

ROBIN MATTHEWS SERIES

DEADLY TOUGH

AUDREY WALKER



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Chapter One

Robin Matthews ran as fast as her legs could carry her. Finally, she waltzed over the fence as the man ahead of her took a right.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Stop! Police!”

“Damn, he’s fast,” cursed Kyle Grange as he overtook her. He turned into the dark alley, and Robin followed him as she clutched her gun in her hands. The man she was chasing jumped onto a chainlink fence and started to climb. Kyle jumped on behind him, and Robin followed, trying to keep up. However, the man landed on the other side and turned around another corner. Robin threw herself down and turned into the same lane as the man, only to stop when she realized he was nowhere to be seen.

“Damn it!” Kyle cursed. “Where did he go?”

Robin looked around the area, searching for any traces or clues their perp might have left behind.

“There,” Kyle said, pointing to the main street, and he and Robin took off. Both of them ran down the road, weaving through the oncoming traffic as they tried to find their target. Where the hell was this guy?

Robin turned around to scour the other side of the street when a woman bumped right into her.

“Oh, sorry dear,” the woman said.

“No, I am sorry,” Robin said, without paying much attention to the

hunched-over old woman. The lady clutched her scarf around her body, pulling her floral cap down even further, and hobbled away.

“You idiot!” Kyle shouted. “That’s him! Stop him!”

Robin whisked around just in time to see the hunched woman become a tall man. The perp threw away the shawl and the hat and bounced into a cab. Robin and Kyle ran toward him, but both of them knew they wouldn’t make it in time. Robin shouted at the taxi to stop, but the driver whisked off without noticing her. She followed the cab, yelling and screaming for it to stop, but it turned onto another street and disappeared into the traffic.

“Damn,” she said, panting in the middle of the street.

“Damn is right,” Kyle said. “Get out of the street before a car hits you, Matthews. I have enough paperwork on my hands without having to file your death too.”

“I’m sorry,” Robin said. “That was my fault. If I had grabbed him when he had bumped into me –.”

“I’ve been after that man for five months,” Kyle said, looking disgusted. “Your first day here, and you’ve already ruined months of work, everything down the drain. So now he’s going to go underground again, and I won’t find him. I guess they don’t teach how to avoid rookie mistakes in the Academy anymore.”

“I am sorry –,” she repeated herself.

Kyle didn’t bother replying. Instead, he just walked away from her in disgust, mumbling on and on about rookies. Robin leaned against the wall, feeling dejected.

Robin had been on the police force for two years and had proven herself a capable and intelligent officer. Many of her coworkers commented that with her intuitiveness, she should take the Detective’s exam. Studying hard while still impressing her superiors in her division, Robin was finally ready to take her exam. She aced it, of course, and the physical trials she completed with ease.

Having just passed her exam, with her record, she was promoted to Detective Robin Matthews within a year's time. She had been thrilled on the first day of her new job at the new precinct. Robin had come in feeling like she was on cloud nine, but her excitement was taken down a few notches when her new partner had shown an instant dislike for her. Kyle Grange, one of the best detectives on the police force with over six years of experience under his belt, had been assigned as Robin's partner.

Their first meeting had been completely different from what she had hoped. First, Kyle had taken one look at her before shaking his head and heading back to argue with the captain. Then, after ten minutes of shouting from the captain's office, he returned looking even more disgruntled. Detective Grange then told her that he didn't have time to babysit a rookie and that she should just stay out of his way. He then proceeded to ignore her for the rest of the morning.

Robin sat at her desk, looking around the busy precinct. She felt awkward and alone as everyone immersed themselves in their work. So, when Kyle had finally called her over, she had been ecstatic. He had been tracking an art thief for months. And today, he finally had information on where the perp was. Robin and Kyle had reached the site and found their man just as they had expected. Kyle had planned on surrounding him before he arrested him, but the thief was more cautious than they had anticipated. He had gotten spooked and made a run for it, which is how the chase had started.

In the end, he had gotten away, and it was all Robin's fault. There was no way her partner was ever going to respect her or trust her after this. She felt like a complete and utter failure. Her first day on the job, and she had already messed up. But then, a loud honking pulled her out of her reverie. Robin looked up to see a car in front of her. Kyle poked his head and honked again before saying, "Get in the car, rookie, or are you going to stand there moping all day?"

Robin apologized again as Kyle rolled his eyes, and she got in the car

next to him. His foot pressed on the accelerator, and they shot off through the streets.

“Look, I know I messed up,” Robin said. “I know I should have been more alert. I should have realized –.”

“It’s fine,” Kyle said with a sigh. “You have nothing to worry about. Everyone messes up at some point. Hell, even I have made mistakes, and mine have been more serious than letting some art thief escape. He will resurface eventually, and I will get him then. Just relax.”

“Thank you,” Robin said, feeling a bit happier at his words. “I –.”

“We ain’t friends, rookie,” he said, cutting her off. “You are still a pain in my butt. Another mistake like this, and I am reporting you to the captain for incompetence.”

With that, he turned the car toward the police station and slowly brought it to a stop. He got out of the car and slammed the door shut, leaving Robin just sitting there. She sighed and opened her door to step out.

The day couldn’t get any worse now, could it?

—

“So, what do you need me to do?” Robin asked as Kyle sat down at his desk.

“I need you to stay away from me,” he grumbled. “I got work to do. Gotta file paperwork about the mess you just created.”

“I will do it,” Robin offered. It was well-known that paperwork was the bane of a detective’s existence. They spent more time on paperwork than on actual cases. No one enjoyed doing it, but it had to be done – and correctly. Any errors in filing could lead to a criminal going free on a technicality.

Kyle looked at her for a minute; his eyes narrowed, and then he threw the file toward her.

“Much appreciated,” he said, putting his legs up on the desk and leaning

back in his chair. Robin took the file and turned around to head to her desk when the door to the precinct burst open.

“Help!” a voice gasped. “Help!”

“What the –,” Kyle muttered, getting off his chair.

The voice belonged to a man who was now shuffling through the precinct. The way he was walking and the slur in his words suggested that he was a drunk, but something felt off about him. Robin marched up to the man as Kyle grabbed him. She could see the disgust in the faces of other officers. Clearly, they thought he was just some drunk junkie as well.

The man was looking around wildly, his eyes wide and filled with fear. He was talking, but his words didn’t make any sense. In fact, they didn’t even sound like any human language. Instead, the guttural noises continued to emit from him as he desperately clutched Kyle’s collar. It was now that it started to hit everyone that the man wasn’t drunk – he was sick.

“Call 911!” Robin shouted as the precinct burst into activity.

Kyle was clutching onto the man, talking to him soothingly.

“Everything will be alright,” he said. “We will get you help, okay? Don’t you worry about it? Don’t try to speak –.”

But the man continued his struggle to talk, even as his throat seized up and he started to gasp for air. And then, something horrifying happened. His skin began to melt off his bones. It started with a blister that continued to spread until Robin could see the muscle underneath. The man continued choking on his words, his body shaking violently now. Robin looked on in horror as froth started to appear from his mouth. The entire precinct was frozen. No one knew what to do. In the distance, she could hear the siren of the ambulance. The paramedics would be here soon. They will know precisely how to save this man.

“You –,” the man gasped out, his eyes boring into Kyle. “Have. To. Stop. Him!”

The words came out of his mouth in painful gasps. He stared at Kyle as

his body continued to blister. He gave one violent shake, and then his body slumped. His vacant eyes stared at the ceiling, froth dribbling down his mouth.

“We’re here,” Robin heard the paramedic say as the team marched into the police station. “What do we have?”

Robin moved back as the paramedic examined the man.

“Damn,” he said as he looked at the body. “I have never seen anything like this.”

Robin watched as he ordered the team to deliver an electric shock and revive the man. All their efforts were futile – the man was dead, and he could not be revived. The body was transferred to a stretcher and then put on the ambulance headed for the morgue. Robin felt sick to her stomach. She was fighting an internal battle not to throw up. She couldn’t get the image of the dead man out of her mind. The entire precinct seemed to be feeling the same, and all around her, the officers looking rather green. It was one thing to see a dead body and entirely another watching someone die before their eyes.

Kyle was still kneeling on the floor where the man had been. He was staring at the now empty space, his mind somewhere far away.

“Someone has to update the captain,” Kyle said loudly.

“I’ll do it,” a man said. Robin recognized him as Gary, one of the oldest detectives here.

“What do we do?” Robin asked Kyle in a soft voice.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking up with a fire burning in his eyes. “The answer is obvious, isn’t it? We have got to find his killer.”

Chapter Two

“A lright, what do we know?” Captain Roy said, leaning in his chair.

Robin looked around the conference room, feeling a bit nervous. As a new detective, she was supposed to brief the police force about the case. It was supposed to help her learn and grow as a detective.

“Our victim is John Doe,” Robin said. “Estimated age is forty years, male, five foot eight inches, stout and dressed in a simple shirt and trousers. He came into the precinct yesterday evening where he asked for help before suffering from some kind of skin lesions and inability to breathe. He then passed away. The man had only a wallet in his possession, which contained some money and an ID card. The card had a name on it – Dave Ester, along with this rather strange symbol.”

She pressed the button on the projector. The image in front of them changed from the dead man to the symbol. A Celtic cross and skull shone on the screen as Robin looked through her notes.

“We ran the ID through the system along with the fingerprints, and we found that Dave Ester did not exist,” she said. “His fingerprints are not in the system, and his ID card appears to be fake. So, as of now, we don’t know who this man is. We did manage to get an autopsy report after the medical examiner, Dr. Sammy Wassel, was kind enough to hurry it up for us. We have some interesting findings. The man had an unknown toxin in his

bloodstream. Dr. Wassel had never seen anything like this before. They are still running it through the system to see if they can identify what kind of poison it is, but the cause of death is clearly the toxin. They believed it was injected into him through the neck – they found a small puncture hole that corresponds with a syringe.”

“The toxin is unique in its properties. From what the medical examiner could tell, the toxin works by destroying the body from the inside out. First, it starts to dissolve the muscles and the organs, including the heart, lungs, and brain. It then moves into the skin and the bones, which is what we saw. The toxin was injected into his body approximately half an hour before he came into the precinct for help. The doctor thinks that the toxin needed about twenty minutes to cause serious, irreparable damage. After twenty minutes, the damage is so bad that the person can’t be saved. The exact cause of death is cardiac failure due to severe damage to the heart muscles. We are still waiting on the forensics report.”

Robin sat down on her chair, and the captain said, “Good work, Detective. Now, we clearly need to identify this man. Detective Grange and Matthews, you will follow this case through. See if you can find out who the man was and what the forensics team has to say. This man came to us for help, and even though we failed to save him, we will ensure that he gets the justice he deserves. You are all dismissed.”

The conference room was filled with the sounds of scraping chairs as everyone got up. The officers muttered amongst each other as they walked out. Robin returned to her desk, lost in her thoughts, staring down at the symbol they had found on the ID card. What could it possibly mean?

“Come on,” Kyle said, appearing out of nowhere. “I just got a call from forensics. They have found something.”

He didn’t give Robin a chance to reply. Instead, he made his way into the elevator and pressed the button. Robin just managed to get in before the door closed and the elevator started climbing. Again, she felt the familiar

excitement tingling through her, the thrill of chasing a criminal – the rush of solving a case. This is why she had become a detective, and now she was experiencing what she always dreamed of.

The door opened, and the two of them made their way to the lab, where a young, blond woman was waiting for them.

“Hey, Sammy,” Kyle greeted. “What have you got for me?”

Dr. Sammy Wassel smiled at Kyle, tossing her blond hair over her shoulder, and said, “I think you will be proud of me, Kyle. I found quite a few things. For one, there was soil embedded in the soles of the victim’s shoes. I ran the soil sample, and I found something quite interesting. The soil contains a special kind of ore that is only found in mining towns, especially in areas where there are iron mines. Not only that, I found some kind of material under his fingernails. Almost like the bark of a tree – but the tree is also a specific one. It’s only found in a few towns within the US. I’ve made you a list of all the possible places.”

“Excellent work,” Kyle said, taking the list. “This should help with tracking down his previous location. There has to be some evidence left in one of these places on the list. Thanks.”

“Anything for you, Kyle,” she said flirtatiously.

Kyle didn’t seem to notice it. Instead, he made his way back into the precinct as he went over all the information Sammy had told him.

“Right,” he said. “We need to find a place with iron mines that match with the specific regions where this tree is found.”

“Wait,” Robin said. She opened up the map and spread it on her desk. She marked the locations that Sammy had suggested, and then for the next half an hour, they narrowed it down further.

“We have five possible areas,” Robin said. “All five have the mines and the trees.”

“We need to narrow it down further,” Kyle said.

“We could narrow it based on time,” Robin said, an idea occurring to her.

“Let’s say that our victim was injected with the drug at one of these mines. He left that area and came to the closest police station for some help. Now, Dr. Wassel said the toxin had been injected around half an hour before he came into the station. Therefore, wherever he was couldn’t be further away than half an hour distance on foot –.”

“Here,” Kyle said, pointing to the map. “It’s a remote town just outside the city, and it meets all of our requirements perfectly.”

“So, we’re assuming that is where the man was when he was injected with the toxin?” she asked. “It’s worth checking out.”

“It is,” Kyle agreed. “I am going to inform the captain, and then we’re going to head out. But, first, let’s find why our victim was in Slaterville and exactly what happened to him.”

Robin’s phone rang at this moment, and she withdrew her phone from her pocket.

“Robin,” her sister’s excited voice greeted her as she answered the call. “I just wanted to check in with you! You didn’t call me last night after getting back from work! How is it going?”

Abby, Robin’s sister, didn’t really support her choice of career. She felt it was too dangerous and high risk, but she cared enough to stand with Robin in her decision.

“Hey, I was so tired that I dozed off on the couch,” Robin said. “I completely forgot I had promised to call you.”

“You’ve only been there a day, and they’re already overworking you,” Abby laughed.

“Abby, you know it comes with the job,” Robin said. She spotted Kyle coming from the captain’s office, and she said, “Look, I have to go. But I will call you whenever I get home. I promise.”

Abby sighed, knowing her sister all too well, and she said, “Alright. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Okay,” Robin said. “Talk to you later.”

She put the phone back in her pocket and rushed out after Kyle.
The hunt was about to begin.

Chapter Three

“What an eerie-looking place,” Kyle commented as the GPS instructed Robin to turn again. The town was strangely quiet and empty, even though it was midday. The streets were bare, and all the windows and doors were closed. Robin could see eyes peeking out from the windows now and then. She knew that they were being watched as she drove through the streets. Robin wanted nothing more than to turn around and get out of this town. There was something so off about the place, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that they were in danger. They finally spotted a grocery store, and Robin brought the car to a stop.

She and Kyle exchanged looks before making their way out. The sun was shining, and the weather was steaming. The two detectives walked inside the store, greeted by the cool interior and the hum of the air conditioner. A man sat behind the counter, his arms crossed across his chest and suspicion in his eyes.

“How can I help ya?” he asked.

“Detective Grange,” Kyle said, flashing his badge. “And that’s Detective Matthews. We got a few questions for you if you don’t mind.”

The man looked at them with even more suspicion. Kyle pushed a picture of their victim forward and said, “Ever seen this man before?”

The man’s eyes narrowed, and they became even more guarded.

“Never,” he said gruffly.

“Are you sure?” Kyle asked. “We know he was in this area yesterday.”

“I am sure,” he said. “No one comes here without me finding out about it. We don’t take kindly to strangers here, ya know. And we don’t like cops either.”

“How come the town is so quiet?” Robin asked. “It’s midday, and the streets are empty like it’s some sort of ghost town.”

“It might as well be,” an old voice croaked behind them. Robin turned around to see an old man hobbling over with the help of a wooden cane.

“What do you mean?” Kyle asked.

“People keep disappearing around here,” the old man said. “Men. Women. Sometimes children. They are here one day, and the next – they’re gone. Almost like some kind of demon is picking us up, one by one.”

“There ain’t no demons,” the man behind the counter snapped. “I told you a thousand times, Pops.”

“Then how do you explain what is happening here?” the old man asked. “No, what is happening here can’t be the work of any human.”

“We think it’s wild animals,” the man behind the counter said, even though he didn’t sound convinced. “Either way, it’s none of your business. You should leave.”

“I know where the demons live,” the old man said. “We can hear them, you know. We can hear their screams and moans and groans echoing through the air. The spirits are haunting our residents!”

“Pops, no one’s got time for your stories,” the other man said.

“Where is this place?” Kyle asked.

“It’s the mansion near the edge of the town,” the old man said. “Right by the river. It used to belong to the Heathrow family, but they are all long dead, and the place has been empty for years. They all died in a terrible fire one horrifying night. It is said their spirits still haunt that place. I know, because another family tried to live there. But the ghosts of the Heathrow mansion

wouldn't leave them in peace.

A month later, the new folks left the place. No one went near there after that, and it fell into complete disarray. And then, a few years ago, the demons took over. All kinds of noises started to come from there in the dead of night. And every few months, our people started disappearing."

"Stop spinning tales, Pops," the other man said.

"Well, if you don't believe me, Bill," the old man said. "Why don't you go to the mansion yerself?"

Bill paled and looked away, disgruntled.

"See?" the old man said. "They can say all the crap they want about me. But none of them are brave enough to even go near the mansion, not after five people who went in there disappeared. Only one ever returned, and even he came back insane. So, we all know what's there."

"How come you never reported these disappearances?" Kyle asked.

"Like I said," the other man growled. "We don't trust cops."

"We tried, son," the old man told Kyle. "The police wouldn't believe us when we told them that demons were taking our men. They came and investigated for a bit, but they decided they couldn't find anything and closed the case. No one took us seriously, and now – well, now we have learned to accept it. Now we tell our children never to go anywhere alone, and we all stick together. But those fiends still manage to take a man now and then."

"Where is this mansion?" Robin asked.

The man pointed through the wide windows of the store, and Robin could make out a huge building in the distance.

"But be careful," the old man said. "Your guns won't help you there. Bullets can't hurt the demons that roam that place."

With that, the old man walked away deeper into the store. Kyle exchanged a glance with Robin before thanking the store clerk and making their way out. Now there were even more eyes peeking out of the window. The sun was even higher in the sky, and its heat more powerful. Robin almost

regretted leaving behind the coolness of the store.

“Come on,” Kyle said, gazing at the mansion. “Let’s go fight some demons.”

—

The mansion looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in years. The grass was overgrown and covered in weeds. The building was shabby, the windows boarded up, and the only door to the mansion locked. The mansion was desolate-looking, broken down, and barely holding on. Robin couldn’t help but think that it would crash down around them any minute now.

“I can’t see anything outside,” Kyle said. “Let’s go in –.”

He took out a pin and fidgeted with the lock a bit before it clicked open. He gave a satisfied smile as the door swung open. Unfortunately, the interior was the farthest thing away from welcoming. The place was dark and dingy, and it didn’t smell very pleasant. Even though the sun was bright outside, only a single ray reached the inside of the building. The boarded-up windows blocked everything, and as the door swung closed behind them, it was almost like they had suddenly been trapped in the belly of a beast. Kyle turned on his flashlight and peered around. The furniture was all covered in sheets, and there was dust and cobwebs all around. Robin had goosebumps just looking around the place.

At one point in time, this place had probably been truly majestic. The stairway still had hints of gold trim, and Robin could make out that the carpet and furniture used to be extremely fancy. On the other hand, the paintings on the walls all seemed to be originals.

She was still looking around when the sound of footsteps caught her attention. She looked up carefully, trying to control her racing heart. Then,

Robin heard the footsteps again, lightly pitter-pattering on the wooden floor upstairs.

“Did you hear that?” Robin whispered to Kyle.

He shook his head, staring at something in the distance, his eyes transfixed. Then, finally, the footsteps stopped, and she saw a shadow standing there on the upper floor.

“Hello?” she called out. “This is Detective Robin Matthews. I have some questions for you.”

“I will check upstairs,” Kyle said and started to make his way up.

The shadow disappeared, and Robin slowly started to make her way for the stairs right behind Kyle.

A giggle rang out behind her, stopping her in her tracks. Her breathing hitched as she quickly turned around. Her hand went for her gun, which she pulled out and held in front of her. She waved her flashlight around, but no one stood there. She sighed in relief and turned her attention toward the staircase again. Kyle was already on the next floor – she could see his flashlight in the darkness upstairs.

“Play with me,” a voice rang out near her ear, followed by the same childlike giggle. Robin whipped her head around but once again found nothing behind or near her.

“Over here,” the voice whispered.

“No, over here,” another voice whispered.

“No, here!” a third voice rang out. A sudden silence followed this as Robin stood there, her gun at the ready.

“Whoever is out there,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Show yourself. I just want to ask a few questions.”

Silence followed this statement, and she slowly turned around back toward the staircase. She could see that the shadow had reappeared, only this time it was different. It seemed to belong to a woman wearing a long dress that appeared to be blowing in the wind even though there was no air current

within the mansion.

For a second, there was complete silence in the mansion, and then, from one of the bedrooms, came the sound of music.

It wasn't just any music but the notes of the familiar nursery rhyme.

"Pop goes the weasel!"

Robin had sung that nursery many times for Abby as a child, and now she heard it again. So what was going on in this creepy mansion?

She opened the door to the bedroom and walked in, her heart beating so fast she was sure it would jump out of her chest. The large music box sat in the center of the room, its lever rotating on its own. Robin slowly walked toward it, her hand trembling. Who put a music box in the room, and how was it playing? Was someone actually living here?

Robin slowly knelt beside it, her heart thumping in her chest. There was something in the air, and her gut was screaming at her to get out of there. She was shaking with pure fear as she reached out to touch it. The moment her hand rested on the box, the music came to an end, and the box burst open. Robin shrieked, falling back in fear and amazement. The jack bounced out, bobbing up and down on its spring. It took her a second to realize that it wasn't a clown toy that had popped out of the box.

In the weak light of the flashlight, she watched in horror as realization dawned on her. The face bobbing up and down belonged to a human. The face looked as if it had been cut off from his body. The neck was slashed and openly bled all over the box and the floor.

Robin shook her head, forcing herself to calm down. She had to stick with Kyle. He had gone upstairs with her following him, but they separated in the hallway, checking the other rooms. Robin needed to find him. This must be some kind of prank – after all, this couldn't be real. She looked up, pulling herself together, and almost screamed once again. Robin hadn't realized that shadows completely surrounded her after she fell back. They were silent and motionless.

She stood up, her pulse racing, and she could barely catch her breath. The shadows didn't move as she looked around, slowly raising her gun. Then, with trembling hands, Robin pointed toward the shadows, ready to shoot at a moment's notice. And then, something dripped on her hand. She ignored it, not wanting to take her eyes off the shadow. But another drop fell on her, and this time she looked up.

A body lay sprawled up against the ceiling. It appeared to be held in place by some invisible bonds. The body was headless, the head still bobbing away in the box. A single splash of blood lay on the floor from where blood had dripped down. Robin ignored the urge to scream – all she wanted to do was get the hell out of this mansion. She was starting to think the old man was right.

“Did you do this, Robin?” his voice whispered in her ear. “Did you do this?”

“No,” she whispered. “No.”

Her voice trembled and shook as she stood there.

“You did, didn't you?” another voice whispered, and Robin looked ahead. She froze at the sight before her. A girl stood in front of her, staring at Robin. The tiny girl clutched a teddy bear close to her chest, a small smile on her lips. She looked like an ordinary girl, except that she had blood coming out of her eyes.

Robin turned around, running toward the door. The phone fell on the floor, and she fumbled around trying to find it. The second she found it, her phone turned off and she was once again submerged in darkness.

She was alone in the dark and at the mercy of whatever demon now haunted her.

Chapter Four

“K_{yle}?” Robin shouted as she ran up the stairs. She could see shadows all around her. They seemed to be following her relentlessly, refusing to let her escape them. With the absence of any light at all, Robin knew she had to get out of there. But she couldn’t just leave Kyle behind. She had to find him and help him gain his way out with her.

She reached the first floor and rushed through the corridor in hopes that he would be there. But the hallway was completely empty.

“Kyle?” she called out again. “Are you there?”

The place was eerily quiet, and the silence seemed to make everything much more terrifying. Then, finally, Robin heard a shout somewhere at the back of the mansion, and she rushed there, following the noise. She was sure it had been Kyle, but where was he? Why couldn’t she see him anywhere?

“Kyle?” she screamed. “Kyle, where are you?”

“Rookie,” Kyle’s voice echoed through the corridor. “I am here! Help me!”

Robin followed the noise and rushed into a room, throwing the door open.

The room was covered with a thick layer of dust. A single metal bed stood in the corner, covered with dirty shirts and a torn pillow. A tall, rectangular mirror stood in the other corner along with a small dresser where someone had kept their clothes. Robin walked in, sighing when she saw the

window boarded up. She turned around to continue her search for Kyle when something caught her eye.

The mirror glinted as she walked toward it. It was as if the mirror were beckoning her. It was old with a metal design around it that was rusty, and the mirror itself looked foggy. But the person who stood in the mirror was as clear as day.

“Kyle?” she asked, walking forward.

He stood in the mirror, staring at her with the utmost despair on his face.

“Save me,” he said. “I am trapped! I am trapped!”

Robin rushed toward him, reaching out and watching in shock as the mirror melted around her.

“Give me your hand,” she said, pushing her hand through the liquid surface of the mirror. Kyle looked at her from the other side of the mirror, and then his face split into a vile grin. Two long fangs protruded from his gums, and the whites of his eye turned utterly black. His jaw was unnaturally open, almost as if it had been unhinged. Before she could react, she felt something scaly, slimy, and horrible reach out and grab her extended hand.

“I am sorry, rookie,” the monster that resembled Kyle said. “It was you or me.”

And with that, she was pulled inside. The surface of the mirror rippled as she went through, her entire body shivering. Robin tried to struggle and resist, but the force was so strong that all her attempts to escape were futile. And just as suddenly as the force had appeared, it disappeared. Now, in the recess of the mirror, she couldn’t help but scream. All around her were nothing but mirrors – like some kind of messed-up funhouse. Her own scream echoed back at her ten times as loud. She could see her reflection in a thousand places. The mirrors reflected each other’s reflection, which resulted in Robin’s multiplying even more.

Robin rushed from one mirror to another, hoping to find a way out, but all she found was the cold, hard surface of the mirror. Finally, she couldn’t take

it anymore, and she closed her eyes to shut out the sight.

“Robin?” she heard a voice calling to her. “Robin!”

“Kyle?” she answered back. Again, she opened her eyes, and this time every mirror showed Kyle standing close to her. She stumbled around, trying to grab onto him, but every time she reached for him, it would just be his reflection.

“Robin,” he shouted. “Robin, give me your hand!”

“Kyle, I can’t reach you,” she said. “Where are you?”

“Robin, I am right here,” his voice answered back. And he was there. He was everywhere. His voice was echoing all over – that was all she could see and hear. She felt herself spiraling as she stumbled around, only to be greeted by another mirror.

“Robin! Robin!” His voice echoed back to her, multiplied.

“Kyle, I can’t find you,” she said desperately. “I can’t –.”

And then she felt a hand grab her right wrist, while another hand grabbed her left shoulder. The hands shook her violently, and the mirror around her started to crack and shatter. She heard the mirrors explode and rain down around her, and suddenly she wasn’t alone anymore. Kyle was with her – right in front of her, clutching onto her. She wasn’t in the room either. No, she was still on the ground floor. What was going on?

“Kyle –,” she stammered. “Kyle, the mirror –.”

“You were hallucinating,” Kyle said, shaking her again. Then, finally, he looked her in the eyes and said, “We are both hallucinating. Here, look!”

He dragged her to one of the vents and pulled the metal frame apart. He extended his hand in, and Robin screamed as she saw a tentacle extend from the darkness.

“No! Whatever you see, it’s just your mind!” Kyle said. He seemed to be struggling with his fears as he forced his hand in. Then, a moment later, he withdrew what appeared to be a large, metal canister of gas.

“These are everywhere,” Kyle said. “Whoever is here has set this up as

either a trap or a defense mechanism. I don't know; it was probably to deter people from investigating the place. These gas canisters are in all of the vents. They have been drugging us this entire time."

"Who's they?" Robin asked. She could see tentacles reaching out and trying to grab Kyle's hand, but now that she knew it wasn't real, it was easier to control the fear that was surging through her.

"I don't know," Kyle said. "But it has to be someone, right? I mean, these canisters were put here by humans. Demons don't need to disperse some gas to terrify us. Come on; we need to power through and ignore whatever we can see. We must get to the bottom of this. Someone doesn't want us finding them or anything about them. But, of course, this makes me think they have quite a lot to hide. Just don't let go of my hand."

Robin didn't need to be told twice. She tightly grabbed his hand and silently vowed not to let go. Kyle held his flashlight up a bit higher so they could see the way, and they slowly started to look around. The shadows still followed her, and wherever she looked, a new terrifying sight would be waiting for her. Robin suppressed the fear, fighting against it, reminding herself repeatedly that what she was seeing was just the effect of some drug.

"Robin?" Kyle called out after a minute. "The girl in front of us –."

Robin looked ahead but saw nothing, and she said, "Nothing there."

"Okay," Kyle said. They continued making their way around, using the flashlight to look for possible clues.

"Kyle?" Robin cried out after a few minutes. "Fire! Fire everywhere –."

"It's just the gas getting to your head, rookie," he said.

Robin swallowed the lump in her throat and moved on, ignoring the burning flames.

"What's that?" Kyle asked, frowning. "Hey, rookie. Do you see the metal ring on the floor?"

Robin turned to see where he was looking and said, "Yes, I see it."

She kneeled and lifted the rug, exposing a trap door.

“Kyle,” she called out. “Trap door.”

“I see it,” he confirmed. Robin reached down and grabbed the ring, lifting it up.

“Ladder,” she said.

“Go down,” he said. “I am right behind you. Keep your gun in your hand. If anyone is down there, shoot them in the knee.”

With that, she started climbing down, while Kyle used his flashlight to help Robin see the way. She reached the floor and looked around to make sure they were alone. He then threw the phone to her, and she held it up as he climbed down. He swung the door closed as Robin looked around for a light switch. She spotted one on the wall and flipped it. The light flickered on, and Robin winced, closing her eyes as the sharp light hit her. As her eyes adjusted, she slowly opened them and was greeted by a rather horrifying sight. Right in the center of the basement was a table, and on the table was a man.

The man was smiling at her, his eyes open and a gruesome smile on his face. He had spikes poking through his body, blood pouring out of him and around the table.

“Kyle!” she gasped. “The man – he’s moving.”

“Yes,” Kyle said, his expression mirroring Robin’s. “Shoot.”

Robin picked up her gun and shot at the man, but the bullets seem to go through him as he made his way over. Kyle had followed suit, and his voice thundered as he watched his bullets disappear through the man.

“It’s the drug!” he shouted. “It’s the drug!”

Robin closed her eyes, taking her hand off the trigger, and waited. Silence followed Kyle’s shouts, and after a minute, she opened her eyes. The man she had seen was gone, but someone was lying on the table.

Robin walked forward to examine the unknown body, clutching her gun.

“He’s dead,” she said. The fact was evident by the sizeable bloodless cut on his chest and stomach, exposing his organs. Instruments were strewn all

around him – the kind one would see at the forensic pathologist’s office.

“Look’s like someone was performing some kind of autopsy,” Kyle said, echoing her thoughts.

“I know,” Robin said. “Doesn’t make any sense.”

“There is also no gas down here,” Kyle said.

The lack of the monsters here was rather noticeable. The drug must be leaving their system. Robin looked at the door and saw a thick layer of padding around it. Whoever had set this all up had been very thorough. They had made sure that the gas wouldn’t seep down into the basement.

“So this is what has been happening to all the town’s people who have been disappearing,” Robin said.

“It’s like somebody has been performing some kind of experiment,” Kyle said. First, he examined the table in the corner of the room covered by vials, machines, and chemicals. Then, he picked up a notebook and leafed through it. Every page was covered in equations and chemical formulas.

“The toxin,” Robin said. “Someone has been synthesizing it here.”

“Seems like it,” Kyle said.

“Look,” Robin said, picking up the ID card on the table. “It says Gerald Anderson, and it has the same symbol as the one on Dave’s ID card.”

“They both must have worked together,” Kyle said. “Look around, see if you can find more evidence.”

He started to take pictures of everything, including the dead body and the entire setup. Then, he took pictures of the notebook and the ID card as Robin began searching for more clues.

She opened the drawers and just found more trash. She sifted through the scraps of papers and wrappers but found nothing interesting. Finally, Robin opened the last drawer and looked through the files, all of which had some kind of research. Then, right at the very bottom of it, she found a newspaper.

“This is from four years ago,” she said, reading the date.

“Disgraced scientists put on trial for the death of their colleague,” Kyle

read the headline. He started to go through the article as Robin resumed her search.

“Apparently, the two scientists were performing some kind of top-secret research when one of their colleagues died in a lab accident. It was horrifying, to say the least. The court eventually ruled that they were not guilty of negligence, but they were fired from their jobs and lost everything. And look, there is a picture. One of them is our victim.”

Robin stood up quickly and glanced at the picture. The man named Dave was there, standing next to another man. Both of them were shackled up and wearing jail uniforms.

“The other one must be Gerald,” Robin said.

Kyle snapped a picture of it and said, “I don’t have a signal here. We need to get out of here and call this in. Get a forensics team down here and do a full sweep.”

“Right,” Robin said. “But the guy might escape if he comes back and sees the police everywhere.”

“Very wise, Detective,” a voice said behind her. She turned around just in time to see the man grab Kyle. He held tightly onto Kyle, backing into the corner. Robin pulled out her gun, her heart racing as she looked at him. Kyle tried to struggle, but the man held him tightly.

“Throw the gun away,” the man said. “Throw it, or he gets the toxin.” He held up a syringe against Kyle’s neck, a malicious smile on his face.

“Okay, fine!” Robin said. “Fine! Just don’t hurt him!”

She threw the gun toward him, and he kicked it out of sight with his foot.

“You too,” he said.

Kyle slowly put his hand inside and brought his gun out before throwing it on the floor. Gerald kicked that away as well, and it went into a dark corner.

“Thank you, Detective,” he sneered and then plunged the syringe into Kyle’s neck.

“Hope you like my toxin, Detective,” the man said with a cold laugh. “I like to call it the death serum.”

“Kyle!” Robin shouted, moving toward him.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he said. “I am the only one who has the antidote.”

“I could just force you to give it up,” Robin said.

“Oh, that won’t work,” he said. “I have nothing to lose. And you don’t have time to sit there and torture me. No – in half an hour, he will be dead. One wrong move, and well – you will get to see my death serum in action.”

With that, he threw back his head in an outburst of laughter.

Chapter Five

“What do you want?” Robin asked, her heart racing in her chest.

“What do I want?” he repeated Robin’s question. “I want lots of things, Detective. But there is nothing you can give me. I have no beef with you, but I can’t let you tell anyone what I’m doing down here. Plus, two more bodies to experiment on sounds lovely to me.”

“We are the police,” Robin said quietly. “If we disappear, they will come looking for us. The entire force will come after you, and you won’t be able to escape them.”

“I am not an idiot, Detective,” he said. “My research is complete. I have no reason to stay here anymore. By the time they realize you are missing and start looking for you, I will have cleaned this place up and disappeared. My purpose is complete!”

“Your purpose?” Robin asked. She knew she had twenty minutes before the effect of the toxin was irreversible. Gerald had talked about an antidote; Robin had to find it and save Kyle. She had to keep him talking until the antidote could be found.

“Yes,” Gerald said. “My toxin. My life’s work. They thought they would stop me, but –.”

“Who thought they could stop you?” Kyle asked. He seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Robin.

“The military,” Gerald snapped. “We were working for them. They asked us to make a toxin – a powerful one. One they could use to torture people for information and also as a weapon of bioterrorism. They had a few rules – it had to be easily dispersed and spread. It had to be quick but not so fast-acting that they wouldn’t be able to retrieve information. But most importantly, it had to be extremely painful. After all, the target has to talk. The effect had to be reversible for a while before it became permanent. They enlisted me, Dave, and Sanjay as their secret team. No one knew what we were doing. The system didn’t have our records – they were wiped. We worked quietly on our research until, one day, everything went wrong. Sanjay died – it was an accident. I forgot that he was in there, and I turned off the ventilation system. Our lab was made especially to make sure no vapors could escape that room. The oxygen was turned off with it, and Sanjay was trapped inside because I locked the lab up. I didn’t know he was there! In the morning, Dave found him dead of suffocation. The military tried to hush it up, but Sanjay’s family was powerful and wanted revenge. The military set Dave and me up, backing out of it. We tried, and only after we threatened to go to the press did the military pull some strings and had us freed. Our records were expunged, and, after that, we hid from the world.”

“And that’s how you came here,” Kyle said.

“Dave and I wandered around for a year,” he said. “Both of us were angry and bitter at what had happened. Both of us were burning for revenge. Then, one day, we stumbled onto this place. We hid in the mansion for a few days – the locals seemed to avoid it at all costs. And then here, I discovered something interesting. The bark of a local tree had a chemical I needed to stabilize my toxin. I stole some equipment from a nearby town and isolated the compound. It worked! I knew I had to set up base here. So Dave and I started our research again.”

Gerald continued – “We got the equipment and the products. Well, we stole them or brought them online. Once we had that, we started our work

once again. But we knew the locals would get nosy and start looking around. So we set up the gas canisters. It's my own invention, you know. The drug causes severe hallucinations. It's fast-acting, and it can cause permanent insanity if someone is exposed to it for too long. So we rigged up the door. If anyone came in, the canisters would be set off. Of course, we knew how to navigate through it. It worked beautifully. No one has ever managed to get down here, except you two. I am impressed that you managed to fight it off."

"Once you know it's not real," Robin said. "It's not that hard."

While Gerald had been speaking, Robin had been inching closer toward him.

"Interesting," he said. "I never thought about it that way."

"Why were you kidnapping the locals?" Kyle asked.

"I needed to study the effects of my toxin," he said. "I needed to know how the body was processing it and what to change. So I kidnapped a few locals and injected them with it now and then. And then I would open them on my table and study them. Eventually, they were foolish enough to come looking. But my gas took care of that. I would come back to find them wandering around, lost in their own mind and hallucinations. I didn't have to kidnap anyone for a while after that. But, of course, I had to be quick; I couldn't let the bodies stink the place up. The locals were terrified! It was perfect!"

"So if everything was going great," Robin asked. "Why did you kill Dave?"

"He fell in love," Gerald spat out. "The idiot started liking some local girl, and he didn't want to do this anymore. And then, just two days ago, he told me that he was through. I had just finished the formula! That had been our plan all along! We were supposed to use it to get revenge on the general who betrayed us. But now, he didn't want to do it. I told him he could do what he wants, but I will not stop. He threatened to tell the police. Well, I couldn't have that now, could I? So I injected him with the toxin. The idiot

managed to get away somehow. I don't know where he went, but he couldn't have lasted long. He must have walked straight toward the police station, I guess. It seems to be the obvious deduction considering you are here."

Kyle was looking extremely pale. His eyes were wide, and his breathing was labored.

"Ah!" Gerald said. "It's taking effect!"

"Give me the antidote," Robin said. "I won't tell anyone you were here. You can take your stuff and disappear. No one will hunt you down. But please, he has done nothing wrong. Just give him the antidote, and I will let you go."

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?" Gerald said, laughing. "No, I am going to have to finish you both off."

Robin was finally close enough, and she took the opportunity to lunge at him. The man threw Kyle toward Robin and scrambled to grab the gun. Kyle and Robin were taken by surprise by the shove, and they both fell to the floor. Kyle was breathing hard, and he seemed to be in severe pain.

Gerald steadied his aim and was about to pull the trigger on Kyle. Being slow to react because the toxin was taking its toll, Kyle dove out of the way, but not before Gerald shot him, grazing his shoulder. The shot took Kyle down to the ground again, leaving him grasping his injured shoulder.

"Robin, don't let him get away with this!! I am of no use to you," winced Kyle.

"Where is the antidote?" she demanded, lunging toward Gerald again. He still had the gun in his hands, and Robin ducked as he tried to shoot at her. She grabbed his wrist, flicking it up so the gun would fly out of his hand and land on the floor. Instead, Robin kicked him in the stomach and followed it with a punch to the face. Gerald retaliated by throwing himself forward at Robin, overpowering her and pushing her onto the floor. He held her down, using his weight to his advantage. Robin struggled to free herself, but Gerald was too strong for her.

While holding Robin to the ground, Gerald steadied the gun again, this time aiming at Kyle's chest. "Say goodbye, Detective," Gerald said. "I haven't worked all these years just to let two detectives take it all away from me."

With that, he pulled the trigger, but Kyle was able to dodge that bullet. In the meantime, Robin had been able to free one of her legs. Now was her chance; Robin had been trained for this. She hooked her leg under his and turned it around, using the momentum to flip him over. She pushed down with her knees, keeping him in place as she wrapped her hands around his neck.

"Where is it?" Robin demanded as he struggled under her. "Where is the antidote?"

She squeezed his throat tightly, watching as his eyes popped out and his face started to turn blue.

"Robin, wait!" Kyle said. "Don't kill him!"

"I will," she said, looking into Gerald's eyes. "I will kill you. I don't care. But you don't want to die, do you?"

"Stop!" Gerald gasped out. "Stop!"

Robin loosened her grip, and Gerald coughed as he panted, trying to get oxygen back in his body.

"I will tell you," he said. "I will give you the antidote! Just don't kill me."

"Where is it?" Robin asked.

"The bottom drawer has a false panel," he said. "Just lift it, and you should see it."

Kyle got up, his body already looking much weaker, and made his way to the drawer.

"I can see the panel," he said. "I am going to lift it out."

He did so and then pulled out a vial.

"I think this is it," Kyle said.

"Gotcha!" Gerald suddenly said. He took advantage of Robin's

distraction and pushed her off. He climbed on top, forcing her to stay down, and pulled out a syringe from his jacket.

“Now it’s over!” he sneered.

Chapter Six

“No, it’s not,” she said.

Robin had anticipated his move, and she pushed his arm away. She grabbed his wrist, twisting it in the way she had been trained. Gerald screamed in pain, and the syringe fell from his hand. Robin grabbed it with swiftness and stabbed him through the neck, pushing down on the plunger.

Gerald stared at her in horror, backing off as he grabbed his neck.

“No!” he shouted. “No!”

“Now, you both are dying,” Robin said. “Tell me where the antidote is if you want to live.”

Gerald stared at her, anger burning through his eyes.

“Tell me,” she said. “You don’t have any other choice. You can try and fight me, but that will just waste time. You already know that. Now, where is the antidote? Tell me, and I will use it to save you.”

Gerald glared at her for a long minute, and then he finally said, “If you look in the small cabinet, you will find a safe. The code is 4-6-7-8. Just inject 7cc of it, and it should work.”

Robin grabbed the gun off the floor and threw it to Kyle.

“If he moves, shoot him,” she said. She walked over to the safe and entered the password. The safe buzzed open, and she opened it to find a single vial inside.

Robin pulled out the vial and the syringe next to it and walked to Kyle.

“Hey!” Gerald shouted. “You said you would save me!”

“Don’t you dare move,” Kyle said, keeping the gun pointed at him.

Robin filled the syringe with the antidote and injected it into Kyle.

“Hey!” Gerald shouted as he watched. “You said you would give me some. You said you would save me! Hey!”

Robin looked at the remaining antidote in the vial, and then she smiled.

“You don’t need it,” she said.

“What? What are you talking about?” he asked, bewildered.

“I never injected you with the toxin,” she said. And it was true; she hadn’t.

She had stabbed him with the needle, but she had removed the toxin before pressing the plunger and emptying the syringe. Gerald had been so panicked; he didn’t realize what had happened. Robin walked over to where the other pistol was, and she picked it up.

“Gerald Anderson, you are under arrest on multiple counts of homicide,” she said. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say might be used against you in the court of law.”

Kyle relaxed as the pain left his body, and he gave a smile.

“Not bad, rookie,” he said. “You will make a fine detective after all.”

—

“We got the last of it,” Kyle said as he walked into the precinct. Robin noticed that his arm was in a sling because of the bullet Gerald shot at him. Luckily, it was only a flesh wound, but he still needed a bit of support to heal. “All his work has been destroyed. Of course, the military was none too pleased when they found out about it, but what could they do? I’m just glad

we had the foresight to do this before they decided to take over the building. Imagine if all that information had gotten in their hands?”

“So, that’s it?” she asked. “The case is officially over?” Robin looked up from all the paperwork she had in front of her that was related to the case.

“Gerald finally broke down and confessed to everything,” Kyle said. “Even if he hadn’t, the evidence we had would have been more than enough to convict him. We also found all the bodies of the people he killed. The locals were horrified to find out the truth. The mansion is being renovated, and they are converting it into some type of hospital.”

“That place looked like it needed it,” she said. “I am just glad that they can finally go back to their normal lives.”

“Hmm,” Kyle grunted. “You did good, little bird. If you hadn’t tried to save me, you could have taken him down sooner. But you got that antidote for me. So, I owe you my life.”

“I couldn’t leave you to die,” she said with a smile. “You are my partner.”

“That you are,” Kyle said with a smile. “Tell you what, why don’t you pass over the remaining paperwork, and I will handle it?”

“Really?” Robin asked, perking up.

“Yea, it’s my way of saying thank you,” he said. “You can go home early.”

“Well, I haven’t visited my sister in a while,” she remarked. “I guess I could go visit with her.”

“Don’t you have any friends? You know, people your age go out with, maybe get a drink or catch a movie?” he asked.

“Not really,” she said. “I have always been more of an introvert.”

“Why does that not surprise me,” he said with a grunt. “You are a good detective, kid. You will do well here. And I am sorry I was such a jerk at first. It’s a bit annoying when you have a rookie tailing you, especially when you have to teach them everything from scratch. But I guess when I was a rookie, someone took the time out to deal with me as well.”

“Do you have any plans for later?” Robin asked. “Fancy a drink?”

“Actually, I promised I would meet Rose,” he said. “My girlfriend. Though, if I had my way, she would be my wife.”

His phone pinged at that moment, and he pulled it out.

“Hey, rookie,” he said. “You know how you let that thief go?”

“Yea?” Robin asked.

“Well, he resurfaced sooner than we expected,” he said with a grin. “Time to redeem yourself, little bird. Do you fancy a hunt?”

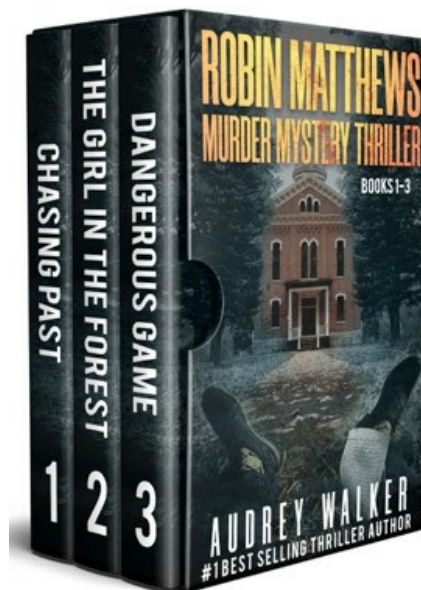
“Sounds like fun,” Robin said with a smile.

The end.

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