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A woman stands in the middle of Detective Chief Inspector Greg Carver's sitting room. She is holding a 1911 Colt pistol in her hand. To all appearances, she is calm; there are things she needs to do. She pivots on the ball of her foot, turning full circle, taking in every detail of the scene. Nothing has been disturbed. An empty whisky bottle lies on its side on the floor. Greg Carver is slumped in an easy chair, one leg bent at the knee, the other straight out. Looking down at him she feels anger and contempt, but also regret. His eyes are open, blood oozes from a bullet wound in his chest. She shifts the weight of the gun in her gloved hand, flips the catch to safety. The place reeks of alcohol, gunsmoke and blood, and her stomach hitches, but she snuffs hard, purging her nostrils of the stench.

She carries the gun through to the kitchen; his laptop is propped open, his files spread out across the table. The floor, ankle-deep in balled-up paper, looks like the aftermath of a massive hailstorm. On a chair beside the table is a cardboard filing box. She drops two of the files into it, gingerly wraps the gun in clean paper and carefully lowers it on top of them.

Under the litter of papers on the kitchen table, she finds a framed photograph, laid face down. DCI Carver's wife, Emma, on their honeymoon, seated on a stony outcrop near a waterfall. Emma is blonde and slender. She is wearing skinny jeans with wedge sandals, a blue peasant top. Her hair, silky and long, is combed in a centre parting. She is smiling. The woman carries

the picture through to Carver's sitting room, wipes it for prints, and places it on the top of the cupboard, where it always sits.

In the bedroom, A3-size wall charts Blu-tacked to the walls. On one, smiling photos of five female victims alongside handwritten notes:

1. Tali Tredwin – DOD: 3rd January. Age 27, 5ft 4", brown hair, brown eyes. Divorced, 2 children. Back & shoulders tattooed – blue ink. Severe ink bleed, speckling. Maori symbols & eyes – all closed. *Berberis* thorn.

2. Evie Dodd – DOD: 10th March. Age 25, 5ft 5", black hair, hazel eyes. Married, 3 children. Torso, neck, arms, legs, feet/soles, hands, palms, all tattooed – blue ink. Stylised plants, magical sigils & eyes – closed/ half-open/open. Ink bleed. *Berberis* thorn.

3. Hayley Evans – DOD: 6th June. Age 28, 5ft 3", brown hair, brown eyes. In civil partnership, 1 child. Torso, neck, arms, legs, feet/soles, hands, palms, all tattooed. Stylised plants, thorns, magical sigils & eyes – closed/half-open/open. Blue ink. Less ink bleed. *Pyracantha* thorn.

4. Jo Raincliffe – DOD: 2nd September. Age 35, 5ft 6", brown hair, brown eyes. Married, 2 children. Torso, neck, arms, legs, feet/soles, hands, palms, all tattooed – blue ink. Stylised plants, thorns, sigils, etc. No ink bleed. *Pyracantha* thorn.

5. Kara Grogan – DOD: 22nd December. Age 20, 5ft 10", blonde hair, blue eyes. Torso, neck, arms, legs, feet/soles, hands, palms, all tattooed – black ink. No bleed. Stylised plants, thorns, magical sigils & eyes – a lot of eyes. *Pyracantha* thorn.

She peels the charts away from the wall, folds them, carrying them back to the kitchen, where she scoops up the rest of the

papers – balled up notes and all – and stuffs them inside the file box, jamming the lid onto it.

She wipes down the door handles, light switches, his chair. Hefting the box, she makes her way out of the house, treading carefully on the fire escape steps at the rear of the building and down the driveway. It has recently been cleared of snow, but her shoe marks are visible in the fresh fall. It's very dark, and the curtains are drawn up and down the street; she doesn't think she's been seen.

Minutes later, she returns ungloved, without the box, and climbs the steps to the front of the house, wipes the bell push, then presses it. She doesn't wait – but takes a key fob from her back pocket and uses one of the two keys on it to open the front door. Inside Carver's flat, she retraces her steps, touching surfaces she has just wiped down. Finishing her journey at Carver's chair, she sees the drained bottle again and something niggles at the edges of her consciousness, like an itch she can't quite reach. But she doesn't have time for this – what's done is done.

She crouches in front of him, gripping the armrests and staring into his face.

She gasps, springing to her feet.

Panting, her heart hammering, she watches him for a few seconds. *You imagined it.*

She lowers herself, holding her breath, her eyes fixed on his. Greg Carver's eyes are light hazel, flecked with gold. Sometimes those gold flecks seem to shimmer, but not now. Now they are dull, dead. She leans in closer, watching, barely breathing – and sees again a flicker of movement in one eyelid. Her shoulders slump and she swears softly.