

A person's silhouette stands on a dark, reflective surface, possibly water or a wet road, under a full moon. The person is positioned in the lower center of the frame, casting a long shadow to the right. The background is a deep blue, hazy night sky with a large, bright full moon in the upper left corner. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

THE

MERCY

OF THE

NIGHT

DAVID CORBETT

THE MERCY OF THE
NIGHT

Also by David Corbett

The Devil's Redhead

Done for a Dime

Blood of Paradise

Do They Know I'm Running?

Killing Yourself to Survive: Stories

The Art of Character

THE MERCY OF THE NIGHT

A NOVEL

DAVID CORBETT

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781477849446
ISBN-10: 1477849440

Cover design by Salamander Hill Design Inc.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014952440

For my wife, Mette

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CHANGELING

In the predawn darkness the forest smelled peaty with mushrooming rot. She hacked a path through sword ferns and redwood sorrel and coiling blackberries spiked with thorns—a long-haired girl, eight years old, light-headed from little to eat for three days and stripped naked, shackled to a broken chain.

She feared crashing through the woods in hopeless circles or, worse, just plunging deeper into the tangled undergrowth, lost for good. From time to time, glancing up through a feathery opening in the pine and eucalyptus branches, she stared at the drifting canopy of mist and felt abandoned by the moon.

Then gravel, like bits of broken glass, stabbed the soles of her feet. She tripped on a jagged lump of asphalt—she'd reached the road: curving, two-lane, dark.

Hugging herself for warmth—how long before she heard a car? Minutes, maybe, warped in hours.

The thing rumbled up the fogbound hill, headlights a smeary glow then breaking the turn, and she stepped out onto the blacktop, breath visible, hands splayed.

The car braked and lurched to a stop. Engine throbbing under the hood, tailpipe with its dervish of white exhaust.

She realized it might be him, coming back. The man they'd identify as Victor Cope but to her was simply the creep, Mr. Menthol Meth Head—what if she got free and stumbled all this way only to make it easy for him?

He'd chase her into the woods, take her down, grab her by the hair and drag her back to the moldy house—and then? He hated her enough already. She wasn't like Marina, his little blossom, his perfection.

The driver-side door creaked open. The ceiling light gave birth to a silhouette beyond the headlight glare. A man. He dragged himself from behind the wheel, got out.

“Jesus H. Christ . . .”

He edged closer. Some kind of redneck longhair—lumberjack shirt, thick black beard, scuffed boots. Voice like a chain-smoking folksinger.

“Are you—Jesus fucking hell—you okay?”

He took off the shirt, wrapped her in the thick coarse wool, warm from his body. Put his arm around her, then just as quick snapped the arm away, like he'd been bit. Cautious. Caring. He led her to the passenger-side door.

“Go ahead. Get in. I'm not gonna hurt you.”

Ten years later, she'd wonder how she knew to trust that.

An old El Camino, kind of car Richie, her brother, would cream over. Inside it reeked of cigarettes and black coffee, while Mardi Gras beads dangled from the rearview and the radio glowed with the music faint, nighthawk soul or some kind of R & B.

He got in, slammed his door, reached for the gearshift. Stopped. Turning toward her, he stared for a second, like she was a fawn, an elf, a changeling, sitting in his car.

“You're that girl,” he said quietly. “The one got took up north.”

No, she thought. I'm the other one.

“What am I thinking?” He slapped his head. “Get us the hell away from here.” Throwing the El Camino into drive, he roared off down the curving mountain road. Velocity seemed to suit him.

Glancing once his way, she saw his jaw was set but his eyes were calm, steady, and she took comfort in that.

He switched off the radio. "Must've had you holed away in one of those houses back up the ridge." He shook his head. "There's coons and mountain lions and ki-yotes up in there. Lucky one of them didn't spot you, slink on down in the dark, drag you off."

"I'm not afraid of raccoons." Her first words in . . . how long?

He chuckled. "Boy, you're a tough one, aren'tcha?" He stopped at a T in the road, looked both ways. A sign read "Bonny Doon—1 ½ miles" with an arrow pointing right. He turned left. "Weren't you really the raccoons I was talking about."

"I know."

That seemed to tickle him even more. A muted kind of laughter in his eyes. She liked that he liked him. She needed to.

"I'm taking you down into town, get you to a hospital. That be all right?"

The word "yes," it caught in her throat. Scared her. She nodded.

"Well," he added, "maybe not directly to the hospital."

Pulling the heavy shirt tighter, she eyed the chrome door handle, then glanced out through the windshield, looking for the next spot he might slow down.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you get looked after and all. I just mean I can't get myself tangled up with the law. No cops, no questions." He nodded, as though to confirm the end of an argument he'd been having with himself. "It's complicated. Let's just leave it at that."

It wasn't till then she realized he'd not mentioned his name.

"I'm Jacqueline Garza," she said.

"Nice to meet you." A nod, like a gentleman tipping his hat. "Seriously, let's leave it there."

He drove down the winding hillside road until they reached a main drag leading south in Santa Cruz. At a little diner called Bernadette's he pulled into the parking lot, killed the ignition, glanced at his watch. The diner glowed like a spaceship serving breakfast.

He turned toward her, arm perched on the steering wheel, eyes warm but wary. "Here's how it is," he said. "Got me a friend who works here, great lady, name is Dawn. I'm gonna go in, let her know I found you up in the hills, then hand you over to her so she can get you seen to. Gonna be a lot of hoopla surrounding that and it's just not what I'm into. Right? I'm glad I could help, real glad. Happy you're safe. And you are, you're safe now."

His hand reached out. She stiffened, not ready to be touched. But he didn't touch her. He dug a cigarette pack from the shirt pocket, tapped out a smoke, lipped it, thumbed in the dash lighter.

"I need you to forget me now, okay? Forget this car, forget my face. A stranger picked you up, saw you standing there by the road about two miles east of the Bonny Doon cutoff on Woodbridge Ridge—remember that, they're gonna need to know the spot so they can backtrack, find the house you escaped from." The lighter popped, he plucked it from its socket, touched the red coil to the tip of his cigarette. That intimate hiss as it singed the tobacco. "This stranger, one who found you—some kind of holy roller, let's say, do-gooder type, no reward necessary—he dropped you off around here, you stumbled into the diner on your own." He exhaled a long plume of smoke. It smelled like him. "Sorry to make it complicated, but it's for the best." He smiled with a wary sort of kindness. "Think you can do that for me?"

Of course she could. And she did.

She gave him back his shirt and let the woman named Dawn bundle her up in a big soft sweatshirt as the El Camino drove off, and she sat at a table inside the diner with some buttered toast and a cup of hot chocolate till the highway patrol arrived. She never mentioned the stranger in the El Camino who'd appeared out of nowhere, though from that day on she'd envy his ability to become invisible.

She said a man in a suit and tie and glasses picked her up, prayed when he found her and prayed they drove off down the mountain, praising the Lord and his mysterious grace and refusing to accept recognition for his good deed—that would be unchristian, he'd said, the sin of pride—leaving her within an easy walk of safety.

She lied, the first in a blizzard of lies, until it became the easier thing, the truth so unforgiving

PART I

1

Phelan Tierney made his way around the palatial Nordic monstrosity housing the center and followed a winding gravel path lined with Japanese maples—the graceful, meticulously tended trees in winter silhouette—continuing back to the sprawling garden, where he finally spotted the woman he’d come to see, Lonnie Bachmann, kneeling in mud.

Dressed in a hooded yellow parka and shapeless jeans, she neither greeted nor even acknowledged him as the crunch of his footsteps stopped. Bracing himself against the blustery cold, he watched as she submerged one gloved hand in a bucket of slop—he could smell it from where he stood: coffee grounds—while the other smeared the gritty black muck around the base of a freshly planted azalea.

“Lonnie?”

Startled, she flinched, then turned to glance up, nudging back the kerchief securing her blondish hair. The face possessed a weathered loveliness, evidence of both her homespun youth and twenty years chasing the crack dragon, turning tricks to pay the freight.

She spanked her gloved hands together, creating a small cloud of black specks. “Well, well. The man with two last names.”

How many thousands of times . . . “I thought I’d explained that.”

“You did.” The ghost of a smile. “I’m teasing.”

His mother’s maiden name was Phelan. She’d been, perhaps, overattached to it.

“Thanks for coming so quick,” she said. “Mind if we talk out here?” She gestured to six or seven unplanted azaleas lined up along the swerving flower bed, each with its own predug hole, root balls mummified in burlap. “I’d like to get these in the ground before the rain.”

A major storm front was moving in off the Pacific, only the second this winter. Good news given the drought, and despite the threat of landslides, overtopped levees, and flood plains turned into lakes.

He said, “We can chat wherever you like.”

They’d met at a fund-raiser for her little operation here, and Tierney had taken an instant liking to her. They shared, in a sense, the same reason for being.

Lonnie had turned her life around at the cusp of forty, the prodigal beauty, steadying her legs beneath her through five years of rehab, battling relapses, gradually acquiring a wise gentle strength.

She started working with teens and women trapped in the same circle of hell she'd escaped—~~proving good at the work, exceptional by some accounts, and with something of a reputation established~~ she cobbled together enough grant money to transform the old Norse American Hall, with its hulking, neo-Viking timber and stone, its hillside view of the Napa River watershed and the North Bay wetlands, into a halfway house where working girls, struggling to stay clean and straight, could hole up, gain strength from one another, learn some job skills, visit with their kids.

Tierney, who'd gained an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the building trades through twenty years litigating construction defects, first became involved with Lonnie's venture by helping her negotiate with the contractors needed to reshingle the Gothic roof, replace the dry-rotted staves and cross braces, regrout the stacked exterior stone. More than once he managed to protect her from the old change-order shakedown, and in the span of nine months the place transformed from ruin to eyesore to local gem, enjoying the same kind of turnaround promised to the young women who came to live there.

She called it Winchinchala House, from the Lakota word for girl, though some of the less enthusiastic neighbors dubbed it the House of Whores, or Casa de Crackhead.

Trudging on her knees along the flower bed—two troughs of flattened grass in her wake—she reached for the next azalea, cut the twine, tossed the burlap aside, then combed loose the root ball with gloved fingers, showering the ground with potting soil.

“You've been working with Jacqi Garza, preparing for the GED, am I right?”

Recently he'd transitioned from construction guru to tutor, something he seemed strangely good at, dropping in twice a week to help the girls with their practice tests.

“Jacqi and a handful of others.” He plunged his hands into his pants pockets, balling them in his fists, not just because of the cold. “Is there a problem?”

She dropped the plant in its appointed hole. “You got along with her okay?”

“I suppose you could say that.” One of the trickier aspects of volunteering in a place like this was that the women could foster attractions, or grievances, which amounted to pretty much the same thing if they decided to start talking about you. He'd sensed no such problem with Jacqi. She took the prep work seriously, had reasonably good reading skills, and didn't think of math as some tedious, draconian kind of magic.

“She's not in some kind of trouble,” he said, wondering as well: Am I?

“I don't know.” Lonnie plowed loose dirt into the hole around the azalea's roots, patted it down. “You've lived here in Rio Mirada how long?”

Where's this heading, he wondered. “Six or seven years.”

“Just curious if you know her story.” She looked up at him with a kind of defeated concern. “Jacqi's, I mean.”

Realizing, finally, he wasn't the one under scrutiny, he smiled. “I tend not to pry into the private stuff.”

“Reason I asked,” she said, “about ten years ago, when she was eight, Jacqi was all over the news.”

“I wasn't aware of that, no.”

“One day she was walking home from school and just vanished off the face of the earth. Lonnie met his eyes again. “Sure you never heard about it?”

He searched his memory—Jacqi Garza, or Jacqueline Esperanza Garza, as she signed her name on the practice tests. It began to ring a bell. A somewhat distant bell. “Remind me,” he said.

“Two girls disappeared in a six-week period. Jacqi was the second. In a lot of ways the girls were almost identical. Physically, at least.”

She turned toward the bucket of coffee grounds, which now lay out of reach. Tierney collected it for her.

“Both girls were slim and pretty and olive-skinned, big brown eyes, long dark hair.” Lonnie extracted a helping of grounds and smudged them around the base of the plant. “But the first girl, Marina Bacay, was by all accounts a little angel—did well in school, made friends easily, good home.”

Tierney, sensing a cue, said, “Jacqi, on the other hand . . .”

Lonnie glanced up at the sky for a moment as overhead a ragtag flock of herring gulls circled and shrieked, the birds heading inland ahead of the storm. “Jacqi was different.” She brushed her hands on her pant legs, then moved on to the next plant, the next hole, same knee-march through the grass as before, this time clanging the bucket alongside. “But that difference didn’t matter much to the man who took them both.”

No, it wouldn’t, Tierney thought, following slowly along. “I think I remember this now,” he said. “She escaped. Jacqi, I mean.” Adding to himself: Physically, at least.

Lonnie nodded. “After three days. A local cabdriver named Victor Cope took her to a house in the hills near Santa Cruz, kept her chained up in the cellar. But then he left her alone for a few hours and she found a way to get out.”

He pictured Jacqi as he knew her, slim but strong and still growing into her beauty, tried to imagine her ten years younger. He cringed at how casually he’d misjudged who she was, what had happened to her. “Pretty brave for a girl that age.”

“Our plucky little heroine.” Lonnie smiled ruefully. “Her father was in prison—Corcoran or Soledad, I can’t remember which. Her brother—he was thirteen at the time, I think—was already involved in gangs, some *nortehño* clique.”

“I suppose that explains her pluck.”

“Yes.” Lonnie scratched her cheek with the back of her glove, leaving a streak of dirt behind. “Fair to say she came pre-equipped for dealing with trouble, especially in the form of men.” She turned the azalea this way and that in its hole, trying to determine which side should face forward. “Mother’s no picnic either. Met her just once, but Jesus.”

“Raised by wolves,” he said.

“Queen of Mars, more like it.”

O for a muse of fire. “And the other girl, the angel?”

Lonnie seemed content with the plant’s orientation now and began backfilling the hole. “Marina was never found.”

Of course not, Tierney thought, sensing the shape of the story now. The wrong girl came home.

“So,” he said, “skip ahead ten years. Jacqi starts using, her dealer becomes her boyfriend and then her pimp, something to that effect. And one day she winds up here.”

“Yes,” Lonnie said, “lucky for her.”

She reached for the next azalea, took its thin trunk in hand, and knee-marched ahead. Once again: cut the twine, tear away the burlap, pitch it aside. She picked off a few brown, hardened leaves.

Tierney waited, then said, “There was a problem.”

She stopped her fussing and just knelt there for a moment, silent, her gaze a thousand miles away.

“Lonnie?”

“Yes, sorry.” She tugged at her gloves, tightening the fit. “You’re right, there was a problem. And now it seems our plucky little heroine has disappeared again.”

Jacqi pressed a washcloth hard against a gaping cut on the big man's massive brow. He sat on the edge of the bed, spellbound by the minibar.

His name was Michael Verrazzo but she called him Fireman Mike, the one repeat trick she had so far and, if she played it right, a possible frequent flyer. He'd sprung for a real room tonight, just a Marriott but still, way better than the usual jump joint. Or his car.

He'd texted ahead, told her to do herself up, look nice, a little catnip for the captain. So she put on some black tights and her one good dress, a low-backed slate-gray sheath with a cinched waist, slipped on her one pair of heels. He'd come decked out himself in his dark dress blues, striped epaulettes, gold piping. Fresh from a city council meeting, he'd said, making it sound like a brawl—a farce—which no doubt explained the drinking.

Big fella tugging away at a flask as he drove them here, and that just a chaser from earlier. Hey, you're head of the firefighter's union, you can get away with crap like that.

Correction. Ex-head.

What you can't get away with is being so tight you miss the curb and swan-dive onto the sidewalk. Head wounds, they bleed like crazy. Made for an interesting check-in.

"Turn this way," she said. Every light in the room on. "Stop fidgeting. Christ . . ."

"Just press, don't rub."

"Don't be such a baby. It's still, like, oozing."

"Here, gimme it." He snatched the washcloth, stood up. Like a refrigerator rising to its feet—shoulders and arms like a powerlifter, grip like a slammed door—but Christ, that was what firemen did all day, free weights and machines, strength and cardio, got paid through the nose for the privilege too.

Snorring back a throatful of phlegm he shambled to the bathroom, dragging his Frankenstein feet in their shiny black shoes. Bracing himself, one hand on the doorframe, he glanced back over his shoulder. A wolfish smile, not unkind.

"You look nice, Jackalina."

She sighed. "I asked you not to call me that." She used Volanda when working.

"Right, yeah." A wink. "Like I don't know who you are."

Not really the point, Buckwheat. "I have my reasons, okay?"

Reaching up, he gingerly touched his gash, inspecting the thread of blood his fingertips touched away. "You're a total smokeshow in that dress, know that?" That complicated smile again. "Look like a real lady."

Don't act so surprised, she thought.

~~“Could pass for twenty-one easy, older even.”~~

Quietly, she said, “Thank you.” Thinking: That's kinda, like, the point? She didn't do the sex little girl bit. For obvious reasons.

He squinted up at the ceiling. “Kill some of these lights, Jesus.” Turning back toward the bathroom, he gathered himself. “Let me take care of some business,” he said. “Then we'll, you know, take care of business.”

Once the door clicked shut she got up, turned off the overhead and two other lamps, then settled in on the bed, slipping her shoes on and off, taking in the décor. Even with mood lighting, it was meh. But every room in this place, she thought, every room in every Marriott across the world had the same fake maple TV cabinet, same torture-to-sit-at desk, same watercolor landscapes of nowhere. You could fall asleep in one room, wake up in another, how would you know the difference?

It gave her the willies, but then Fireman Mike snapped her back by hurling up his last five meals beyond the bathroom door.

Long-distance call on the big white telephone. Looks like it's gonna be a while, she thought, snapping open her purse to collect her phone.

Checking the chat rooms she used for clients—BlueMoon.com, MeetMe.com—she found no hits on either and felt both disappointed and relieved. Glad not to be bothered, needing the money.

She'd have to go out north of town tomorrow and work the river road, hope for a drive-by, trucker or two. And the forecast was rain, for once. Lots and lots and lots of it.

She'd saved a little under two hundred already, not bad for just one week, the benefit of not pissing it all away on wine coolers and crank—God help me, she thought, remembering that night they arrested her in Browner Park, jackhammer heartbeat, head full of snakes, bruised and bloody and screaming.

Tricking again was degrading enough, but she'd rather set herself on fire than go back to being that strung out. She had no illusions about the undertow. Death by a thousand bumps. And everybody got one. Just for you.

Give Lonnie Bachmann her due. Got me clean—okay, I'm grateful—but the woman had a agenda. “I'm here for you”—such a crock. I Play Favorites, more like it. Well it's my life, queenie, not yours, not Terrible Tonelle's, not Momzilla's, nobody's.

How dare you ask me those questions. How dare you let them go at me like that.

She figured once she had two thousand, she could make her move, put this town behind her forever. If two grand ended up leaving her short, she'd work it out when she got there.

The point was she had to go, leave here, leave her miserable freakish past, everybody wanting to know all about it, again, forever, thinking they had a right—which prompted a switch from BlueMoon.com to the Lonely Planet web page.

The place was named the Costa Chica: a long bright stretch of empty white sand starting for miles south of Acapulco and continuing all the way down to Oaxaca. One spot in particular, Playa Ventura, called to her, and she scrolled through the pictures again.

A town with just three narrow streets, a few beachfront hotels and restaurants shaded by palm trees, simple and friendly, nothing to the west but blue water.

She'd live in a thatched *palapa* and hustle up work, make herself useful, folding laundry, scrubbing floors, collecting firewood, whatever. Her Spanish was rusty since her *abuelita* died but she'd get it back, and her English could prove a plus, always useful, even off the major tourist track.

If that didn't work out she'd head farther south, Playa La Bocana, where the Rio Marquel meets the ocean. She'd sleep in a hammock hitched to coconut palms near the food stalls on the beach, find work at the hotel, clean out *cabañas* along the lagoon.

She knew what people would say if they knew. Okay, so sue me, I have this thing, this hope—hear that, people?—call it a dream, fine. I need it. Or I think I just might die.

There's a place where nobody knows me and nobody asks. A place where I'm just the new girl, the quiet girl. A place where, for the first time in my life, I'm free.

The screen on her phone went dark. She thumbed it back so she could exit out of the page on Lonely Planet. Got that right. But not forever. Nothing says it has to be.

The bathroom door blew open and Fireman Mike stood there, tie tugged loose at his mangled collar, face flushed. He offered a slack grin as his big legs steadied beneath him and from somewhere miles inside his gut he dredged up a ripping belch.

He made way to the bed and dropped like a buffalo on a trampoline, bouncing Jacqi upward.

"I'm so outta here." He dug the flask from his pocket, unscrewed the cap, a ravenous lip-lick and chug. Beads of sweat glistened across his meaty face. "Got myself a whole new situation, captain's post in Visalia, start next week."

"Yeah," she whispered. "You told me in the car coming here."

"That's why I went down to the circus tonight," he said, "give a fond farewell to the fuckwad Citizen Pinhead, Angry Joe Blow. Milquetoast the Mayor and the Council of Cunts. You wanna make me the scapegoat for the city going belly-up, hey, have at it. Place you oughta be looking, though, straight into a goddamn mirror."

He wasn't talking to her so much as some invisible anybody, the stenographer in his head. He went away for a second, behind the invisible curtain, then just like that he snapped back, peered one-eyed into the flask, a little shake to hear how much was left.

"Time to hit the minibar."

Knock yourself out, she thought. "I'm good."

"Gonna make me drink alone?"

Like me and an army could stop you. She shrugged, remembering to smile.

He studied her for a second, that lurid, friendly grin of his.

Then he did the strangest thing.

3

It was almost ten by the time Tierney returned to Winchinchala House. He stood on the floodlit porch and pressed the bell, listening to the stately gong echo beyond the thick stone walls. Footfall approached on the slate entry floor, then a shadow darkened the peephole. A scramble of locks, the door swung wide.

A twentyish black woman stood there. Catlike, muscular. Shaved head.

“Kinda late to come a-tutorin, ain’t it?”

Tierney smiled. “Good evening, Tonelle. I’m here to see Lonnie.”

She eyed him cagily. Schooling’s just racist indoctrination, she’d told him once, keep the niggers under the boot. Diploma’s just a new kinda chain. None of which meant much. Tonelle just liked to argue.

She waited a beat, just to emphasize she could, then stepped back to let him pass. “Go on through, Tooder. She in her office.”

The study room hummed with a quiet intensity as the young women suffered over their studies. A few curled up in beanbag chairs and plowed through dog-eared paperbacks with torrid covers. Across the hall a handful of others watched TV, the volume a respectful murmur. Several greeted him with lazy waves as he headed toward the back.

Reaching Lonnie’s office, he glanced in at the doorway before knocking. She sat at her desk, a massive oak monolith turned caddy-corner at the center of the room, the better to fill the vast, high-ceilinged space. A gooseneck lamp cast a focused glow on a blotter full of paperwork.

Rapping his knuckles on the doorframe. “Got a minute?”

She glanced up as though from a miserable dream, then smiled, seeing it was him. The smile faded quickly. “No luck, I take it.”

She’d been to a function earlier, judging from how she was dressed, navy blazer and gray herringbone skirt, the jacket unbuttoned, revealing a jabot blouse.

He took a seat. “I haven’t tracked her down as yet, no. But I’ve been busy.”

Lonnie sat back in her plump chair, outside the cone of light. “Tell me.”

He took note of the wariness in her voice. “Spent the afternoon at the courthouse, plowing through case files. The Cope thing, in particular. Came to nine volumes, with the trial transcripts.”

She cocked her head. A small, dispirited sigh. “Don’t take this wrong, but was that really the best use of your time?”

“You don’t just want me to find her,” he said. “You want me to persuade her to come back, right?”

“Yes. I told you that.”

—“I don’t want to come off like a simpleton when I talk to her again. And I don’t want to get sandbagged.”

She reached for a paperweight on her desktop, something to hold, fuss with, then dipped back out of the light again. “I suppose I see your point.”

“After the courthouse I checked out the library—street kids like to hang there, it’s warm and dry, it’s safe. Spent some time on the computer, waiting to see if she might turn up, got a little more background off the web. When she didn’t show I went to the mother’s house—you’re right, she’s well, interesting. And unhelpful.” He shrugged. “Then I drove around for a while, circling the usual places in case, you know, Jacqi’s working again.”

In a small voice: “Thank you.”

“There’s still a few things I’d like to get a better handle on. You said her dad was in prison when Cope took her.”

“Still is, I think.”

“Don’t think. He’s doing twenty-five to life. Felony murder. He was the driver in a jewelry store heist that went sideways, the shop owner and one of the crew got killed.”

He waited for a response. She shrugged. “I’m not sure—”

“That’s not just some random fuckup,” he said. “That’s heavy. It tells you something. About the home Jacqi grew up in.”

“I thought I made that clear—her home life, I mean. If I didn’t, I’m sorry.”

“I also tried to follow up on the brother, the one you said was with the *norteños*.”

“That was the rumor.”

“There’s hardly anything on him. What’s there is minor, drug stuff, theft. And all of it goes away. He’s never been convicted of anything.”

She leaned forward, far enough for the light to harshen her features. “Phelan, I’m not sure where you’re going with all this, but the point I was trying to make is that when two girls were missing in just six weeks, it felt like the city was cursed. Then Jacqi escaped, and it was like a miracle. The curse got lifted.”

“But not for long.”

“No. This is still a small town in a lot of ways, no matter how big it gets or the kinds of problems it has. It didn’t make headlines, more like a whisper campaign, but the issue of her family just wouldn’t die. People weren’t content with just Jacqi back, they wanted Marina too, they wanted Jacqi to lead the police to her, and when she couldn’t, well . . . There was some resentment. That’s all I was trying to get across by bringing up her dad and her brother.”

“Okay,” Tierney said, thinking: Let it go. “I also checked out Jacqi’s files. There were four razor thin, nothing but the complaint inside.”

“That’s not unusual. She’s a juvenile, the rest is sealed.”

It’s not all that’s sealed, he thought, not by a long shot. But he was saving that to talk over with Jacqi.

He said, “She’s been tagged with soliciting and public intoxication—no surprise, since she wound up here—but there’s also two assault charges, one against a teacher, a second against a gentleman named Gerald Anthony Manzello, who just happens to be with the Rio Mirada police.”

“Are you surprised?”

“Can you fill in the blanks a little? She’s always been pretty tame with me, but if she’s going to take a swing, I’d like to be prepared.”

Lonnie sat back in her chair again for a moment, rocking a little, then got up, went to the door and closed it. Sitting back down, she said in a lowered voice, “Jacqi’s something of a unique case, but

a lot of the girls here have been abused. Most, actually. None who've been abducted, okay, but plenty who've been through some pretty awful stuff. You know Tonelle, nice-looking black girl, bald?"

"She greeted me at the door," Tierney said. "I use the term 'greeted' somewhat loosely."

"Tonelle never, ever has nothing to say."

"That's pretty much my experience."

"But she's got a story, too. Break your heart."

"I can only imagine."

"Anyway, you go through all that, a childhood like that, then hit puberty and the hormones kick in? It's weird to begin with, for everybody. But abuse means depression, and some girls go inward, others act out—turn mouthy, pick fights."

"We're back to Jacqi now."

"Not just her. They all get into drinking or drugs or both. And they get sexually active way too soon—I know, after the abuse it doesn't make sense, and yet it does."

Todestrieb, Tierney thought. Freud's term, the repetition compulsion, rooted in Thanatos. The death instinct.

"Odd as it sounds," she said, "tricking can give you a strange sense of power. It did for me. Anyway, the drugs, the sex, the acting out, all that happened with Jacqi by the time she was sixteen. Became a terror at school, and she was hardly a model student before the Cope thing. Started picking fights, ugly ones, not just with other kids."

"The thing with the teacher," Tierney said. "And Officer Manzello?"

"I don't know about that specifically. But she was living on the street for weeks at a stretch, which meant run-ins with the cops. They hate her—I know a bunch of them here, grew up with some of them, got to know the others through work. I even know Manzello, but I never heard about this. Anyway, they can't understand. 'She got her life back, now look at her, throwing it all away.' One guy told me cuffing her was like trying to put a headlock on an explosion."

"What about the most recent thing? The one that brought her to you."

She glanced at the distant wall, its array of plaques and commendations, as though to reassure herself of something. "Six months ago somebody spotted Jacqi wandering around in Browner Park, no shoes, just a tank top and cutoffs, cranked out of her skull. Paramedics took her to ER, and they piped her so full of droperidol and olanzapine it's a miracle she didn't slip into a coma. Turns out she had her gear with her when she was found and that just enhanced the parole violation. She was looking for a lockup but juvie probation came in, contacted me, we got her diversion instead. That's how she ended up here."

My star pupil, he thought, bit of a joker but quiet, attentive, pencil chewer, all bouncing knees and awkward elbows. "It seemed to be working out," he said. "At least, from what I could tell. She was working hard—"

"She got scared. Scared enough to turn the corner. Cleaned up, stayed clean the whole time she was here. I was proud of her. And I'm worried for her now. I hate to think she's falling back into that life. She really is a sweet, strong, pretty girl. And smart. Wicked smart."

Interesting way to put it, he thought. "You still haven't told me what went wrong. Why she left."

Lonnie sat there a moment, looking at him with that same sad, helpless concern. It was beginning to seem a bit like a mask.

"She couldn't deal with group. The girls and me, we sit in a circle, we talk. It's not enough to be honest with yourself. You have to learn to be honest with others. But Jacqi couldn't go there. As for her what was going on, she'd say she was fine, maintaining, whatever. Try to delve into what happened with her, the abduction, how she's dealing with it, she'd rattle off details like she was

reciting her trial testimony. Ask her about why she used or tricked and she'd say it was behind her now, so no big deal, and don't waste your breath asking about her family. Nothing to tell, she'd say. mean, really. Finally some of the girls called her on it. I called her on it. Tonelle seriously got in her face."

"So no secrets," he said. "No privacy."

"That's not how it works. Privacy is one thing. But secrets are for users."

She stood up suddenly, idly searching through papers on her desktop, as though in hope of some kind of validation. Proof. He wanted to tell her to sit back down, it was okay. There are a thousand ways to get greedy, being greedy for the truth is hardly the worst. But before he could say that her hands fell still. The mask of concern fell away.

"I should have stepped in," she said. "Protected her better."

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