

PATRICIA





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Yellow bulldozers and excavators hack earth and stone in an old city block that has seen more death than most modern wars, and Kay Scarpetta slows her rental SUV almost to a stop. Shaken by the destruction ahead, she stares at the mustard-colored machines savaging her past.

"Someone should have told me," she says.

Her intention this gray December morning was innocent enough. All she wanted was to indulge in a little nostalgia and drive past her old building, not having a clue that it was being torn down. Someone could have told her. The polite and kind thing would have been to mention it, at least say, Oh, by the way, that building where you used to work when you were young and full of hopes and dreams and believed in love, well, that old building you still miss and feel deeply about is being torn down.

A bulldozer lurches, its blade raised for the attack, and the noisy mechanical violence seems a warning, a dangerous alert. I should have listened, she thinks as she looks at

the cracked and gouged concrete. The front of her old building is missing half of its face. When she was asked to come back to Richmond she should have paid attention to her feelings.

"I've got a case I'm hoping you might help me with," explained Dr. Joel Marcus, the current chief medical examiner of Virginia, the man who took her place. It was just yesterday afternoon when he called her on the phone and she ignored her feelings.

"Of course, Dr. Marcus," she said to him over the phone as she moved around in the kitchen of her South Florida home. "What can I do for you?"

"A fourteen-year-old girl was found dead in bed. This was two weeks ago, about noon. She'd been sick with the flu."

Scarpetta should have asked Dr. Marcus why he was calling her. Why her? But she wasn't paying attention to her feelings. "She was home from school?" she said.

"Yes."

"Alone?" She stirred a concoction of bourbon, honey, and olive oil, the phone tucked under her chin.

"Yes."

"Who found her and what's the cause of death?" She poured the marinade over a lean sirloin steak inside a plastic freezer bag.

"Her mother found her. There's no obvious cause of death," he said. "Nothing suspicious except that her findings, or lack of them, indicate she shouldn't be dead."

Scarpetta tucked the plastic bag of meat and marinade inside the refrigerator and opened the drawer of potatoes, then shut it, changing her mind. She'd make whole-grain

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bread instead of potatoes. She couldn't stand still, much less sit, and she was unnerved and trying very hard not to sound unnerved. Why was he calling her? She should have asked him.

"Who lived in the house with her?" Scarpetta asked.

"I'd rather go over the details with you in person," Dr. Marcus replied. "This is a very sensitive situation."

At first Scarpetta almost said that she was leaving for a two-week trip to Aspen, but those words never came out and they are no longer true. She isn't going to Aspen. She'd been planning on going, for months she had, but she wasn't going and she isn't going. She couldn't bring herself to lie about it, and instead used the professional excuse that she couldn't come to Richmond because she is in the midst of reviewing a difficult case, a very difficult death by hanging that the family refuses to accept as a suicide.

"What's the problem with the hanging?" asked Dr. Marcus, and the more he talked, the less she heard him. "Racial?"

"He climbed a tree, put a rope around his neck, and handcuffed himself behind his back so he could.'t change his mind," she replied, opening a cabinet door in her bright, cheerful kitchen. "When he stepped off the branch and dropped, his C-2 fractured and the rope pushed up his scalp in back, distorting his face, so it looked like he was frowning, as if he were in pain. Try explaining that and the handcuffs to his family in Mississippi, deep down there in Mississippi, where camouflage is normal and gay men are not."

"I've never been to Mississippi," Dr. Marcus said blandly, and maybe what he really meant was he didn't care

about the hanging or any tragedy that had no direct impact on his life, but that wasn't what she heard, because she wasn't listening.

"I'd like to help you," she told him as she opened a new bottle of unfiltered olive oil, even though it wasn't necessary to open it right that minute. "But it's probably not a good idea for me to get involved in any case of yours."

She was angry but denied it as she moved about her large, well-equipped kitchen of stainless-steel appliances and polished granite countertops and big bright views of the Intracoastal Waterway. She was angry about Aspen but denied it. She was just angry, and she didn't want to bluntly remind Dr. Marcus that she was fired from the same job he now enjoys, which is why she left Virginia with no plans for ever coming back. But a long silence from him forced her to go on and say that she didn't leave Richmond under amicable conditions and certainly he must know it.

"Kay, that was a long time ago," he replied, and she was professional and respectful enough to call him Dr. Marcus, and here he was calling her Kay. She was startled by how offended she was by his calling her Kay, but she told herself he was friendly and personal while she was touchy and overly sensitive, and maybe she was jealous of him and wished him failure, accusing herself of the worst pettiness of all. It was understandable that he would call her Kay instead of Dr. Scarpetta, she told herself, refusing to pay attention to her feelings.

"We have a different governor," he went on. "It's likely she doesn't even know who you are."

Now he was implying that Scarpetta is so unimportant

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and unsuccessful that the governor has never heard of her. Dr. Marcus was insulting her. Nonsense, she countered herself.

"Our new governor is rather much consumed with the Commonwealth's enormous budget deficit and all the potential terrorist targets we've got here in Virginia . . ."

Scarpetta scolded herself for her negative reaction to the man who succeeded her. All he wanted was help with a difficult case, and why shouldn't he track her down? It's not unusual for CEOs fired from major corporations to be called upon later for advice and consultation. And she's not going to Aspen, she reminded herself.

"... nuclear power plants, numerous military bases, the FBI Academy, a not-so-secret CIA training camp, the Federal Reserve. You won't have any problem with the governor, Kay. She's too ambitious, actually, too focused on her Washington aspirations, the truth be told, to care about what's going on in my office." Dr. Marcus went on in his smooth southern accent, trying to disabuse Scarpetta of the idea that her riding back into town after being ridden out of it five years earlier would cause controversy or even be noticed. She wasn't really convinced, but she was thinking about Aspen. She was thinking about Benton, about his being in Aspen without her. She has time on her hands, she was thinking, so she could take on another case because she suddenly has more time.

Scarpetta drives slowly around the block where she was headquartered in an early stage of her life that now seems as finished as something can be. Puffs of dust drift up as machines assault the carcass of her old building like giant yellow insects. Metal blades and buckets clank and thud

against concrete and dirt. Trucks and earth-moving machines roll and jerk. Tires crush and steel belts rip.

"Well," Scarpetta says, "I'm glad I'm seeing this. But someone should have told me."

Pete Marino, her passenger, silently stares at the razing of the squat, dingy building at the outer limits of the banking district.

"I'm glad you're seeing it, too, Captain," she adds, although he isn't a captain anymore, but when she calls him Captain, which isn't often, she is being gentle with him.

"Just what the doctor ordered," he mutters in a sarcastic tone that is his most common one, like middle C on a piano. "And you're right. Someone should have told you, that someone being the prickless wonder who took your place. He begs you to fly here when you haven't set foot in Richmond for five years and can't bother to tell you the old joint's being torn down."

"I'm sure it didn't cross his mind," she says.

"The little prick," Marino replies. "I hate him already."

This morning Marino is a deliberate, menacing mixture of messages in black cargo pants, black police boots, a black vinyl jacket, and an LAPD baseball cap. Obvious to Scarpetta is his determination to look like a tough big-city outsider because he still resents the people in this stubborn small city who mistreated him or dissed him or bossed him around when he was a detective here. Rarely does it occur to him that when he was written up, suspended, transferred, or demoted, usually he deserved it, that when people are rude to him, usually he provokes them.

Slouched in the seat with sunglasses on, Marino looks a

bit silly to Scarpetta, who knows, for example, that he hates all things celebrity, that he especially hates the entertainment industry and the people, including cops, who are desperate to be part of it. The cap was a wise-guy gift from her niece, Lucy, who recently opened an office in Los Angeles, or Lost Angeles, as Marino calls it. So here is Marino, returning to his own lost city, Richmond, and he has choreographed his guest appearance by looking exactly like what he's not.

"Huh," he muses in a lower pitch of voice. "Well, so much for Aspen. I guess Benton's pretty pissed."

"Actually, he's working a case," she says. "So a few days' delay is probably a good thing."

"A few days my ass. Nothing ever takes a few days. Bet you never get to Aspen. What case is he working?"

"He didn't say and I didn't ask," she replies, and that's all she intends to say because she doesn't want to talk about Benton.

Marino looks out the window and is silent for a moment, and she can almost hear him thinking about her relationship with Benton Wesley, and she knows Marino wonders about them, probably constantly and in ways that are unseemly. Somehow he knows that she has been distant from Benton, physically distant, since they got back together, and it angers and humiliates her that Marino would detect such a thing. If anyone would figure it out, he would.

"Well, that's a damn shame about Aspen," Marino says. "If it was me, it would really piss me off."

"Take a good look," she says, referring to the building being knocked down right before their eyes. "Look now

while we're here," she says, because she does not want to talk about Aspen or Benton or why she isn't there with him or what it might be like or what it might not be like. When Benton was gone all those years, a part of her left. When he came back, not all of her did, and she doesn't know why.

"Well, I guess it's about time they tore the place down," Marino says, looking out his window. "I guess because of Amtrak. Seems I heard something about it, about needing another parking deck down here because of them opening Main Street Station. I forget who told me. It was a while ago."

"It would have been nice if you had told me," she says.

"It was a while ago. I don't even remember who I heard it from."

"Information like that is a good thing for me to know."

He looks at her. "I don't blame you for being in a mood. I warned you about coming here. Now look what we find right off. We haven't even been here an hour, and look at this. Our old joint's being smashed up with a wrecking ball. It's a bad sign, you ask me. You're going maybe two miles an hour. Maybe you ought to speed up."

"I'm not in a mood," she replies. "But I like to be told things." She drives slowly, staring at her old building.

"I'm telling you, it's a bad sign," he says, staring at her, then out his window.

Scarpetta doesn't speed up as she watches the destruction, and the truth sinks in slowly, as slowly as her progress around the block. The former Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and Division of Forensic Science Laboratories is well on its way to becoming a parking deck for the restored Main Street railway station, which never saw a train during the decade she and Marino worked and lived here. The hulking Gothic station is built of stone the hue of old blood and was dormant for long years until, with but a few agonal twitches, it was transformed into shops, which soon failed, and then state offices, which soon closed. Its tall clock tower was a constant on the horizon, watching over sweeping bends of I-95 and train overpasses, a ghostly white face with filigree hands frozen in time.

Richmond has moved on without her. Main Street Station has been resurrected and is a hub for Amtrak. The clock works. The time is sixteen minutes past eight. The clock never worked all those years it followed Scarpetta in her mirrors as she drove back and forth to take care of the dead. Life in Virginia has moved on and no one bothered to tell her.

"I don't know what I expected," she says, glancing out her side window. "Maybe they would gut it, use it for storage, archives, state surplus. Not tear it down."

"Truth is, they ought to tear it down," Marino decides. "I don't know why, but I never thought they would."

"It ain't exactly one of the architectural wonders of the world," he says, suddenly sounding hostile toward the old building. "A 1970s piece of concrete shit. Think of all the murdered people who been through that joint. People with AIDS, street people with gangrene. Raped, strangled, and stabbed women and kids. Wackos who jumped off buildings and in front of trains. There ain't a single kind of case that joint ain't seen. Not to mention all those pink rubbery bodies in the floor vats of the Anatomical Division. Now that creeped me out worse than anything.

'Member how they'd lift 'em out of those vats with chains and hooks in their ears? All naked and pink as the Three Little Pigs, their legs hitched up." He lifts his knees to demonstrate, black-cargo-pants-covered knees rising toward the visor.

"Not so long ago, you couldn't lift your legs like that," she says. "You could hardly even bend your legs not even three months ago."

"Huh."

"I'm serious. I've been meaning to say something about how fit you're getting."

"Even a dog can lift its leg, Doc," he jokes, his mood obviously improved by the compliment, and she feels bad that she hasn't complimented him before now. "Assuming the dog in question's male."

"I'm serious. I'm impressed." She has worried for years that his atrocious health habits were going to drop him dead, and when he finally makes an effort, she doesn't praise him for months. It requires her old building to be torn down for her to say something nice to him. "I'm sorry I haven't mentioned it," she adds. "But I hope you're not just eating protein and fat."

"I'm a Florida boy now," he says cheerfully. "On the South Beach Diet but I sure as hell don't hang out in South Beach. Nothing but fags down there."

"That's an awful thing to say," she replies, and she hates it when he talks like that, which is why he does it.

"Remember the oven down there?" Marino continues his reminiscing. "You always knew when they was burning up bodies down there, because smoke would be coming out the chimney." He points to a black crematorium smoke-

stack on top of the battered old building. "When I used to see ol' smoky going, I didn't particularly want to be driving around down here breathing the air."

Scarpetta glides past the rear of the building, and it is still intact and looks exactly the way it did last time she saw it. The parking lot is empty except for a big yellow tractor that is parked almost exactly where she used to park when she was chief, just to the right of the massive closed bay door. For an instant, she hears the screeching and complaining of that door cranking up or down when the big green and red buttons inside were pressed. She hears voices, hearses and ambulances rumbling, doors opening and slamming shut, and the clack and clatter of stretcher legs and wheels as shrouded bodies were rolled up and down the ramp, the dead in and out, day and night, night and day, coming and going.

"Take a good look," she says to Marino.

"I did the first time you went around the block," he replies. "You plan on us driving around in circles all day?"

"We'll circle it twice. Take a good look."

Turning left on Main Street, she drives a little faster around the demolition site, thinking that pretty soon it will look like an amputee's raw stump. When the back parking lot comes into view again, she notices a man in olive-green pants and a black jacket standing close to the big yellow tractor, doing something to the engine. She can tell he is having a problem with his tractor, and she wishes he wouldn't stand in front of the huge back tire, doing whatever he's doing to the engine.

"I think you might want to leave the cap in the car," she says to Marino.

"Huh?" Marino asks, and his big weathered face looks at her.

"You heard me. A little friendly advice for your own good," she says as the tractor and the man recede behind her and are gone.

"You always say something's friendly and for my own good," he answers. "And it never is." He takes off the LAPD cap and looks at it thoughtfully, his bald head glistening with sweat. The scant quota of gray hair nature is kind enough to allot him is gone by his design.

"You never did tell me why you started shaving your head," she says.

"You never asked."

"I'm asking." She turns north, heading away from the building toward Broad Street and going the speed limit now.

"It's the in thing," he replies. "Point is, if you ain't got hair, may as well get rid of it."

"I suppose that makes sense," she says. "As much sense as anything."

Edgar Allan Pogue stares at his bare toes as he relaxes in the lawn chair. He smiles and contemplates the reactions of people should they find out he now has a home in Hollywood. A second home, he reminds himself. He, Edgar Allan Pogue, has a second home where he can come for sun and fun and privacy.

No one is going to ask which Hollywood. At the mention of Hollywood, what immediately comes to mind is the big white Hollywood sign on the hill, mansions protected by walls, convertible sports cars, and the blessed beautiful ones, the gods. It would never enter anyone's mind that Edgar Allan Pogue's Hollywood is in Broward County, about an hour's drive north of Miami, and does not attract the rich and famous. He will tell his doctor, he thinks with a trace of pain. That's right, his doctor will be the first to know, and next time he won't run out of the flu shot, Pogue thinks with a trace of fear. No doctor would ever deprive his Hollywood patient of a flu shot,

no matter the shortage, Pogue decides with a trace of rage.

"See, Mother Dear, we're here. We really are here. It's not a dream," Pogue says in the slurred voice of someone who has an object in his mouth that interferes with the movement of his lips and tongue.

His even, bleached teeth clamp down harder on a wooden pencil.

"And you thought the day would never come," he talks around the pencil as a bead of saliva drips from his lower lip and slides down his chin.

You won't amount to anything, Edgar Allan. Failure, failure, failure. He talks around the pencil, mimicking his mother's mean-spirited, slurred, drunken voice. You're a thin soup, Edgar Allan, that's what you are. Loser, loser, loser.

His lawn chair is exactly in the middle of the airless, stinking living room, and his one-bedroom apartment is not quite exactly in the middle of the second level of units that face Garfield Street, named after the U.S. president and running east-west between Hollywood Boulevard and Sheridan. The pale yellow stucco two-level complex is called Garfield Court for reasons unknown, beyond the obvious one of false advertising. There is no courtyard, not even a blade of grass, just a parking lot and three spindly palm trees with ragged fronds that remind Pogue of the tattered wings of the butterflies he pinned to cardboard as a boy.

Not enough sap in the tree. That's your problem.

"Stop it, Mother. Stop it right now. It's unkind to talk like that."