguel Ruffino and Barth Kramer, lounged in chairs, their focus divided among the note, the SAC, Nikki, and Brad, who paced at the head of the conference table.

There was a reason these two would always be good, but not great, at their jobs, Brad thought. They lacked the obsessive personality required to bring inordinate focus to any single task.

"So this is it," Temple said to Brad's left. "We have us a certified wacko. A freaking lunatic from some funny barn who's out there drilling holes in women to make a point." He looked around with a bemused look. "No pun intended, of course."

Ruffino and Kramer guffawed, just as Nikki shot the SAC a sharp look. "I wouldn't put it like—"

"Spare me the psychobabble." Temple stood and shoved his hands into his pockets. "If this isn't certified crazy, I don't know what is."

The man stood maybe three or four inches shy of six feet, wiry as a bull snake. He shaved his head and took pride in his body, which he regularly and rigorously brought into submission at the gym. The man was a misfit in Denver, Brad thought. In the Southeast, from which he'd been transferred a month earlier, his attitude would have been less of a problem. But up here, gunslingers were frowned upon, and James Temple was most definitely a gunslinger—hotheaded, quick to conclusions, and choleric to the bone.

"On balance, most pattern killers are mentally stable," Nikki said. "They are well educated, financially stable, often good looking, seemingly well-adjusted people. Unlike mass murderers, whose delusions feed beliefs of supremacy, serial killers act for personal gain or revenge. They do so in a calculated, thoughtful way. Hardly your freaking lunatic."

"Read it." Temple frowned and jabbed his sharp, dimpled chin in the direction of the screen. "Any idiot can see that this religious nutcase slobbers on himself. You're saying you see something different?"

Nikki's face reddened, but she didn't point out the man's blunder in essentially calling himself an idiot. She looked at the screen.

The note was written in black lettering, with a fine ballpoint pen. The two-by-three-

inch piece of white paper had been cut using a straightedge, then was folded several times before being rolled and inserted into the hole in Caroline's heel, at least several days after it had been written.

Brad read through the poem again.

*The Beauty Eden is Lost*

*Where intelligence does centered  
I came to her and she smashed the Serpent head  
I searched and find the seventh and beautiful  
She will rest in my Serpent's hole  
And I will live again*

"He can hardly spell."

Brad regarded the man. "I'm sorry, James, but I don't see an imbecile."

The SAC raised a brow and pulled out a chair to sit in. At times like this, Brad's reputation proved useful. And he'd hailed from Miami before dazzling the Four Corners. That made James Temple basically kin, at least in Temple's mind. He would think twice before dismissing anything Brad had to say.

"Is that right? Well, please..." He opened a palm of invitation. "Fill us in."

Nikki shifted her gaze to the dark window, struggling to hide her frustration.

"I think Nikki's assessment is right," Brad explained. "We're dealing with a highly intelligent individual who knows exactly what he's doing within the context of his own world."

"Just because he knows how to drill holes and clean up after himself doesn't mean he's not barking mad."

"No," Nikki interjected, "but even if he is suffering from psychosis, it doesn't mean he's an animal."

"I see motivation and intention," Brad continued, nodding at the note on the screen. "But it would be a significant mistake not to assume the author knew exactly what he was writing and why he was writing it."

"You're saying he's broadcasting his next move," Temple said, glancing back at the note. "How so?"

"Assume with me that this was written by a scholar; a poet with the intelligence of Hemingway. And written for our benefit, with some bad grammar thrown in to make himself look less intelligent."

"Grammar has little to do with intelligence," Nikki said.

"I realize that. But go with me. What's he really saying?"

"The beauty of Eden is lost," Nikki read. "The fall of innocence."

Temple closed his eyes momentarily in a show of impatience. "Fine. Something less obvious."

Brad nodded at Nikki. She exchanged an inquisitive look with him, nodded her appreciation, and looked up at the screen.

"He's saying that where once beauty, innocence, and intelligence were found, this Eden, it's now lost. The serpent—read evil or the devil—is responsible. Not sure about the third line—'I came to her and she smashed the Serpent's head'—doesn't make sense to me."

She glanced at Brad.

“Motivation,” he said. “He, the serpent, destroyed beauty but was wounded in the process. He’s upset. Go on.”

Nikki nodded. “I can go with that. The last three lines seem straightforward. He’s after a replacement for the beautiful one who fell, so he can live again.”

“He’s looking for a wife,” Brad said. “A new Eve.”

“And this helps us how?” Barth Kramer asked.

The SAC ignored him entirely, having stood again to pace. “Okay, I’m with you. Tell me more.”

Brad walked behind the conference table, keeping his eyes fixed on the words, written in the killer’s own hand. He could see it all: The desk. Neatly arranged. Perfectly ordered. A pen poised over the paper just so, while the words he had recited to himself a thousand times flowed through his mind, sung by a choir, a chorus in a symphony. A requiem that thundered the truth, demanding to be heard.

Now such truth was reduced to mere words on a simple piece of white paper, for his greatest enemies to see. It was like being stripped naked, both terrifying and thrilling at once. The killer was coming out. His whole life was here, on this piece of paper.

Brad cleared his throat. “His killings are ritualistic, leading him to life. He’s not doing it out of anger. None of the crime scenes has shown signs of rage.”

Local authorities had found the first victim three weeks ago in a barn just south of Grand Junction, in the arid Grand Valley near the border of Utah and Colorado. Serena Barker had been twenty-three, and the police had assumed her to be a victim of satanic ritual. She’d been dead for three days, and a coyote had gotten to her left foot.

The Denver FBI office hadn’t been engaged until the second body was found sixty miles northeast of Denver, in an apartment near the plains cattle town of Greeley. Karen Neely, twenty-four. Again carefully preserved, nearly flawless in her final presentation. Brad had been assigned the case and immediately requested copies of the file from Grand Junction. A studious detective, Braden Hall, had meticulously documented the case. There was little doubt that they had a serial killer on their hands.

The Bride Collector killed his third woman a week later in Parker, south of Denver. Julia Paxton was twenty and had been found less than eight hours after her death, a vision of twisted beauty glued to the wall of her own house.

All women under the age of twenty-five. All exceptionally beautiful. As of yet, only one murder had been publicized—that of Julia Paxton, who was a well-known model for Victoria’s Secret. Other than the distinctive circumstances of death, they could determine no connection among the women.

As for the killer, recovered evidence from the previous scenes put him at 180 to 200 pounds based on the depth of his shoe indentations in soil. No DNA to run through CODIS—the Combined DNA Index System. No hair or cell samples. No saliva, blood, semen, or latent prints tied to the killer.

He was essentially a ghost.

“His motivation is in finding life,” Brad continued, “not in delivering death. He believes he’s leading the women into life.”

Temple stared at him. “You see, now there’s where my psycho-nutcase warning bells start going crazy. Forgive me if I don’t see torturing and killing someone ‘into life’ as nothing less than barking mad.”

“Psychotic, maybe,” Nikki said. “Mentally ill, maybe. But not necessarily less intelligent than any of us. The direct link between psychosis and intelligence is well documented in some subjects. We should assume that the Bride Collector is more intelligent than anyone in this room. If we don’t, we risk seriously underestimating him.”

“That’s your profile? Our man’s a genius?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

Temple crossed his arms and settled back against the desk. “Okay, I’ll let you go with that.”

“There’s more,” Brad said. “He wants us to know he’s going after beautiful women, that much is unmistakable in his writing. I would say he knows we’ll see through his attempt to look unintelligent. He wants us to look for a supremely intelligent person who has a penchant for killing beautiful women because he’s been jilted by one. In reality, that’s not the case. Sound right to you, Nikki?”

Her blue eyes widened. She nodded, lost in thought. “Eerily right.”

Temple drummed his fingers on the desk. “Okay, so we play his game his way. We look for the most beautiful women in and around Denver.”

“That’s what he wants us to do,” Frank said.

“I’m open to suggestions. In the absence of any, we keep him engaged, even if it means playing things his way. Keep it under wraps. We don’t need everyone who thinks they’re decent looking in a panic. Any tire tracks lifted at the shack scene?”

“None.”

“Other evidence processed?”

“So far he’s clean. The fresh hair, bodily fluids, and fingerprints match the victim. Three other hair samples we’re running now. Could be from anyone messing around in there.”

Temple nodded at Frank and glanced at the others. “Any other ideas?”

Nikki shifted off the wall and paced. “You want to play his way, start with all known cases of mental illness in Colorado.”

“So now he’s a wacko again?”

“You’re not listening. Again, being a genius and mentally ill are not mutually exclusive.”

“But you’re willing to concede that he could be nuts.”

She breathed out slowly. “I think our guy could be deeply disturbed, just not nuts. Maybe psychotic and delusional, maybe suffering from acute schizophrenia, but he doesn’t slobber.”

“Then until we learn differently, we assume he’s both mentally ill and a genius. Fair enough?”

She nodded. “The ones that aren’t complete loners tend to congregate on the Internet, in psychiatrists’ offices, psychiatric wards. It’s a starting point.”

“As of now we start looking for records of any anomalies or patterns in mental health facilities, residential care homes, whatever.” Temple turned quickly to Brad. “Pull whatever resources you need, cross-check what we know of the Bride Collector against the files of every known psycho released from any facility in the last”—he looked at Nikki—“ten years?”

“Too many cases. Mental illness is more widespread than you think. Nearly seven

hundred thousand mentally ill are jailed each year in this country. Start with a year.”

Temple looked stunned. Brad found it odd that the man wasn't already familiar with this statistic. “God help us all.” He glanced up at the wall clock, which was closing in on ten. “A year then. I have to go.”

Brad spoke before the man could move. “We should also assume he intends to kill seven women. The seventh and most beautiful may refer to his final target.”

That brought a pause.

“Unless he's killed three others without anyone's knowledge,” Frank said.

“As long as we're assuming the worst, he has three more to go.” Eyes on Nikki. “And being the smartest mind in the room, he knows that we know that. He wants us to know that he's going to kill three more women.”

“It fits.”

Brad pushed on quickly. “He's going to go again in a few days. If it takes him a few days to kill, then he's likely already engaged. It's a short cycle for a pattern killer who kills to satisfy compulsion. But our guy's method is based on reason, not raw compulsion.”

They stared at him, arms crossed.

“Okay. I gotta go.” Temple grabbed his cell phone and walked toward the door. “We assume our guy's out there now, outwitting us morons, stalking a beautiful woman he intends to kill in the next few days.” He turned back at the door. “For the love of all that is holy, stop him.”

### 3

**QUINTON GAULD WAS** his name, and at the moment he was preparing to enjoy a thick, juicy, prime-cut rib eye at Elway's steak house at the corner of 19th and Curtis, just one block from the FBI building on Stout Street, downtown Denver, Colorado, USA, North America, World, Universe, Infinity.

The thought of being so close to the only humans capable of ruining things put him in a calculating mood. It was a time for reflection and self-examination, soaking in the fluids of truth.

And upon such introspection, Quinton was feeling abundantly satisfied.

The waiter, a tall blond man with a slightly protruding belly and sharp elbows, set a ceramic plate down using a cream-colored hot pad folded over the dish's rim to protect his palm and fingers from being seared like the steak. His name was Anthony.

"Be careful, it's hot."

"Thank you, Anthony."

"Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"I'll let you know in a moment."

"Are you sure I can't get you anything else? Vegetables? Bread?"

"I am all set, Anthony."

"No drink?"

"I have water, Anthony. Water washes steak down quite nicely after so much bloodletting."

The waiter offered a coy smile, signifying his appreciation for Quinton's choice of words to describe a cow's being slaughtered. But Quinton was speaking of Caroline, not the cow. Caroline wasn't a cow, and she hadn't been slaughtered.

She was one of God's favorites, and she'd been drilled. And then bled.

*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.*

Quinton picked up his fork and held it in his large, bony hand. He paused for a moment, staring at the gold cuff link that buttoned the sleeve of his shirt. An inch of white, and then the blue Armani suit, reserved for special occasions.

He never worked in a suit and tie because he found them too constraining, preferring instead nakedness encumbered only by black briefs.

He was momentarily fascinated by the chrome fork in his fingers. Larger than many forks. A real man's fork. His own fingers were larger than most by as much as an inch in length. By his hands alone, one might guess him to be nearly seven feet tall. In reality, he stood only six foot four.

He twisted his wrist, caught up in the sight of flesh against metal, such a harsh surface in the embrace of soft flesh. He'd once considered his hands too large and gangly, alien appendages on the end of long bones. So he'd decided to take special care of his hands and in the process had come to truly appreciate them. They had a

unique beauty, a subject about which he knew far more than most. He'd allowed various women from Asia to give him manicures and pedicures twice a week for nearly a year now, and the results were impressive.

Quinton moved his forefinger. Then he did it again, trying to trace the messages that spread across neurons in his brain at a rate of six hundred per second before being shot down his nerves to the muscles in his hand. Little bundles of energy were racing from his brain to his hand with clear, precise directions at this very moment, yet he was completely unaware of how or when his brain began or ended the cycle. How decision became instruction. How instruction became movement.

The brain was a mystery for most humans, and as of yet for Quinton Gauld.

It occurred to him that his moment of exploration into the finer things of life had stretched on a full minute or more. Not a bad thing, for after all, he was here to enjoy himself. No enjoyment could exceed the power of the mind to amuse itself.

And the whole time he had been contemplating his hand and the utensil in that hand, he was in perfect tune with all else in Elway's place of feeding.

The bartender with silver earrings who had apologized after spilling beer on a customer's hands. He offered the woman a free drink. She declined, but she despised him for his carelessness. She was a real cow who'd been convinced by inner delusional voices that her black polyester slacks were not too tight despite the fact that she had gained ten pounds in the last three months, thanks to her meds. He would say depression was her demon.

The two new customers, one with bratty kids, who'd entered the premises since he'd picked up his fork.

The husband and wife two booths over, arguing over the price of a new minivan and whether the van should be blue or gray. Black got too dirty. No, white got too dirty. Quinton briefly entertained the thought of helping them gain a more expansive understanding of the word *dirty*.

The pretty waitress wearing a white halter top who smiled as she passed his table. She found him interesting. Handsome. A real gentleman, judging by his appearance and his posture. He knew this not only by her look, but because women always commented on these admirable traits. This particular woman, whose name tag identified her as Karen with a C, or Caren, was also likely attracted to his tall frame. They said size didn't matter, but most women had preferences when it came to size. Caren liked large men.

There was a single fly caught in the window to his right.

A hundred other stimuli had been trapped by his brain as he contemplated the fork. Not the least of which was the aromatic steam rising off his charbroiled steak.

Quinton held his fork in his left hand with one finger on the bridge to steady it. He sliced through the tender meat with a serrated blade, one provided by Jonathan Elway, the famed Denver Bronco quarterback who, based on Quinton's research three days earlier when he'd carefully selected the restaurant for this occasion, had indeed been a favorite among all of God's children.

*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.*

A man with enviable strength and intelligence, able to hurl an inflated leather sack through the air with such accuracy and power that few defenders could see it coming, much less stop it from reaching its intended receiver.

On his God-given field, Jonathan Elway, known to the rest of the world as John Elway, had been a god. He didn't mistakenly think of himself as a god, like most humans desperate to live out their pathetic fantasies did. He actually *was* a god, something he himself likely didn't know.

Quinton placed the first bite of meat into his mouth, pulled the tender morsel off using his teeth, and closed his eyes. The taste was heavenly. The seared crust gave way with a faint crack to the moist fibers beneath. Juice flooded his mouth and pooled under his tongue as he sank his molars deep into the flesh.

So delectable and satisfying, he allowed himself a soft moan. Two more chews with his eyes still closed to shut out all other visual stimuli. The pleasure demanded more vocalized appreciation. Whispering this time.

"Mmmm... Mmmm... Delicious."

It was important not to be plastic. Pretending to himself only minimized who he was. Most humans wore a public facade, an attempt to compensate for their own flaws and weaknesses. The whole world was plastic, populated by people playing roles, fooling only the foolish. Sadly, they'd worn the facades for so long that they had lost even their awareness of the habit.

I am an important executive who has made money—the Rolex label on my wrist should make that clear.

I am a powerful lover and provider, signified by the way I've engineered my body to appear strong and symmetrically lumpy.

I am comfortable with myself, signified by the way I walk so nonchalantly wearing only sweats and a T-shirt.

I am nobody. But please, please don't tell anyone.

The voice of the bratty boy, who was now seated across the room in a booth, scraped at Quinton's mind. He fought back a grimace of frustration. It was important not to be plastic, but it was also important not to step on the sanctity of others' space. The boy was upsetting the balance of peace and tranquility in the room. No doubt, every last patron would readily shove a sock or boot down the boy's throat if they were not so afraid of being found out for who they really were.

He shut the boy out and focused on the cavalcade of flavors dancing around in his mouth. He began to chew with powerful strokes of his jaw, drawing the juices into his mouth and throat. Swallowing deep.

The details of his earlier activity, which he was now celebrating by breaking an otherwise strict vegetarian diet, slipped through his mind. His special time with Caroline had been satisfying in the same way all great accomplishments were rewarding. But he'd drawn no physical pleasure from the bloodletting.

Eating the steak, however... This was indeed like sex. And because Quinton had not known any sexual gratification since that terrible night seven years earlier, he relished every other physical pleasure that reminded him that physical pleasure was indeed an immeasurable gift.

News of Caroline's death would soon fill the world with a single question: *Who is it? Who is it? Is it my neighbor, is it the grocery clerk, is it the high school principal?*

Humans were predictable. Like animated carbon units. Cardboard cutouts with fancy trim, far too much of it. There was only one human who really mattered, and at the moment that was him. Everything around him was stage dressing. He was the only

real player on this stage.

The audience was watching him only; the rest were only extras. It was the same for all of them, but few were courageous enough to understand or confess this single beautiful, bitter truth: Deep down inside, each of them believed they were at the center of the universe.

But at the moment, it was Quinton, and he was wise enough to embrace it.

God had chosen Quinton Gauld. Simple. Indisputable. Final.

Which brought Quinton to the task set before him. Three more, as he saw fit. Ending with the most beautiful.

The boy in the booth was whining his dislike for peas. A perfectly good vegetable, but this dark-headed boy who looked to be about ten or eleven was refusing to consider reason, in part because the father wasn't delivering reason, but distraction. "How about ice cream, Joshie? How about lobster, Joshie?"

Quinton cut off more meat and savored the bite. So delicious. Rarely had he drawn such pleasure from meat. But the boy was undermining the experience, and Quinton felt regression pressing in on his psyche. *Joshie* was mad as hell and there seemed no good reason for it. The boy was simply misfiring. Going kaput. Rotting before his time in the grave.

Few things distracted Quinton any longer. He'd long ago conquered his mind. A doctor had once diagnosed him with schizoaffective disorder, a condition that supposedly involved the complications of thought disorder and a bipolar mood disorder. Five years of his life had vanished in a fog of heavy medication, until he silently protested the oppression.

The condition was his greatest gift, not a disease. He still took a very low dosage of medication to control the tics—a natural by-product of a supercharged mind—but otherwise he relied on his own substantial focus and enlightenment.

At the moment, it took every fiber of his formidable intellect to remain calm. The square of seared cow flesh in his mouth was tasting more like cardboard than meat. After his significant accomplishment earlier today, the heavens were cheering, but the rats on earth were totally oblivious. There was no respect left in the world.

The father suggested that Joshie take a time-out to think about it, and the boy raced screaming to the restroom. None of the others seemed too put out by the scene.

The whole mini-drama was more than Quinton was willing to bear. He calmly set down his knife and dabbed his lips with his serviette seven times, alternating corners, a habit that helped to bring order to his mind. He took one more deep draft of the purified water, slipped a hundred-dollar bill onto the table, and stood.

With a nod and smile at the waitress who wanted him, he walked toward the restroom.

It was important not to stand out in a crowd while simultaneously living a nonplastic life. An authentic life. Authentic, but not proud and obnoxious, either. That was the boy's problem: He was standing out in the crowd, acting as if he were a coddled king who ate ice cream while the rest of the kingdom was subjected to peas.

Quinton's problem, on the other hand, was how to enlighten the boy without making the same mistake and drawing attention. He neither wanted nor needed the spotlight, particularly not now.

He walked into the bathroom with a backward glance, noting that no one else was