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presents

THE BEST MYSTERY STORIES OF THE YEAR

EDITED WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY

LEE CHILD

2021

SERIES EDITOR OTTO PENZLER

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FOREWORD

Long ago, I came to agree with the brilliant John Dickson Carr, who wisely averred that the natural form of the traditional mystery is not the novel but the short story. It is not uncommon for a detective story to revolve around a single significant clue—which can be discovered, divulged, and its importance explained in a few pages. Everything else is embellishment, and novels have more of this than short stories.

The classic tale, as invented by Edgar Allan Poe, popularized by Arthur Conan Doyle, and perfected by Agatha Christie, is familiar to aficionados and casual readers alike: A crime (usually murder) is committed, law enforcement officers are called in and respond with utter bafflement, and assistance is offered by a gifted amateur, a private eye, or an outlier police detective, who discovers clues, breaks down alibis, and, ultimately, identifies the culprit.

Mystery fiction has changed a great deal over the years, as have all art forms, and as deliciously satisfying as this type of story may be, it is seldom written today. The traditional tale of observation and deduction has largely slipped into the background. The psychology of crime has become the dominant form of mystery fiction in recent years, replacing the whodunit and the howdunit with the whydunit. Those tales of pure deduction may be the most difficult mystery stories to write, as it has become increasingly difficult to find original motivations for murder, or a new murder method, or an original way to hide a vital clue until the detective unearths it.

The working definition of a mystery story for this series is any work of fiction in which a crime, or the threat of a crime, is central to the theme or the plot. The detective story is merely one subgenre in the literary form known as the mystery, just as are romantic suspense, espionage, legal legerdemain, medical thriller, political duplicity, and those told from the point of view of the villain.

I am confident that you will find this to be a superb collection of original fiction about extremes of human behavior caused by despair, hate, greed, fear, envy, insanity, or love—sometimes in combination. Desperate people may be prone to desperate acts—a fertile ground for poor choices. Many of the authors in this cornucopia of crime have described how aberrant solutions to difficult situations may occur, and why perpetrators felt that their violent responses to conflicts seemed appropriate to them.

And what a remarkable job the contributors to this volume have achieved! James Lee Burke has stated that this story is the best he's ever written. How fortunate have we been that an unknown story by the muchloved Sue Grafton was discovered among her papers by her widower and was published for the first time in 2020, four years after her death? David Morrell and Stephen King, two authors whose greatest successes have been on the fringe of mystery fiction, have superb entries that make us wish they wrote more in this category. Paul Kemprecos wrote his very first short story, which is so accomplished that it easily made the cut. Sara Paretsky, who doesn't write nearly enough short stories, proved once again how good they are when she does turn to this challenging form. Doug Allyn is back with another highly professional thriller, as are John Floyd and Jim Allyn. Plus, here's a long story by Joyce Carol Oates, arguably the greatest living writer who has not yet won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

To find the best of these stories is a year-long quest, largely enabled by my invaluable colleague, Michele Slung, who culls mystery magazines, both printed and electronic, for suitable stories, just as she does short-story collections (works by a single author) and anthologies (works by a variety of authors), popular magazines, and, perhaps the richest trove to be mined, literary journals. As the fastest and smartest reader I have ever known, she looks at about three thousand stories a year, largely to determine if they are mysteries, and then to determine if they are worth serious consideration. I then read the harvested crop, passing along the best to the guest editor, who completes the selection process to arrive at the twenty that comprise the book. Ten additional stories are listed on an Honor Roll. Finally, there will be a lagniappe—a bonus story from the past.

Having the right person serve as the guest editor to launch this series is no small thing. Being willing and agreeing to perform this service is an act of extraordinary generosity, certainly not the first such act by Lee Child, the creator of the Jack Reacher series and one of the world's most successful authors. As a national and international bestseller, you may be certain that he is asked to do something virtually every day of his life: write a story, make a speech, sign a book, visit a bookshop or library, provide a quote for a dust jacket, offer advice about how to be a better writer or a more successful one, attend a conference or convention, and even serve as a judge on the Booker Prize committee (which he did last year)—the list goes on.

Child has, at the time of writing this preface, written twenty-five novels in the Reacher series, beginning with *Killing Floor* in 1997 and continuing to *The Sentinel* in 2020, which he cowrote with his brother Andrew. Two novels have been adapted for the screen with Tom Cruise as Reacher: *One Shot*, released as *Jack Reacher* in 2012, and *Never Go Back*, released as *Jack*

Reacher: Never Go Back, in 2016. Child had cameo appearances in both. His novels have won numerous honors from the mystery community, and he has been given lifetime achievement awards by the International Thriller Writers, the (British) Crime Writers' Association, and others. In 2019, he was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his service to literature.

While I engage in a relentless quest to locate and read every mystery/crime/suspense story published, I live in terror that I will miss a worthy one, so if you are an author, editor, or publisher, or care about one, please feel free to send a book, magazine, or tear sheet to me c/o The Mysterious Bookshop, 58 Warren Street, New York, NY 10007. If the story first appeared electronically, you must submit a hard copy. It is vital to include the author's contact information. No unpublished material will be considered for what should be obvious reasons. No stories will be returned. If you distrust the postal service, enclose a self-addressed, stamped postcard and I'll confirm receipt.

To be eligible for next year's edition of *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year*, a story must have been published in the English language for the first time in the 2021 calendar year. I am being neither arrogant nor whimsical when I state that the absolute firm deadline for me to receive a submission is December 31 due to the very tight production schedule for the book. Sending submissions early is better than sending them later. If the story arrives one day past the deadline, it will not be read. Sorry.

Otto Penzler

February 2021

INTRODUCTION

I was delighted when Otto Penzler asked me to be involved in this new short-story project. I felt the request implied he thought I had something worthwhile to offer on the subject. I'm always delighted to create that impression. But sadly, on this occasion, an impression is all it is. I don't know much about short stories, or their true origins, mechanisms, or appeal. My only consolation is I'm not sure anyone else does either.

What is a short story? Clearly there's a clue in the name. A short story is a story that's short. A *story* is an account of events—in this context almost

certainly made up—and the adjective *short* acts to separate the form from other types of accounts that customarily tend to be longer. As a compound noun, *short story* first appeared in print in the year 1877, alongside other compound nouns new that year, including *belly button*, *coffee table*, *cold storage*, *genital herpes*, *medical examiner*, *musical chairs*, *stock option*, and *toilet paper*.

Some of those things were genuinely new in the 1870s—cold storage, certainly, which shook up food supply and started the decline of landed aristocracies by breaking their local monopolies on agricultural production. And coffee table was new as well, I suppose, given the rise of the Victorian middle class, and stock options, and toilet paper, possibly. But others among those things were merely newly *named*—for example belly button, which of course we've all had forever, and probably genital herpes too.

Which category did *short story* fall into—new, or just newly named? The latter applies, as a matter of record. A by-then-established literary form was first called *a short story* in the year 1877. So, newly named. But, without doubt, wrongly named. And far from being new, the form could be the oldest we have ever known.

No one knows when fiction was invented. Or, long before that, the syntactical language that permitted it. Spoken words leave no archeological trace. As soon as their last echoes die away, they are gone forever. All that is left is speculation. Scientific advances in the field of human origins have been spectacular, but scientists don't like to speculate. Just the facts, ma'am.

They will agree, however, on a couple of things. Some explanation is needed, of how a relatively weak and vulnerable and not-very-successful hominid proto-human later came to dominate the whole world and reach outward into the universe. How did that happen?

And scientists will agree that complex, coherent, if-this-then-that language, with a plan B, and a plan C, would have required a big brain. Which they're happy to show us, because that's back in the realm of facts. It's right there in the ground: our brains got big enough less than half a million years ago. There's a vigorous, but very polite, argument whether language colonized a freak mutation, or whether the increase in size was itself driven by the absolute need for language. But either way, that's when it all started.

And it was crucial. A single human was slow and weak. Prey, not a predator. But a coordinated group of a hundred humans was the most powerful animal the earth had ever seen. Tooled up, organized, drilled, rehearsed, if this, then that, plan B, plan C. Language came to the rescue. It

made all the difference. We survived. Not that things were easy. Pressures were many and various, and sometimes catastrophic. But we stood a better chance than most. We had lengthy discussions, accurate assessments, correct recall of past events, realistic projections into the future.

In other words, nonfiction saved the day. Language was a lifesaver because it was entirely about truth and reality. It could have no value otherwise. Possibly it stayed that way for hundreds of thousands of years. Then something very strange happened. We started talking about things that hadn't happened to people that didn't exist. We invented fiction.

When exactly? It's impossible to say. The echoes have died away. But we can speculate. Just the guesses, ma'am. We know—because it's right there in the ground, or on rocky walls—that music and representative art date back almost seventy thousand years. Both involved some kind of technical intervention—drums, with stretched skins, hollow bone flutes, with holes carefully drilled for finger stops, pigments found and mixed, twigs chosen and frayed for application—whereas storytelling required no technology. We already had what we needed. We had expressive voices, and sophisticated language. So, it's reasonable to guess storytelling happened much earlier than art or music.

Why did it happen? Not to fill our leisure time. We had none. We were still deep in prehistory, still cognitively premodern, still evolving. Everything we did had a singular purpose: to make it more likely we would be alive tomorrow. Any notion or activity that didn't meet that need quickly died out, literally. How do we square that circle? How did stories make it more likely we would be alive tomorrow?

By encouragement, and empowerment, and subtle instruction, surely. Perhaps the first made-up story was about a boy who came face to face with a snarling saber-toothed tiger. Maybe the boy turned and ran as fast as he could and made it safely back to the cave. Which was encouragement, in the strategic sense of maintaining morale, by delivering the message that not everything has to turn out bad. And also in the tactical sense, in that the specific terrain outside the cave was survivable. Which was the subtle instruction. You had to go out and hunt and gather. A balance had to be struck between reactive caution and proactive boldness, such that the tribe endured.

Then maybe a thousand years later the story evolved to where the boy swings his stone ax and *kills* the saber-toothed tiger. The first thriller, right there. The boldness is turned up a notch. The tribe not only endures, but prospers.

It's worth noting in passing those who neither prospered nor even ultimately endured—our very distant evolutionary cousins, the

Neanderthals. On its face, that's a surprise. Compared to us, Neanderthals were faster, stronger, healthier, better toolmakers, better organized socially, and more solicitous of one another. They had bigger brains than us, which surely means they had sophisticated language, possibly even better than ours. Yet they went extinct, almost forty-thousand years ago—granted, after hundreds of generations of extraordinary stress from the Ice Age climate emergency. But we survived it. Why us, and not them?

Those given to fanciful speculation might construct a clue from the actual in-the-ground evidence. Neanderthal settlements tell of occupation by sober, sensible people. They were sporadically nomadic, like all huntergatherers, but almost invariably their next settlement was barely out of sight of their last. There is no evidence they ever crossed a body of water without first being able to see land on the other side. The overall impression is one of stolid caution.

Whereas we—*Homo sapiens*—were nuts in comparison. We were bold to the point—beyond the point—of recklessness. We ranged thousands of miles into unknown regions. Hundreds of times we launched bark hulls onto giant oceans, and only a tiny percentage can have survived to see the far shore. If any. Our brains were wired differently. The Neanderthals did things we didn't, and we did things they didn't.

Did that include making things up? Nothing about the jump from nonfiction to fiction was biologically preordained or inevitable. It just happened to us. Maybe it just *didn't* happen to our distant cousins. Maybe their sober, sensible, stolid brains couldn't provide the necessary pathway.

Maybe wild imagination was required to fire the spark.

What if Neanderthals never left the world of nonfiction? Never entered the land of make-believe? And thereafter, despite their speed and strength and health, and their technical and social skills, what if they didn't make it because of that? Because they didn't have story, to encourage and empower and instruct. Maybe that tiny margin made all the difference.

What do we know about the stories we had and they might not have had? Nothing, of course, but we can speculate. There would have been a strong central strand, be it encouraging, emboldening, instructing, warning, scaring, or whatever else, all wrapped up in context and diversion, and verisimilitude, but not quite. There would have been a rim of unreality, however faint, to expand our experience, which was the evolutionary purpose of story, to take us places we wouldn't normally go, to shine a beam into corners normally left dark. The stories would have been concise, pithy, and focused. They wouldn't have taken long to tell.

Survival was a full-time job. Bandwidth was precious.

And now, a hundred thousand years later, you find yourself currently holding in your hands an anthology featuring twenty outstanding contributions from twenty outstanding authors. I know many of them personally. I bet they think this foreword is crazy. I bet they don't agree with a word of it. I bet they all have more plausible explanations. I bet they're going to quote from my first paragraph, right back at me: I don't know much about short stories, or their true origins, mechanisms, or appeal.

But equally, I bet you'll agree their stories fit pretty neatly inside the hundred-thousand-year-old scaffolding described two paragraphs ago. Therefore, you'll also agree the items included here should be called simply *stories*, and those other things their authors produce from time to time should be called *long stories*. Seniority should count for something, after all. Naming rights, at least.

Lee Child

Wyoming

January 2021

*Twice an Edgar Allan Poe Award winner, and the record holder in the Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Reader's Award competition, **Doug Allyn** is one of the best short-story writers of his generation—and probably of all time. He is also a novelist with a number of critically acclaimed books in print.*

*The author of eleven novels and more than a hundred and thirty short stories, Doug Allyn has been published internationally in English, German, French, and Japanese. His most recent, *Murder in Paradise*, (with James Patterson) was on the NYT Best Seller list for several weeks. More than two dozen of his tales have been optioned for development as feature films and television.*

*Mr. Allyn studied creative writing and criminal psychology at the University of Michigan while moonlighting as a guitarist in the rock group *Devil's Triangle* and reviewing books for the *Flint Journal*. His background includes Chinese language studies at Indiana University and extended duty with USAF Intelligence in southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.*

Career highlights? Sipping champagne with Mickey Spillane and waltzing with Mary Higgins Clark.

30 AND OUT

Doug Allyn

The sign on the door read Sgt. Charles Marx, Major Crimes. I raised my fist to knock, then realized the guy at the desk wasn't just resting his eyes. He was totally out, slouched in his chair, his grubby Nikes up on his desk, baseball cap tipped down over his eyes, snoring softly. Looked like a class C wrestling coach after a losing season. Edging in quietly, I eased down into the chair facing his desk. When I glanced up, his eyes were locked on mine like lasers.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Jax LaDart, Sergeant Marx. Your FNG."

He frowned at that, then nodded. "The fuckin' new guy?" he said, massaging his eyelids with his fingertips. "Ah, right. You're the homeboy the chief hired, straight out of the army. I was reading your record. It put me to sleep." He spun the Dell laptop on his desk to show me the screen. "According to the Military Police, you've closed a lot of felony cases overseas, but the details are mostly redacted, blacked out."

"The army'd classify 'Three Blind Mice' if they could. You don't remember me, do you? Jackson LaDart?"

He glanced up at me again, looking me over more carefully this time. Not a comfortable experience. I was in my usual leather jacket and jeans. Not dressed to impress.

"Nah, sorry, I got nothin'. Did I bust you for something?"

"No, but you could have. When I was fourteen, you had me for grand theft auto."

"No kidding?" he said, curious now. "What happened?"

"My cousin and I were working after hours at the Shell station by the freeway, tuning up an old junker Norton motorcycle. Managed to get it running, took it out for a test drive. We made it a few miles, then a tire blew and we cracked it up."

He nodded, didn't comment.

"I banged my face up pretty seriously," I said, jerking a thumb toward an old scar on my forehead. "I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, we had no phone.

My cousin runs to the nearest house. Nobody's home, but a pickup in the yard had keys in it, so Jimmy piled me in, drove me into Samaritan Hospital, pedal to the metal. You spotted us on the road, chased us the last few miles with lights and sirens. But at the hospital, you took one look at my face, hustled me inside, and got me some help." I shook my head, remembering.

"Thing is, Jimmy and I were only fourteen, neither of us had a license yet and we'd wrecked a bike and stolen a truck. You could've come down hard on us, but you stood up for us instead. When the pickup's owner came stomping in, yelling he wanted our asses arrested, you took him outside, straightened him out."

"Curly Beauchamp," Charlie nodded slowly, "I remember now. He was half in the bag, all bent out of shape about you two borrowing his piece-of-shit ride. Needed an attitude adjustment, is all. No big thing."

"It was to us."

"I was new to the badge back then," he said with a shrug. "Young and dumb and full of myself. Threw my weight around a lot. Till I learned not to."

"How do you mean?"

"What's that rule about unintended consequences? Something about butterflies?"

"Butterfly Principle," I said. "A butterfly in China flaps its wings, and Hawaii gets a hurricane."

"Except butterflies don't know any better. Cops are supposed to be smarter, but sometimes we're not. That's what the law's for. Draws hard, clear lines, the ones we don't cross."

"You crossed a line for me, back then. If you hadn't, maybe I'd be talking to you from a cage."

"And the world might be a better place."

We both smiled at that. He was probably right. But his grin morphed into a frown as he cocked his head, listening to the loud music wafting up from the street. Rock and roll at concert volume. "Sweet Home Alabama." Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Easing stiffly out of his chair, Charlie moved to the tall window behind his desk and cracked the blinds. I stood at his shoulder, looking down on Valhalla's Main Street, three stories below. Northern Michigan in midDecember. Snow and sleet mixed, stinging like BB pellets in the winter wind.

Down on the street, a funeral cortege was crawling past, a flatbed truck in the lead, carrying a small coffin, escorted by a long queue of pickups and motorcycles, revving their engines, adding to the din of Skynyrd blasting

from the flatbed's sound system. Battle flags were flapping wildly in the wind, some trucks flying Old Glory, others flying red rebel flags, the Stars and Bars. The flatbed was flying both, full size banners at the head of the small casket.

"What's all that?" I asked.

"What we were talking about," Charlie said. "How bad things can wind up when you cross a line."

"In a funeral, you mean?"

He nodded without speaking, which was answer enough.

Eyeing the long cortege, I noticed an old man on the flatbed staring up at me. He was maybe sixty, salt-and-pepper beard, wrinkled black suit from Goodwill. I wondered if he was somebody I knew from back in the day. I tilted the blinds for a better look, but the truck was already passing out of our sight.

"Crossing a line can definitely go sideways," I conceded. "But sometimes bending a rule or two is the only way to get a bad guy into a cage. Or in the dirt."

"What was your date of separation, LaDart?"

"A few weeks ago."

"From where?"

"Afghanistan. Why?"

"You're back in the world now, troop, and here we call 'em cells, not cages. And dirt naps—"

"Strictly hyperbole, Sarge," I said. "Just kidding."

"Right," he said, eyeing me doubtfully. Because I wasn't kidding. And we both knew it. I'd come home from a war without rules, where I learned to live by my own. He let it pass.

"Chief Kaz tells me you grew up out in the county."

"I'm a woodsmoke kid," I nodded. "Raised in the deer woods."

"Still know your way around out there?"

"Some, sure, but nobody knows it all. There's eighty thousand acres of state land spread over the five counties, Sarge. Daniel Boone could get lost."

"Which is why our brother officers in the DEA have asked us for a guide. They got a call on their tip line about a motor home parked deep on state land. Their GPS coordinates put it somewhere inside this red circle, but they've got no idea how to get there."

He tapped a computer key, then swiveled his laptop to face me again.

I leaned in, scanning the screen. It took me a moment, but then I recognized a few landmarks. "Their circle's just beyond the north fork of

the Black. It's swampy ground, but there's an old logging road just east of it. That road is the only way an RV could make it in. I can get them there."

"Won't be easy. The DEA Strike team will be mostly newbies, recruits fresh out of Quantico. We'll have our hands full with 'em."

"We? You're going?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"The chief said you're short. Almost out the door."

"Eight days to my anniversary," he said with a broad grin. "Thirty and out. Thirty years from the day I signed on the Valhalla force as a rook."

"It'll be rough going out there, Charlie, and I owe you one. Why not relax, put your feet up for once. Let me handle it."

"You think I'm ready for a rocking chair, LaDart? You're the FNG here, not me."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Then let's get something straight. A couple weeks back, I got called to the Samaritan Hospital emergency room. Three kids had been dumped off in their driveway, overdosed on meth. They were foaming at the mouth, like *dogs! High school* kids! So if the DEA thinks some lab rat's cooking crank on our turf, I'm all over it. If that's okay with you? FNG Sergeant LaDart?"

"Absolutely, boss." I raised my hands in mock surrender. "It's totally fine by me. "

But it wasn't totally fine. The raid was the diametric freaking opposite of fine. Charlie and I met up with the DEA crew at first light at an abandoned motel parking lot just off the interstate. Charlie knew the Agent-in-Charge, Ken Tanaka, but the others were green kids, decked out in full battle rattle, body armor and helmets, M4 automatic weapons, night vision gear clipped to their helmets like snorkels. Looked like fucking starship troopers. They even brought a dope dog along, a black-faced Belgian Malinois bitch half again the size of a German shepherd. She looked more wolf than dog, but she definitely seemed to know her business, cool, calm, and collected. Which was a lot more than I could say for her crew. The young agents were practically jumping out of their skins with excitement, first raid, first action. I was getting a very bad feeling about this.

We divided up into two squads, then scrambled into a pair of camouflaged Humvees to head into the back country. As the guide, I was riding shotgun in the lead vehicle with the DEA boss, Agent Ken Tanaka at

the wheel, a hard-eyed oil drum of a warrior, shaved skull, Fu Manchu. Ken would have looked at home on a steppe pony, riding to war beside Genghis Khan.

Only the Belgian dog was totally calm, alert and aware, but not a bit hinky. Like she'd done this a hundred times before. Which made me wonder about her.

There was no time to quiz her handler about her history, though. The logging road twisted through the hill country like a rattler with a broken back. We stayed with it until we were roughly a half mile from the DEA's red ring, then I called a halt to dismount. Our target should be straight ahead, at the end of the road, but we were in a cedar swamp now. If the meth cooks heard us coming and scattered into the woods, we'd be chasing them all damned day. We needed to locate the lab, encircle it, then tighten the noose.

Good luck with that.

Out of the vehicles, we formed a long firing line, stringing the young DEA agents out for seventy meters on both sides of the road, with Charlie and me holding down the center. It's a Tactics 101 maneuver, should have been easy, but the line has to stay absolutely straight to give everyone a clear field of fire.

No chance. A hundred meters along, we had to stop to realign, then twice more as we made our way through the snowy swamp. The young agents were unconsciously edging ahead, eager to put first eyes on the target. Unfortunately, they were also increasing their chances of getting their heads blown off by their own crew. There's no such thing as friendly fire.

After our second stop to realign, I was seriously wishing I could turn the lot of 'em into dogs. The Malinois maintained her position perfectly, always aligned with the center, her eyes front, sniffing the icy breeze—

“Contact!” one of the agents yelled. “Ten o'clock, straight ahead!”

He was right! A hundred meters down the road, a battered Coachman motorhome had been pulled off the road into the trees. It was well hidden, crudely camouflaged with rattle-can paint, then covered with brush.

Even at this distance, we could smell the rank bite of crystal meth on the wind. For the young agents, it was red meat thrown to a pack of wolves.

Battle tactics required us to extend our line, then surround the motorhome. Instead, the agent on the far end totally blew off his training and headed for the RV at a dead run. A few others raced after him, joining in the chase. Only the rough country and the foot or so of snow on the ground slowed their rush— And saved their lives.

I dropped to my belly on the road, pulling my weapon, screaming

“Down, down, down! Take cover!” into my lapel mike. Tanaka and Charlie Marx dropped instantly, but the younger agents froze in confusion, uncertain as to *why* I was warning them.

For a split second, I wasn't sure why I was yelling either, then it registered. The Belgian! When we'd first smelled the meth, the dog had frozen in place, her tail twitching slowly, alerting us . . .

But then she suddenly dropped to her belly, which sent a far more serious signal. Explosives! IED!

WHAM!

A massive blast smashed the motorhome into flaming splinters, lifting it off its frame, raining fiery debris down around us like a hailstorm from hell! I rose to my knees, dazed, glancing wildly around, trying to make sense of what the hell just happened.

Most of the agents were down, flattened by the blast, but a few were already collecting themselves. Thanks to the Belgian, we were still far enough out that the explosion had roughed us up, but no one seemed to be badly hurt. No one was screaming for a medic or—

A shattered door in the motorhome burst outward as a guy came hurtling through it, sprawling in the snow, shrieking, his face a bloody shambles, his clothing on fire. Scrambling to his feet, he was off to the races, trying to outrun the flames that were burning through his clothes.

“Red light! Red light!” Tanaka shouted. “Hold your fire!”

But the dog handler had lost his leash, and the Belgian instantly gave chase, racing after the runner like a rocket. And after her warning before the blast, I knew what she was, knew what she'd do if she caught him and pulled him down.

She'd tear him apart!

I was up and running, knowing I was already too late. She'd be on him in an instant—

“*Hond!*” I shouted after her. “*Auf! Auf!*”

The Belgian dropped like she'd been shot. Down flat on her belly, but still taut as a drawn bow, teeth bared in a silent snarl, ready to resume her attack on command, her eyes were locked on the runner like rifle sights. I tackled him a few steps later, holding him down as he thrashed around in the snow, which actually helped smother the flames.

Tanaka and Charlie caught up and joined in, grabbing fistfuls of snow, smearing it all over the kid. And he was a kid, a freakin' teenager, bleeding from a half dozen cuts, and clearly in shock. I tried a few questions, but he could barely remember his own name. Had no idea why the RV had been blown to hell. One of Tanaka's newbie DEA agents had EMT training, and

took over for us, rendering first aid. The Belgian was still crouched, watching. I picked up her leash, but she didn't even look up, totally focused on the kid. One wrong move and he'd be gone.

Her handler trotted up, a fresh-faced redhead, Kelly on his nametag. He reached for the leash, but I held on to it.

"Where'd this dog come from?"

Kelly glanced a question at Tanaka. "Better tell him," Ken said.

"Overseas," Kelly admitted. "My brother was her handler in the 'Stan. Worked with her for two tours, but he got orders to Iraq and she's maxed out age wise. They were gonna put her down." "Do you know why?" I asked.

"Her age—"

"—has squat to do with it," I snapped. "She's a war dog, Kelly. I've worked with Belgians, attack dogs, trackers, bomb sniffers. Once they've tasted blood? Chewed up an intruder or tackled a runner? They change, up here," I said, tapping my temple. "After that, they're as dangerous as a brick of C-4. When their handlers rotate back to the states, their dogs stay behind. They retrain with new handlers and go straight back to the war. Over and over, until we get too old or too crazy." "We?"

Kelly echoed.

"It's a running joke over there. Guys who pull multiple tours? Like me? We're called Belgians too. This dog can't be in the field here, Kelly. I'm taking her."

"The hell you are!"

"Jax is right," Charlie said, stepping between us. Look at her, son. One wrong word and she'd tear that kid's throat out before you could—"

A supersonic crack split the air, opening a fist-size wound in Charlie's throat, lifting him off his feet, slamming him to the ground.

"Down, down!" Tanaka roared, as I crawled on top of Charlie, covering him with my body as the rifle report echoed over us, instantly drowned out by the thunder of return fire as the young agents opened up, loosing a hail of lead toward the tree line, whacking down branches, chewing up brush. In the winter wind, they couldn't spot the muzzle blast or gun smoke, had no idea what they were shooting at.

But maybe it had some effect. No more shots came.

Kneeling beside Charlie, I put pressure on the wound, but I could feel the disconnect from his spine, an unnatural flexing, and read his empty stare.

He was dying before my eyes.

"Help me!" I roared at the EMT. "We've gotta get him out of here!"

Our flying column roared into Valhalla Samaritan like the invasion of Iraq. We'd called for an ambulance, but Charlie couldn't wait for it. We loaded him aboard the lead Humvee and tore out of the forest, leaving the young agents to sort through the wreckage and hunt for the shooter.

At the hospital, the emergency team quickly loaded Charlie onto a gurney and rolled him away. Tanaka and I found a bench in a waiting room, but neither of us had much to say, both of us trying to sort out what the hell just happened.

We weren't the only ones asking. A State Police team showed up a few minutes later. Officer-involved shootings are always investigated by another department, but this didn't feel like standard procedure to me.

Two uniformed States quickly led Tanaka away to question us separately.

I stayed in the waiting room with two detectives in civvies, a heavyweight sergeant, Haskey, square and gray as a cement block with an attitude to match, and his boss, Lieutenant Sharon Keenan. Haskey's tweed jacket was Sears off the rack. Keenan was in black slacks, black jacket, black turtleneck. Blonde, no makeup, her hair cropped short as a boy's. Haskey had a mouse under his right eye. It looked fresh.

I gave them a quick briefing on what happened, our approach, the blast, the kid running out, then Charlie's shooting.

"So, right after the blast, you, Agent Tanaka, and Sergeant Marx were bunched up?" Haskey asked. "Not too smart. Made a pretty sweet target for the meth cooks."

"I'm not sure it was them. The RV was already blown, the shot came from the other direction and it was definitely a long one. Charlie was already falling when I heard the report. The shooter had to be seven or eight hundred meters out. Helluva long ways for a head shot."

"Actually, the round struck Sgt. Marx in the throat," Keenan said.

"Think center mass, Lieutenant. Normally, you zero in on the heart, but Charlie was wearing a vest. The shooter moved his bull's-eye up to the bridge of his nose and only missed by a few inches. I think he hit what he was shooting at."

"Why cap Charlie?" Haskey asked. "He's at thirty and out, about to retire and everybody knows it. There was even a write-up in the paper about it. If somebody wanted him gone, they only had to wait a few days. But you? You're brand-new on the job when the DEA tip line gets a call about a lab they need your help to find? Did you make that call, LaDart? Or maybe one of your backwoods relatives, trying to make you look good?"

I stared at him. “Me? Where’s that coming from?”

“Same place you came from, sport—Afghanistan. Only a trained marksman could make a shot like that. Or maybe a woodsman. Did you make any enemies over there LaDart? Maybe one who followed you here?”

“You think a vet did this?”

“We’ve been having a lot of problems with Afghan vets,” Keenan put in. “Sergeant Haskey mixed it up with one last week.” Which explained the eye, and maybe the attitude.

“We’re seeing substance abuse, domestic violence, even suicides—”

“I’m aware,” I interrupted. “We call it going Belgian, the same as the burned-out war dogs. A vet would have no reason to kill Charlie.”

“Maybe he missed by more than a few inches,” Haskey said. “Maybe he missed by a couple of feet.”

“Missed me, you mean? How long have you been on the job, Haskey?”

“A lot longer than you, sport.”

“Maybe that’s your problem,” I said, standing up. “This is a lazy interrogation, guys. You’re asking me questions without doing fieldwork first, ergo, you don’t know if I’m lying or not.”

“Are you lying to us, Sergeant LaDart?” Keenan asked.

“Lady, somebody just capped the guy who saved my life, years ago. I want him a lot more than you do.”

“This is a State Police investigation, LaDart,” Haskey said. “Stay away from it.”

“I know the rules, guys. If I accidentally trip over anything useful, you’ll be the first to know. But right now, unless I’m under arrest? I need to get some air before somebody gets his other eye blackened.”

I half expected an argument, but they let me go. No choice. We all knew they had no cause to hold me.

Out in the corridor, I took the stairs, two at a time, up to the burned cooker’s room.

Agent Kelly was on guard out in the hall. “Any news about Charlie?” I asked.

“In surgery, last I heard, Sarge.”

“How’s the kid doing?”

“Still unconscious. He was a mess before he got burned. Meth head, bad skin, rotten teeth. He’ll be a zombie in a year.”

“Did he talk at all?”

“Nothing coherent. Between the painkillers they gave him for his burns, and the bat shit he’s been snorting, I doubt he knows what year this is.”

“Did he say anything about the shooting?”