

T.J.  
BREARTON  
SURVIVORS

THE  
INTERNATIONAL  
BESTSELLING

TITAN TRILOGY

BOOK II

A GRIPPING THRILLER FULL OF SUSPENSE

# SURVIVORS

BOOK TWO OF THE TITAN TRILOGY

T. J. BREARTON

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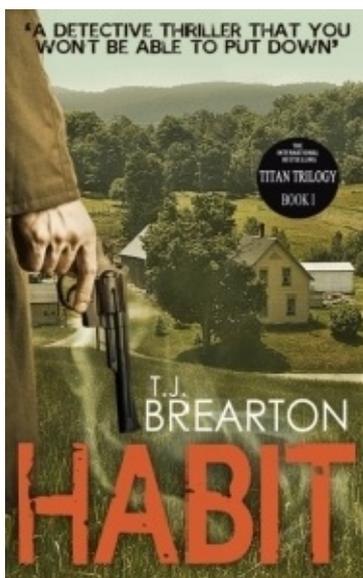
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## **SURVIVORS IS BOOK TWO OF THE TITAN TRILOGY**

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A young woman, Rebecca Heilshorn, lies stabbed to death in her bed in a remote farmhouse. Rookie detective Brendan Healy is called in to investigate. All hell breaks loose when her brother bursts onto the scene. Rebecca turns out to have many secrets and connections to a sordid network mixing power, wealth, and sex. Detective Brendan Healy, trying to put a tragic past behind him, pursues a dangerous investigation that will risk both his life and his sanity. Habit is a compelling thriller which will appeal to all fans of crime fiction. T.J. Brearton amps up the tension at every step, until the shocking and gripping conclusion.

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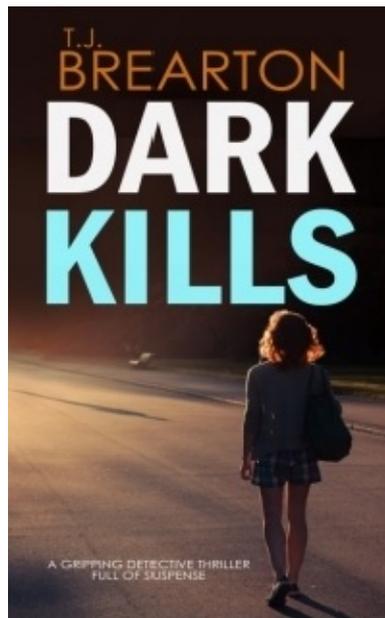
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**Who is murdering female college students and can they be stopped?**

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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE / Saturday, 8:18 AM

CHAPTER TWO / Saturday, 8:44 AM

CHAPTER THREE / Saturday, 9:04 AM

CHAPTER FOUR / Sunday, 9:53 AM

CHAPTER FIVE / Sunday, 2:11 PM

CHAPTER SIX / Sunday, 3:25 PM

CHAPTER SEVEN / Sunday, 4:26 PM

CHAPTER EIGHT / Sunday, 5:38 pm

CHAPTER NINE / Sunday, 6:44 PM

CHAPTER TEN / Sunday, 6:58 PM

CHAPTER ELEVEN / Sunday, 7:09 PM

CHAPTER TWELVE / Sunday, 8:20 PM

CHAPTER THIRTEEN / Sunday, 9:47 PM

CHAPTER FOURTEEN / Monday 12:53 AM

CHAPTER FIFTEEN / Monday 1:03 AM

CHAPTER SIXTEEN / Monday, 6:18 AM

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN / Monday, 8:18 AM

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN / Monday, 8:30 AM

CHAPTER NINETEEN / Monday, 8:44 AM

CHAPTER TWENTY / Monday 10:56 AM

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE / 11:18 AM

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO / Monday, 11:36 AM

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE / Monday, 11:53 AM

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR / Monday, 12:09 PM

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE / Monday, 12:36 PM

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX / Monday, 12:52 PM

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN / Monday, 1:06 PM

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT / Monday, 1:44 PM

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE / Monday, 2:44 PM

CHAPTER THIRTY / Monday, 3:08 PM

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE / Monday, 3:31 PM

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO / Monday, 3:55 PM

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE / Monday 4:08 PM

[CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR / Monday 4:15 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE / Monday 4:09 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX / Monday 4:20 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN / Monday, 4:28 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT / Monday, 4:35 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE / Monday, 4:35 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY / Monday, 4:44 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-ONE / Monday, 4:59 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-TWO / Monday, 5:10 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-THREE / Monday, 5:10 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR / Monday, 5:22 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE / Monday, 5:29 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-SIX / Monday 7:03 PM](#)  
[CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN / Tuesday, 12:11 AM](#)  
[EPILOGUE / Tuesday 6:31 AM](#)

**Titanomachy:**

In Greek mythology, the Titanomachy, or War of the Titans, was the ten-year series of battles which were fought in Thessaly between the two camps of deities long before the existence of mankind: the Titans, based on Mount Othrys, and the Olympians, who would come to reign on Mount Olympus. This Titanomachia is also known as the Battle of Gods. The war was fought to decide who would become the rulers of the Universe.

“SURVIVORS” IS BOOK TWO OF THE TITAN TRILOGY. THE OTHER TWO BOOKS “HABIT” AND “DAYBREAK” ARE AVAILABLE NOW.

## PROLOGUE

The crash of metal. That was what she knew before she was aware of anything else. First it crashed, and then it squealed – an ear-splitting noise like the sound of those big machines that crunched cars into compact squares. Angie was thrown forward, and at the same time her body wrenched to the side as the car started to roll.

Her next thought was of Gloria, in the car seat behind her, and she turned her head while the car was spinning on the black freeway.

*Baby. My baby.*

*And: What hit us?*

It happened so fast – too quick to process. Those headlights had been coming up in her side view, and she’d made one of those casual, slightly indignant observations, *This maniac has really got it to the floor*. And then: impact. A shuddering bludgeon, the back of the car, on that side, she thought it was the left side, urging the car into a skid.

Then the tires caught on their edges, and the car was rolling over now, *Oh Dear God Jesus, Gloria, my baby*, they were launching up and they were over on their side. Her body was mashed against the driver’s-side door, she’d only just been driving, for God’s sake, just driving along, center lane, best place to be on the Saw Mill Parkway, let them pass you on the left, get out in front of the slowpokes on the right – in the center lane you went a sane speed, a civilized speed, and then that son of a bitch came up on her like that and . . .

The car was sliding along on its side, and that was the screeching, and she saw something that her mind first called *welding*, but she knew it wasn’t welding, it was the metal scraping along the macadam, and they still had to be at least doing fifty, maybe fifty-five, and the world was a roar of razor metal sheared away by the asphalt, bitumen biting into the paint, the steel, tearing it, hot sparks like a metal-works factory, oh so much *industry*, so much *power* and combustion and things exploding in this world, and my baby. My baby.

Gloria was suspended by her car-seat straps, hanging off to the side, just a moment of her sweet face, her big blue eyes wide – she had his eyes, she’d always had his eyes, more than anything else, and his dark hair. Damn him, goddamn him for not being here.

The car screamed on its side, the rushing black all around her, hunting her, sucking her into its maw, and Angie felt her body start to fall, to come away from its cramped crunch against the door, and gravity taking hold, pulling her down to the jagged orange sparks. But then there was another shrieking peal of metal, and a lightning crack, a sound that then shattered into a million pieces, a bright, terrifying symphony of bells as the windshield imploded, showering her with glass.

And the car continued to roll as it tore along the night parkway, bright white lights

whipped past – *Help us!* – spangling the deadly splinters of glass as shards stabbed into her, nettling her face and hands and arms with white hot pain, and somewhere in there she reached out with everything and tried to shield Gloria, tumbling as the car continued its thunderous pitch onto its roof.

Glass everywhere, and she was blind. She couldn't see her baby. She heard something – did she hear something? High above the cacophonous monster of glass and steel and oil and engine and growling pavement. Did she hear her child?

Oh where was she? Where did her baby go, lost in the black world, lost in the bedlam of a deafening orchestra. Angie flailed with her hands, but her body was taken by the inertia of the gimbaling automobile, the goddamned Land Cruiser, the car *he* said would be good in the snow, the car that made her feel like some Westchester yuppie when she was not a Westchester yuppie, she was a girl from Hawthorne, her parents had had the same place since she was three, all she could remember, those two Goldfish plants hanging from the rusty brass hooks underneath the porch roof in the summer time; the short walkway across their tiny postage stamp lawn with the one piece of disgorged concrete that was sort of cockeyed, like a lazy eye; her bedroom window, tucked secretly in behind the twining branches of the Maple tree; her second floor bedroom that was, with the electric baseboard heaters that came on always smelling a bit like syrup and dust, like a lost crayon was slowly sizzling down inside; the ghungroos chiming around the doorknob; her mother watching ice skating on the TV downstairs, her mother's gray hair, the ragged sponge-gold apron, her father smelling like ink toner and cigarettes.

Her baby, she couldn't find her, because she was pinned to the roof of the car, nothing but white noise now, no discernible sounds, no sense of direction, the grating rush of the angry road, it screamed at her, all around her, a million black teeth gritting in the riot of noise. Leering, pinwheeling around her, blank and loud and remorseless, a chasm of vibration and rage.

They were upside down, they were on the roof of the car, and it was still careening along, trembling, shaking concussively, rattling her bones to the hollow straws of their centers, filled with cold air now, her skin scorched black and scalding with the searing fire of the sparks of metal, the flints of paint and steel in her hair, her teeth, her eyes, the glass embedded in her.

My love. I met you when I was so young. You gave me our girl. Our baby. My love. When did you start to leave? What didn't I do? What could I have done better for you?

She saw him as he stood in the doorway of the restaurant, that slight smile on his face, the one that was righteous and guilty and somehow young, leftover from before time had dragged on the skin and bones and bent us over with responsibility, and the crush of reality. His eyes swimmy with drink, but still cutting through to her, the part of him trapped in there – had his eyes said goodbye?

*Thank you, my love, for giving me our baby girl.*

*She's lost now; I need you to help me find her.*

*I think, I think the car is going to flip again. I can't tell for sure but we're lifting. I feel lighter.*

Bleeding, broken – something is broken, oh I know, my leg is not right, my arm, my throat – my throat feels hot and wet and angry. I want to scream.

And Angie realized she was screaming, and she was crying, and there was compression from all sides. The thought occurred to her – just a mote, really, that this *was* in fact like those car crushers, that the Land Cruiser was not handling the stress of overturning, it was crumpling like an accordion, pinching her, trapping her, while the wreckage of it all raged around her, blood singing as loudly in her ears, her mouth open with her lips moving as if in prayer.

When the baby fell into her arms, it was the last thing she knew, and it was warm, warm, and Gloria's face was pressed into hers, her skin soft and calm, and the baby gripped her around her neck, and Angie found she had an arm free and she put it around her.

They were in that position when the first police arrived fifteen minutes later, lights spinning. The highway patrolmen cleared the rubberneckers out of the way, and prepared the jaws to open the twisted metal. They were like that, enmeshed in the center of it all, mother and child.

## CHAPTER ONE / Saturday, 8:18 AM

The FBI agent was slapping a pack of cigarettes against his palm as Jennifer Aiken entered the diner. It was a Saturday morning, and the place murmured and clattered and sizzled all around her, the smell of maple syrup and fried potatoes filling the air. The agent looked up at her as she approached, and she could already see the wariness in his eyes. He scratched at the pack's cellophane. She sat down across from him and watched as he shook out a cigarette.

He was about ten years older than her. She knew he'd never kicked down any doors; she'd picked him because he came recommended as a good profiler. He stuck the smoke in between his lips. She wondered for a moment if he was actually going to light it up, which would be ballsy, even for a guy with greying hair and crow's feet framing his dark blue eyes – you couldn't smoke in Westchester County, not in restaurants, pretty much not anywhere. It didn't matter to Jennifer, she'd found it fairly easy to give up smoking after college, much to the frustration of friends who'd struggled to kick the habit. But he only held the cigarette there between his lips, and she saw his nostrils flare as though he was taking in the tobacco's aroma, and then he pinched it between his two fingers and pulled it out, and held it like it was lit.

"Morning," he said to her.

"Morning. Cold out there." She mimed a shiver and then slipped her bag off her shoulder and set it down on the bench seat.

The waitress came over with a pot of coffee, giving Jennifer a lopsided smile.

"Please, yes," Jennifer said, and slid her cup closer to the edge of the booth table. The waitress poured, and Jennifer said, "That'll be good for now."

The agent raised his eyebrows. "Not eating?"

"Are you?"

"I ordered, yeah. Hungry. Sorry I didn't wait."

"That's alright."

The waitress was looking at them like people gawked at zoo animals, wondering if they were going to do anything which might hold her attention, or if she could just move on. Jennifer smiled politely and turned her face up. "I'm fine for now."

Jennifer focused on the agent. His name was Gary Petrino. He seemed rough and part Italian and his voice sounded like the gin mill had spat him out. They said he drank a bit and had an eye for the ladies, but she wasn't one to judge. She and Petrino had only spoken twice on the phone: once for the introduction and the assignment, then again to arrange this meeting, three days later. He was looking her up and down, she could feel his eyes, like sensors, moving over her. She was thirty-one, auburn hair, brown eyes. She considered herself plain, and called it curiosity when men checked her out. Men checked everyone out. But then, looking through photos, and seeing herself objectively, something in her would tip, like a ship rolling in the Cotuit Bay, spilling the sunlight across the deck, and she would understand she might be pretty. Then it would be gone.

He lifted a yellow folder from the seat and set it on the table beside his steaming mug of coffee. Then he turned for a second and looked out the window over

Mamaroneck Avenue. The morning traffic was a hushed rumble on the other side of the glass. Jennifer thought he was taking this moment to gather his thoughts. Her gaze fell to the unlit cigarette he was holding, the familiar way it sat in the crux of his fingers, the fallow tips of his nails. Then Petrino turned back to face her.

\* \* \*

“So this guy, Healy . . . Here’s the first thing; this guy is a hot mess.”

She raised her eyebrows and settled back into her booth, the plastic giving a little groan.

“He’s got himself tucked away. Found himself a cool, dry place . . .”

She could see the question floating in Petrino’s dark eyes. He wanted to know why Jennifer Aiken, why the Justice Department, was looking into Brendan Healy, and what that had to do with the price of tea in China. She let that keep for now. She said nothing, attempting to pull more out of him with her silence.

“Guy’s a wacko, if you ask me. You know he carries a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver? That gun hasn’t been standard-issue since Reagan was president. So, look, I don’t know what you know, or don’t know. I’m just going to lay it out, okay? I don’t usually do this type of assessment on law enforcement. Even if he’s . . . well, whatever. You want my profile, here it is: he’s survived some serious shit and he went through the ringer on a major homicide investigation. Yet he skedaddles after cracking one of the biggest, grisliest cases Central New York has seen. My feeling? Sure, he’s screwed up. Maybe he’s not interested in the world’s approval. It all turns to ashes in the mouth anyway, trust me. He’s walked away from just about everything in his life, okay. And he’s had a serious drinking problem, looks like. But still . . .” Petrino shook his head. “I think something spooked him, sent him packing.”

Petrino relaxed his posture a little, and his weedy eyebrows that had climbed high onto his forehead dropped, and he took on that sleepy, bored look again. “Anyway, it’s all here in the dossier.” He sighed and pushed the folder across the table. Jennifer flipped it open. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Petrino tap the cigarette he was holding, as if unloading invisible ash into an invisible ashtray.

She glanced up from the paperwork. “He lost his wife and child?”

“Yeah. Ten years ago. Car wreck, not far from here, Saw Mill River Parkway. And then he went to work for the Mount Pleasant Police in Hawthorne. That’s north from here, six, seven miles. Did a few years as a beat cop, then somehow he got up into Oneida County as a criminal investigator. That part you know. He’s a college boy, you’ll see that right there, his records from New York University, studied neuroscience. I mean, you can’t make this stuff up, right? Some trooper sergeants, some investigators, you know, they might have gone to law school or something, but this guy was a few credits shy of being called doctor. Picked up and left it.”

“But you don’t think this was typical behavior for him, leaving his job, leaving the state?”

Petrino shrugged. His conviction seemed gone. “I just think, you know, it’s possible, there’s more to it than that. More than some pattern he has; something else . . .”

The agent shifted in his seat.

“Anyway, you can look that over. From what I found, he had just the one case in

Oneida County. Kind of unusual for a Sheriff's Department to handle a homicide and not the State Troopers? I don't know who is rubbing whose back up there, but that's how it unfolded. There was a dead girl in a farm house; senior investigator was a guy named Ambrose Delaney . . . Now am I just telling you things you already know?"

She glanced up from leafing through the file. "No, please, continue. This is all helpful." She smiled at him. Her mother said that when she smiled her face lit up. Otherwise, she looked like she was in mourning. *Thank you, Mom.*

He pursed his lips and stuck them out for a moment, exhaling through his nose. "Alright. So, the dead girl had a brother. The brother shows up to the crime scene, and he's got a wild hair up his ass to see his sister. Understandable, I guess. He's given a grief counselor . . ."

"That's Olivia Jane."

"Uh-huh. Right. He's given a grief counselor, and who knows what they do, and then he's just let go. Told to stay in the area. But they've got nothing hard to tie him to the murder yet, so . . ." Petrino looked at his cigarette. "The Sheriff's Department, ya know? What are you gonna do? The D.A. probably apologized for the inconvenience. This was an election year, if you see what I'm saying – everybody thinking about the votes. Then this kid, the brother, he rides up to the counselor's house . . ."

"Rides up?"

Petrino frowned. "Motorcycle. Young kid, comes from money, rebellious, whatever. But *this* kid, he opens up on Brendan Healy and Olivia Jane. I mean, pop-pop-pop. They're there together at Jane's house, in uh . . ." He peered across the table at the file, maybe trying to read it upside down. "Remsen or something. Or Stanwix. I don't know. That whole area is depressing as hell. So, the kid fires on them, then there's a showdown, and Healy takes the kid out with a fatal GSW, and he sort of gets taken off the case while I.A. does the officer-involved-shooting bit."

"Sort of taken off the case?"

"Like I said, this guy is a stubborn MF. He's tenacious, and keeps investigating on his own. He's got this paperback that was found at the crime scene and . . . anyway, it's all in there. I really don't feel like rehashing the whole case for you."

"That's fine. I appreciate your work, Agent Petrino."

He did that thing, blowing air through his nostrils, so loud it sounded like wind rushing through the trees. He tapped his fantasy cigarette again. Tap-tap. She saw he was growing impatient, and then he asked:

"What does Healy have to do with assembling your task force? That's what I don't get. Yes, the murdered girl was in an escort service. Right, and the thing turns on its head when they find out that Jane, the counselor, was actually the one who got her in? Yeah? And the one who *did* her in, all with the help of this psycho Reginald Forrester, some guy who found Satan after 9/11, or something. I don't think Healy knows more than what's in any of those depositions. I mean, Jane was sent up the river. You know that. And Forrester is long dead. Healy is a hawkshaw now, but I don't think he's even made one case."

She looked up from the papers again and put her hands together in front of her.

"*Hawkshaw?*"

"Private eye."

The waitress appeared with a steaming plate of ham and eggs and set it down in

front of Petrino. His eyes widened at the sight of it.

“There you go, sir.”

Petrino snapped the unlit cigarette in half. He took the plate in both of his hands, repositioned it a little more directly in front of him, and grabbed up his silverware. He glanced up and saw the waitress smiling dubiously at the broken cigarette.

“It’s how I quit,” he said.

The waitress looked unimpressed. She turned her half-lidded gaze to Jennifer.

“Still good,” Jennifer said with a wan smile.

The waitress turned on her heel and walked away as Petrino tucked into his food.

## CHAPTER TWO / Saturday, 8:44 AM

Brendan woke up, the last thought he'd had while dreaming lingered like a sunspot on his soul.

*I was born under the black smoke of September.*

The phone rang. It hung on the wall in the small hallway of his apartment. Brendan got off the couch and walked stiffly into the hall.

It was Sheriff Taber.

"Brendan. Been a long time. Two years?"

"I think that's right."

"It's good to hear your voice."

Brendan returned to the couch and sat down. His laptop was open on the coffee table in front of him. He looked away from it and out the window. In the distance he could see the snowcapped Medicine Bow Mountains.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Sheriff?"

"Oh, I don't think it will be a pleasure. I don't know how to say this, and I'm not big on melodrama, as you know."

"I remember."

A pause. Brendan thought he could hear muffled chatter in the background on Taber's end. He imagined the Sheriff sitting at the desk in his office. Taber usually kept the door open; he liked his policemen to come in and talk to him.

"Seamus Argon is dead."

The news hit Brendan like a punch to the gut. For a moment, he even struggled to get his breath. Argon? That was impossible, there had to have been a mistake. Seamus Argon was a force of nature, indestructible. How long had it been since he had even spoken to Argon? Brendan realized it had been too long, and a blush of guilt heated his face as he finally managed a breath.

"How?"

"Line of duty. That's all I know." There was a pause. "The cell phone number I had for you didn't work. But Rudy Colinas had a landline number for you, unlisted."

Brendan swallowed. "I've been taking some time to build my business out here and . . ." He was having difficulty speaking, emotions over Argon rising within him.

"Oh you don't have to explain it to me. I'm just happy I was able to find you, and pass on the message. I mean, not happy, it's not exactly a happy occasion . . ." Taber trailed off.

"I understand, sir."

The Sheriff cleared his throat. Brendan heard the squeak of his swivel chair, like Taber was shifting his weight, or standing up.

"Good that you still talk to Colinas, though. He was a little worried about passing on your number."

Brendan closed his eyes for a second. He needed to pull himself together. "No, it's fine. I'm glad he did. Yeah, Rudy and I still talk sometimes. Happy to hear about his new baby. Good guy."

*Rudy saved my life*, thought Brendan. That might sound dramatic, but really, that

was the truth, wasn't it? When Brendan had gone off, against the Sheriff's orders and despite Alexander Heilshorn's warnings, tracking Rebecca Heilshorn's killer to a half-finished building in Albany, he'd been headed into the belly of the beast. If Rudy Colinas hadn't been keeping tabs on Brendan that night, chances are he'd have ended up sitting in a chair next to Alexander Heilshorn, tied up and beaten, then killed most likely. And Olivia Jane would be still out there, instead of locked away for a long time.

"That's good, that's good," said Taber. It sounded like he was running out of small talk. Taber wasn't much for chit chat. He'd delivered the news, and now what?

Brendan heard another noise come over the line, the snap of a latch. The Sheriff had closed the door to his office.

"Argon was a good man," Taber said.

"That he was."

Seamus Argon had, during a time that had mercifully begun to slip into the obscurity of the past, been the man who had brought Brendan back from the brink. Brendan had left his job at the Langone Research Center where he'd been studying human habits, working on the doctorate he nearly completed. Alone, racked with guilt and depression, he'd thought of killing himself.

Then, one day, he'd tried it.

*The PhD Policeman experiments with a little death by asphyxiation*, Brendan thought, and felt that old familiar nudge of something far back in his mind, a gnarled finger pushing a chip across the ratty table.

*Your move.*

Argon was the cop who'd responded to the call. Brendan's neighbors had seen a man parking his car in his garage. Fifteen minutes later they'd seen the exhaust coming out from beneath the garage door. Brendan had always felt the neighbors lived too close for his liking. "Fences make good neighbors," so the saying went. Brendan thought fences just made people nosy. Argon had been on duty nearby and showed up a few minutes after the 911 call. He'd flung the door open and found Brendan succumbing to the deadly carbon monoxide fumes.

After that, Argon stopped by regularly. He got Brendan to enlist in Alcoholics Anonymous. That was what it felt like: as if Argon had drafted him. When Seamus Argon suggested you do something, you did it. And after a few months of hand-holding and the unsteady first steps of sobriety, Argon encouraged Brendan to join the force. He persuaded him that being a cop would give his life purpose and meaning. It was what had slaked his own thirst, he said. But, again, the reasons didn't matter. When Seamus Argon told you something was the right thing to do, you just did it.

Argon had opened a door for Brendan into a new beginning. Rudy Colinas had company – Seamus Argon had saved Brendan's miserable life, too.

He owed them both, and he knew it, even if most days he wished they never had.

A few moments had passed since he or the Sheriff had said anything. The silence was heavy. Brendan thought he knew what Taber was struggling with; what he wanted to ask. *Out with it.*

"Think you'd go to the funeral?"

Brendan exhaled and sat back against the couch. His gaze wandered to his laptop screen for a moment. He wondered what Argon would think of what Brendan had been occupying his time with. What he would think about Brendan switching cell phones

every four months, regularly changing all his computer passwords, renting a house in Laramie under a fake name. Would he think it was productive? Or paranoid and obsessive?

“I can’t, Sheriff.”

“I see,” said Taber, his disappointment clear. For a Sheriff, Taber wore his heart on his sleeve.

“Brendan . . .”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is . . . I don’t know exactly how to handle this.”

“Handle what, sir? I’m sure the Mount Pleasant PD will appoint an officer to deal with his affairs”

“That’s not it. It’s possible that Argon’s death was a result of foul play.”

Brendan felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He sat himself up. In front of him, on the coffee table, was a pack of cigarettes. He couldn’t quit. He drew one out of the pack and lit it.

“How?”

“I don’t know. What I believe is that he had something. Some information. Something others didn’t want him to have. If you could go, Brendan, you could look into it. Look through his stuff, talk to the people he knew.”

Something was breathing close by him now, something connected to that bony hand, the kind with the bacteria munching through parchment skin, a knobby finger pushing the chip towards him, the marker he owed for his life. Brendan took a breath. “It sounds like something Mount Pleasant will investigate. An LODD internal investigation will be conducted. It’s not my place.”

He felt bad about being so brusque with Taber, but Brendan could feel his anxiety rising. This had something to do with the Heilshorn case. He knew it; he felt it in his bones. That case would not stop haunting him. It was something he’d been hiding from, if he were honest – for two years.

“This was Argon’s personal business,” Taber said. His words were heavy and emphatic. They conveyed what Brendan had been already thinking – that he owed Argon a debt. At the same time, the emphasis in the Sheriff’s voice made Brendan wonder if there wasn’t something personal about this for Taber, too. He’d known Argon longer than Brendan had.

“Please. Just check into it. I’ll even pay you what I can.”

“Sir, that won’t be . . .”

Taber took a deep, sighing breath, interrupting. “I would go myself. I can’t get away. I’ve got this other thing going on right now and . . . I can’t do it, or I’d be there. I know it’s asking a lot of you, son. Argon protected everyday people. And he deserves their respect. That’s something Cushing probably wouldn’t understand.”

“Cushing?”

“The new chief at Mount Pleasant. He’s got a real chip on his shoulder, and he didn’t know Argon. Not like you or me.”

Brendan heard Taber sigh, and then the squawk of the chair as the Sheriff sat back down.

“If there was anything . . . wrongful about Argon’s death, it’s way over their heads anyway. You see what I mean? Okay, son? I’ve got to go.”

Twice now Taber had called him son, Brendan thought. That had only happened once before, during Brendan's troubled recuperation in hospital after the showdown with Forrester. Whatever Taber thought Argon knew, must be big. For one thing, he was breaking with protocol and Taber usually went by the book.

And if Argon had been murdered – that was another thing. He couldn't ignore his debt.

“Okay. I'll be there.”

“Thank you, Brendan. Keep in touch with me. And watch yourself.”

“Alright.”

Taber hung up.

Brendan clicked off the cordless phone and slowly set it down on the coffee table next to his laptop and the ashtray. He remembered his cigarette. He hadn't even taken another drag; the ash had formed a crooked cylinder. He reached over and tapped it in the ashtray, took a final drag, then stubbed it out.

He stared at the tendril of smoke winding around itself. People who thought things like he'd been thinking, things he'd been trying to put out of his mind for two years, they called them paranoid, delusional, and they carted them off to the loony bin.

*I was born under the black smoke of September.*

*Titan is so entwined with the government that you'll never get it free.*

You started thinking about things like this too much, you hid yourself away, and your mind had its way with you. Feeding itself conspiracies about the American robber barons, the money-makers, dark forces colluding with the central banks, a world both of illusion and the baldest of crimes committed right in front of everyone's faces. Shit that did no one any good to think about.

He closed his laptop and looked out once more at the mountains in the distance.

## CHAPTER THREE / Saturday, 9:04 AM

“I mean, I get that this is a hot-button issue.” Petrino took a forkful into his mouth and chewed it. “But Justice Department got, what, over thirteen billion last year? A hundred and twenty thousand positions, guys and gals out there, fighting crime? Why isn’t this black market more of a Homeland Security issue? That’s what I don’t understand.”

Petrino gave her a skeptical look, the kind usually reserved for conspiracy theorists. Jennifer found it bracing, but Petrino was worth listening to. He was a good fact-finder, they said he could find a fart in a hurricane and put together its profile. Yet he seemed to lack a sense of the bigger picture, a trait which Jennifer found quite common among highly specialized individuals. It could be challenging to see the wood for the trees and it could also be scary.

“Human trafficking doesn’t always mean movement,” she said in a level tone. “It doesn’t always mean crossing borders, or immigration. Human trafficking crimes, let’s say, are defined in Title Eighteen, Chapter Seventy-seven, as compelling a person for labor, service, or commercial sex act against their will. There doesn’t have to be any smuggling or movement of the victim. And while it’s true victims are often undocumented migrants because they’re easy to coerce – they’re afraid of the authorities – the other vulnerable groups are runaways, children. Rebecca is an anomaly because she was from a well-to-do family, she was college-educated, and she had means. That doesn’t make a person exempt from becoming a victim, just unusual. Something that warrants further inquiry.”

“Hmm.”

“And I’m not compelled to *assemble* a task force, per se. The HTPU already exists. We work closely with the Assistant United States Attorney, and with the Attorney General himself, as you know. What I *am* compelled to do is to observe the required notification of certain Criminal Sections of the U.S. Attorney’s manual. Sections 8-3.120 and 8-3.140. There needs to be coordination between districts in order to prosecute overlapping criminal networks. And on a timetable, too.”

He took a big mouthful of hash browns. “Timetable? Been two years since the girl in the farmhouse.”

For a moment, she hoped he would gag on his potatoes. Just a little.

“Yes, some time has gone by. I can’t help that. I only took this on last week.”

“Oh yeah? Holder pulled you from the desk, huh? Where they got you, some little shitty condo up here?”

He looked at her like now they could be pals, commiserate with each other as two people given the short end of the stick. She could have just let him think what he wanted, but she thought she’d at least take the satisfaction of setting him straight.

“I volunteered.”

Her admission had the opposite effect, and he nearly choked after all as he stifled a laugh and put a fist to his lips. His eyes watering a bit, he got his breath back and said, “What? Didn’t you go to school to work for the BOP? A penologist or something? Man that’s cozy. Why jump in with the pimps and hoes?”