

'A SCARY BREAKNECK RIDE'
TESS GERRITSEN



CHRIS MOONEY
**THE DEAD
ROOM**

YOU
WON'T
COME
OUT
ALIVE

The Dead Room
by
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Penguin Books Ltd

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The Dead Room

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Day 1

I

Darby McCormick stepped over the dead bodyguard as she ejected the two empty thirty-round magazine cartridges from her Heckler & Koch sub-machine gun. By the time the cartridges hit the floor she had loaded two fresh clips.

Sweat running down her face and back, she moved to the side of a door and tried listening for movement underneath the low and steady *thump-thump-thump* of the helicopter blades coming from the roof.

She couldn't hear anything but knew Chris Flynn would be heading this way any moment. Downstairs in the main bay, crouched behind a stack of wooden crates as Flynn's two bodyguards fired rounds from their automatic weapons, she had caught sight of Flynn rushing up the set of stairs just before her SWAT partner had cut the power to the warehouse. She ran up the opposite rickety balcony stairs to the first floor to intercept Flynn before he could make his way to the stairwell, his only means of escape.

Darby felt confident he hadn't reached it yet. She swung around the corner, looking down her weapon sight at the long hallway lit by dim light bleeding

through the windows. Still too dark. She flipped the night-vision goggles down across her eyes.

The darkness inside the warehouse room disappeared in a green ambient glow of light. She moved down the corridor, making her way to the stairwell.

A door slammed open and then she saw Flynn standing behind a frightened woman with his forearm wrapped around her throat, the muzzle of a Glock digging against the side of her head. A single eye peeked above the woman's shoulder. No single body part was exposed.

Shit. No way to get off a clean shot. She didn't want to kill him, just wound him before he could reach the copter. Her orders were explicit: capture Flynn alive. Dead, he was worthless.

'I know what you assholes want me to do,' Flynn screamed, his voice echoing through the stifling hot air. *'I'm not going to say shit.'*

Darby inched her way down the hall. 'I'm here to protect you, Mr Flynn. The cartel —'

'Stop right there and drop your weapon.'

Darby stopped but didn't lower her weapon. 'The cartel will kill you, Chris. You know too much. They can't afford to keep you alive. We can offer you protection in exchange for —'

'I'M NOT PLAYING AROUND HERE. DROP YOUR WEAPON RIGHT NOW OR I SWEAR TO CHRIST I'LL KILL HER.'

Darby had no doubt the 38-year-old American

banker would do it. He had strangled his girlfriend of twelve years to death when he found out she had talked to the Boston police about Flynn using his cheque-cashing company to launder nearly half a billion dollars in cocaine profits for the Mendula family, a Columbian drug cartel.

Flynn lurched forward, using the woman's body as a shield. The woman stumbled, the heels of her shoes scraping across the floor as she clutched Flynn's arm. Her long black hair covered most of her face. She wasn't dressed like any of the warehouse employees. She wore rhinestone T-strap pumps and a white business suit professionally tailored for her tall, curvy frame.

SWAT can track the copter, Darby thought. They might be able to move people into place by the time it touches down.

'Please do what he say,' the woman cried in broken English. 'Two babies at home. I want to go home and see babies.'

Darby spoke in a loud, clear voice. 'Okay, Chris, you're in charge. I'm backing away from the stairs.'

'Now drop the gun.'

Darby still hesitated.

'Let the hostage go and you have my word.'

The woman yelped, a harsh, choking sound.

'I'll do it, I swear to Christ—'

'Okay, Chris.' Darby lowered her weapon, then released the clip for the shoulder strap.

Flynn inched towards the stairs. The FLIR night

vision provided excellent clarity and contrast. She could make out the tiny, worm-like scars on Flynn's bald head, could see the woman's diamond rings and the intricate details of her bracelet.

Darby dropped the HK and kicked it down the corridor to her right. If Flynn decided to fire, she might be able to duck down there. She wore a bullet-proof vest underneath the camouflage, metal armour plates on her shins and legs. *You better hope he doesn't try for a headshot.*

'Your turn,' Darby said.

'I still don't trust you.' Flynn stepped closer. 'Get on your knees – and no sudden movements.'

'I'll do whatever you want as long as you promise not to harm the hostage.'

'Then *do* it, nice and slow. You pull any shit and I'll kill her, understand?'

'I understand.' Darby knelt and slowly moved her hands up by her face.

'Stay right there,' Flynn said. 'Stay right where you are and I'll let her go.'

Flynn stopped near the bottom steps of the stairwell. The corridor's hot, musty odour mixed with the unmistakable scent of the woman's Chanel No. 5.

He released the hostage. Darby heard the woman run up the steps, tripping in her ridiculous shoes.

Flynn didn't follow. He stepped forward, his handgun raised.

Fear flooded her body, turning her skin slick and

cold. Darby didn't see her life flash before her eyes and all that bullshit; she did what she'd been trained to do.

She jerked her head to the side as Flynn fired. The shot hit the wall. Her hands came up lightning quick. One hand clutched his wrist, the other wrapped itself around the Glock's muzzle and twisted it back so that it pointed at his stomach.

She yanked him towards her. Flynn stumbled, caught by surprise. He couldn't gain his footing.

Darby pulled the nine from his grasp. She turned it around in her hands and shot him in the thigh.

Flynn fell to the floor, screaming. She spun the nine to the hostage standing on the stairwell landing. The woman was holding a sub-compact Beretta pistol with a laser sight.

Darby fired twice, hitting the woman in the stomach. The woman stumbled back against the wall and Darby fired two more shots.

Flynn was scrambling across the floor. Darby threw him down on his stomach, dug her knee into his spine and yanked his arms behind his back. She grabbed a pair of Flexicuffs from her tactical belt as the lights came back on.

Darby flipped up her night-vision goggles, blinking sweat away from her eyes.

'*Goddamn,*' the hostage said, staring at the dark red splotches on her white suit jacket. 'These paintballs really do sting.'

The man playing Chris Flynn groaned. ‘Quit your bitching, Tina. I’ve been killed three times over the past two days.’ He rolled on to his back. ‘Christ, McCormick, I think you bruised my spine.’

A fireplug of a man with a brown crew cut and a worn sun-blasted face stepped into the hall – John Haug, the SWAT instructor for the Boston Police Department. He snapped his fingers and pointed to the doorway.

‘McCormick, with me.’

2

Darby trailed a few inches behind Haug, as the adrenalin rush of the training exercise – the first part of her final SWAT exam – started to evaporate and give way to a bone-crushing exhaustion. For the past three days she had grabbed fistfuls of sleep while conducting round-the-clock surveillance on the warehouse.

The first week of her SWAT training, she had started each morning with a ten-mile run under a blistering August sun on Moon Island. There were eight other recruits. All men. For the rest of the morning she carried out close-quarter combat exercises and firearms training. Late afternoons were spent crawling through old sewer tunnels wearing blacked-out goggles to test the limits of her claustrophobia. She completed night-time diving exercises in Boston Harbor and abseiled from a Black Hawk helicopter. One recruit broke his foot. Two other men suffered physical injuries and dropped out. The five remaining members graduated to ‘The Yellow Brick Road’, a punishing gauntlet designed to crush the human body.

Dressed in a military flak jacket and combat boots, wearing a backpack loaded with thirty pounds of sand

and with an assault rifle strapped across her chest or held above her head, she ran in the sweltering heat until her legs buckled. She picked herself up and ran some more. She crawled through mud. Climbed ropes and nets and scaffolding. She trod water dressed in her SWAT clothing and tactical gear. When she removed herself from the stream, the sand-filled backpack now twice as heavy from the water, she ran until she collapsed. When the fun ended, she was treated to a boxed lunch – two bottles of water, bread and an apple – and ate it along the way to the firing range, where she shot at targets until the muscles in her forearms cramped. The training ended at 10 p.m. After a quick shower, she slumped into her cot at the all-male bunker and woke at 4 a.m. to start the process all over again.

The second phase of training, Darby knew, was also designed to break one's mental spirit. Without proper sleep, the body couldn't heal. The physical toll tore down the mind's protective walls and led to frustration, anger and, in some cases, dementia. Two more men dropped out. They couldn't hack it. The final three made it to the live training exercise.

Haug walked quickly down the final set of stairs. Her SWAT partner lay on his back smoking a cigar, his chest and one shoulder covered with blood-red paint. He saw her and waved. The members of Haug's SWAT team who had been brought in to play the roles of Chris Flynn's bodyguards smoked cigarettes

and cigars and talked among the crates and shelves. They didn't look at Haug; they were looking at her. She felt their glares drilling into her skin.

They're pissed I killed them. She grinned.

Haug stepped into the car park. Sweat had soaked through his grey T-shirt. He fitted a thick wad of chewing tobacco in the pocket of his cheek. As usual, it was impossible to read his face. The man lived behind an emotionless mask carefully crafted from his years as a marine.

He walked briskly around the side of the warehouse, his tactical boots crunching against the gravel. The hot air throbbed with crickets.

'The woman you killed,' he said after a long moment. He looked straight ahead into the darkness surrounding the woods. 'What made you think she wasn't an actual hostage? What tipped you off?'

Darby had anticipated the question. 'I wondered what a well-dressed woman would be doing working at the warehouse at such a late hour.'

'You didn't think she was the owner? During the planning sessions, I told you the owner's wife saw to the day-to-day operations of the warehouse and often worked late hours.'

'You also said that Ortiz was a frugal son of a bitch.'

'Your point?'

'That woman was wearing a Cartier love bracelet.'

Haug's head whipped around, eyes wide and brow furrowed. 'You recognized her goddamn *bracelet*?'

‘And her Christian Louboutin pumps,’ Darby said. ‘Those shoes cost about eight hundred bucks. The bracelet, around three grand. I don’t know about the suit she was wearing but it looked expensive. What is it? Gucci? Armani?’

‘I strike you as a guy who knows shit about clothes?’

‘The way you dress? No, sir.’

Haug jogged up the road leading to the restricted site for bomb disposal.

‘The intel you gave on the cartel didn’t state whether the ringleader was a man or a woman,’ Darby said. ‘After Flynn released her, she didn’t run into another room. She didn’t scream for help. She ran up the stairs leading to the roof – same destination as Flynn. I thought that was odd, so, after I shot Flynn, I turned to the stairs and there she was holding a Beretta. I take it she was the head of the cartel.’

‘She was.’

‘So the plan was for her to play the hostage role and, once Flynn released her, if he hadn’t killed me then she would when I went to cuff Flynn.’

‘That was the plan.’

‘How many of the recruits got shot?’

‘You’re the only one who pulled it off.’

‘That’s what happens when you send in a woman to do a man’s job.’

Haug spat a dark blob of tobacco juice and turned left on to a new road.

In the distance Darby saw the small ranch building

where she had lived for the past two weeks. She could see the glowing lights coming from the locker room and bunker.

‘Why are we heading there?’

‘Some guy is here to escort you back to the city on the orders of the police commissioner,’ Haug said. ‘Don’t ask; I don’t know the details.’

Darby had an idea. She was the head of Boston Police Commissioner Chadzynski’s Crime Scene Unit, a specialized group comprised of the department’s top investigators and forensic specialists. CSU was assigned to violent crimes and missing persons.

Haug spat again. ‘I know you fought like hell to earn a spot on this programme. Your shooting skills qualified you – you’re the best in the group, no question. And I’ll admit to having a lot of reservations about accepting you. In my experience women don’t have what it takes to be SWAT officers.’

‘Glad I proved you wrong.’

‘You’re the second woman I’ve ever trained. The first broad was a world-class cunt.’

Haug didn’t look to see if he’d insulted her. He didn’t care if he had. The man spoke his mind and didn’t give two shits whom he offended. She found his attitude refreshing.

‘This broad demanded her own locker room,’ Haug said. ‘Kept bitching about the workouts, that she wasn’t as strong as a man and didn’t have the

same endurance and stamina. All that happy horseshit. The truth was she couldn't hack it. That didn't stop her from trying to file a discrimination lawsuit, which the court rightfully shoved up her ass.

'You, on the other hand, didn't request anything special. You slept, ate, showered and dressed with the boys. You worked out the logistics on your own. You didn't burden me with whatever feminine problems you had, and on top of that you survived pretty much everything I threw at you. And not once did you bitch or buckle. You kept your yap shut and your ears open. You worked your ass off.'

Haug spat again. 'Heard you're a doctor. Got a degree from Harvard in criminal psychology.'

Darby nodded.

'Never had a doctor – or a forensics fellow, for that matter – do what you did back there. They teach you to shoot like that at Harvard?'

'I've put in a lot of practice at the firing range.'

'It shows. You took down all of the bodyguards, you prevented Flynn from reaching the chopper and the way you took him down was pretty goddamn impressive. You remember what I told you about firing your weapon?'

'Every bullet has a lawyer's name on it.'

'Right. Now if what happened here tonight had been an actual hostage situation, you'd breeze right through Internal Affairs like shit through a goose, but that doesn't mean some lawyer won't come

after you. Lawyers don't give a crap about what's right, or that you risked your life. When blood is spilled there's money, and these lawyers will crawl up your ass and hibernate there until they've leeches every last penny. You're quick on the trigger, so you best keep that fact forefront in that thick Irish head of yours, understand?'

'Understood.'

Haug held open the door to the front office. 'You can watch my back any day of the week, McCormick.'

Darby dropped off her field gear and weapons at the vacant front desk and walked rubber-legged into the locker room.

Her lab partner, Jackson Cooper, sat on one of the benches bolted to the floor between rows of steel-grey lockers. The hard, knotted muscles in his back and shoulders moved underneath the dark blue fabric of his short-sleeved polo shirt as he thumbed through a wrinkled issue of *Playboy*.

‘You always hang out in men’s locker rooms?’ Darby asked, unbuttoning her flak jacket.

Coop didn’t look up from the magazine. ‘Your instructor, GI Joe, told me to wait here. Fortunately I found this on the floor to keep me entertained. Did you drop it?’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Some sort of home invasion in your old hometown, Belham. Marshall Street. Woman and a teenage boy tied up to kitchen chairs. Woman’s dead, kid’s at the hospital.’

‘What are their names?’

‘Amy Hallcox. I don’t know the boy’s name.’

Darby didn’t know the family but she had grown

up less than two miles away from Marshall Street. She remembered the neighbourhood as an area of big old New England-style Colonial homes with ample land and wooded backdrops with trails leading to Salmon Brook Pond. Doctors and lawyers had once lived there. It was – at least when she was growing up – considered one of Belham’s safer places to live.

Darby sat on a bench and began unlacing her boots. ‘Who’s the lead?’

‘Guy named Pine.’

‘Artie Pine?’

‘That’s the man in charge.’ Coop looked up and stared at her, one eye blue, the other a deep green. ‘How do you know him?’

‘Artie started off as a patrolman along with my father. Then he became a detective and was shipped off to . . . Boston, I think.’

‘Christ, you stink.’

‘I’ve been living outside in this heat for three days.’

‘Most women I know spend their vacation relaxing on a beach – take Samantha, for example.’

Darby tossed her boots into the locker. ‘Who’s Samantha?’

‘Samantha James, Miss September.’ He held up the centrefold. ‘After spending her day rescuing puppies and kittens from kill shelters in her hometown of San Diego, she unwinds at the beach with a beer and a good book. I bet she enjoys reading the fine literary novels of Jane Austen.’

Darby laughed. ‘How do you know about Jane Austen?’

‘This woman I’m dating, Cheryl? She’s really into Jane Austen.’

‘Every woman is.’

‘No, I mean she’s *really* into it. We do a little, ah, role-playing, and she makes me dress up in a suit and pretend to be this Darcy guy from that awful *Pride and Prejudice* movie.’

Darby smiled, thinking about Colin Firth as Mr Darcy.

‘You’ve got that same dreamy look Cheryl gets,’ Coop said. ‘What am I missing?’

‘You wouldn’t understand. Go back to your picture book.’

Darby stood and tossed her balled-up socks into the hamper.

‘Nice shot. How are things going with the yuppie investment banker?’

‘Tim and I are no longer seeing each other,’ she said, working the wet T-shirt over her head.

‘And why is that?’

‘Typical excuses. I’m really into my career. I’m not ready to commit. I’m —’

‘Gay.’

‘It’s just as well.’

‘That you found out he’s gay?’

‘He’s not gay, you dink. Tim’s a nice guy, but we really didn’t click. Check this out.’ Darby grabbed her

belt buckle with one hand and removed a compact knife. ‘There’s also a razor wire, compartments to hide things and –’

‘I can’t wait until you get married. Your wedding list’s going to be *real* interesting.’

‘No need to buy this. I get to take the belt home with me.’

‘Congratulations,’ Coop said, his gaze dropping back down to the magazine.

Darby slid out of her trousers and stood in front of him dressed in a black jogging bra and a pair of training shorts. She didn’t feel self-conscious. Coop had seen her plenty of times dressed like this. They worked out together at the gym and often went running through the Public Garden after work.

And for the past two weeks she had refused to use the women’s locker room. She’d dressed here, in this quiet corner, while men stood in the other aisles. They sat and walked naked to the showers. These alpha men had barely given her a glance or nod. Any sexual energy they’d had at the start had quickly been channelled into surviving ‘The Yellow Brick Road’ and whatever other physical tortures Haug threw at them.

She slung a clean towel over her shoulder and carried the ball of sweaty clothes over to the hamper near the sink. She undid the rubber band holding her hair together and caught her reflection in the mirror. Her gaze shifted to a thin but hard white scar peeking out from the greasepaint above her fake cheekbone.

The implant had replaced the bone shattered by Traveler's axe.

Darby wet the towel and began to scrub the grease-paint from her face. Coop stared at her. Their eyes locked in the mirror.

'Nice six pack,' he said.

Darby looked at the sink, felt her throat close up. Not from the compliment but from this awkward feeling she'd been experiencing lately – the way Coop's voice hung inside her chest at the end of the day. Sometimes she caught herself thinking about him when she was alone in her condo. Coop was the closest thing she had to family – the only thing, really, since her mother had died. Darby wondered if this newfound feeling she had for him had something to do with the fact he was being headhunted for a new job. Coop had been approached by a London forensics company that was making new technological advances with fingerprints – his area of expertise.

'What's the latest from London?' she asked.

'They increased their offer.'

'Are you going to accept?'

'Say it.'

'Say what?'

'Say you'll miss me.'

'Everyone will miss you.'

'You especially, though. I'll leave and you'll lock yourself inside that fancy Beacon Hill condo of yours

and listen to John Mayer while drowning your sorrows in Irish whiskey.’

‘Don’t every say that again.’

‘That you’re going to miss me?’

‘No, that I listen to John Mayer.’ Darby grabbed a clean towel from her locker. ‘I need to take a quick shower. Give me five minutes.’

‘Take your time, Dirty Harry.’

4

Darby wanted to get a handle on the crime scene before she reached Belham. She called Artie Pine half a dozen times while driving out of Boston and each time she got his voicemail. On the last call she left a message.

WBZ, Boston's twenty-four-hour all-news radio station, had the 'breaking story'. The twenty-second pre-recorded audio spot, courtesy of an on-scene reporter, offered up only vague details: 'A Belham woman and her son were victims in what police are calling a botched home invasion. The woman was pronounced dead at the scene, and the son is listed in critical condition at a Boston hospital. Belham police won't release the names of the victims, but a source close to the investigation called it "grisly and horrific, the worst I've ever seen".'

The story ended and switched to the local weather report. More rain and more oppressive humidity. People were running their air-conditioners day and night, putting a drain on the state's electric grid. A spokesman told people to expect more blackouts.

Half an hour later Darby pulled the crime scene vehicle, a navy-blue Ford Explorer, on to Marshall Street. Residents crowded the pavements around the

cul-de-sac, flashing blue and white lights flickering on their faces as they stared across the roofs of three cruisers parked at the end of a driveway leading up to a massive white Colonial home with a wraparound farmer's porch and an attached three-car garage. Only the middle door was open.

An antique-style lantern light was mounted on each side of the home's front door. The same lights had been installed on the garage. A wooden fence at least seven feet high separated the driveway and a basketball court from the backyard.

The driveway had been taped off. Darby parked against the kerb, got out and lifted her kit out of the back. All the shades had been drawn on windows facing the street.

Coop moved across the trimmed front lawn, lugging his kit. Michael Banville from the Photography Unit, a big bear of a man who had a permanent case of five o'clock shadow, stood on the porch near the front door, dressed head to toe in a heavy-duty white Tyvek coverall.

Darby turned on her flashlight and made her way to the edge of the lawn to examine the driveway. Bloody footprints gleamed in the bright beam of light. She placed evidence cones next to one.

'Don't bother,' Banville called from the porch. 'The EMTs left them on the driveway, the walkway and the front steps.'

Must be a hell of a lot of blood in there, Darby thought.

She placed her kit on the grass and, watching where she stepped, made her way to the garage.

No cars inside, just mountain bikes and a John Deere ride-on mower. Dark stains on the floor. *Motor oil*, she thought, until she moved the beam of her light and saw bloody footprints. A single set made by a narrow shoe – a sneaker or running shoe, judging by the shape of the tread marks.

In the back of the garage she found blood smeared against a set of wooden steps leading up to a door.

‘When the queen shows up,’ a man said from behind the fence, ‘are we supposed to bow down and kiss her ass?’

‘When you get a good look at her you’ll want to do more than kiss her ass,’ a different male voice replied. ‘You’ll want to bury your face between her thighs and not come up for air. You ever see her up close?’

‘I’ve seen her on the news a few times,’ the first man said. ‘Looks like that English actress that always makes my pecker stand up at full attention and bark – the one from those *Underworld* movies, Christ, what’s her name?’

‘Kate Beckinsale.’

A snap of fingers. ‘That’s the one,’ the first man said. ‘The McCormick broad is the spitting image of her but has that nice dark red hair. Wouldn’t mind running my fingers through *that* while she’s on her knees giving me a blow-e.’

Laughter all around.

Darby shrugged off the comments. She had learned early on that a good majority of men viewed women as nothing more than sexual objects – receptacles solely designed to satisfy a biological urge and nothing more. *Pump em and dump em* was the phrase she'd overheard around the station, when her male counterparts thought she was safely out of earshot.

‘Listen up, boyos.’

Artie Pine's voice sounding older, deeper and raspy – a voice ragged from too many cigars, too many late nights and booze. Hearing it brought her back to the long Saturday afternoon barbecues her father had thrown every other weekend right up until he was shot a few months shy of her thirteenth birthday. Pine, a big bowling ball with feet, would sit in a lawn chair and smoke what her father called ‘fives-and-tens’ – cheap dime-store cigars rolled into thin wrappers the size of a pencil, the odour so bitter and pungent it scared away the mosquitoes after the sun went down. Pine would sit in the chair all day, smoking and drinking and telling stories to an audience that always ended with wild eruptions of knee-slapping laughter. He'd ask kids to fetch him another beer from the cooler and always gave them a folded dollar bill.

‘That's Big Red's little girl you're talking about,’ Pine said. ‘When she gets here, make sure you show her the proper respect.’

Darby shut off the flashlight. She made her way back to the front and saw bright camera lights from

far across the street. Belham police had corralled the small media crowd behind sawhorses.

Coop stood on the porch talking to Banville. Darby examined the bloody footwear impressions on the blue-stone walkway. Two different sets of footprints. They matched the ones on the driveway.

She joined them and said, ‘The footprints on the walkway and driveway are different from the single set I found inside the garage.’

‘I’ll get to work on it,’ Banville said, picking up his camera equipment. ‘I’ve already photographed the foyer and kitchen. Before you two head in, you’re going to need to change into one of these fabulous bunny suits.’

‘Awesome,’ Coop said. ‘It’s not like I’m sweating my balls off already.’

‘One other thing,’ Banville said. ‘The front windows facing the street? The shades and blinds were drawn when I got here. The windows facing the backyard, and the sliding glass door in the living room – none of those shades were drawn. That’s what we call a clue, Coop.’

‘Good to know.’

Darby grabbed the suits from the hatchback. They slipped into them while flashbulbs popped over her shoulder. She put on a pair of clear glasses, walked back up the lawn and eased open the front door.

The foyer looked as if it had been hit by an earthquake. All the pictures had been removed from the

walls and smashed. An old wooden secretarial desk lay on its side, its drawers pulled out. Papers, family pictures and shards of glass covered nearly every inch of the tiled floor. Bloody footprints stretched across the foyer and back into the kitchen. Broken plates and glasses covered the brown-granite worktops. The cupboards – at least the ones she could see – had been opened, each shelf emptied.

Darby looked at Coop. ‘Did Pine tell you about this?’

Coop shook his head. ‘If he had, I would’ve called the Wonder Twins and asked them to meet us here. We can’t process this by ourselves – not unless we want to be working around the clock for the next week.’

Darby unzipped her suit, took out her phone and dialled the Operations Department in order to request the services of Mark Alves and Randy Scott. The dining room, she saw, was right off the foyer. What looked like a china cabinet and sideboard had been overturned. All the drawers had been pulled out, the contents dumped on an oriental rug covered with shattered glass.

‘Let’s go through the dining room,’ she said after hanging up. ‘Looks like the easiest route.’

Carefully navigating her way through the dining room, she smelled cordite and, lurking underneath it, blood – a strong, coppery odour that always made her eyes water.

An archway led into the kitchen; to her left was the living room, where she went first. A flat-screen TV and console had been thrown against the floor. Muddy footprints on the beige carpet led away from a sliding glass door of shattered glass. She spotted a few of the same muddy prints on a redwood-stained deck and wondered if one of the responding officers had left them.

When she reached the archway, she turned the corner.

Darby saw the woman's fingers first. The ones still attached had been broken backwards and were now splayed at odd angles. Thick duct tape bound the woman's wrists and forearms to the armrests of a kitchen chair. More tape, strips and strips of it, had pinned her ankles against the chair legs. Her throat had been slashed from ear to ear, the cut so deep it had nearly decapitated her. Her eyes were taped shut and her severed fingers – three of them – had been stuffed inside her mouth.

'Jesus,' Coop said behind her.

Darby broke out in a cold sweat despite the A/C. Pools of blood had collected underneath the chair and stretched like fingers across the white tiles. A second chair covered with cut strips of duct tape lay sideways. One of the cut strips fluttered from the cold air rushing through a vent.

Bloody footprints covered the floor. Two bright red trails of blood stretched across the floor and

down the hall leading to the door for the garage. A black handbag lay on its side, its contents scattered across the tiles.

Every inch of the long, wide kitchen had been ransacked. Every drawer had been pulled out. The refrigerator door hung open; the shelves had been wiped clean. The oven and dishwasher doors were open; the grills had been pulled out. The kitchen island had been unbolted and overturned. The bloody footwear impressions in the hall led back and forth. Someone had made several trips between the garage and kitchen.

Coop swiped the back of his arm across his forehead, his face as white as a sheet.

‘Go outside and get some air,’ Darby said, making her way to the living room. ‘I’ll go talk to Pine.’

Darby’s gaze swept across the bare white walls covered with an arterial spray of blood. She forced her attention back to the chairs and wondered if they had been arranged so that the woman faced her son.