



LLOYD DEVEREUX RICHARDS

STONE MAIDENS

A THRILLER

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LLOYD DEVEREUX RICHARDS

 THOMAS & MERCER

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Published by Thomas and Mercer
P.O. Box 400818
Las Vegas, NV 89140



To Ritie, in loving memory.

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PROLOGUE

It was late summer, and he was seventeen. It was hot. He liked that, even though he worked on a farm and spent long hours stacking hay. He was laying up bales for the winter in a three-story loft. From the open bay where the chain pulley swung to hoist the pallet, he saw her—the nubile young daughter of a neighbor farmer in a flower-print dress that flowed prettily. The tight-fitting bodice showed off her slim waist. The way her body moved inside the frock sent him tumbling down the wooden steps and out into the hazy August air.

She wandered into a cornfield, slapping the long green leaves of a second planting tasseled out, and disappeared down a row, taking a shortcut home. He followed her into the corn as if pulled by a ring in his nose, pushing aside the leaves and thick stalks in the fading heat of the day, his work boots sinking into the loamy soil. Walking faster, two rows over, he caught glimpses of her flowery dress. For several minutes he trolled behind, waiting till she was farther along into the maize. Gradually, he drifted deeper into the sweet-smelling crop. The bees buzzing from tassel to tassel made a loud, persistent hum.

His skin began to crawl as if covered in a swarm of ants. The droning of the bees penetrated directly into his skull. Breathing shallowly, he dropped to one knee, and everything went dark. He scratched at the ground, as if searching for his lost sight there, heaving on all fours with his face in the soil, sucking up dirt. Then slowly, slowly the light had returned—and with it a new craving.

CHAPTER ONE

The air had a film in it like her eyes did upon first waking. By midmorning the Fourth of July heat pressed in, almost choking her. Missy Hooper tapped END, dropped her cell phone into her purse, and closed the bag with a sigh. A second later she double-checked to make sure she'd turned the clasp all the way. The amusement park was jam-packed, and it would be easy to get pickpocketed if she wasn't careful.

Now what? Glenna had gone in to cover for a waitress who'd called in sick at the diner where they both worked, and couldn't meet her as planned. What a drag. Wandering around alone in a park full of so many people her own age out on dates was not her idea of fun. Damn Glenna. Why couldn't she have just told Rickie no? Missy sighed again. Glenna let people take advantage of her. She needed to learn to stick up for herself better.

A tattooed carny drifted her way, holding out three baseballs with a toothy grin. "Whaddya say to a game of chance, little lady? Got some nifty prizes for a purty girl like you. Three balls for a dollar."

Missy turned to avoid him and ran smack into a wiry young man with sandy-brown hair and bright-blue eyes.

"Whoa! It's the bottles you're supposed to knock over, not the other patrons." He smiled and ran his hand through his crew cut.

Missy took a step back. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I guess I wasn't watching where I was going."

"No problem. What's your poison: bulldogs or monkeys? One of those prizes would look mighty good sitting on your bedroom shelf." He leaned in closer. "It's on me." He gave the carny a five-dollar bill and got handed back four ones from the man's change bib.

"Beg your pardon?" Missy said, blushing. "Are you speaking to me?" The young man had the weather-beaten appearance of someone who worked outdoors, like both of her brothers, and his face was strangely familiar though she couldn't recall from where.

“Sure am.” He bowed from the waist, clothed in paint-spattered jeans and a red T-shirt. His orange Timberland work boots were flecked with paint stains. “Just point out the prize you want,” he boasted, his arms akimbo, “and it’s yours.”

Missy tugged at the front of her blue tank top, which immediately rode back up, exposing her belly button. She squinted up at the stuffed animals that hung from hooks. “That bulldog looks kind of cute.”

“Wish me luck then.” He winked.

Missy giggled. “Good luck.” She watched him collect the first baseball from the carny and palm it lightly, judging the target’s distance. He turned toward Missy and gave her a confident grin.

The shriek of a girl mid-drop on a roller coaster spun Missy around just as the coaster banked steeply and disappeared behind a high-topped tent.

Thwack! The sound of the bottles toppling spun her back again.

“Darn if you aren’t the best of me!” The young man pumped a fist, obviously pleased with himself. “Now ain’t it just true that faith moves mountains?” He winked at Missy again. “Yours sure did.”

Missy awkwardly rode the outsides of her sneakers—the young man’s addressing her so forthrightly embarrassed and flattered her at the same time. A moment later her arms were full of the bright-blue bulldog, which was as awkward to carry as a bale of hay.

“Got a car to put that thing in?”

She rolled her eyes. “I wish. A friend dropped me off. Someone else was supposed to meet me here.”

“Not a problem. You can leave it in my truck if you’d like.” Before she could respond, he blurted, “Say, are you hungry?” He stepped up to a concession booth and then turned his head back to her. “Want a Coke with your elephant ear?”

She was suddenly aware of the smell of fried dough and sugar permeating the air. Her stomach, as if on cue, gurgled loudly. “Sure.”

She decided she liked being waited on better than being the waitress. Even his doing all the talking felt nice, like he was taking care of her. He returned with the drinks and two fried elephant ears, each wrapped in wax paper. She rested the prize on the ground between her legs.

“Thanks. I can pay you back.”

“Your money’s no good here,” he said. The words were overly gracious, but his tone was self-mocking. He was funny, Missy decided, and cute in an odd, scraggy sort of way.

“Thank you,” she said. “My name is Missy.”

“Glad to meet you, Missy. I go by Jasper. On account of I like carving rocks in my spare time. Shall we go drop your prize in the truck then?”

They finished their fried dough and drinks and then walked out the park entrance.

“Say, if you’d like, I can drive you home.” He climbed in the driver’s side, leaned over the bench seat, and shoved open the passenger door, adding, “I’d be more than grateful to do you the honors, Missy.”

The thought of having to call and ask one of her brothers to come get her made her cringe. It would be a hot, sweaty wait, with Jimmy at his coed bowling league and Dean over in Odon at his girlfriend’s house. “Sure. I guess that’d be all right.”

“Spilt some paint in the back bed. It’s still a bit messy,” he said. “Why don’t you put the bulldog up front?” He gestured toward the passenger seat.

Missy pushed the bulky prize across the seat then climbed in herself. The bulldog caught on cracks in the vinyl covering; yellowed foam padding protruded, and an acrid, salty smell hit her in the face.

He goosed the engine and shoved the vent window out all the way, told her to do the same. The road wound through a state forest. Although the amusement park was only a couple of miles away, it felt like they were in another world entirely. Everything here was quiet. Peaceful. Splintering sunlight shot between the trees.

“Ever been to Clear Creek before?” he said across the rush of incoming air.

She glanced at him over the stuffed animal. “You mean that swimming place?”

He shook his head. “Nah. Different place. I suspect it’s about as sweet a spot as you could find.” Jasper turned to look at her and smiled, almost shyly. “I’d like to show it to you if I could.”

They were on State Road 67. Her house was only five miles farther south. He seemed polite. “How far did you say it is?” she said, squinting in the sunlight that blazed through the side window.

“We’re almost nearly there.”

She nodded. “All right then, I guess.” She looked over at him again, trying to place him. The man was working something around in his mouth, and the edge of something glistened between his teeth.

“Got any more?” she said. “Of those candies you’re sucking?”

He lifted his lips. A dark sliver jutted out, glistening and wet. “Not what you think.” It slid back into the pocket of his cheek. “Didn’t your

mother ever tell you sugar's bad for your teeth?"

"OK. Well, what is it then?"

"Ever since I was a kid I always liked cutting stone. Carving small things, you know, like faces, animal shapes. Even cut some people out of rock. It's tricky." He slid a quick glance her way and then looked out the windshield. "Easy to break the stone in two if you aren't real careful doing it."

Missy grew quiet and gazed out her side window, not exactly sure how to respond. The truck passed familiar landscape. She could see a friend's farmhouse on a ridgeline opposite the road. She was about to ask him to stop the truck and say that she just remembered she was supposed to drop by her friend's house this afternoon when the man extended an open palm near her lap.

"See?" he said. "I finished this one yesterday. Hand carved from chert, a variety of jasper." He smiled at her. "Like my name."

Missy stared at the reddish stone still wet from being in the man's mouth. It was about the size of a chess piece. At one end, a distinct head and face were carved. Grooves along the small stone outlined arms and legs.

"I bet that takes you a long time."

"Yup." The man closed his palm and pocketed the charm.

"So where do you work, Jasper?" Missy asked, changing the subject. "I bet it's outdoors, on account of your tan."

"Well, aren't you a smart young lady," he said, nodding slowly. "I sign paint different places, business establishments. Some people think hand-painted signs are old-fashioned. I guess I'm what you call a throwback." He grinned and flicked the tips of his fingers gently against her bare shoulder.

She started at the casually intimate touch.

"A regular artist I am. Do my best work when I'm left alone, know what I mean?"

She glanced down at his spattered jeans. "Yeah. But it kind of looks like you work for the fairground people, painting clowns."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "That's a funny one. Truth is, the damn Sweet Lick Resort can't buy near enough of me. I get worn out working so much."

"You mean that fancy golf course place?" she asked. "My friend's uncle is a groundskeeper there. His name is Lonnie Wallace. Ever hear of him?"

"No, I don't think I've ever met the man. But then..." He arched his

brow and hesitated as if pondering her question. "I'm not apt to talk to anyone when I'm on the job. Better to concentrate." He fidgeted his hands over the top of the steering wheel, twisting his grip. "Like throwing that baseball, winning you this prize." He tugged one of the stuffed animal's ears. "It truly was worth all the tea in China meeting you like this, Missy."

The truck jounced over a bump. Missy rocked forward and pushed back her hair away from her face. He winked both his eyes at her, and Missy laughed right on cue. He told her how earlier in the year he'd been put in charge of a painting crew renovating a Chicago museum—a hundred men working under his watchful eye repainted primitive exhibits, ones that displayed spear-wielding cannibals in their native jungle habitats.

"Really? That must have been amazing."

"I fib you not." She felt his eyes brush over her and smiled self-consciously. "I'm only the greatest damn sign painter on the whole darn planet, you know? No splash-and-dash operation, no ma'am."

"Well, yeah. Sure." It puzzled her—his saying first how he worked solo most of the time and then right afterward saying a hundred men had worked under him in a museum renovation. She chalked it up to male insecurity—his needing to boast so much. Besides, he was funny and sweet in his own way. And she'd finally figured out why he looked so familiar.

He slowed the truck and pulled off under a high canopy of evergreens. The air was a full ten degrees cooler than the fairgrounds and smelled piney sweet.

She leaned an elbow over the stuffed bulldog, rubbing one of its ears between her fingers. "Know why I really came along with you?" A coy smile broke across her face.

"I suspect you wanted to see Clear Creek."

"You don't remember me, do you?" she said, dipping her chin shyly. "Science class junior year?" She looked straight into his eyes. "Weaversville High?"

He hesitated. "If you say so."

"Come on. Really, don't you remember? You were the only one too afraid to cut open that cow's eye." Nodding, feeling more certain of herself, she said, "You walked out of class too grossed out to even touch it."

He scratched hard behind one ear. "You sure got a memory for things, I'll say that." He opened the truck door and hopped out.

Missy followed him around to the hood, hands tucked in her back jeans pockets. "You were so shy back then. What happened?"

“I guess”—he covered his face, peeking out between his fingers —“because I started playing hide-and-seek so damn much! Better run and hide before I count to ten,” he yelled.

Like a lit firecracker, Missy took off. She plunged down the wooded bank like a kid half her age would, sparked by Jasper’s boyish charm and his clear interest in her. There was nothing but the petticoat rustle of leaves and the nutty smells of the forest telling her that this was one of those rare occasions in life when wishes might just come true. When finally, finally you met someone meant just for you. Like magic, it was happening exactly the way it was supposed to, the way her mother had met Missy’s father and had known in that instant he was the man for her.

The grade slanted steeply. Missy took choppy steps and had to grab hold of slender saplings to keep from falling. Far below, she caught glimpses of water sparkling between the trees.

She deftly slalomed in and out of a mixed grove of beeches and oaks, then dropped onto the sandy bottom of a partially dry creek bed. Beyond were standing pools of water. She crouched behind a massive overturned sycamore, giddy with expectation. Peering up the wooded ravine she’d just descended, she listened intently for his footfalls over her rapid heartbeats but could hear nothing.

She registered a dull thud behind her, across the creek. How could he be there already? Missy bolted away from the sound across the deep, damp basin, each step slowed by the sucking sand. Something wasn’t right.

From behind, she heard him splashing through a deep pool. “You sure are...fast on your feet,” he panted. His voice sounded taunting somehow, not charming at all, and a sharp bolt of fear ripped through her chest.

Scattered sunlight glinted on the water. Instinctively, Missy’s eyes scanned what lay ahead, searching for an exit. Her eyes picked out a line of escape: a patch of harder ground that veered back up along the edge of the woods. She swung her arms for added speed, unnerved that she hadn’t heard him coming through the forest. She hadn’t heard a damn thing until he had dropped down from the opposite bank.

She ran while looking behind her and plowed straight into a fallen tree, sending her sprawling to the ground. Frantically, she clawed at the bark, tumbled back down the sandy bank, and tore her shirt in the process. Tendrils of panic worked their way into her brain, nearly sending her headfirst into a deep pool. The collision with the tree had left a nasty gash on her left kneecap, and blood was trickling down her shin.

The sound of a semi downshifting nearby brought her struggle to a

standstill. She could just make out the moving hulk's flickering shadow in breaks between the trees that rimmed the steep ravine high above her. A coal carrier chugged by with a full load from the Lincoln Mines in Blackie, where her father worked. Her dad's kind, weathered face flashed through her brain. The slowmoving truck was only a football field's distance away as the crow flies, but deadfall formed a near-insurmountable barrier.

Missy suddenly realized it wasn't her own breathing growing louder, but her chaser's, from directly above her on the bank. She looked up, blinked.

"Thought I'd lost you for a minute."

Confusion spun the contents of Missy's mind as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. The man was reclining, arms crossed and utterly relaxed, on the fallen tree that had sent her flying to the ground. His face was covered by an elaborate feathered mask.

He tucked the mask back over the top of his head and gazed at her sympathetically. "Got a little hung up, didn't you?" His hand flopped over the side of the trunk, pointing out her torn shirt. A stone of some kind dangled from his neck.

She crossed her arms over her ripped shirtfront and stepped backward into the cool water, warily maintaining eye contact with him. She'd lost her sneaker during her mad dash, and her one bare foot slipped on creek stones coated with algae. She had been badly mistaken. Jasper wasn't the name of the student from science class, and the face gazing down at her wasn't anything like that of the shy boy she'd known in high school.

CHAPTER TWO

A knock came at the door. A slim woman with gray hair pulled primly back poked her head in. “Christine, they’re waiting.”

“Just a sec, Margaret,” said Christine Prusik, chief forensic anthropologist of the FBI’s Midwest Forensic Sciences Laboratory. Its jurisdictional responsibilities took in most of the central corridor from the Great Lakes to the borders of the Gulf Coast states, which were handled by New Orleans forensics teams.

Prusik tucked her short chestnut hair behind her ears, revealing two gold studs—the only piece of female hardware on the special agent—and continued to scan her field notes with practiced eyes. Of medium height and well proportioned from years of swimming the backstroke—she’d been a county champion when she was in her early teens—she was adept at rebuffing the advances of men who hadn’t correctly read what she tried to make eminently clear through her body language: Hands Off.

Her mammoth desk—a fortress of piles, with no surface free on which to jot even a note—was still insufficient a space to display all the materials she needed to ponder a case and its possible permutations. On the floor wreathing around her desk were open field notebooks, forensic-ruled photographs, and postmortem summaries underscored and starred with Magic Marker blues and pinks. Prusik’s dynamic intelligence at once focused in on the most diminutive detail and nuance of trace evidence and panned out to the wide screen, factoring in the significance of geographic location, crime scene patterns, and any similarities and differences with other potentially linked cases.

To Prusik, working a case meant all information had to be at hand, to be positioned or repositioned on the floor as she stood hunched over, scanning downward like some bird of prey on patrol, intently searching for a telltale sign, something—anything—odd or out of place or deliberately wrong.

Wind buffeted the building. Slanted streaks of rain raced across the

large-paned windows of her sixteenth-floor office overlooking downtown Chicago. Prusik leaned back in her chair, holding a color slide up to the light. Hurriedly she skimmed the stack sent by overnight courier, looking for one in particular, the angle shot of the neck. She preferred holding actual slides to toggling through an array of digital images on a flat screen. To her, a photographic positive was crisper on close-ups than on the digital counterparts from the new Canons most field agents preferred.

She propped a brown, crepe-soled oxford shoe on the edge of her desk. Her free hand tugged a tuft of her hair, snagging loose a few strands in the process, as she mulled one particular close-up of a gaping purple wound—a vicious cut—that perversely mimicked the contours of an open mouth along the abdominal cavity. Just then an itchy panic took hold of her, and the photographic slide slipped from her fingers onto the floor.

Prusik fumbled open the desk drawer and grabbed the small pewter pillbox she kept there. Many years ago it had belonged to her grandmother, and Christine had wondered what pills her mother's mother would have kept in it. Swallowing one Xanax tablet dry, she lofted the Bose headset over her ears and flipped the lever of the CD player on the credenza. She closed her eyes in the hunt for calm, waiting for the near-trance-inducing chords of Bach's Partita for Keyboard no. 1 to return things to order. She tightened her right fist, squeezing her pinkie against her palm. Pills couldn't erase the fact things were getting worse.

Within a few minutes, the combination effect had worked—the modern miracle of neurochemistry acting in consort with Bach's genius. Her breathing had slowed; her heart rate no longer frightened her.

The office phone rang, destroying her peace and startling her forward in the chair. It was Margaret, her secretary, nudging her again. But she wasn't ready yet. She refocused on the short stack of slides in front of her and hunted for any forensic anomaly that might cast light on the killer. The pictures had been taken the preceding day, July 27. Three whole months had gone by since the first corpse had turned up—nearly three whole months without delivering a positive ID of the killer or even one iota of incriminating evidence. The body of the first victim, a teenage runaway named Betsy Ryan, was found in water, near Lake Michigan and protected shore lands. Very private, with no residences nearby housing someone who might have heard her cries for help had she made any.

This latest victim, a Jane Doe, had been found two hundred and fifty miles south of Chicago in Blackie, Indiana, a coal-mining district southwest of Indianapolis, a region dominated by dense forests and steep-sided ravines. The victim's body had been discovered partially exposed

under some leaves near a creek bank; she wasn't a floater or submerged like Betsy Ryan had been. Ryan's body had surfaced in the third week of April, snagged on the anchor line of an outgoing skiff on the Little Calumet in Gary, Indiana—practically Prusik's doorstep. The Ryan girl had been washed clean; nipping minnows and crustaceans had made sure that no foreign DNA had been left behind. But one thing remained that no amount of washing could erase, and it tied the first crime irrefutably to the second—a vicious ventral slit running the length of the left side of the victim's abdomen. All the internal organs had been removed, leaving the bodies literally eviscerated. And both killings had occurred near water.

The office door cracked open again.

Without looking up, Prusik said to her secretary, "Yes, Margaret, I know." Christine's boss's plane to Washington would be leaving in one hour, his car to the airport in fifteen minutes.

"No, you don't know," Margaret scolded in a stern whisper. Margaret eased herself all the way into the office. "It's Thorne. He's calling again." She paused for emphasis, though none was needed. "He's got a plane to catch."

"Tell him to keep his shirt on for chrissakes." In her ten years with the bureau, Prusik had acquired a reputation for gruff impatience, which she exhibited at inopportune times with superiors and subordinates alike. Driven by high expectations of herself, she had little room for work or effort that was, in her opinion, second rate.

Prusik took a deep breath. "You can tell Mr. Thorne—"

Their eyes met, calculating the possibilities and silently rejecting most of them. Calmer now, Prusik said, "Thank you, Margaret. Tell him I'm on the way."

Christine watched as her secretary's face relaxed and she left the room, carefully avoiding focusing on any of the gruesome photographs pinned to the corkboard behind the desk. The blowups of Betsy Ryan, the first victim, looked more like color abstractions than the barely recognizable remains of a young human. Ryan was a fifteen-year-old runaway who'd been living with an aunt in Cleveland. The girl's trail had gone cold shortly after she had hitched a ride on March 30 with an Allied Van Lines mover. The driver had let her off at a Portage, Indiana, truck stop. His fuel receipt checked out. So did the absence of any incriminating forensic evidence in the cab of his truck. Three weeks later, on April 21, her body had been recovered off the boat anchor, cruelly hooked through the man-made pocket along the victim's left side, not far from the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, where the killer would have been able to

savage her with plenty of cover. Cellular analysis disclosed that the remains had likely been underwater several weeks, which Prusik figured meant her attacker had probably spotted her shortly after the driver—the last known eyewitness—had dropped the girl off at the truck stop.

She fingered another slide from the Blackie crime scene. This one showed a man's boot print, approximately size nine. The local police had found it in the mud beside the creek and made a quick-dry plaster kit impression. The killer liked to do his cutting by water. She swallowed hard. Time was ticking.

Damp weather had inundated the Midwest for most of the spring and early summer—conditions appalling for the preservation of evidence, accelerating the decomposition of flesh. Prusik knew that it was unlikely she'd find anything worthwhile on the latest victim's body or in the area surrounding the crime scene. The Blackie woods, a great stomach of damp forest, had surely already digested her case, eating with it whatever evidence the killer might have left behind.

Tucking the slides into her lab-coat pocket, she stepped quickly around the desk, resolving not to let the case get away from her. She hustled past her secretary's partition and walked briskly down the hall. "Back soon," she called over her shoulder as an afterthought.

Outside the lecture room, Prusik's hand froze on the doorknob at the unmistakable sound of Roger Thorne clearing his throat a few feet behind her.

She turned and met Managing Director Thorne's piercing gaze over his tortoiseshell glasses. His fine navy-blue suit made Prusik feel frumpy in her so-so stretch knit, which had more than a few tired sags and stains from stooping and studying remains in situ. Its last excursion had been to another field agent's crime scene, where a local deputy had done a miserable job fending off the weather with an umbrella, letting the small of her back become a nice rain catch.

"Christine, may I speak to you for a moment?" Thorne's tone was studied, formal. He bent his forearm, purposely displaying the gleaming new chronograph watch he was so proud of—a Montblanc, the same brand as the smart-looking fountain pen clipped to his shirt breast pocket. He tapped the watch crystal.

"It's getting late." Thorne straightened his cuff back over the shiny chronometer, then arranged the jacket he frequently wore for his Washington trips, the chosen type of garment of all men who sat behind desks behind doors with brass name placards at the FBI. "I just got off the phone with headquarters. Told them about the *second* one, we think."

She nodded. “I’m on my way to update the team. There are important forensic similarities between both cases. The forensics *will* yield us results, I am confident.”

Thorne smiled into her eyes. “Good, good. I’m confident you will succeed, Christine. It’s why I assigned you these cases in the first place. Stick-to-itiveness is one of your finer qualities.” He squeezed her shoulder. She stiffened at his touch, and he dropped his hand. “You are an astute scientist, one of our best. You know how much I respect your able observational skills. I doubt there’s another managing director in the agency whose forensic unit is superior.”

She returned his smile, pleased by the compliment yet expecting to hear a “but” coming next. “Thank you for saying so, Roger.” Christine always appreciated hearing his praise. Thorne’s sincerity in acknowledging her accomplishments as a forensic scientist was unquestionable. That, his good looks, and sharp dressing style were all it had taken for her to fall in love with him.

His straw-colored eyebrows rose a notch higher over the tops of his glasses. “So, now that you’re in charge, I can speak frankly.” His eyebrows lifted again. “I’d be remiss if I didn’t tell you that they’re a bit concerned I let you take the lead on such a high-profile case.” He put up his palm before she could respond. “Hear me out. You’ve been a prominent head of the forensic lab, doing a damn fine job for ten years—until now, that is. It’s your first lead, and their concerns are understandable given that you have no demonstrated experience managing all aspects of a case: the logistics, directing personnel from different offices, interfacing with local police and political officials. You know what I’m talking about, Christine.”

Let me take the lead? She bit her lip, trying to remind herself that Thorne was only doing his job. Still, she knit her brow and spoke defensively. “You know I’ve put together the best team. They’re working around the clock on this. No one has slipped up unless you count the local and state police foul-ups.”

“So is that it then—police foul-ups?” Thorne clearly wanted some significant news. “I need progress to report, Christine. Progress is what gets noticed. I know your team is diligently processing fragmentary information, looking for clues. Give me something to prove to Washington I made the right decision putting you in charge of this case. Management needs to be kept informed of a case’s progress and be assured that appropriate assets are being committed to bring about an effective resolution. Believe it or not, Christine, a cost-benefit analysis figures into