

An excerpt from
BLOODLETTING

By Michael McBride

PROLOGUE

El Mirador Ruins

Torrential rain laid siege to the jungle, beating a discordant melody on the broad leaves of the sacred ceiba trees and tropical cedars. No celestial light penetrated the smothering black storm clouds, beneath which a damp mist rolled across the muddy ground. Somewhere in the darkness a parrot cawed from an enclave in a mahogany tree and the hooting of howler monkeys echoed from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Until abruptly the world fell silent.

Four shadows peeled from the night at a crouch and emerged from the undergrowth into a small clearing at the base of the steep hillside that had grown over the ancient Maya temple La Danta converged upon a rickety aluminum shack surrounded by drilling and earthmoving equipment sinking into the detritus. One of the shadows reached the door of the flimsy building, and after a few seconds, a padlock dropped into the mud. Another shadow drew the door wide and all four disappeared inside. Wooden crates and packing material lined the wall to the left, while middle Preclassic Era artifacts from narrow-mouthed *tecomate* jars to jade and obsidian figurines were displayed in a staged jumble on a table to the right, as though someone had merely stepped away from their task of boxing and shipping. It was all for show. As were the baskets brimming with small picks and brushes, the dirty jackets hanging from nails, and the row of hardhats mounted with halogen lamps.

The rear of the shack abutting the slope had been retrofitted with a door to match the front, beaten and dirty, hinges rusted...yet more than a simple padlock secured it. Two

of the shadows isolated the external detonators rigged to bricks of C4 and deactivated the remote triggers, while a third removed the cover of a breaker box on the wall, revealing a small black screen. The shadow produced what looked like a lollipop from an invisible pocket and held it up to the scanner. A red light projected from the screen, spotlighting an excised brown eye at the end of a short metal post.

They removed the aluminum door as the reinforced steel door behind slid back into the recessed wall, revealing a stone tunnel reaching back into the black heart of the pyramid. Merging with the darkness, they inched deeper, Steyr AUG 5.56 mm assault rifles sweeping the rocky passageway illuminated only by the pale green glare provided by the unwieldy night vision apparatuses strapped over their eyes. They advanced in silence, infiltrating what had once been a temple to a long dead god, but now led to the altar of technology, modernized to feature track lighting on the rock roof, the circulated air blowing in their faces, and the humidity controls that held the jungle at bay.

As one, the shadows flattened against the wall where the tunnel opened into a vast square chamber from which several dark passages branched. A row of gas-powered generators rumbled to the right beneath a hood that vented the fumes to the surface.

“We’re too late,” the first shadow said. “They knew we were coming.”

“No,” another said, shoving through the others into the room. “They have to be here somewhere.”

Though none could see the man’s eyes, glistening green tracks of tears streaked the mud he’d rubbed on his face. He headed straight for the widest branch, passing between walls composed of great cubes of stone, decorated with seventh century hieroglyphics barely visible through layers of dust and spider webs, until he reached the terminus, from which twin tunnels forked to either side.

The man turned left and nearly barreled into a stainless-steel door. Beside it was another retina scanner that granted him access thanks to the eye in his pocket. The impenetrable slab hissed back into the wall and he stepped into a small tiled room with lockers to either side and clean suits hanging by another door directly ahead. He blew through and the door opened for him into a small chamber with a pull-cord chemical

bath. As soon as the door closed behind him he was buffeted by scalding hot steam from the vents surrounding him, but he didn't care. All that mattered now was finding them.

After a blistering moment, the door in front of him slid back to expose a sterile laboratory more than thirty feet long, a recent addition with shiny steel walls that reflected his distorted black image. A series of metal drums dominated the center of the room, vaguely reminiscent of round horse troughs with domed lids upon which were mounted circular pressure, temperature, and humidity gauges. Racks lined the wall to the left, brimming with chemicals, glassware, pipettes, and Petri dishes. To his right was a long counter with several workstations demarcated by powerful electron microscopes, centrifuges, and other equipment beyond his comprehension.

The caustic scent of disinfecting agents was overwhelming, but beneath it lurked a more organic stench similar to stagnant marsh water that he recognized immediately.

"God, no," he whispered, running to the back of the room where a half dozen surgical lamps were mounted to the ceiling, directed toward the same point beneath. "No, no, no."

An agonized moan wrenched loose from his chest.

A body was draped across a steel table. The gutters to either side were sloppy with congealed blood and bone chips. Its abdomen had been opened and all the viscera removed, revealing the exposed spine framed by ribs that had been cracked open and drawn apart like a clamshell. The legs and arms were untouched, though a marbled shade of gray, the digits dark from necrosis. But her face...her beautiful face...

He leaned forward and gently caressed her waxy cheek, glancing only briefly into the hollow sockets where her blue eyes had once been. Sobbing, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. He lowered his chin to her forehead and stroked her tangled blonde hair, now crusted with blood.

Bellowing his sorrow, he had to look away, finally catching sight of the message they'd left for him, smeared in blood on the wall.

She died slowly.

The man roared, grief and rage forcing aside rational thought. He whirled and punched the nearest metal drum. The hatch of the dome opened and a gust of what looked like steam billowed out. Within was a liquid nitrogen-cooled system filled with

organs in numbered containers. Before he could turn away, he saw a liver, kidneys, a heart, and two long, coiled ropes that he wished had been intestines. Deep down, he knew exactly what they were and collapsed to his knees.

“Get up, Colonel,” a firm voice said from behind him. Fists knotted into his jacket and he was pulled to his feet. “We’re registering heat signatures down the hall.”

And with that, the Colonel was running, through the lab and the decontamination chamber, through the locker room into the corridor where two men stood before the other door with a thermographic infrared camera directed at the steel slab. The eye was in his hand before he shoved them aside and thrust it up to the scanner. He slid through sideways as the door opened, welcomed into the darkness by a cacophonous riot of crying.

There were plastic incubators to the left, rows of bassinets to the right. Toward the back were clear plastic cribs with cage lids. The screaming was all around him.

“Jesus Christ,” one of his men said from behind him, but he was already dashing toward the incubators. The heating elements over two of the incubators provided a faint green glow through the goggles. The first unit was empty. Beneath the second was a squirming infant, arms stretched stiffly from beneath a blanket, tiny fists clenched and trembling. Its mouth framed a scream, its eyes pinched closed. A tuft of light hair capped its wrinkled, round head.

The Colonel reached in and gently lifted the child from the incubator, cradled it to his chest, and sobbed anew.

There had been two umbilical cords in the cryogenic freezer, two heat lamps over the incubators.

“Where’s the other one?” he shouted.

“There are more over here,” one of the men called from his right. Children swaddled in blankets, none of them newborn, all crying. He passed them by, noting that only every other bassinet was occupied.

“More back here!” another man yelled.

The Colonel ran toward the voice, but there were only toddlers and small children wailing behind the vented plastic walls of their cages. He spun in a circle. There were no more infants.

Only the terrified cries.

“Where’s my child?” he screamed, his voice echoing into the dark stone corridors beneath the temple.

CHAPTER ONE

I

20 Miles Southwest of Wren, Colorado

The words of the dying man haunted him.

You’ll never find her in time.

Special Agent Paxton Carver cranked the wheel to the right, the black Caprice Classic fishtailing on the gravel road in a cloud of dust before the tires finally caught and launched the sedan down the long, rutted dirt drive toward the distant farmhouse. Fallen barbed wire fences blew past to either side, tangled with tumbleweeds and overgrown by wild grasses and sunflowers, the fields beyond a riot of vegetation, prematurely browning from dehydration.

He could barely hear the distant cry of sirens behind him over the pinging of rocks against the undercarriage.

The crows were already waiting when he reached the house and jammed the brakes. They lined the steeped roof of the white clapboard house, the aluminum outbuilding, and the thick black wires stretching back to the telephone poles. The setting sun beyond cast a scarlet glare over everything, limning the feathers of the raucously cawing birds as though they’d bathed in blood.

The transmission had been well masked, bouncing from one satellite to another. They had finally isolated the source, but it had taken so long...

Too long.

Twenty-two hours and nineteen minutes.

Carver leapt from the car and hit the front steps at a sprint, tightening the Kevlar vest over his torso, his official windbreaker still on the passenger seat. He drew his M9 Beretta 9mm from his shoulder holster and pointed it at the front door. The porch planks were bowed and gray, pulling the nails from their moorings; the siding of the house sandblasted, white paint peeling in curls. Two rusted chains dangled from the overhang to his left where a porch swing had once been suspended, the window behind covered from within by dusty drapes and cobwebs. He threw back the screen door, hammering the wall with a bang, tried the front door, then kicked it in.

“FBI!” he shouted, shoving past the shivering door through the cracked and splintered threshold and into the living room, arms tensed in front of him, taking in the room along the sightline of the Beretta.

Single level; no stairs. Dusty sheets draped over a couch and chair to the right. Twin framed oil landscapes flanking a single window guarded by floor-length maroon drapes. Older television on a stand. Magazines on an end table, glossy covers dulled by dust. Open bedroom door to the left. Stripped, stained mattress. The mirror on the inside of the open closet door reflected a rack of empty hangers, nothing beneath. A bathroom door stood ajar beside the bedroom. Shower curtain missing, the toilet and rim of the tub stained by rust. Mirror on the medicine chest, spiderwebbed.

The buzzing of flies drew him toward the kitchen ahead before being drowned out by the rising sirens and the grumble of tires on gravel.

He paused at the entryway, flattening his back to the wall between the living room and the kitchen. Deep breath. In. Out. Ducking around the corner, he scrutinized the room with a sweep of the pistol. To his left: white refrigerator, ice chest-style handles; oak cabinets; gas stove; green Formica countertops freckled with crumbs. To his right: dinette, two chairs, no dust; microwave behind, green numbers flashing the wrong time.

He glanced at his watch. Twenty-two hours, twenty-one minutes.

At the back of the kitchen, the sink was overflowing with foul-smelling pots, above which bloated black flies swarmed, seething over the tarnished copper. They darted in and out of the hole to the garbage disposal. The gold sashes covering the window behind were alive with them.

Carver turned to his right and passed through the mudroom without slowing, bursting out through the rear door onto a windswept stretch of hard dirt. A worn path led to the corrugated aluminum building, the slanted roof covered by screaming crows jostling for position.

Voices rose from the far side of the house, now a black silhouette against the swirling red cherries. Footsteps thundered hollowly on the front porch and pounded the packed earth as they converged upon his position.

Twenty-two hours, twenty-two minutes. There was no time to wait for backup.

He grabbed the knob and threw the door inward, thrusting the Beretta through in front of him. The sour smell of spoiled meat and feces swatted him in the face. Frenzied talons clamored on the roof, the frantic cawing reaching a crescendo. Twin slants of mote-infested light stained the straw floor crimson, illuminating a bare room the size of the entire house, with only a single foldout table with a laptop on it in the middle of the vast emptiness. The screen faced away from him, deeper into the vacuous space.

You'll never find her in time.

He sprinted to the table and spun the laptop so he could see the image he knew would be there. The girl had slouched forward onto the concrete floor, her face buried beneath her tangled blonde hair, her flesh a sickly shade of gray under the single overhead bulb. Her shoulders trembled almost imperceptibly with a soundless inhalation.

"She's still alive," he shouted over his shoulder.

He yanked on the computer until he met resistance. The power cord was strung to an orange extension cord and buried beneath the straw, but it was the network cable stretching deeper into the outbuilding that he sought. Following its length, he stomped as he pulled it from the straw, listening until he heard the change from solid cement to something metallic.

Carver fell to his knees and cleared away the detritus, uncovering a rusted iron hatch, secured to the concrete by an eyebolt and a padlock. A single shot destroyed the lock and he frantically lifted the hatch, revealing a set of wooden stairs leading down into the earth.

Steeling himself against the intensified smell, he pointed the barrel toward the landing below, and slowly began the decent into hell.

* * *

Twenty-two hours and thirty-two minutes earlier, Carver had known he was close, but he had no idea just how close. He had been pursuing the monster for the last two months, since the discovery of the body of eleven-year-old Ashlee Porter. A vagrant had found her right foot in the Dumpster behind a convenience store, but the resultant search had only turned up eight more parts in trash receptacles across the west side of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Fortunately, her head had been among them. Angela Downing's corpse had been found similarly dismembered in the hollow trunk of a lightning-struck cottonwood outside of Brush, Colorado three weeks later, and only two weeks prior to unearthing the right hand of Jessica Fenton from the bank of the Big Thompson River, southeast of Greeley. By a stroke of luck, one of her fingerprints had escaped the claws of the crawfish, providing her identification since they never did find her head, or any of the rest of her for that matter. All three had presented with lacerations of the palmar surface of the distal phalanges, broken fingernails, and trauma to the cuticles consistent with a futile struggle against a hard surface while being pinned from behind. The two salvaged heads had exhibited bruising on the occipital and temporal regions, betraying repeated blows from behind, and areas where fistfuls of hair had been torn from the scalp. Angela Downing's left ankle had been chafed to the exposed muscle by what residual traces of metal confirmed to be an iron manacle.

The Rocky Mountain Regional Computer Forensics Laboratory had been able to conclude that all three victims had been exsanguinated prior to being butchered. The superficial strata of their skin showed elevated levels of ammonia absorption consistent with chronic exposure to urine and feces, a trait common in people held captive in close

confines over an extended period of time. Unfortunately, they had been unable to separate any viable DNA from those of the corpses.

Until that point, his day had been spent following up on one dead-end lead after another and he had been both physically and emotionally exhausted by the time he returned to his townhouse that night, takeout Chinese under one arm and a week's worth of forgotten mail under the other. He had left his briefcase in the car, knowing that if he brought it in with him, he would be staring down the barrel of another sleepless night spent poring over the pictures of dismembered little girls. For a moment, he thought he had been right on the monster's heels, but he had come to the grim realization that there would be no more progress until his worst nightmare became reality.

Until they discovered the next body.

He set the soggy brown paper sack on the table and the mail on the eating bar. The sink beneath the lone window was brimming with dishes he'd at least managed to rinse, the curtains riffling gently behind. The counter beside was littered with crumpled fast-food wrappers. He was about to open the fridge to grab a Killian's when he saw the note he had affixed to it only the night before: Buy Beer. Shaking his head, he shrugged off his suit jacket and drank some water straight from the faucet. He'd just head upstairs and change his clothes, come back down, choke down a little Mongolian Beef, and pray sleep claimed him before he again broke down and cracked open the case files.

Passing through the darkened living room, the light from the kitchen reflecting through the layer of dust on the TV, he ascended the stairs one at a time, feeling aches upon pains throughout his body. There were three doors at the top of the landing overlooking the great room: to the left, the master bedroom; straight ahead, a bathroom; and to the right, the second bedroom, which served as his study. He always kept them open. Always.

The door to the study was closed.

He took a deep breath to focus his senses. There was no time to hesitate or whoever was inside would realize that he knew. He pulled the Smith & Wesson Model 19 snub-nose from his ankle holster and jammed it under his waistband, untucking his button-

down to hang in front. Drawing his Beretta, he kicked the door in with a crack of the destroyed trim.

The room beyond was dark, as he knew it would be, but he immediately sensed someone else in there with him. He could smell their sweat, rank breath, ammonia—

Cold metal pressed against the base of his skull behind his left ear as he entered the room. An even colder, trembling hand with spider-like fingers closed around his and relieved him of the Beretta.

“Why couldn’t you find them?” a voice whimpered directly into his ear. It was somewhat effeminate and dry, a freshly sharpened scythe through wheat.

“I must have been close.”

“I never meant to hurt them. But I know, I know. I did. They’re dead, aren’t they? Dead, dead, dead!” the man said, jabbing him in the head with the barrel of the gun.

Carver staggered deeper into the room, colliding with his desk chair.

“Sit down,” the man said, training both guns on him through the darkness. The mismatched pair of pistols shook in his hands. There was a rustling of papers as he sat on the desk. “I have to show you. So you’ll understand. You have to see.”

He turned the computer monitor on the desk toward him and pressed the power button with the barrel of the gun in his right hand. A weak glow blossomed from the screen, highlighting his face. His unblinking eyes bulged and tears streamed down his cheeks. The muscles in his face twitched spastically.

“This wasn’t what I wanted,” the man sobbed. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this. No one can help them. No one can—”

Before the man could turn back to him, Carver pulled the snub-nose from beneath his waistband, raised it, and fired. He caught a glimpse of the man’s profile, silhouetted by the light from the screen, as he flipped backwards over the desk, a pinwheel of blood following him from the spouting hole in his ruined chest.

Carver lunged from the chair and leapt up onto the desk, training the revolver on the heap of humanity crumpled against the base of his bookcase. The man shuddered and tried to rise. Carver dropped down beside him and kicked both of the guns away. He was

just about to drag the man back around to the front of the desk when he heard a soft voice behind him.

He turned to face the monitor on the bloody desktop.

There was a hiss of static, a droning monotone interrupted by the sound of labored breathing.

“Please,” the voice whispered, barely discernible above the din. “Mommy... Please...”

A girl was sprawled on a filthy concrete floor, naked save the brown skein of refuse and blood coating her body. Her tangled blonde hair covered her face, framed by both hands, still feebly trying to push her up from the ground. A thick chain trailed from the manacle on her ankle to an eyebolt on the nicotine-yellow concrete block wall.

A single overhead bulb illuminated the room, casting a dirty manila glare over everything, turning the spatters on the walls and the dried pools on the floor black.

“Jesus,” Carver gasped.

There were no windows in the girl’s prison. Her respirations were already becoming jerky, agonal. She was asphyxiating.

“Where is she?”

A burbling of fluid metamorphosed into crying.

“Where is she?” Carver shouted.

The man whimpered. Blood drained from the corners of his mouth. Trembling, he tried to stand, but collapsed again.

Carver grabbed him by the shirt, lifting him from the ground and slamming him against the shelves. Blood exploded past the man’s lips, hot against Carver’s face.

“Where is she?”

The man’s head fell forward onto Carver’s shoulder.

“You’ll never find her in time,” he rasped. The burbling tapered to a hiss as heat streamed down Carver’s back, and then finally to nothing at all.

* * *

Carver eased down the stairs. They were sticky and made the sound of peeling masking tape each time he lifted a foot. There was no sound from ahead. The only light

was a pale stain creeping along the concrete floor at the bottom from beneath a rusted iron door with an X riveted across it.

Footsteps stamped behind and above him.

Carver licked his lips and seated his finger firmly on the trigger. He leaned his shoulder against the door and prepared to grab the handle, but the pressure caused the door to open inward with a squeal of the hinges, allowing more light to spill onto the landing. Cringing against the stench, he shoved the door and ducked into the small chamber, swinging his pistol from left to right.

Twenty-two hours and twenty-three minutes. He had never stood a chance.

The laptop monitor to his left, balanced on top of a workbench crusted with blood, still showed the image of the girl collapsed on the floor, and the web camera mounted above still faced into the room, but it had all been a ruse.

Beneath the harsh brass glare, he lowered the Beretta and stepped deeper into the cell. In the middle of the floor where the girl had once been was a stack of body parts, a pyramid of severed appendages built upon her torso, her head balanced precariously on top, facing the doorway. Her lank hair stuck to the blood on her face, eyelids peeled back in an expression of accusation, lips pulped and split over fractured teeth.

She'd been dead before the monster had even revealed himself to Carver, her agonizing death previously recorded and broadcast after the fact.

Carver averted his eyes from the carnage as the sounds of voices and pounding treads filled the room.

A full-length mirror had been recently affixed to the gore-stained gray wall directly ahead. A single word was painted in blood near the top.

Killer.

Beneath the word, he stared at his own reflection.

II

Sinagua Ruins

36 Miles Northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona

Kajika Dodge followed the buzzing sound to a small patch of shade beneath a creosote bush where the diamondback waited for him, testing his scent in darting flicks of its black tongue. It acknowledged the burlap sack at his side, ripening with the limp carcasses of its brethren, with a show of its vibrating rattle.

No matter. Soon enough it would join them.

Kajika readjusted his grip on his pinning stick.

The rattler seized the opportunity and shot diagonally out onto the blazing sand away from him.

He dropped the bag and with a single practiced stride was in position to drive the forked end of his stick onto the viper's neck when it vanished into a circular hole in the earth.

Kajika could only stare. A short length of three-inch PVC pipe protruded from the ground. The white plastic was smooth and unscarred, brand new. He wandered through this section of the desert at least once a week. It was a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts, an opportunity to pay homage to the desert from which his lifeblood had sprung. The pipe was definitely a recent addition, the only manmade interruption in the otherwise smooth sand.

Why would someone wander out into the middle of the Sonoran, a solid half-mile from the nearest dirt road, only to shove a length of pipe into the ground?

He crouched and pulled the plastic tube out of the earth. The sand immediately collapsed in its stead. He brushed it away with the prongs of his stick, revealing a shallow system of roots and a warren of darkness beneath.

The sand slowly slid back into place.

This was all wrong.

Wiping the streams of sweat from beneath the thick braid on his neck, he surveyed the landscape of golden desert painted by creosote and sage in choppy green and blue brushstrokes. Beyond rose a rugged backdrop of stratified buttes, red as the blood of his ancestors. Their spirits still inhabited the Sonoran Desert, lingering in the memories of crumbling stone walls and scattered potsherds.

He lowered his black eyes again to the ground. Those weren't roots. Not six feet from the shrub.

Turning the stick around, he shoved the duct-taped handle into the nearly invisible hole until it lodged against something solid and levered it upward. A tent of what appeared to be leather-wrapped sticks broke through the sand, smooth and tan.

His instincts told him to grab his sack and head back to the truck. Forget about the diamondback and the odd length of pipe. His mother had named him Kajika, he who walks without sound, as a constant reminder that there were things in life from which he would be better served to silently slink away.

But those weren't roots.

He kicked the sand aside with the toe of his boot, summoning a cloud of dust that clung to his already dirty jeans and flannel shirt, thickening the sweat on his face.

With a sigh, he unholstered the canteen from his hip and drew a long swig, closing his eyes and reveling in the cool sensation trickling down his throat.

"Couldn't have left well enough alone," he said aloud, grabbing his bag and stick and heading back toward his truck, where there was a shovel waiting in the cluttered bed.

No, that wasn't a tangle of roots. Not unless roots could be articulated with joints.

* * *

The sun had fallen to the western horizon, bleeding the desert scarlet by the time he climbed back out of the pit. His undershirt was soaked, his flannel draped over a clump of sage. He dragged the back of his hand across his forehead and slapped the sweat to the ground. Strands of long ebon hair had wriggled loose from the braid to cling to his cheeks. Night would descend soon enough, bringing with it the much-anticipated chill.

The rhythmic hooting of an owl drifted from its distant hollow in a cereus cactus.

Tipping back the canteen, he drained the last of the warm water and cast it aside, unable to wrench his gaze from the decayed old bundle he had exhumed. Tattered fabric bound its contents into an egg shape, a desiccated knee protruding from a frayed tear, exposing the acutely flexed lower extremity he had initially mistaken for roots, the mummified flesh taut over the bones. Even though the rest was still shrouded in an ancient blanket tacky with bodily dissolution, it didn't take a genius to imagine what the leg was attached to.

"Burnin' daylight," he said at last, sliding back down into the hole.

He slashed the bundle with the shovel, the sickly smelling cloth parting easily for the dull blade. The foul breath of decomposition belched from within.

"Moses in a rowboat," he gasped, tugging his undershirt up over his nose and mouth, biting it to hold it in place.

Casting the shovel aside, he leaned over the bundle and grasped either side of the torn blanket. He could now clearly see two legs, both bent sharply, pinned side by side.

The stench of death was nauseating.

He jerked his hands apart with the sound of ripping worn carpet from a floorboard, the shredded blanket falling away to betray its contents.

A gaunt face leered back at him, teeth bared from shriveled lips, nose collapsed, eyes hollow, save the concave straps of the dried eyelids. Its long black hair was knotted and tangled, fallen away in patches to expose the brown cranium. It had been folded into tight fetal position, its thighs pinning its crossed arms to its chest. Lengths of rope, hairy with decay, bound the body across the shins and around the back, tied so forcefully the dried skin had peeled away from beneath. There was no muscle left, no adipose tissue. Only leathered skin and knobby bone.

Kajika was overcome by a sense of reverence. Could this possibly be one of his ancestors? Could the very blood that had crusted and rotted into the fabric and putrid sand now flow through his veins?

He felt the spirits of the desert all around him, dancing in the precious moment when the moon materialized from the fading stain of the sunset and countless stars winked into being.

Movement, a mere shift in the shadows, dragged his attention to the corpse a single heartbeat before a wave of diamondbacks poured out of the hollow abdomen where they had recently made their den and washed over his boots.

III

Death Valley

40 km West of Nazca, Peru

The Nazca Desert stretched away from her to the eastern horizon, rising and falling in rolling dunes, contrasted by the distant blue of the jagged Andes, shrouded by the omnipresent snow clouds. Behind her, lush mangrove forests sheltered the tributaries feeding the Pacific Ocean, green walls of foliage at a standoff against the white sand. Only the occasional mangrove braved the desolation, oases of withering leaves interrupting the ivory perfection. From afar, the desert appeared pristine and untouched, but from where she stood now, her hiking boots ankle-deep in the sand, it became an apocalyptic wasteland. Human bones were scattered everywhere: long femora and humeri, curved segments of rib cages, vacant-eyed skulls, and the pebbles of carpals and tarsals, all bleached and baked by the sun. Many had been gnawed by feral mongrels or provided structure for spider webs and reptile burrows, though even more were broken and trampled puzzle pieces, never again to be assembled. The ancient skeletons had been unceremoniously disinterred and cast aside by marauding groups of *huaqueros*, grave robbers pillaging their own heritage for the most prized possessions of the dead.

Elliot turned away with a sad smile, imagining artifacts of incalculable archeological value being pawned for next to nothing, and slid down the slope to her dig where the team of graduate students crouched inside the rebar and rope-cordoned grids, excavating the ground in centimeter levels. So far they had already unearthed three intact Inca mummy bundles against the odds. The *huaqueros* had a sixth sense for buried gold and were as thorough as they were destructive. She had something of a gift herself,

though. If there were a mummy to be found, Dr. Elliot Archer would find it. There was little scientific method to the search. She simply closed her eyes and tried to envision the world as it was more than a thousand years prior, constructing the scene detail by detail until she felt as though she were really there.

She tucked a stray shock of raven-black hair beneath her Steelers ball cap, the fabric long since faded to a weathered brown, and tugged the curved bill low to shield her eyes, blue as the placid heart of a tropical sea. Exhausted faces acknowledged her as she passed, using the distraction to stretch the kinks from their backs and legs before once again resuming their tasks of removing the earth from the grids, sifting it through wire mesh, and meticulously cataloging everything larger than the fine desert sand. The sun was only beginning its ascent and they were already covered with a thick skin of dirt with only a handful of teeth, corn kernels, and bits of charcoal to show for it.

“Let me know when you reach China,” she said in an effort to combat the looks of disappointment on their faces, eliciting a few smiles but not a single weary chuckle. There was a generation accustomed to acquiring anything in the world with a single click of the mouse, the simple lessons of patience harder learned. She was less than a decade older than most of them, but the generational gap seemed to grow by the year. At least there was that moment of silence in her passage before the sound of scraping trowels and sifting resumed, reassuring her that the gap hadn’t grown too wide, at least not from behind.

There were six khaki tents past the site, three to either side of a path trampled into the sand. The three mummies were housed in the first on the left, still bundled in fetal position within layers of hand-woven blankets that had assumed the fluids from the dead and hardened over time. She heard the thrum of the generator powering the portable x-ray setup from the tent to her right where the radiographer was presumably preparing to begin taking films of the bundles. Attempting to unwrap the mummies would destroy them. Using x-rays allowed them to visualize not only the body, but also the valuables and various bowls of corn, grains, and charcoal hidden inside. Preserving the integrity of their discoveries also helped maintain the often-strained relationship with the Peruvian government, which frowned upon the rape of its heritage, at least by

foreigners. The tent beyond was draped with tarps and served as the darkroom, the scent of chemicals seeping out on toxic fumes. The remaining tents to the left were larger and functioned as housing, sleeping the unpaid labor in matchstick fashion, while she shared the final tent on the right, which also acted as their satellite communication center, with her fellow professors, Dr. Abe Montgomery from the University of Texas and Dr. Eldon Wilton from Vanderbilt. As she approached, Dr. Montgomery threw back the flap.

“Ah, Elliot,” he said, his eyes brightening when he saw her. He reminded her of Santa Claus on Jenny Craig, an affable bear of a man who radiated the wonder of a child. “I was about to come looking for you. We just received a very interesting call on the satellite phone, followed by an equally intriguing email.”

He was trying to hold a poker face, but the corners of his mouth twitched with excitement.

“Oh, my gosh. Did the Connolly Grant come through?”

“Better,” he said, holding back the flap so she could enter. “You apparently know a Dr. Mondragon at Northern Arizona University?”

“He was my faculty advisor in anthropology as an undergrad. I haven’t talked to him in years. Why...?”

Montgomery didn’t answer. Instead, he turned his back and led her through the piles of blankets and sleeping bags to the rear of the tent where the laptop sat on the lone table beside a kerosene lamp. He allowed her to study the image on the screen for a long moment before speaking.

“Well?” he said.

Her heart was beating too fast to formulate her thoughts. She rubbed her eyes and scrutinized every detail of the picture again.

When she finally turned to face him, her hands were shaking.

“Where did he say this picture was taken?”

“Arizona. Outside Winslow, to be precise.”

“There’s no way,” she snapped.

He held up his hands in supplication. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“This can’t be real,” she said, though she allowed herself a hopeful smile.

“There’s only one way to know for sure.”

“Yeah, but...”

He interrupted her with a sly grin.

“Eldon’s gassing the Jeep. You can be at the airport before nightfall. We’ve got you covered here. You just remember that when you publish.”

Elliot squealed and threw her arms around his neck, squeezing for everything she was worth.

IV

Byron G. Rogers Federal Building Denver, Colorado

Killer.

Carver leaned over the sink and splashed cold water in his face. When he looked at the mirror again, the word finger-painted in the blood of an innocent child was gone and he stared only at the reflection of the man saddled with the title, bearing the burden in his very soul. He had failed the girl. Whether or not he had abused and butchered her himself was irrelevant, for her blood was still on his hands.

Killer.

He had to turn away from the weary, bloodshot eyes staring back at him, water running down his stubbled cheeks like tears. His tie was crooked and his shirt collar and the cuffs of his blazer were soaked, his red hands chafed from trying to wash away the unforgivable sin of inaction.

Exhaustion had replaced the adrenaline, yet he hadn’t been able to sleep. He couldn’t go home, for agents still infested his study, combing through microscopic particles for any clue as to why four children needed to die, relegating him to his small office in the federal building, his uncomfortable chair, and his thoughts. Closing his eyes only summoned the image of the decapitated girl looking back at him from the ether through

glazed and filmy eyes set into bruised, bloody sockets, casting the blame he had already willingly accepted. Sometimes her tattered lips moved to echo the sentiments of the mirror, which he now saw as the physical manifestation of his conscience.

Killer.

Unanswered questions sprung unbidden to his mind. Why had the monster revealed himself in such a way? He had taken an incalculable risk in doing so and had forfeited his life for what amounted to nothing more than insanity. Carver couldn't shake the convenience of it. The man he had been tracking for two months, whom he had barely come close to cornering, had been waiting for him in his own house and now the hunt was over. It was too neat, too tidy. Too abrupt. Had the man been following him? Was there a leak somewhere in the Bureau? Was the monster an insider, or if not, how was he kept apprised of the investigation? Most importantly, though, Carver needed to know why. What deviant appetites had this psychopath needed to satisfy that could only be sated by the torture and slaughter of helpless children?

Despite the inarguable finality of the monster's death, Carver wouldn't be able to conclude his investigation until he was able to explain to four sets of grieving parents why their daughters had to die, knowing that no such justification existed. There were simply times when the black heart of a brutal, dying world bled into the lives of those once oblivious to it, whose days had never before been touched by an evil that no longer simply lay dormant, but actively boiled through the planet's crust, afflicting the dark minds of men and women who refused to bear their pain in silence, but actively searched for others upon whom to inflict it. A black scourge of the light in all things, living shadows passing lives from the periphery where they never come clearly into focus until their darkness falls upon the unsuspecting, and the world is revealed to them for what it truly is.

Carver checked his watch. His left hand shook. Blaming it on the copious amounts of caffeine, he shoved it in his pocket and exited the bathroom.

The eighteenth-story hallway stretched out before him. Agents and support staff were arriving, making their way to their desks and offices. None of them acknowledged him. They stole wary glances from the corners of their eyes before finding something

pressing in need of their attention, be it straightening case files or a crooked mouse pad, or even plucking lint from their jackets. He couldn't blame them though, for were their situations reversed, he would have undoubtedly done the same. It didn't take very long for word to travel, especially in high profile cases where a mother and father were forced to watch their daughter slowly asphyxiating in a presumed live-feed web broadcast, hoping against hope that someone would reach her in time, only to learn she had been dead all along.

Her name had been Jasmine Rivers and she had wanted to be a dancer. She had been abducted somewhere along the half-mile route between Mountain View Middle School and her house two weeks prior, sixteen days before her thirteenth birthday.

At the end of the stoic white corridor, he veered into a shorter hallway and passed through the polished oak door at the end. The gold placard adorning it read: M. Stephen Moorehead, Special Agent-in-Charge. The receptionist rose with a curt nod and disappeared through the closed door behind her desk, her silhouette barely discernible through the tempered glass beside it.

Carver sat in the black leather chair to the right of her desk and tried to lose himself in the saltwater tank on the opposite wall to keep from imagining the conversation to come, but the jerky respirations of the lionfish and loaches spurred the onslaught of memories...a child gasping for air in the very same manner until finally slumping to the cold concrete floor.

He closed his eyes to stall the tears. When he opened them again, all trace of emotion was gone.

They say pride comes before the fall, but he had never paused long enough to contemplate the heights. Professionally, he had been invincible. Every perpetrator upon whom he had set his sights was now either behind bars or dead. Every single one of them. Even the last. He had earned the reputation of a tracker. There wasn't a trail he couldn't follow, regardless of how cold, from his humble start investigating check fraud, to interstate drug trafficking, and finally to violent crimes.

The office door opened with the click of a dry swallow.

“Special Agent Moorehead will see you now,” the receptionist said, resuming her post behind the desk, attempting to busy herself until he passed.

“Please close the door behind you,” Moorehead said. He gestured toward a matching set of chairs. “Have a seat.”

Carver eased into the room and sat in the closest chair, facing his superior across a glass-topped desk adorned with a flat screen monitor, keyboard, and a single framed picture facing outward: Moorehead shaking hands with the second President Bush. It was tilted at just the right angle for Carver to see his own haggard reflection. It was no wonder everyone shied away. His formerly close-cropped sandy blonde hair was a little too shaggy, his face pasty, ghostly blue eyes sunken into dark pits of weariness, echoing the fact that he hadn’t slept more than a couple of hours in a stretch for weeks.

“Thank you for coming, Special Agent Carver,” Moorehead said. His no nonsense manner matched his appearance. Rich brown hair slicked back and to the left. Just the right tan. Smooth shave. Chocolate eyes with lashes that may or may not have been touched with liner. Perfectly tailored Turnbull & Asser suit. The kind of man who could just as easily stand apart from a crowd as blend into it.

“Yes, sir,” Carver said, looking beyond the SAC through the window. A bank of cotton candy clouds battled the sun for supremacy while a flock of pigeons swirled through the nothingness beneath. The reflection of a dark shape passed across the glass at the same time that Moorehead’s eyes ticked away from his and to the corner of the room behind him.

He had recognized Moorehead’s discomfort from the moment he had stepped through the door, but between being lost in self pity and assuming the Special Agent-in-Charge’s nervousness was in anticipation of the pending discussion, he had allowed his defenses to fall.

Carver turned just enough to see the man, who now stood behind him, without allowing the man to witness the momentary expression of surprise that crossed his face.

“Special Agent Carver,” Moorehead said. “Allow me to introduce Special Agent Hawthorne.”

His expression again composed, Carver rose from the chair and turned to find himself toe-to-toe with a man perhaps ten years his senior. They were so close that had he proffered his hand it would have impacted Hawthorne's gut. Four parallel scars ran diagonally across the man's forehead from his prematurely graying hairline over his right eye to his cheek, his eyebrow little more than a mass of scar tissue interrupted by a few swatches of hair. The hazel eye itself was fixed and focused, yet it didn't track in unison with the left. His skin was tight over his concrete jaw. His black suit had quite obviously never known a rack and was cut perfectly to hide a small arsenal underneath.

Carver stood a breath away from Hawthorne, just long enough that when he took a step back to extend his hand it wouldn't be perceived as an act of submission.

"It appears you had a rough night," Hawthorne said, shaking Carver's hand.

"I've had better."

"I'm sure you have." Hawthorne's face remained expressionless. He reached under the breast of his jacket and removed a manila folder. "I believe this could be of some assistance."

Carver took the folder and leafed through the contents. All of it information regarding a man named Tobin Schwartz. Hawthorne's eyes flashed with momentary amusement at Carver's astonishment.

"So how is it you didn't know the Rivers girl would already be dead?" Hawthorne asked.

"I assumed the feed was live."

"The eyes deceive."

"I guess I should say I hoped the feed was live."

"Hope is nature's veil to hide truth's nakedness. Alfred Nobel."

Carver stared at Hawthorne. Who was this guy?

"Sometimes hope's the only thing that can keep a little girl alive."

"And sometimes you find hope stacked like corded wood with its severed head in its hands."

“Special Agent Carver,” Moorehead interrupted. “I expect your preliminary report on my desk by noon. I trust the material Special Agent Hawthorne provided should be of assistance.”

“Yes, sir,” Carver said.

“Special Agent Hawthorne and I have more to discuss,” Moorehead said. Carver noted his SAC never made direct eye contact with Hawthorne. “You are dismissed.”

“Yes, sir,” Carver said, turning to exit. He glanced back at Hawthorne as he passed through the door into the waiting room. The man made him nervous. His level of confidence lent him a pompous air. There was an aura of power surrounding him that belied his rank.

And his eyebrow...it looked like it had been slashed by a tiger. What in the world could have done that to him? Carver supposed that wasn't nearly as bad as what he imagined Hawthorne must have done to it in return.

V

Sinagua Ruins

36 Miles Northeast of Flagstaff, Arizona

Elliot could hardly contain herself. Her feet tapped a restless beat on the floorboard of the passenger seat, her right hand fidgeting with the door handle. Dust filled her sinuses and coated her tongue, even inside the Pathfinder with the windows rolled up. The whole car was enveloped by a pale brown haze. It lurched and bounced on the warped dirt road, but Elliot was oblivious. She stared eagerly through the windshield, spotted shrubs flying past to either side, lorded over by the enormous cereus cacti and the occasional ocotillo with their long, wispy arms and stunning scarlet blossoms. Red buttes rose from the horizon, the layers of strata clearly defined as though steps leading to the heavens.

If they had really found an Inca mummy bundle in the Sonoran Desert, the implications were staggering. Like many of the great pre-European societies, the Inca had either vanished or dispersed around the time the Spanish arrived in the New World. Elliot knew better than to believe that an entire society could simply vanish from the face of the Earth. They had to have gone somewhere, and while cultures changed and adapted through the centuries, the one true constant was how they regarded their dead. Granted, burial practices metamorphose over time, but much more slowly and without significant leaps in style.

The Inca were the first to mummify their dead for public display, predating even the Egyptians. The first Black Mummies were coated with manganese, their faces hidden beneath a primitive, sculpted mask. The organs were removed and the remaining skin stuffed with straw. Incremental modifications over hundreds of years led to the ritual of bundling, whereupon the corpses were eviscerated, but the rest of the body was kept intact, folded into fetal position, and bound by rope. Jars and bowls made from hollowed gourds were then filled with the treasured possessions of the deceased, maize, cotton, charcoal, and feathers, and then wrapped inside layer after layer of intricately designed and hand-woven blankets before being committed to the ground. Various mutations of this practice had been found from southern Peru through the Andes Mountains and north into modern day Latin America and Mexico. Even before their disappearance, the Aztecs came to use similar forms of mummification, suggesting a potential northward Inca migration and possible assimilation into other civilizations as opposed to extinction. Incan jewelry and artifacts were even traded by Native American Indian tribes as far north as Montana, though modern scholars contended that whatever Inca blood reached the North American continent died with the Aztec and Maya.

Elliot, on the other hand, believed that shy of a catastrophic, mass-casualty event, there was no way to completely sever a bloodline. As an evolutionary anthropologist, she had devoted her life and career to proving as much. The exhumation of a mummy bundle in America promised the unprecedented opportunity to compare genetic markers in samples separated by hundreds of years and thousands of miles, hopefully helping to not only trace Inca blood into modern society, but possibly even help formulate theories as

to what may have happened to Native American tribes like the Sinagua and Goshute, which mysteriously disappeared from the Arizona-Utah region in the fifteenth century.

But she was getting ahead of herself. She needed to distance herself from her excitement and force some semblance of clinical detachment. They needed samples of bone and fabric for carbon dating. They needed to test the composition of the soil, pray for viable DNA to compare against other samples—

“You okay over there?” Dr. Mondragon asked from the driver’s seat. His dark eyes settled on her momentarily before returning to the rutted road. He had been waiting for her outside the terminal at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, and they had barely paused long enough to swing through a drive-thru before heading straight out into the desert. Her bags were still in the back and she hadn’t given a thought to the coming night’s sleeping accommodations. After nearly two full days in transit, trying to sleep in chairs in various airports and on one flight or another, she figured when the time finally arrived, she’d probably be able to pass out on her feet if need be.

“Yeah,” Elliot said, offering him a smile. He was still the attractive older man who made the undergraduates swoon: rich black hair, thoughtfully pursed lips, and Latin tan, yet the last decade had allowed the hint of gray to creep back from his temples, and his forty-six years now showed in the lines on his forehead and faint crow’s feet by his eyes. “Jetlag and adrenaline are an awkward mix.”

“We could always turn back and find a motel—”

“No!” she nearly shouted.

He grinned and gave her a playful wink.

Elliot tried to relax, settling back into the seat with a sigh. “Thanks again for calling me about the discovery. This could be the opportunity I’ve been waiting for.”

“Any time. Not many of my former students are actually working in the field, and even fewer are doing anything of significance. Believe me, the pleasure’s all mine.”

Elliot wanted to make small talk, she really did, but she was too tired and her mind was focused on one thing only.

“How much farther?” she asked.

“See that small rise off to the right? The crumbled walls on top are all that remains of what we speculate to be a temple built to the goddess Tihkuyiwugti from the post-eruptive period of Sinagua culture, circa the mid thirteen hundreds. We divide the Sinagua culture into pre- and post-eruptive based on seismic events that led to the volcanic eruption of what is now the Sunset Cone in 1064, which truly altered everything about their lives. Prior to that point, they used wooden materials to construct their dwellings, but afterward, they built all of their structures from stone. And then sometime as late as the early fourteen hundreds, they simply vanished.” He glanced over at her and shrugged. “But that really didn’t answer your question, did it? I tend to go on and on unless someone stops me.”

She debated asking again, but the car had begun to slow and she could see a gap in the creosote where an untended road branched to the right. They veered off and continued to the southeast.

“Dr. Mondragon—”

“Please, call me Emil. We’re colleagues now after all.”

“Okay, Emil. What’s the prevailing theory as to the disappearance of the Sinagua?”

“The current school of thought is that they migrated to the north where water and game were more plentiful and assimilated into the Anasazi ranks. Later Anasazi cliff dwellings reflect the influence of Sinaguan style.”

“But the Anasazi didn’t bundle their dead.”

“Nope. Some of the primary burials held bodies flexed into fetal position, but the majority were secondary burials that were essentially just piles of disarticulated bones without regard to individuality. Many were even violently broken before death, leading to speculation of cannibalism.”

“And there haven’t been any previous findings of Sinagua remains?”

“This is the first.”

The Pathfinder grumbled to a halt, the fist of dust trailing in their wake closing around them. Elliot climbed out and walked around to the front of the car, shielding her eyes against the sun and surveying the area. The flat desert reached toward the eastern horizon, where in the distance she could see a khaki tent a shade apart from the

glimmering sand. Three cars were parked farther up the road to the right, a black Blazer, an old, white Ford pickup, and a boxy police cruiser straight out of the Seventies, both covered with so much dirt it appeared the desert was trying to claim them for its own. She had been so distracted on the way in that she hadn't noticed them.

Without a second thought, she struck off into the desert, weaving through scattered bushes until she encountered a recently trampled path and headed straight toward the tent. When approaching a site for the first time, she always tried to mentally transport herself back in time to see the world as it once was through the eyes of the dead, stripping away all of the extraneous details. The tread of footprints in the sand faded away. The cars behind and even the tent ahead disappeared. Only the hawk circling overhead and its shrill cry existed in the otherwise empty desert. A gentle breeze arose, blowing into her face. She closed her eyes, allowing the warm wind to caress her features, and was stolen away by the past.

She knew something was amiss before she even opened her eyes.

The burial site felt somehow...wrong. Nothing she could specifically pinpoint, but she definitely felt an uncomfortable sensation she hadn't experienced before. She smelled rot on the currents creeping into her nostrils. There was only the vast expanse of desert ahead where she was unable to imagine the ancient Sinagua gathered in mourning to bury their loved ones. She instinctively knew that something about the scene was incorrect, and with that flash of intuition came another thought that should have elated her, yet somehow filled her with dread.

There were still many more bodies to be unearthed.

I hope you've enjoyed this extended preview of **BLOODLETTING**.
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