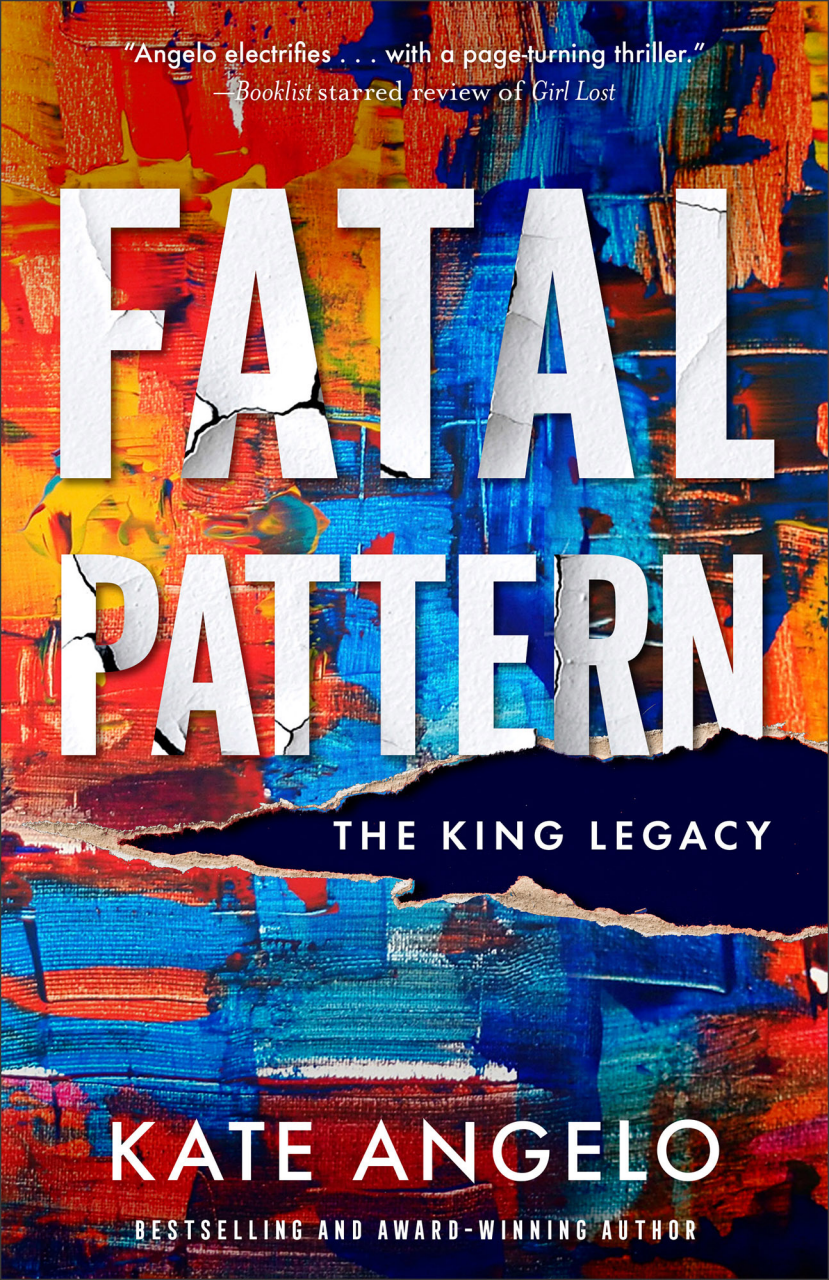




"Angelo electrifies . . . with a page-turning thriller."

—Booklist starred review of *Girl Lost*

FATAL PATTERN

THE KING LEGACY

KATE ANGELO

BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

THE KING LEGACY #2

FATAL PATTERN

KATE ANGELO



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Fatal Pattern • Kate Angelo
Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2026 used by permission

© 2026 by Kate Angelo

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Angelo, Kate (Romance fiction writer) author

Title: Fatal pattern / Kate Angelo.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2026. | Series: The king legacy ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2026001947 | ISBN 9780800746643 paperback | ISBN 9781493455492 ebook

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction | Thrillers (Fiction) | Christian fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PS3601.N554426 F38 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026001947>

Scripture is taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Mumtaz Mustafa

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

26 27 28 29 30 31 32 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To God,
who fills me daily with
unimaginable peace and joy.

To Jerry,
my prayer warrior, trusted adviser,
biggest supporter, and best friend.

And to those living among the wheat and tares,
take heart—the harvest will reveal what only God can see,
and his hand will separate light from darkness.

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

“An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

“No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

Matthew 13:24–30

1

THE COLD EDGE OF THE BLADE kissed Tori Crew's throat, drawing a rivulet of blood that began its descent down her neck.

"Don't move." The whisper brushed against her ear.

Tori tasted bile at the back of her throat, and for one horrifying moment, she thought she might throw up. Her pulse thumped against the knife pressed to her carotid. Each beat reverberated through the steel and deep into her bones.

The parking lot at the Kingdom MMA Gym stretched dark and empty around her. It was her stupid idea to meet at 4:30 a.m., and now here she was all alone. No witnesses. No help.

Stryker should be here. Setting up folding chairs in a circle near the boxing ring, brewing that industrial-strength coffee that could wake the dead, preparing for morning Bible study with the kids who lived in the residential program.

But Stryker wasn't coming.

Stryker lay unconscious in a hospital bed, his salt-and-pepper hair loose around his pale face instead of tied back the way he always wore it. Some lunatic had tried to kill her mentor. One of the greatest men she'd ever known, and now—

The blade pressed deeper. "I said don't move."

Her knees wanted to buckle, but she locked them straight. Stryker had taught her that. Stay strong. Stay focused.

The fighter in her knew what to do. Elbow to solar plexus. Heel to instep. Grab the wrist. Twist. Three seconds and he'd be on the ground. But he had the knife pressed just right. She couldn't make a move without him slicing through a major artery. One wrong angle, and she'd bleed out before she hit the pavement.

She forced her breathing to slow. Fought the adrenaline that wanted to flood her system and make her do something stupid.

Assess. Analyze. Act.

The mantra from Krav Maga training steadied her racing thoughts. Observe first. Plan the attack. Strike when the odds shifted.

"You're bleeding." His breath was hot against her neck. "I've always liked the color of blood."

She cataloged details. Male. Less than six feet tall, based on the angle of the knife. Maybe 5'9". Right-handed. Gloves. No discernable accent. No alcohol on his breath. Not impulsive. Calculated. Educated.

He drew in a breath. "Such a pretty shade of red, don't you think?"

"Who . . . who are you?" She worked to keep her voice steady despite the tremors threatening to overtake her body.

"I'm the one who watches. I'm your . . . shadow. A part of you." His free hand clamped around her chest, crushing her arms against her ribs. The blade pressed deeper, stealing her breath. "You've been busy. Two new cases, six trips to the gym, and you changed your coffee order to vanilla instead of caramel."

Her stalker. The one who'd been leaving notes on her car. The one who'd been calling and hanging up. The one the police wouldn't pursue because the "non-violent harassment" apparently didn't meet the threshold for a credible threat.

He'd been watching everything.

Her stomach twisted, not with fear—she could handle fear—

but with fury. “You think that makes you powerful? It makes you pathetic.”

The knife pressed deeper. Not enough to do serious damage, but enough to elicit another drop of blood. His gloved finger caught the droplet sliding down her neck, then traced it back up to the wound.

“Ah. We mustn’t lose too much. Not yet.”

She analyzed his posture. The way he held the knife. How his chest rose and fell against her back. “What do you want?”

“To show you that I can kill you anytime I want.” His laugh was soft, almost tender. “This is just the beginning, Dr. Crew. I’m not done toying with you yet.”

Fight instinct coiled through her muscles, but her mind weighed the odds again and overrode them. *Information. Get information.* Every criminal had a pattern, a motivation. Understanding him meant catching him. And catching him meant ending this nightmare.

She strained her eyes to the right, trying to catch even a sliver of his face in her peripheral vision. “Why me?”

“Because you think you understand the darkness,” he said. “But you don’t. Not like I do.”

A pair of headlights sliced through the blackness, white light stabbing her retinas. The blade lifted from her throat.

She spun, fist cocked for a power jab at his face, but she only struck air. Gone. The coward had melted into the shadows along the wall, black clothing swallowed by the darkness as he disappeared into the alley beyond. Her chance—blown. She could have ended this right here, right now. Could have put him down and dragged answers out of him. Instead, she was standing here bleeding while he slipped away like the roach he was.

A car screeched to a halt beside her. The driver’s door flew open. Detective Blade St. James erupted from his unmarked Charger with his hand on his holstered weapon. “Tori? You okay?”

Her fingers went to her throat and came away sticky with

blood. She stared at the crimson smear. A savage anger bubbled up inside her chest. He'd touched her. Cut her. And vanished like smoke.

"What the—" Blade's eyes widened at her blood-slick fingertips. "You're bleeding."

"It's just a scratch." Her knees felt shaky. She'd had every skill and training to handle situations exactly like this, and she'd let the stalker get the drop on her.

"What happened? Who was that?"

"My stalker." She pressed the cut to stem the bleeding.

"Stalker?" His voice rose in disbelief. "What stalker? Since when do you have a stalker?"

"Three weeks, give or take." A crimson droplet had dropped on her knuckle. Perfect. Round. Like a bead of glass.

"I've always liked the color of blood."

Ice slid through her veins.

"And you didn't think to mention this?" Blade had his phone out. "We need to call this in. Get you to a hospital."

"No." She caught his wrist. "The locals are aware, but you know stalker cases. Nothing they can do."

"Tori, he had a knife to your throat." His voice ticked up. "That's attempted murder."

"It's not that simple."

"It is that simple. Let's do this right. Get an officer out here. Take your statement, photos, dust for prints, canvass witnesses—"

"There are no witnesses at four thirty in the morning!" She swept her arm toward the deserted street and empty parking lot. "And he wore gloves, so no prints. We've got nothing."

"All the more reason to report it. You say this guy's been watching you for weeks, and now he's crossed the line to physical assault. He's escalating."

"You think I don't know that?" She dropped her hand from the cut and stormed over to Blade's car.

She hadn't seen a hint of the stalker in the last week, but she

couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. Even now, standing in the dark parking lot, she sensed he was still nearby.

"Look, I didn't see the knife or his face, but we've got footage from the security cameras. We've got four hours in the car to fill out a police report. I'd rather do it myself than stand around here being told how many things I did wrong."

Blade's eyes lost that hard detective edge. His thumb, calloused from a thousand hours lifting weights at the gym, lifted her chin. The touch was feather-light, but it sent a jolt straight through the icy shock that encased her. Heat, unexpected and unwelcome, pooled in its wake. The urge to lean into that warmth warred with the instinct to pull away from a closeness that suddenly felt . . . dangerous. More dangerous than the man who'd held a knife to her throat.

His gaze dropped to the cut, his focus so absolute the world seemed to narrow to the few inches between them. "This needs medical attention."

"It's superficial." The words came out breathless. She stepped back, breaking the contact. The sudden loss of his touch left her skin cold, but she needed the space. Not just to think. To breathe.

Blade stood there in his rumpled slacks and dress shirt, his hand working the change or keys in his pocket. The look on his face said everything his mouth wasn't.

"Don't make that face at me, Blade. I'm a big girl."

"You are the most stubborn—" He caught himself. Shook his head and looked around the parking lot as if he expected the stalker to lunge at her again. "Fine. But we're not done talking about this."

"I figured." She resisted rolling her eyes.

She'd known Blade since they were teenagers, young and stupid, throwing punches at heavy bags in the Kingdom MMA Gym where they'd both been court ordered to live and attend the Warrior program.

Back then, Blade's restless energy had matched her desperation to hit something—anything—until her knuckles bled and her

mind went quiet. Unlike her, he processed everything out loud. Their talks turned into him working through problems step by step while she listened.

He flicked a hand at his ride. "Get in the car. I'm gonna check the area."

"Don't bother. He's—"

But Blade was already moving, his flashlight sweeping across the shadowy spaces around the building where her attacker had disappeared.

"Gone," she said.

Long gone by now.

She slid into the passenger seat and shut the door. Pulled down the visor and flicked open the mirror. An amber light illuminated the red parenthesis at her throat. Not deep enough to kill, just deep enough to remind her he could. Her mouth went dry. She couldn't generate enough saliva to swallow. If Blade had been even a minute later, she might be dead. Instead of pulling up to pick her up, he could've found her bleeding out in that alley.

"Thank you, Jesus," she whispered, digging through her work bag for her travel first aid kit.

One of many items she lugged in her work bag. Foster care had taught her that. Always be prepared. Always have what she needed to take care of herself.

The driver's door opened. Blade got in.

"Nothing. No footprints, no evidence. The guy's a ghost."

"Not a ghost." She dabbed an antiseptic wipe on the cut and winced. "Just careful. A planner. He wants to be in control, so he's been watching. Learning my patterns."

"And you didn't think to vary your routine?" he snapped. "Basic security protocol, Tori. You of all people should know better."

The criticism stung. Mostly because he was right. She'd been careless, overconfident. Told herself she could handle it. That she wasn't afraid.

But that was before she felt the cold steel against her skin. Before

she heard him whispering threats in her ear. "I know. I screwed up. Won't happen again."

She peeled away a Band-Aid's backing and pressed the adhesive over the cut. The flesh-colored circle was amazingly discreet.

Something in her tone must have registered with him, because his voice softened. "We'll catch him. I promise you that."

"Let's focus on today." She flipped the visor closed. "We have a four-hour drive to Union Correctional, and I need coffee."

Blade didn't start the car. He turned in his seat to study her with those piercing blue eyes that always seemed to see more than she wanted them to.

"Are you sure you're up for this? We can reschedule. Damien Sullivan isn't going anywhere."

"I'm fine," she insisted despite the tremor in her hands that she couldn't quite control. "It's just adrenaline."

"Tori—"

"I said I'm fine!" She gritted her teeth, wishing she hadn't yelled at him. The look of hurt on his face made it worse. He'd seen her through just about everything in life; it made sense he'd want to do that now. "I'm really okay. Promise. I need this."

He didn't look convinced, but nodded anyway. "Okay. But if you change your mind—"

"I won't," Tori said, tucking the bloodied wipe into a small plastic bag and sealing it. Evidence. Just in case. "Now drive, Detective, before the morning traffic turns our four-hour trip into six."

He started the engine, casting one last glance her way before easing out of the parking lot. She turned to look out the window, watching as the gym where she'd learned self-defense receded in the side mirror.

She absently pressed her fingers to the wound on her neck, feeling the sting of it. A reminder that she was dealing with someone dangerous. Someone who had gotten close enough to hurt her. Someone who had promised he wasn't done.

"He said that I think I understand the darkness, but I don't."

Blade glanced over. "What?"

"It's what he said." The hot breath in her ear. The pressure of the knife. His fingers digging into her arm. "He's wrong. I understand darkness better than most."

"So, what are you thinking? Profile?" Blade shifted into work mode.

She exhaled, taking a few seconds to create professional distance. "Male, late twenties to early thirties. Comfortable with weapons."

"That narrows it down to about half the men in Florida," Blade muttered.

"He's also controlled. Educated. Narcissistic, with delusions of grandeur," she continued. "He sees this as a game between us. He's not just stalking me, he's on a mission only he understands."

"A mission for what?"

She stared at the road ahead. The sun began to peek over the horizon, casting long shadows across the asphalt. "That's what I need to figure out."

Blade pulled into a drive-through and ordered his usual coffee and sausage biscuit. Tori asked for a double Americano, extra cream.

"You want anything to eat?"

"Nah." Her stomach churned at the thought of food. Food meant chewing. Swallowing. Basic functions that required her throat to work normally.

Blade paid and pulled back onto the highway. "So, you want to tell me what really happened back there? Because I know you. You're a third-degree black belt. You teach self-defense classes. There's no way this guy got the drop on you unless you let him."

The question she'd been dreading. The car suddenly felt ten degrees warmer. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you weren't fighting back. Not really." His eyes flicked to her, then back to the road. "Why?"

For a moment, she considered deflecting, making a joke, chang-

ing the subject. But this was Blade. He deserved honesty, even if it made her sound crazy.

"I needed to understand him," she admitted. "I needed to hear his voice, feel his presence, gauge his confidence."

"You risked your life for a psychological assessment?"

"I took a calculated risk." She sipped her coffee. "And now I know things about him I didn't before. He's escalated and injured me. Things the police can't ignore."

Blade shot her a look that was half concern, half grudging amusement. "You really are something else, you know that?"

"So I've been told." She leaned back in her seat, trying to ignore the phantom sensation of cold steel against her skin and the whispered promise of more to come.

"Should I be worried about you?"

"Remember when I ankle-picked you at the gym last month? I think I can handle myself, chico."

Blade laughed, and she felt her smile reach her eyes this time. "Now quit driving like a Florida snowbird. We've got a killer to interview, and it would be rude to keep him waiting."

He shook his head. "One of these days, Dr. Crew, your curiosity is going to get you killed."

"Maybe." She smiled again. "But not today. Today, the only thing that matters is what Damien Sullivan knows about my parents' murder. And not even a knife-wielding stalker will keep me from hearing what he has to say."

2

THE HIGHWAY STRETCHED AHEAD, four lanes of asphalt cutting through Florida scrubland toward Union Correctional. Blade kept the speedometer steady at seventy-five, watching the landscape shift from coastal palms to inland pines. Each mile took them closer to Damien Sullivan's cell, where the man spent twenty-three hours a day in protective custody, holding secrets that might finally give Tori answers about her parents' murder.

Blade had argued with himself for days about whether to make this trip. Tori insisted she didn't need a babysitter, that interviewing dangerous inmates was part of her job. But something about Damien Sullivan set his teeth on edge.

Blade glanced over at Tori, who sat with her laptop balanced on her knees, fingers flying across the keyboard. She'd caught her lower lip between her teeth, a habit she did whenever she concentrated. The Band-Aid on her neck showed a pinprick of fresh blood seeping through the center.

What would have happened if he hadn't shown up when he did? That maniac had a knife to her throat, and she'd stood there analyzing him like he was a case study instead of a predator who could have killed her.

“Eyes on the road, Detective,” Tori said without looking up from her screen.

“I *am* watching the road.”

“You’ve glanced over here six times in the last five seconds.” She looked up, eyebrow raised. “Something on your mind?”

“Just making sure you’re not planning any more psychological experiments with knife-wielding psychopaths.”

“We don’t call them psychopaths. They’re individuals with antisocial personality disorder. And I told you, the only reason I’m riding shotgun is so I can work.”

“Work?” He shot her another look. “You’re supposed to be filing a police report about your stalker.” Was this woman trying to give him an ulcer?

“I haven’t made it that far. I’m reviewing everything we know about Damien Sullivan before we walk into that prison.”

Blade couldn’t blame her for that. She had a lot riding on this trip. More than just catching a lead on her parents’ cold case. “Remind me again how you managed this trip as part of your research sabbatical?”

Her fingers paused on the keyboard. “The book I’m writing is on behavioral patterns in familial homicides. Part of that means consulting on active cases, gathering real-world data.”

“How exactly does interviewing Sullivan fit your research? He isn’t a family annihilator.”

“True, but Sullivan’s case is textbook workplace violence with underlying family dysfunction. Plus, if he can provide a connection to my parents’ case, I’ll have material for my chapter on perpetrator psychology in cold cases.” She closed the laptop and leaned back against the headrest. “The FDLE encourages field research. Keeps me sharp while I’m technically on academic leave.”

“Academic leave.” Blade shook his head. “Most people take sabbaticals to write poetry or learn French. You’re chasing down murderers.”

“Different people, different hobbies.”

"You know, I should turn this car around and haul you straight to the station." He pointed at her bandage. "Document that knife wound with photos."

"Ease up a little, Detective. I'm fine with the photos, but I can snap them myself."

"I swear, woman." He flicked a look at her. "You're the reason I'm losing my hair. You know that, right?"

"That's not my fault. You've been thinning since college. I just help the process."

"Very funny. At least you admit you're a walking disaster."

"I prefer magnet for adventure."

"Yeah, well, I'd prefer adventures that don't involve knives at four thirty in the morning."

She stuck her tongue out at him then smiled.

The jokes and easy conversation didn't cool the rage simmering beneath his skin. A man had attacked Tori. Held a knife to her throat. One different angle, one deeper slice, and he'd have found her body cooling in that parking lot.

He took his eyes off the road for a second. "I'm sorry for what happened back there."

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand and opened her laptop again. "Look, if you'll stop yapping, I could actually fill out this report."

Classic Tori deflection. Fine by him.

He reached over and flipped to a classic rock station. Guitar riffs cut through the car, drowning out the lecture he'd been building in his head about proper threat assessment and the wisdom of actually filing police reports before they became obituaries. The opening chords of a song from his middle school days drifted through the speakers. Since when was this song classic rock? He drummed his thumbs against the steering wheel, singing along under his breath.

"You're getting all the words wrong," Tori said, not looking up from her laptop.

"Am not."

"It's not 'can't find the pyramids.' It's 'can't find a better man.'"

He shrugged. "Pyramids make more sense. Who goes around looking for better men anyway?"

"Women who date cops?"

"Ouch." He grinned. "That one stung."

"I speak the truth."

"Hey, I have a girlfriend. Unlike some perpetually single profil-ers I know."

The jab was meant to be easy. Another shot in a game they'd been playing for years. But he watched the comeback die on her lips. For a half second, the light in her eyes just . . . went out.

"I'm a behavioral analyst." She turned her head, giving him nothing but the sharp line of her jaw.

The "perpetually single" crack must've hit a nerve. He was about to apologize when she let out a short huff and turned back, her expression all familiar armor.

"And please. Give it a month, and you'll have found something wrong with poor Kiara just like all the others."

There it was. Same old Tori.

"Hey, five months is a new record. Cut me some slack."

Her eyes flicked up, and he caught the flash of—what? Disappointment? Relief? Gone before he could pin it down.

She went back to typing. The quiet click of the keys was the only sound in the car, each one a tick on a clock measuring the distance she'd just put between them.

But Tori had punched back with the very thing he'd been avoid-ing.

Five months with the pretty records administrator. Longer than any relationship since high school. He hadn't told Tori how serious things were getting with Kiara. He wasn't sure why. Maybe because saying it out loud would make it too real. Or because he might be the one left behind when Kiara realized she could do better than a swamp rat with a badge. For once, he

found himself dating a woman who offered a future he wasn't sure he deserved.

Sure, he couldn't needle Kiara the way he did Tori and expect her to dish it right back. Kiara didn't snap back with quips that could slice through steel or roll her eyes when he cracked jokes that fell flat. But Kiara listened, and her calm, earnest nature was the kind of gentleness he'd never experienced in a relationship.

Tori's fingers paused over the keyboard. "What time did you pull up at the gym? I need it for the report."

"Four thirty-seven." At least she'd document the stalker properly instead of pretending a knife to the throat was just another Tuesday morning.

He heard her sucking air between her teeth as she peeled the bandage off her neck. "Ay, that hurts worse than the knife did."

"Wimp."

She angled her phone's camera at him and snapped a photo. "That fairy princess filter suits you. I'm sure Luna and Harlee will love it."

Luna King would have a field day with that photo. The former CIA operative had married Corbin six months ago, but she still found time to roast Blade at every opportunity. And Harlee Bay, the ATF intelligence specialist with tattoo sleeves and a stare that could freeze lava, would probably print it out and tape it to his locker at Kingdom.

"Delete that." He swiped for the phone, but she pulled it out of reach.

Tori tapped her phone. "Too late. Already sent."

"You know they're going to make that my contact photo."

Tori grinned. "That's the plan."

The smile dissolved as she flipped the camera around and tilted her chin up, exposing the thin red line across her throat. The phone clicked. She studied the screen, adjusted the angle, took another shot.

The laptop keys clicked in rapid succession.

She snapped the laptop shut. “There. Happy now?”

“That wasn’t so bad.”

Tori fished a fresh Band-Aid from her bag and pressed it over the cut. She crumpled the wrapper and stuffed it into her bag.

“Says the man who’s never had to photograph his own wounds.”

“That’s not true. Remember that time in college when I had to put myself between you and your psych professor?”

“That wasn’t a knife, it was Professor Bernstein’s nails.”

The guy had claws longer than most women Blade knew. “Dude needed a manicure.”

“Or he should take a class at Kingdom and learn not to hit with an open hand. Bernstein was a hack. He had it coming.”

“Maybe so, but leading with your fists is a quick way to lose a scholarship.” Blade massaged his jaw. Bernstein’s talons had raked furrows deep enough to warrant campus police documentation. “I spent three hours convincing the dean you were having a PTSD moment.”

“He gave me a C, Blade. He stood there in front of the whole lecture hall and insisted that criminal behavior was purely environmental. That people like *me* were just products of a bad zip code. I proved him wrong.”

“By proving you were violent?” He slid her a look.

Tori looked away. Her bravado flickered. “Yeah, not my best moment.”

“You were nineteen.” He softened his voice. “You were a kid who’d grown up believing you were less than everyone else. You didn’t have a fuse back then. You just had a detonator.”

“I’ve learned containment since then. Most days anyway.” She exhaled through her nose. “Speaking of criminal behavior, how’s the task force going? Any closer to finding who’s at the top of the organ harvesting ring?”

Last year, he’d played a supporting role in an undercover mission where Luna and Corbin infiltrated a biomedical research facility and uncovered an organ harvesting operation straight out of

Frankenstein. The arrests of Dr. Forest and his daughter, Elizabeth, had only scratched the surface. Forest had been the surgeon, sure, but someone else had been bankrolling the enterprise. Someone who'd made sure every witness disappeared before they could talk.

"Things are a little weird right now." He tapped the brake for a red Ferrari cutting into the HOV lane. The supercar passed a minivan, then darted back into regular traffic. "They replaced Brown at the local FBI office with Special Agent in Charge Sebastian Wells. He's taking over the task force. No interviews. No evidence moving. Nobody touches the file until he reviews everything himself."

"Uh-oh. Is he cleaning house?"

"Not exactly. He seems like a great guy. Very encouraging. He spoke highly of the work we've done so far."

"Sounds like the old school FBI move," Tori said.

"He's not that old. Early forties, maybe." He glanced over his shoulder and switched lanes. "Back to your question; everything's on hold until SAC Wells decides what happens next."

"That's frustrating," she said. "You've put in a lot of hours on this case."

Not to mention how personal it had become. Every fiber in Blade's body demanded he tear apart whoever orchestrated the whole sick operation that had killed countless innocent people and nearly killed his friends. They had Forest and his daughter locked up, but somewhere out there, a puppet master still pulled strings from the shadows, and he wanted to find him.

"Sounds like Wells is making the right call. We've got too many suspects, and every lead dies before we can follow it. Maybe with fresh eyes, the case will gain traction."

"I'm guessing that's why you're here with me instead of working the case."

He reached over and turned the radio down until the music faded to background noise. The speedometer needle held steady at seventy-five, but his mind shifted gears to the case that had been eating at him.

“Actually, I caught a homicide a few days ago. It’s not sitting right with me. I could use an extra brain. Mind if I walk you through it?”

Her smile said he had her attention. “Hit me.”

“Male victim, forty-eight years old. Found stabbed to death inside his home. CSU traced the killer’s movements by how the blood spatter painted the living room walls in arcs.”

“Ay. That couldn’t have been an easy scene to process.”

“One of the worst I’ve ever worked. Furniture overturned. Glass from shattered picture frames crunching underfoot. The victim’s face was unrecognizable.” Blade flexed his fingers and tried not to picture it. “Took the crime scene team twelve hours to document everything.”

“Run down the vic for me.”

“Donald Florek. Corporate attorney. Worked for one of those big firms out of Ft. Lauderdale that charges a thousand dollars an hour to read contracts.”

“Family?”

“Divorced. Ex-wife lives in California with their teenage daughter. Both have solid alibis.” He’d spent hours on the phone with the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department, confirming their whereabouts. “No current girlfriend. No close friends that we can find.”

“Enemies?”

“None that anyone admits to knowing about,” he said. “Florek’s colleagues described him as quiet, professional, and unremarkable. The kind of man who went to work early and stayed late.”

Tori nodded. “Okay, so that leaves the scene itself.”

“Looks like the attack started in the foyer and ended in the living room. No signs of forced entry, so either the killer had a key and waited inside, or Florek let him in willingly. The unsub got Florek the second he walked through the front door. Blood trail leads to the living room, where the killer continued stabbing, even after Florek went down.” He switched lanes and passed a VW bus with a surfboard strapped to the top, then continued, “CSU

is still working the evidence, but so far nothing useful. No prints. No murder weapon.”

“That’s a lot of blood for such a tidy exit. Usually the handle gets slick and the killer ends up slicing their own hand when the knife hits resistance.”

“A few drops of the killer’s blood mixed in with all that carnage? It’ll take the techs a while to test every sample. Like finding a specific grain of sand on a beach.”

“If Florek is such a loner, who found the body?”

“Dog walker. Florek has a pitbull mix, and with his corporate attorney hours, he had a dog walker who handled morning and afternoon walks. She’s taking care of the dog for now.” Or maybe the dog was taking care of her. The woman’s screams had brought three neighbors running, and she was still clinging to the dog when Blade arrived.

“Anything taken from the house?”

“Not that we can tell.”

Tori sipped her coffee and slid the cup back into the holder. “Without seeing the scene, I can only hypothesize. The close-quarters violence and weapon choice signal rage.” She shifted in her seat, warming to her analysis. “Knife assaults are intimate. The killer wanted it up close and personal. He wanted Florek to fight. Otherwise, he might have used a gun. But the lack of prints or even a shoe print indicates some level of control.”

“That makes sense. The repeated stab wounds, especially to the face, are generally a sign of rage.”

“Yes, or a fused mix of anger, possessiveness, power, or a desire to humble or debase the victim,” she said. “There could also be ritual elements, but again, I’d need to see where Florek was attacked and the subsequent staging to verify. What about defensive wounds?”

“All over Florek’s forearms where he’d tried to block the knife. Bruising too. The man had fought hard before going down.”

“Which means your unsub had to be strong enough to over-

power Florek and knew it,” Tori said. “As you run down a suspect, look for cuts and bruises.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” he said, grinning.

“Hey, do you want my help or not?”

They laughed.

“Of course I do,” he said. “Care to take a look at what we’ve got later today?”

“Sure. But I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know on some level.”

“Your brain works differently from mine. You see evidence and connect it to patterns in behavior. Right now, I’m staring at a dead end, so I’ll take any direction you can give.”

The GPS announced their exit, and Blade guided the car onto the off-ramp toward Union Correctional. Pine trees lined both sides of the two-lane road, their branches creating a canopy that filtered the morning sunlight into scattered patches.

“Two hours, twenty-three minutes until destination,” the GPS said.

Tori yawned. “I think I’m gonna take a nap. I got up way too early.” She reclined her seat and closed her eyes. “Wake me when we get there.”

Within minutes, her breathing settled into the deep, even rhythm that meant she’d actually fallen asleep. The woman could drop off anywhere.

He kept his eyes on the asphalt rolling toward them, white dashes clicking past the windshield in hypnotic succession. Finally, he could let his brain work the Florek case without interruption. Two hours of pine trees blurring past the windshield, exit signs counting down the miles, and the steady thrum of rubber meeting asphalt lay between them and Damien Sullivan’s cell.