



ROHAN ELLIOTT

SURVIVORS  
ALLEY

A DETECTIVE THRILLER

‘That’ll be fifty-four thirty-five, my friend.’

Anthony Reid handed the driver sixty dollars as he grabbed his luggage on the seat next to him and slid out of the car.

‘Keep the change.’

Anthony stepped out onto the nature strip, suitcase in hand and watched as the cab pulled away from the curb and disappeared down the street. Anthony looked around for any sign of nosy neighbours. Seeing none, he picked up his suitcase and carried it to the sidewalk taking in his surroundings. It had been twenty years since he had last set foot in his hometown. His childhood house hadn’t seemed to age a day, it was like he’d never left.

It was the classic 1950s American suburbs dream. White picket fence, American flag hanging above the front porch, the whole nine yards. The garden, his mother’s pride and joy was immaculate and ordered in the way she’d always insisted. Anthony spied the New England Asters he’d given his mother a week before he left in the centre of the garden.

‘Well Ma, I’m home,’ he said with a bittersweet smile.

Anthony unlatched the gate, swung it open and picked up his suitcase. He crossed the garden, running his hand through the Asters as he passed them and dug out his keys from his pocket. He unlocked the door and was greeted by the dark and cold house. He dropped his keys on the nearby side table and placed his suitcase next to it. He took in the thick layer of dust covering everything that had invaded since his mother had passed and decided to take the clean-up one room at a time.

The next few hours flew past with Anthony managing to push back the dust on the kitchen and lounge room fronts before moving upstairs. He avoided the bedroom for the moment, that would mean confronting the fact he hadn’t been there for her in her final moments before he had to. Instead, he focused on the sunlight-filled office overlooking the garden. The office mirrored the garden’s ordered nature, everything was squared away into relevant documents with post-it notes covering almost every surface of the desk. Everything had its place. Everything had its purpose.

Except for the letter.

It stood alone in its own separate pile. There were no post-it notes, none of her mother’s scribbles that she did out of habit when she was immersed in work, there was nothing. The envelope had been torn open which Anthony found puzzling as the letter opener was in its usual place and his mother had insisted on using it for every single letter that came across her desk. He pulled out the letter and skimmed over it at first, expecting it to be some boring council zoning request.

That couldn’t have been further from the truth.

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From memory, a brisk twenty-minute walk got Anthony from his house to the town’s main street with another five minutes to reach the police station. Anthony made it to the main street in fifteen minutes, the letter’s contents bouncing around his head as he passed the twenty-four-hour diner. All of a sudden, he froze as the realisation hit him.

There was no one on the main street.

He looked back past the way he had come. The stores were boarded up with messy, hand-scrawled *foreclosed* signs plastered across their storefronts. The flickering neon sign of the diner had fizzled out, a faded *back in five minutes* sign hung lopsided on the door. Curious, Anthony peered inside.

The diner had been gutted. Furniture and fixtures were gone, the years of built-up dirt showed where they had once stood. Naked wires and air ducting trailed from the ceiling and mould had blossomed throughout the diner.

*What the hell happened here?*

Anthony added that mystery to the ever-growing pile and kept walking down the street, the letter sliding onto the backburner as he was greeted by more foreclosed signs and boarded-up stores.

*None of this makes any sense.*

As Anthony broke into a jog the police station came into view across the street. Squad cars filled the parking spots out the front with a lone cop leaning against the building, having a smoke. The cop stared at Anthony as he took a draw from his cigarette and blew smoke into the air. Anthony kept his eye on him as he stepped out onto the street.

Hearing a tyre screech, he spun at the sound to see a yellow VW beetle bearing down on him. Anthony dove out of the way, hitting the tarmac and rolling up against the curb. The car roared past him and he watched as the dented fender of the beetle disappeared down the main street. Anthony picked himself up, dusted himself off and noticed the cop hadn't moved a muscle.

'Did you see that?' he asked.

The cop took another drag of his cigarette. Smoky haze blew into the air as he flicked the ash onto the ground. He stared at Anthony, cleared his throat and looked in the direction the car had gone.

'Seems like you didn't look both ways before crossing the street.' The cop said.

Another drag on the cigarette.

'The car almost knocked me down!'

Another exhale. More ash flicked to the ground.

'Aren't you even going to call it in?'

The cop dropped his cigarette and ground it out with his boot.

'You got a license plate?' Before Anthony could answer, the cop turned his back and walked up the steps into the police station.

Anthony stood there until he glanced down and the letter and its sinister message leapt back into the forefront of his mind.

'Time to get to the bottom of this' he took the stairs two at a time and entered the police station.

Entering the police station was like entering a time warp. The station's front desk was a solid oak affair with a small swing gate the only barrier halting his access. The desks past the gate were also oak, supporting the weight of ancient, turn of the millennium computers. These machines hummed away as bored officers slouched in their chairs and pretended to look busy. The ceiling sagged with water damage and the floor was a scuffed and stained mess.

*State-of-the-art facilities.* Anthony approached the front desk. The officer ignored him, preferring his riveting game of solitaire. Anthony rapped his knuckles on the desk tearing the officer's gaze from the computer.

'Can I help you?' the officer inquired.

'I'm here to see your chief.'

The officer cast a glance back over his shoulder at the closed door. 'I'm sorry, that just isn't possible at the moment.'

Anthony followed his gaze. Windowed oak partitions separated an area from the rest of the desks that Anthony assumed was the Police Chiefs' office. The door was shut but Anthony could see a man engaged in an animated discussion on the phone. Anthony brandished the letter from his mother's office.

'I have evidence that suggests that the death of Beth Reid warrants an investigation and I need the chief to open a case.'

The officer rose from his seat, adjusting his belt so his holstered weapon was in full view of Anthony. 'We don't just let anyone walk in off the street and demand investigations conducted on their say so. It's called due process.'

Anthony leant in close. 'yes and when you have someone coming to you with credible intelligence requesting an investigation to be conducted you don't jerk them around with due process bullshit.'

The officer ignored the bait and remained standing, using the elevated position to intimidate Anthony. Anthony for his part remained unintimidated.

'Why don't you just hand over that so-called evidence, and I'll make sure it gets to the chief personally.'

'That's not going to be necessary, Matthew,' a voice said. Matthew and Anthony both jumped as a heavy-set man appeared from behind the officer and slapped him on the back. The man extended his other hand towards Anthony, 'Frank Carson, I'm the chief of police here. What seems to be the trouble?'

Anthony declined the handshake and indicated the letter in his hand, 'I need an investigation opened in relation to the death of Beth Reid in relation to this evidence I discovered in her house.'

Frank stepped back and held the gate open.

'Now that certainly is something. Follow me to my office and we'll have a look at what you have there before we rush into anything.' Once Anthony was through the gate Frank let the gate swing shut as he led Anthony towards the office.

'You'll have to excuse Matthew,' Frank said. 'He's a bit uptight but no one else in the department enjoys manning the front desk.' He stepped into his office and shut the door behind Anthony, 'he enjoys it so much he never leaves while he's on duty.'

The room was your typical small-town office that was dated when the interior designer envisioned it twenty years ago. Beige walls, beige carpets, beige furniture. The dire state of the office was highlighted by the afternoon sunlight slanting in through the sagging blinds. Anthony eyed the stained carpet as he sat down in the nearest seat, grimacing as the vinyl groaned. The chief sat down

behind his desk and started typing away. Anthony cast his eye over the office's back wall. Framed photo after framed photo of the good captain in ill-fitting Hawaiian shirts alongside a man in a suit. After a couple of keystrokes, the chief turned his attention back to Anthony.

'So, your Beth's kid, right?' Anthony shifted in his seat.

'Yes, it's Anthony.'

'Well Anthony, let's check out that letter of yours and see what old Beth has in store for us from beyond the grave.'

Anthony met Frank's eyes. 'Old Beth?'

'Sorry yes, I forgot you left before all of this. Beth and I worked together a lot, as one would expect of their Mayor and Police Chief.' Anthony's eyebrows shot up.

'She ended up winning that election?' he nodded to himself. 'I guess that must have kept her busy enough for a couple of years or so before everyone got sick of her.'

'Sick of her?' Frank chuckled to himself. 'No, no everyone loved her around here. She was Mayor for twenty years before her passing. She kept this family together as best she could all that time.'

'Yeah, seems like she did a real good job.'

'Main Street is an unfortunate loss but if you want to really see how the town is doing, I recommend Survivors Alley.'

'Survivors Alley? Sounds like a bad theme park ride.'

'It wouldn't be the name I would have chosen but it is a sight to behold.' Frank reached out for the letter. 'You can take a trip down that way once we sort out this little issue of yours.'

Anthony's attention snapped back to the letter in his hand. He passed it across to Frank.

'You've been Police Chief working with my mother for how long?' Frank slipped the letter out of the envelope and skimmed over it.

'Oh, it's hard to say, you lose count after a while,' he tapped the letter against his chin. 'Gun to my head, I'd have to say about five years as Chief then fifteen years on the force before that.'

'In that time, you weren't aware of my mother having arguments with anyone, no angry voter, anything like that?'

'No, like I said, everyone loved Beth.'

'Whoever wrote this letter seems to have soured on her.'

Frank's brow furrowed as he reread the letter. 'Yes, it certainly seems someone has.'

'So, what we'll need to do is get a list of potential suspects then get them interviewed and perhaps couple that with-' Frank held up his hand to stop Anthony.

'With all due respect Anthony, this is my town, not yours. I understand that as an FBI agent, you're used to flashing your badge and getting your way.' He steepled his hands and locked eyes with Anthony. 'But now you've got no badge and as such no sway in our processes.'

Anthony's head shot up.

'I didn't tell you I was with the FBI.'

Frank smiled.

'Beth was always quick to tell people about her FBI agent son,' he winked. 'It's a small-town thing.'

Anthony leant back and crossed his arms. 'So, what do you suggest I do?'

Frank stood up from his desk and crossed the room. 'As I said, Survivors Alley is a must-visit for our town. It's a short drive but it's a lovely day and a bit of walking never killed anyone.'

'Well, thanks for your time,' Anthony stood up and reached for the letter. Frank tutted as he held the letter back from Anthony' outstretched fingers.

'You'll need to leave this with me, Anthony. Nothing to worry about, just making sure we tie up all the loose ends... We'll contact you once this is all over.'

Anthony nodded and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Frank glanced down at the letter in his hands. Feeling his phone vibrate, Frank slipped the phone out of his pocket. He sighed as he recognised the number.

'Great, exactly what I need right now.'

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Anthony was making his way towards the front desk, lost in his own thoughts when he bumped into a police officer going the other way.

'Sorry, I was in my own world.' Anthony motioned an apology and turned back towards the front desk.

'That's all I get from you after this long Anthony?'

The tone sparked a faint memory in Anthony' subconscious. He knew that voice. Spinning on his heel, Anthony faced the speaker. He was met with a warm smile, the face open and inviting with sea-green eyes full of humour and mischief. Her brown hair that cascaded past her shoulders was greyer than Anthony remembered.

'Ella? Is that you?'

Ella feigned irritation.

'Give the boy a prize.'

'I'll be damned, I didn't expect to see you here. How long has it been?' Anthony' eyes shot to her name tag. *Officer Sterling*. She still had his name. He tried to sneak a look at her hands for the ring. Ella noticed his wandering gaze and shot him a look.

'I'm not the one that left Anthony,' she slipped her hands into her pockets. 'I thought you said you weren't coming back here.'

Anthony brushed some non-existent dust off his pants leg.

'Mum left me the house in her will. I had planned on selling it once I had cleared all her stuff out but now, I'm not so sure.'

Ella fixed him with a look, bemused.

'How long do you think it'll take you to make your mind up?'

Anthony met Ella's eyes. There was that spark in there that he remembered from all those years ago.

'Well, I can't make anything close to a reasonable decision on an empty stomach.'

Ella smiled and pulled her keys out of her pocket, 'You're buying.'

'Really?'

'I haven't seen you in years so yes, you're buying.'

'Any suggestions?'

'I know just the place.'

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Driving through the empty streets in Ella's squad car, Anthony's eyes passed over the boarded-up shops, empty and left to fade from the town's memory... just like the ones on the main street.

'What the hell happened here? This place is little more than a ghost town now.'

Ella kept her eyes on the road as they cruised down yet another empty silent street.

'Just after you left, early 2003 if I'm remembering right, a big tobacco company from Kentucky set up shop just outside the townsite. At first, the town was prospering and everything was fine. Then times changed and the shit hit the fan big time.'

Without warning, Ella slammed on the brakes and blasted the horn. 'Get out of the goddamn road!' Anthony's attention swung away from Ella onto the road. A man carrying groceries held out a hand in apology and jogged across the street. Ella shook her head and continued down the street. Reaching an intersection, she turned down a side street.

Anthony's eyebrows shot up. The street was bustling with people. Some were window shopping, others were carrying bags brimming with groceries. Most were just enjoying the day, listening to the band playing out the front of a small café and just watching life pass them by. Ella made her way through the crowd, parking the car in the first available spot. The two of them stepped out onto the sidewalk and Anthony surveyed the bustling street before him.

'I'm guessing this is Survivors Alley?' Anthony asked. Ella smiled and spread her arms wide.

'This is Survivors Alley. The only street with any businesses still running.' She locked the car and together they strolled down the sidewalk, slipping through the crowd towards the small café in the middle of the street. The outward appearance of the café was old-school, the classic Midwest fifties diner – flickering neon and all. Anthony noticed Ella staring at the café's faded sign. She caught him staring and looked away, adjusting her holster.

'My favourite place in town. The food's pretty good and not even remotely healthy.' Ella held the door open for Anthony as he entered. A small bell announced their arrival as Anthony stopped and let out a low whistle. The interior matched the outward façade with red vinyl booths lining the front wall looking out into the street and a chipped linoleum countertop taking the back wall. Swinging double doors kept the kitchen hidden from view while the scratched display case showed off their labours. The only thing out of place was the plaque on the wall behind the counter with an old service revolver and police medals on display.

'If I'd known this place was here, I might have stuck around.'

'A lot of things might have happened if you'd stuck around.' Ella muttered. Any retort was cut off by an old lady bustling through the double doors. Wiping her hands on a tea towel and tucking it back into her apron, she gave the two new arrivals a warm smile.

'Welcome folks, you looking for a meal or just something to drink?'

Ella returned the smile. 'Hi Deliah, good to see you still up and about.'

Deliah snorted, 'I'll be working in this diner until I drop dead.' She nodded towards Anthony. 'Nice to meet you mister...?'

Anthony held out his hand, 'Anthony Tanner, nice to meet you too.'

Deliah froze, her hand halfway out to shake Anthony's hand. 'You're not Beth Tanner's son, are you?'

Anthony smiled, 'Yes, she was my mother. Did you know her well?'

Deliah gave Ella a look. 'I wouldn't say I knew her well... she did help save this place a while back so any family of hers has a seat at my restaurant any time.'

'She saved this place? What do you mean?'

Deliah smiled, 'she came in one day and took a liking to the place. Ever since that day, she made sure everything was smooth sailing for us down here.' She gestured around her. 'What do you think?'

Anthony ran his eyes over the café interior for a second time. 'It's certainly homely... I can see why she liked it so much... I've got to ask though, what's with the plaque up there?'

Deliah glanced over her shoulder at the plaque. 'That was my father's. Twenty years of service on the force and they pinned some medals on his chest. They let him keep his revolver though which was nice of them.'

Anthony nodded and his eyes searched for a menu as his stomach grumbled.

Deliah reached into her apron and pulled out a well-worn pad and blunt pencil. 'Now, can I get the two of you some sustenance? A sizzling stakeout perhaps?' she pointed towards a blackboard hanging above the counter. An intricate chalk illustration with handwritten words underneath claimed the sizzling stakeout to be the tastiest sandwich in all of the Northwest.

Anthony rubbed his stomach and looked back at Deliah. 'Can't refuse such a legendary sandwich. I'll have a side of fries as well.' Deliah scribbled down the order and raised an eyebrow at Ella.

'The usual.' She said with a wave of her hand.

'Excellent, anything to drink?'

'Water for the both of us, thanks.'

'Coming right up,' she smiled at Anthony as she tucked the pad and pencil back into her apron.

'Lovely to meet you dear, and I just want to say how sorry I was to hear about Beth's passing.'

Deliah hustled back through the swinging doors into the kitchen shouting to the chef as Anthony and Ella slid into the nearest booth across from each other. Anthony stared out the window at the crowd flowing past outside, drumming his hands on the table.



'It just doesn't make any sense'.

Ella lounged back in the booth 'What doesn't?'

'Mom taking a shine to this place. She never took me down to this part of town when I was a kid, and I don't remember her liking the type of food this place would serve.'

Ella gave him a sad look. 'Maybe she wanted something to remind her of the family that she no longer had, maybe she needed something to fill that space that was missing in her life.'

Anthony shifted in his seat, not meeting her eyes. 'I couldn't stay in this town, not forever. I had to get out and break free before I became just like her... that's what I told myself all these years. I don't even know whether I actually believed it or not but either way I couldn't stay here anymore.'

'Why couldn't you stay here anymore? You had everything planned out, you were happy.'

Anthony watched the band down the street playing their instruments. *She knew why he had left. The real reason why, not the lie he had fed himself for years. It was there on her shirt, taunting him, mocking him even after all this time.*

'Plans have a nasty habit of changing without warning.'

Ella's eyes belied the emotions warring for dominance on her face.

'I wasn't the one that changed those plans, Anthony.'

Anthony winced at the venom in her words. He mulled them over in his head, trying to find the words that would justify his actions to her, justify them to himself.

He was snapped back to reality as Deliah appeared with their order, placing two greasy sandwiches in front of them and disappearing back to the bustling kitchen. Silence descended between them as they both ate. Despite himself, Anthony was caught off guard at the rich flavours that exploded in his mouth, each bite a new sensation. Ella was in a similar state of culinary bliss. Deliah wandered past with another order fresh from the kitchen. She noticed Anthony and Ella's plates and gave him a wink.

'Best in the Northwest.'

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'You didn't have to drive me home, you know. I could have walked back from the police station.' Anthony said as he stared out the car window.

Ella shot him a smile from the driver's seat. 'You looking to get rid of me or something? I haven't seen you in twenty years, let me drive you home.'

Her smile was infectious, and Anthony couldn't resist smiling back. He'd missed those cute dimples on her cheeks.

'I've just got a lot of things on my mind.'

Ella's smile faded as she focused back on the empty road.

'You never did tell me why you left all those years ago.'

Anthony's attention was dragged away from his private thoughts with that question. It was the cloud that had hung above them since they'd reconnected. Anthony had been trying to figure out the best

time to broach the subject and it sure as hell wasn't while Ella was in control of a state-issued police car... or had a gun in arms reach.

'It... it was a lot of things,' he could feel himself start to sweat as Ella's eyebrows crept skyward. 'I didn't feel like there was a place for me there anymore with my mom and-'

Ella sighed and pulled the car over, skidding to a stop. The silence stretched as she reached down, switched off the ignition and turned to face him. The sweat had started to carve a path down his back.

'Even after all this time, you're the same Anthony that skipped town twenty years ago,' Ella's gaze froze him to his seat. 'Using your mother as an excuse for why we can't talk to each other. There's always something that gets in the way, always something that conveniently pops up. Last time that something was your mother becoming mayor, what's the next one going to be?'

Anthony shifted in his seat, searching for any way to escape from this conversation. His gaze fell past Ella's shoulder onto an abandoned bar across the street. Without another word, he jumped out of the car and jogged across the street. Ella swore under her breath as she realised where they had stopped. Debating with herself whether to stay in the car or not, she relented and hopped out of the car.

The afternoon sun reflected off the boarded-up bar's faded signage. Anthony stared at the faded signage. He peered through a crack in the boards. Like the diner on the main street, the store was gutted and bare, with only a *back in 5 minutes* sign laying forgotten on the floor. The memories from twenty years ago rushed back to him. Ella stood a few paces behind him, those same memories washing over her.

'This was the spot,' Anthony slid his hands in his pockets to hide the tremors. 'This is where I told you I was leaving town.'

'I remember.' Ella's voice seemed another world away.

'We were sitting at a corner table at the far end of the bar. You'd finished your shift, I was heading for the airport. That you'd never see me again.'

*There was so much I wanted to tell you.*

*You're marrying the wrong guy...*

*Come with me...*

*I love you...*

'I told you I didn't believe you, and that we'd see each other again,' Ella was next to him now, her hand gripping his arm. 'Although twenty years seems like a bit too long to keep me waiting don't you think?'

Anthony smiled. 'Next time it'll be no more than fifteen years, I promise.' Ella smiled back and pulled him in for a hug.

'I missed my friend,' Anthony buried his face in her shoulder, and he was back twenty years ago, saying the hardest goodbye he'd faced in his life. After what felt like too short a time, they pulled back and Anthony was standing in front of the derelict building. Ella cleared her throat and turned back to the car.

'Guess we'd better get you back home then.'

Anthony nodded and turned his back on the building when something caught his eye. The fence surrounding the bar had panels missing and Anthony spotted a car parked at an unusual angle. His curiosity piqued, he called out to Ella.

'How long has the bar been like this?'

Ella frowned. 'A couple of years, why?'

Anthony pointed towards the car. Ella followed his finger.

'Yeah, just a couple of bored kids going on a joyride on a Friday night.'

'Well, I'm sure whoever owns the car would like to know where it is.'

'I'll put in a call with the station.'

Anthony walked towards the fence, slipping between the gap and over to the car. The car was parked across two spaces like whoever had driven it needed to get out of there fast. Anthony's breath caught in his throat as he noticed the VW badge and the car's dented fender. He jumped at the sound of Ella smacking her shoulder against the fence as she climbed through.

'Is this a local's car?'

Ella winced, rubbing her shoulder as she eyed the car.

'Why?'

'I recognise that car. It almost ran me down earlier today.'

'No one here would be caught dead in that type of car.'

Reaching the driver's side door, Anthony noticed a figure slumped forward against the steering wheel. Shooting a look at Ella he reached for the door handle and flung it open. The figure tumbled out of the car, landing at Anthony's feet. Anthony rolled the figure over with the toe of his boot, revealing a single bullet hole lodged in the figure's head.

He turned to Ella. 'Guess you'd better call the station now.'

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The closest town with a forensics department was an hour away. Anthony and Ella had been sitting at an abandoned table next to the crime scene playing cards for an hour and a half before the forensics team arrived.

Ella threw down another winning hand and walked over to the forensics unit. Anthony gave her back a dirty glare as he collected the cards.

Ella watched two men in casual clothes climb out of the car. 'The term rapid response mean anything to you fellas?'

The two men glanced over at her and shrugged.

'We had to stop for lunch, sue us.' One of them said. The second man rummaged around in the car boot, tossed a face mask to his partner, and pulled one on himself. Together, they wandered over to the VW Beetle.

Anthony strode over next to Ella, hands in his pockets. He called out to the two men.

'You guys aren't going to worry about preserving the crime scene?'

The pair ignored them and stared down at the corpse.

'Looks like suicide.' one said.

'Seems that way.' The other concurred.

Without another word, the two men unmasked, wandered back to their car, got in and drove away. Anthony and Ella watched them drive off.

'Suicide my ass,' Anthony muttered. Anthony pulled out a crumpled napkin from Deliah's diner. Holding the in his hand, he strode to the Beetle.

He motioned for Ella to join him as he knelt and examined the body. The bullet had entered the forehead straight on, leaving a small, discoloured entry wound. He rolled the body onto its side to examine the exit wound. Dried blood crusted around the jagged hole that the bullet left as it carved through the skull.

'Definitely death by gunshot. Looks like an older revolver.' Anthony slipped the napkin back into his pocket.

'So, forensics was right?' Ella asked. Anthony gave her a look.

'Hardly,' he stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. 'The angle's all wrong. Most if not all self-inflicted gunshot wounds are normally under the chin or against the temple.' Anthony motioned to the corpse's clean hands. 'There's also no gunpowder residue on any of the wounds or on the hands.' Anthony stepped over the corpse, peering into the car's interior.

'What are you looking for?'

'Well, if it's a suicide there's going to be a gun and shell casing,' he looked back at Ella 'unless he shot himself in the head, caught the casing and chucked both out the window which then disappeared into an alternate dimension.'

While Anthony was checking the car, Ella rummaged through the corpse's pockets and pulled out a wallet. She opened it and pulled out a driver's license.

'Martin Williams, born 1976,' she kept rifling through the wallet and found a business card. 'Looks like he was a journalist from the next town over.' Ella handed the card over to Anthony as he finished searching the car.

'Business reporter for the Menlo Park Telegraph. Offices just outside of Stevensville. We should get over there.' Anthony said.

'No, we need to run his details through our database first.'

'That's just a waste of time. We've got to keep following the trail before it goes cold.'

'It's our procedure and that's final.'

'Says who?'

Ella smiled and held up the car keys.

'I'm the one driving.'

Anthony sighed. 'I forgot how much I hated these little discussions of ours.'

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The police station was quiet when they walked in. Ella walked straight to her desk piled high with paperwork in the far corner next to a busted radiator. She gave the computer a smack as she sat down, and the screen whirred to life. Anthony went to follow her but stopped by the front desk.

'Where the hell is everyone?'

'I don't know. Probably out on patrol.'

'The whole precinct?'

'Yeah, this town does have crime every now and then.'

'What about Matthew?'

'What about him?'

Anthony pointed to the empty front desk. 'The chief says he never leaves the front desk!'

'Maybe he's grabbing lunch.'

'It's three in the afternoon.'

Ella spun in her chair to face him. 'Listen. We can waste time wondering where everyone is, or we can figure out who killed this guy and why.' She spun back around and typed away on her computer. Anthony walked over to her desk and stood behind the chair.

'Okay, so what now Dragnet?'

'Now we plug this guy's details into our database and see if we can't find anything suspicious.'

Ella hit enter and the database spat out Martin William's details in a heartbeat. Anthony ran his eyes over the screen.

'Wow, there's nothing there, great job Detective.' Anthony shook his head. 'Now let's get back onto an actual lead and pay the Menlo Park Telegraph offices a little visit.'

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An accident outside of Stevensville slowed traffic on the highway to a crawl as the sun blazed a trail through the sky. The sun was dipping below the tree line by the time they arrived at the location stated on Williams' business card. They pulled up and Anthony had to double-check the card they'd found to make sure they were in the right place.

'You've got to be shitting me.'

The Menlo Park Telegraph office was a single decrepit building surrounded by high-rise apartments that had seen better days. The windows were covered by security shutters, the paint was peeling, and the signage was missing. Ella checked her watch as they stepped out of the car.

'Long lunch or something?'

Anthony cast his eye over the apartments on either side. They looked like they had been deserted for years.

'Doubt it.' he walked over to the building's front door. A directory of the journalists working for the paper was by the door. Every name on the directory was scratched out apart from Martin Williams.

'Any luck or just another dead end?' Ella asked as she joined him by the front door.

'Seems like our victim was running solo, don't think there'd be enough room for receptionists. How long do you think it would take for us to get a warrant for the -' Anthony was cut off as Ella kicked the door in.

'About that long.'

Anthony stepped into the dark building with Ella by his side, her gun drawn. They found themselves in a long dark corridor with offices flanking both sides. The offices were dark with the doors closed, the only light source was from the lone office at the end of the corridor. They walked straight to the illuminated office. Martin Williams' name was stencilled into the door's frosted glass.

Anthony nudged the door with the toe of his boot, and it swung open without a sound. Ella's pocket vibrated and she stepped into one of the dark offices to take the call. Anthony watched her go and stepped into the office.

Piles of documents were scattered around the cramped office. A corkboard in the corner was a mess of paper and red string webs with more documents burdening the cheap oak desk. Anthony crossed the room and ran his finger along the string.

The sound of a gun's safety disengaging gave him pause. He turned to see a shadowy figure standing in the doorway, his gun pointing straight at him.

A gunshot rang out as Anthony dived behind the desk. He waited for the second shot, took a deep breath and peeked out the top of the desk. He saw Ella standing in the doorway, looking down at the crumpled figure.

'Well, this is a twist I did not see coming.'

Anthony got to his feet, brushing dust off his clothes.

'What do you mean?'

Ella motioned for him to come over.

Anthony walked over to the body and stopped short.

The unseeing eyes of Matthew stared back up at him, the bloodstain spreading over his undershirt. Ella shot Anthony a look and walked over to the desk, wiping a tear from her eye as she rummaged through the desk. Anthony closed Matthew's eyes and searched his pockets before the blood ruined any items. He found a phone and an empty shell casing. Anthony pocketed the casing and checked the phone. The latest message flashed up on the screen.

*Get rid of the evidence. No loose ends.*

Ella stepped away from the desk and turned to Anthony.

'You find anything?'

'Just this.' Anthony frisbeed the phone to her and turned towards the corkboard.

'Shit,' Ella looked up from the phone and noticed the board. 'What's on the board?'

Anthony examined the corkboard. The documents were new stories with the red string connecting the stories to reports and research. He reached out and tore a page off the board.

'News stories,' Anthony skimmed the story. 'About police corruption in a small county in South Dakota. All about big corporations coming in, getting officials in their back pocket, and running the town like it was their own personal piggy bank.'

Anthony pulled another story off the board. 'Same story, this time it was in Florida.'

The two of them started searching the piles of documents around the office. Twenty minutes later, they'd got a general idea of what was going on. Every story, all the research told the same story of a corporation taking over a small town and running all the small business owners out of business. The documents spread around the office all came to the same conclusion. Ella threw down the pile of documents she had been reading.

'What are we even still doing here? We've just stumbled onto evidence of a police cover-up, we've got a dead cop on our hands, we've got to get back to town and explain this all to the chief.'

Anthony shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. 'No, we're missing something here. Why would the journalist be collecting all these stories and reports...' He froze with his hand halfway through his hair. 'The letter.'

'What?'

Anthony gave her a look and slipped his hand into his pocket, rolling the shell casing around in his palm.

'I found this letter as I was cleaning out Mom's things. It was a rambling mess about mistakes, a journalist, and the police chief. I had no idea what it was talking about at the time but now I feel whoever wrote it knows what happened to our journalist friend...' Anthony trailed off as his eyes slid from the board to Ella. Before he could say anything, Ella's phone rang. She answered it and turned away from Anthony.

'Yes... I understand,' she hung up and turned back to him. 'We've been called in. They're setting up roadblocks around town. Apparently, something big happened and they need us to help lock it down.'

Anthony stood up from the desk and headed for the car. 'Let's go then.'

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The town was dark by the time they arrived. The moon was covered by dark clouds and the only light was from their car's headlights. As they reached the town's outskirts, a cop car's blue and red lights flicked on. The headlights blazed to life and Ella slowed down as a silhouette climbed out of the car and strode towards them. The figure reached the driver's side window and leant down. Anthony looked across as Ella rolled down the window and recognised the smoking cop from earlier today. The cop ignored him and addressed Ella.

'We've got the outer perimeter set up. Chief wants you on the main street.'

'Roger that.'

The cop nodded and walked back to his car. He flicked the headlights off, and Ella drove past the car into town. They reached the main street and parked in front of the police station. Ella shut off the car and slumped down in her seat, settling in for a long night. Anthony stared down the street, rolling the shell casing around his fingers.

'This doesn't make any sense.'

Ella stirred from her daze. 'What do you mean?'

'This whole thing,' Anthony said.

*Get rid of the evidence, no loose ends.*

The message rattled around in his head.

'Why'd he call us in just to park in front of the...?' Anthony trailed off as he opened the car door and stepped out. Ella leaned across to look at him.

'What are you doing?'

Anthony made a show of rubbing his hands together and stamping his feet.

'Need to warm myself up and use the bathroom. Just stay in the car, I'll be back in a sec.'

'Okay.' Ella returned to her slumped position in her seat. Anthony walked down the footpath until he was at the steps of the police station and broke out into a run, heading for Survivors Alley.

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The bell rang out as Anthony entered Deliah's diner for the second time that day. Navigating in the dark and on foot had meant it had taken longer than Anthony would have liked. The street was as dark as the rest of the town when he stepped into the silent diner. The blackboard had been wiped clean for the day and the display case was empty. Anthony searched for a light switch and flicked it on, his eyes falling on the plaque as the diner lit up.

'Deliah? You still here?'

Silence greeted him.

Anthony searched the entire area, checking the corners for any possible hiding spot.

No one was there.

Anthony walked over to the plaque and slipped the revolver free from its podium. He checked the chamber, surprised to see it was loaded. Anthony had a feeling he'd need it for what was coming next.

Reaching the kitchen's double doors, Anthony pushed the door open and stepped back into darkness. As his eyes adjusted, Anthony heard footsteps and cutlery clatter to the floor. Anthony slid behind a stainless-steel counter as he got his bearings. The sounds faded away with a strangled groan replacing it. Anthony shimmied along the counter towards the far wall. Without warning, light filled the room and his vision filled with spots. Anthony covered his eyes until the spots faded. Reaching the gun, Anthony vaulted the counter, scanning the room.

The kitchen was your standard industrial setup. A row of burners sat at the back wall with stainless-steel counters spaced out for the kitchen staff to mill around without bumping into each other. A



dishwasher and sink combo were set into the wall closest to Anthony and it was in the reflection of the dishwasher that Anthony noticed the body. Keeping his eyes scanning the room, Anthony moved past the next row of counters and looked down.

It was Deliah.

She was splayed on her back, eyes wide and flitting around the room. Her eyes met Anthony' and she let out another strangled groan and turned her head away from him.

It was then he noticed the foam trickling down the corner of her mouth.

Anthony placed his gun on the counter, dropped to his knees and elevated Deliah's head to try and clear her airway. Deliah gave a gasping cough and a spray of foamy blood splattered against Anthony' face. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her chest grew still. Anthony held her in his arms before he laid her head back on the floor and with the cuff of his jacket, wiped the foam from her mouth.

'Something she ate definitely didn't agree with her.'

Anthony looked up to see Frank appear from the shadows, a polished 44 magnum pointed straight at him.

'Don't even think about reaching for your gun.'

Anthony sunk to his haunches, keeping his eyes on the gun.

'What did you do to her?'

Frank glanced down at Deliah's still body.

'What I had to do to keep this town from becoming a ghost town.'

'To keep your pockets lined you mean?'

'Not just me,' Frank motioned towards Deliah. 'This one was just as eager to take their cash.'

'So, what happens now?'

Frank eyes shot back to Anthony.

'I've already killed three people to keep this secret, what's one more body to the pile?' the magnum centred on Anthony' chest.

Anthony shifted his weight, the gun now off target. 'Three? Martin Williams, Deliah... that's only two,' he eyed his gun sitting on the benchtop out of his reach.

*Keep him talking.*

Frank gave a cold smile.

'Really? You haven't figured it out yet, Anthony? A shame, I thought FBI agents, even desk jockeys, were meant to be sharper than that.'

Anthony shuffled back, reaching out with his hand for the counter to his left, feeling the cool metal against his skin as a cold hand gripped his heart.

Frank's face softened. 'I truly am sorry Anthony, she wouldn't see sense, so she became an obstacle.'

Anthony was watching Frank's eyes as he talked. They had wavered the more he talked and as he finished, his eyes flicked back to Deliah for a second. Sensing his chance, Anthony used the counter to spring to his feet and reached for his gun.

Frank snapped back to reality and fired. The gunshot echoed in the room as Anthony's hip erupted in pain. His legs gave way, and he dove for the gun, his outstretched fingers brushing against it. Anthony swore as he slammed into the top corner of the counter and fell to the floor, his hand scrabbling for purchase on the counter before it dropped onto the floor, defeated. Frank walked over, the gun ready at his side.

Frank kicked Anthony in the ribs, forcing him onto his back. Frank raised his gun 'Been real good seeing you again, Anthony.'

Anthony coughed, pain raking his side. 'Yeah, I suppose it was.' Without warning, he flung the knife he had snatched off the counter and rolled to his right.

The throw was off-target and lodged in Frank's shoulder. Frank flinched from the pain, his aim pulling to the left as he fired. The shot nicked Anthony's ear as he rolled into the counter. He reached up, searching for the gun. Feeling its well-worn touch, he wrapped his hand around the weapon and pulled it close. Anthony sighted Frank, aimed, and fired three shots. Each shot found its mark and Frank sunk to his knees, blood gushing from his chest.

Anthony struggled to his feet and stood before Frank. 'Who else is in on it, Frank?'

Frank spat a gob of blood onto Anthony's shoes, blood dribbling out of his mouth onto the floor. With a smirk, he answered and raised his gun. Anthony didn't hesitate to fire again.

Frank's head snapped backwards, and his body slumped to the floor, his eyes staring up at Anthony.

Anthony kicked his corpse and winced as lances of pain ran along his rib and hip. Clutching his side, Anthony limped out of the kitchen, swinging the double doors open with his foot. The darkened restaurant welcomed Anthony back with its silence.

The doors swung shut, sealing the grim scene away and leaving Anthony alone with questions echoing around in his head. Anthony holstered his gun, noticing his hands shaking in the dim light as Frank's final words deafened him.

*It can be anyone in this little town. Don't trust anyone.*

Anthony sucked in the cool night air, wincing as his side flared with pain. *Likely a broken rib.* After a minute, his hands had stopped shaking and the pain resided to a dull ache.

*Right, I need to get out of this place. Sneak down the backroads to grab my stuff then get out and get the FBI involved.*

Anthony limped out of the restaurant and checked the street.

*Don't trust anyone.*

It was deserted, the cover of night had closed in.

He was halfway across the street when car headlights blazed to life at both ends of the street. Anthony shielded his eyes from the light and saw silhouettes on either side of him, standing motionless beside the multiple cop cars barricading the street. As his eyes adjusted, Anthony saw a lone figure approach him.

They stopped a few feet away from him.

'All you had to do was stay in the car, Anthony.' The figure said.

*It can be anyone...*

It was Ella. It made sense it was Ella.

'Did you know he killed her?'

'I couldn't stop him.'

Anthony's hand hung free at his side, his thumb and index finger circling each other. Ella noticed.

'We don't have to do this Anthony.'

'I'm not walking away from this, so you better put me in the ground.'

Anthony could see the tears trailing down her face as she fought to keep her emotions in check. It was a fight she was losing.

'Please, please don't make me do this. Just come in with me. I'll – I'll work something out.'

Clouds had closed in, and sheets of rain had begun to fall.

'I go in with you and I'm dead within an hour,' he yelled. 'No, we settle this now.'

Ella's shoulders sagged in defeat and her hand dropped to her holster.

Anthony ran his hand over the pistol grip.

The silence stretched out between them as they stared each other down over the distance. Neither one wanted to make the first move. Neither one wanted to force the other's hand.

Anthony spotted movement over Ella's shoulder, silhouettes moving in formation towards them, weapons at the ready, drawing a bead on both of them.

*Looks like I'm coming home Ma.*

'Nice seeing you again Ella.' Anthony murmured as he drew the revolver. Ella saw the movement and drew hers.

They both raised their weapons, mirror images of each other.

The bell tolled in the distance.

A single shot echoed out into the night.

THE END