



FROM THE CREATOR OF CSI

DARK ORIGINS

SERIAL KILLERS AREN'T MADE,
THEY'RE BORN

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by
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It is well-known among law enforcement personnel that murderers can be categorized as belonging to one of twenty-five levels of evil, from the naive opportunists starting out at Level 1 to the organized, premeditated torture-murderers who inhabit Level 25.

What almost no one knows—except for the elite unnamed investigations group assigned to hunt down the world’s most dangerous killers, a group of men and women accounted for in no official ledger—is that a new category of killer is in the process of being defined. Only one man belongs to this group.

His targets:

Anyone.

His methods:

Unlimited.

His alias:

Sqweegel.

His classification:

Level 26.

PROLOGUE

the gift

Rome, Italy

The monster was holed up somewhere in the church, and the agent knew he finally had him.

He removed his boots as quietly as he could and placed them beneath the wooden table in the vestibule. The boots were rubber soled, but even those could make some noise on the marble floors. So far, the monster didn't know he was being followed—as far as the agent could tell.

The agent had been chasing the monster for three years. There were no photos of the monster, no physical evidence at all. Catching him was like trying to capture a wisp of smoke in your fist. The force of your action would cause it to dissipate and re-form elsewhere.

The hunt had taken him all over the world: Germany. Israel. Japan. The United States. And now here, Rome, inside a seventeenth-century baroque-style church christened Mater Dolorosa, which was Latin for “sorrowful mother.”

The name fit. The interior of the church was gloomy. With his gun in a two-hand grip, the agent moved as silently as possible along the yellowed walls.

A notice posted on the church door said it was closed to the public for renovations. The agent knew enough Italian to understand that the four-hundred-year-old fresco on the interior dome of the church was being restored.

Scaffolding. Gloom. Shadows. It was a natural habitat for the monster. No wonder he'd chosen it, despite its being a sacred place of worship.

The agent had come to understand that the monster knew no boundaries. Even in times of war, churches and temples were considered places of sanctuary—safe havens for those seeking the comfort of God during their darkest hours.

And as the agent made his way around the metal poles and underside of the scaffolding, he knew the monster was here. He could *feel* it.

The agent was no believer in the supernatural; he did not claim to have psychic abilities. But the longer he hunted the monster, the more he found that he was able to tune in to his savage wavelength. This gift brought the agent closer than any other investigator to catching the monster—but it came at a cost. The more he tuned his brain in to the monster's insanity, the more he lost touch with what it was like to be sane. He had recently begun to wonder whether his single-minded pursuit might soon kill him. He'd discarded the thought.

His focus had returned when the agent saw the most recent victim, just a few blocks away. The sight of the blood, the torn skin, the viscera steaming in the cool night air, and the marbled beads of fat hanging from exposed muscles would later send the first responders outside to vomit. Not the agent, who had knelt down and felt a thrilling burst of adrenaline when he touched the body through the thick latex of his examiner's gloves and realized it was still warm.

It meant the monster was nearby.

The agent knew he wouldn't have gone far; the monster loved

to hide himself and enjoy the aftermath of his work. He had even been known to secret himself within the scene while law enforcement cursed his name.

So the agent had stepped into the small courtyard near the victim's body and let his mind wander. No deductive logic, no reasoned guesses, no gut, no hunch. Instead the agent thought: *I am the monster; where do I go?*

The agent had scanned the rooftops, then saw the glittering dome and knew immediately. *There. I'd go there.* There was not a seed of doubt in the agent's mind. This would end tonight.

Now he was moving silently among the wooden pews and the metal poles of the scaffolding, gun drawn, all of his physical senses on high alert. The monster might be smoke, but even smoke had a look, a scent, a taste.

The monster stared down at the top of his hunter's head. He was positioned on the underside of a paint-splattered wooden plank, clinging to the gaps between the wood with his skinny, strong fingers and equally powerful toes.

He almost wanted his hunter to look up.

Many had chased the monster over the years, but none like this one. This one was special. Different.

And somehow, familiar.

So the monster wanted to look at his face again, in the flesh. Not that he didn't know what his hunters looked like. The monster had plenty of surveillance photos and footage of all of them—at work, in their backyards, on the way to fill their vehicles with gasoline, bringing their children to sporting matches, and purchasing bottles of liquor. He'd been close enough to catalog their smells, the aftershave they wore, the brand of tequila they drank. It was a part of his game.

Until recently he'd thought this one was merely average. But

then the man had begun to surprise the monster, making leaps no one ever had before, coming closer than anyone else. Close enough that the monster had let the other hunters fall away, focusing in on the one photo he had of this one, staring at it and trying to imagine where his weakness lay. But a photograph wasn't the same as real life. The monster wanted to study this one's face while he still tasted the air, gazed at his surroundings, drew its smells into his nostrils.

And then the monster would slay him.

The agent looked up. He could have sworn he saw something moving up there, in the shadows of the scaffolding.

The dome above him was a strange quirk of seventeenth-century architecture. It was fitted with dozens of stained-glass windows that took all incoming light and shot it to the peak of the dome, as if exalting God with his own radiance. In the sunlight it would be breathtaking. Tonight's full moon gave the windows an eerie glow, but everything below the dome, from the vaults down, was draped in dramatic shadow. A stark reminder of man's place in the universe—down in the unknowing dark.

The dome itself was adorned with a panorama of heaven, with floating cherubs and heralds and clouds, as if to taunt man even more.

Wait.

Out of the corner of his eye, the agent saw a flittering of white and heard the faintest pull of something that sounded like rubber.

There. Over by the altar.

This hunter is goooooood, the monster thought from his new hiding space. Come find me. Come let me see your face before I rip it from your skull.

The silence was so absolute, it was almost a pulsing, living thing, enveloping the church. The agent moved swiftly, hand over hand, climbing the scaffolding as silently as possible, gun tucked in his unbuttoned side holster, ready to be drawn at a second's notice. The wood was rough and sharp beneath his searching fingers; the poles felt dusted with motes of dirt and steel.

The agent slowly crept around another platform, climbing higher now, looking for any kind of reflection or hint of the monster. But there was little available light. He took a quick, sharp breath and lifted himself to another level, desperate to see over the edge as he exposed his head and neck to the unknown. If only he could see . . .

I see you, the monster thought. Do you see me?

And then he did.

The agent saw the monster's face for the first time. Two beady eyes looking out from a blank visage—as if someone had taken a hot iron and pressed away all of its features . . . except for the eyes.

Then it was gone, scurrying up the side of the scaffolding like a spider ascending its webbing.

The agent abandoned stealth now. He tore after the monster with a speed that surprised him, pulling himself up the crossbeams of the scaffolding and around the edges of the planks as if he'd been practicing on an FBI course back in Virginia.

There he was again—a glimpse of a pale white limb, whipping around the edge of a platform, just two levels above.

The agent climbed even harder, faster, more frenzied. The

monster was moving closer to the heavenly dome. But heaven was a dead end. There was no way out other than the exits below.

For the first time in decades, the monster felt true fear. How had this hunter sensed him? How was he so fearless as to pursue him up here?

The face of his hunter looked different now. This was no mere law enforcement officer who'd followed a *hunch* and caught a *lucky break*. This was something new and wondrous. The monster would have tittered with excitement if it wouldn't have slowed his ascent.

For a glorious moment the monster had no idea what would happen next. It reminded him of being a child. Just a few square inches of pressure on his hunter's trigger and the right trajectory could end everything. The monster was many things, but he was not bulletproof.

Will it end up here? Are you the one who will bring death unto me?

The agent had him.

He felt the trembling of the wooden plank above him—the last bit of scaffolding before the dome. The agent whipped past the last two crossbeams. He pulled his gun.

There he was—pressed flat against the uppermost plank. A moment passed as the agent stared through the gloom into the monster's eyes and the monster stared back. What passed between them was the length of a heartbeat, impossibly short and yet unmistakable—a primal recognition between hunter and prey in the climactic moment just before one claims victory and the other collapses in death.

The agent fired twice.

But the monster didn't bleed. It exploded.

It took only a split second for the agent to recognize the sounds of splintering glass and identify the mirror he'd shattered with his bullet—no doubt meant to help the experts with their restoration work. The mistake could have been fatal. But as he whipped around to fire again he knew the monster was already gone, could hear him smashing his way through a stained-glass window and out onto the rooftop of the church. Colored glass rained down, opening a gash under his eye as he lifted his gun and fired blindly through the jagged hole in the glass. The bullet hit nothing, soared away into the heavens. A scampering sound could be heard running down the outside of the dome . . . and then nothing.

The agent raced down the scaffolding, but in his heart he knew it was futile. The monster was loose on the rooftops of Rome, an invisible tendril of smoke wafting up and away, nothing but the faintest lingering trace left to prove he had ever really been there at all.

PART ONE

the man in the
murder suit

Two Years Later

chapter 1

Somewhere in America / Vestment Room

Friday / 9 P.M.

The emaciated, ghost-thin man the FBI called “Sqweegel” worked feverishly at his grandmother’s sewing machine. The maniacal pecking thundered in the small bedroom on the second floor.

ThwakwakwakwakwakWAKWAK.

WAK.

WAK.

WAK.

Sqweegel’s small bare foot pushed the pedal. His toenails were manicured, as were his fingernails. A desk lamp cast a glow on his intent face. His delicate hands coaxed the material forward, sending the cloth around the zipper directly into the path of the throbbing metal head as it applied the stitches. It had to be right.

No; scratch that.

It had to be *perfect*.

The hot parts of the machine made the room smell of burning dust; the blood smelled like pennies.

The piece of material was still tacky with dark, partially dried blood. The material was tough but not indestructible. He'd caught the zipper on something just sharp enough to slice through an inch of the black cloth attaching it to the rest of the latex suit. There was no blood loss; it had scraped away a few layers of epidermis at most. Still, even this was too much. He'd dug the lighter out of his tool kit, then held a flame to the edge of the metal until whatever skin cells had clung to it were gone. He mustn't leave anything of himself behind. Then he'd come home.

And now he was repairing the tear.

It had troubled him the entire way home from the little whore's apartment on the outskirts of the city. Before packing it in its case, Sqweegel had tried to poke the curled flap back into place. But it refused to stay. He closed the case and tried to forget about it. That proved impossible. He saw the tiny cloth flap sticking up off the suit in his imagination, like a black flag frozen midflap on an airless moon. It distracted him so much, he almost drove off the road so he could open the trunk and push the flap back into place.

He resisted the urge. He knew it was silly. And he knew he'd be home soon enough.

The moment he closed the front door behind him, Sqweegel took the suit to the sewing room. This had to be taken care of immediately.

Sqweegel used his grandmother's machine because it worked as perfectly now as it had the day she'd ordered it from the Sears, Roebuck catalog in 1956. It was a Kenmore 58, and it cost \$89.95. Sewed forward as well as in reverse, under a built-in light. All it required was a little oil on the moving parts and a good cleaning of the exterior every few weeks. Give something enough attention, it'll last forever.

Like the suit.

His small foot stopped working the machine. The speeding

head cycled down to a complete stop. He crouched down until his eyes were inches from the material. He admired his handiwork.

There.

No more tear.

Now it was time to wash all of the filthy whore blood away.

chapter 2

The Bathroom / Dressing Room

Sqweegel rubbed his hands with powdered soap and watched the pink water swirl at the bottom of the white porcelain sink. Another sad life down the drain. But this sacrifice would be the herald of something new. Something wondrous. It excited him to think about it.

Now, though, it was time for more practical matters, such as the removal of the hair.

Sqweegel's blade was clean, the water hot. His skin was already moisturized with vegetable oil—never shaving cream. That would be like mowing a lawn under six inches of snow. He needed to see what he was doing. Every square inch.

Top to bottom. Open areas first: Scalp. Face. Neck. Forearms. Chest. Legs.

He paused after each pass of the blade to hold it under the running water. Bits of black stubble and microscopic skin flakes swirled in the drain before disappearing.

Then, his underarms. The backs of his legs. His ankles.
Scraping. Pausing. Rinsing. Swirling.

Next came the most difficult—yet satisfying—part of the process: flensing the hair from his genitals and anus. To do it right required pulling his scrotum until it was perfectly taut, ready for the pass of the blade. The positioning took time—sometimes upward of five or six minutes. The pass of the blade, by contrast, was always steady, deliberate, careful.

The shaving of his anus required even more positioning. His feet pressed high against the tiled walls of the industrial bathroom, his torso leaning forward, for easier access. One hand steadied him; the other held the blade. It was as if the base of his spine was hinged, and he could fold himself in half. The ritual was the same: Scrape. Pause. Swirl in a bowl of warm water. He took his time, sometimes holding the position for a few minutes before another pass of the blade.

The more hair he removed, the calmer he felt, and the easier it was to hold this position. The closer he felt to pure.

The closer he came to salvation.

In the next room, Sqweegel opened the combination lock on the refrigerator—which was kept at the warmest temperature possible—and removed four and a half sticks of butter. He had tried economizing and getting it down to four, but the extra half stick really was necessary. Five was too much and not really a solution, anyway.

Four sticks were the ideal; four sticks come in every package. Which meant that every eight packages required one extra package, to be used for half sticks.

He tried not to think about the half stick too much. Someday he'd find a way around the half stick.

He carefully opened the paper wrapping of the first stick, split it in half with his hands, and began to rub his chest and shoulders—the largest part of his body first—before moving to his extremities. Each limb required a half stick, as did his genitals and anus. The depth of the butter must be consistent over the entirety of his body. No peaks, no valleys.

The last of the butter—about a quarter of the final half stick—was spread on the part of the suit that would cover the soles of his feet. It took a lot of practice to get the amount just right.

Now the suit.

He paused for one last spot check. The suit was spread out on a piece of industrial plastic on the floor of the clean room, which he had been resanitizing for the past few days.

No holes. No thin spots in the material. The parts of all three zippers—the chains, the teeth, the sliders, the tape ends, the bottom stops—were in perfect working order.

It was ready. So was he.

He began to climb into the suit, a process that was studied, slow, and precise. An observer might liken the sight to a five-foot, six-inch, 126-pound stick bug wrapping itself in a thin white chrysalis tailor-made to its insectoid body. That is, if an observer had the patience to watch the entire process, which took the better part of two hours. He didn't time it. He focused on the task at hand. And the half stick really did make all the difference. The cleansing. The plastic. The shaving. The four and a half sticks of butter. The suit.

It all led to this.

He turned toward the mirror slowly, delaying the gratification for as long as he could stand it, but it was hard now, so hard. He raised his slender arms in the air as if to praise something that lived in space.

Turning, turning, *turning*, hearing nothing but the faint beat of his heart against his rib cage.

Finally, the mirror captured his image.

Ah, *there* he was.

No one.