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Iron rails the rusty brown of old blood cut across a cracked paved road that leads deeper into the Lowcountry. As I drive over train tracks, it enters my mind that the Georgia Prison for Women is on the wrong side of them and maybe I should take it as another warning and turn back. It's not quite four p.m., Thursday, June 30. There's time to catch the last flight to Boston, but I know I won't.

This part of coastal Georgia is a moody terrain of brooding forests draped with Spanish moss and mudflats etched with convoluted creeks that give way to grassy plains heavy with light. Snowy egrets and great blue herons fly low over brackish water, dragging their feet, and then the woods close in again on either side of the narrow tar-laced road I'm on. Coiling kudzu strangles underbrush and cloaks

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forest canopies in scaly dark leaves, and giant cypress trees with thick gnarled knees rise out of swamps like prehistoric creatures wading and prowling. While I've yet to spot an alligator or a snake, I'm sure they are there and aware of my big white machine roaring and chugging and backfiring.

How I ended up in such a rattletrap that wanders all over the road and stinks like fast food and cigarettes with a whiff of rotting fish, I don't know. It's not what I told my chief of staff, Bryce, to reserve, which was a safe, dependable, mid-size sedan, preferably a Volvo or a Camry, with side and head airbags and a GPS. When I was met outside the airport terminal by a young man in a white cargo van that doesn't have air-conditioning or even a map, I told him there had been an error. I'd been given someone else's vehicle by mistake. He pointed out the contract has my name on it, Kate Scarpetta, and I said my first name is Kay, not Kate, and I didn't care whose name was on it. A cargo van wasn't what I ordered. Lowcountry Concierge Connection was very sorry, said the young man, who was quite tan and dressed in a tank top, camo shorts, and fishing shoes. He couldn't imagine what happened. Obviously a computer problem. He'd be glad to get me something else, but it would be much later in the day, possibly tomorrow.

So far nothing is going the way I'd planned, and I imagine my husband, Benton, saying he told me so. I see him leaning against the travertine countertop in the kitchen last night, tall and slender, with thick silver hair, his chiseled handsome face watching me somberly as we argued again about my coming here. It's only now that the last trace of my headache is gone. I don't know why a part of me still believes, contrary to evidence, that half a bottle of wine will resolve

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differences. It might have been more than half. It was a very nice pinot grigio for the money, light and clean with a hint of apples.

The air blowing through the open windows is thick and hot, and I smell the pungent, sulfuric odor of decomposing vegetation, of salt marshes and pluff mud. The van hesitates and surges by fits and starts around a sun-dappled bend where turkey buzzards forage on something dead. The huge ugly birds with their ragged wings and naked heads lift off in slow, heavy flaps as I swerve around the stiff pelt of a raccoon, the sultry air carrying a sharp putrid stench I know all too well. Animal or human, it doesn't matter. I can recognize death from a distance, and were I to get out and take a close look, I probably could determine the exact cause of that raccoon's demise and when it occurred and possibly reconstruct how it got hit and maybe by what.

Most people refer to me as a medical examiner, an ME, but some think I'm a coroner, and occasionally I'm confused with a police surgeon. To be precise, I'm a physician with a specialty in pathology, and subspecialties in forensic pathology and 3-D imaging radiology, or the use of CT scans to view a dead body internally before I touch it with a blade. I have a law degree and the special reservist rank of colonel with the Air Force, and therefore an affiliation with the Department of Defense, which last year appointed me to head the Cambridge Forensic Center it has funded in conjunction with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Harvard.

I'm an expert at determining the mechanism of what kills or why something doesn't, whether it is a disease, a poison, a medical misadventure, an act of God, a handgun, or an improvised explosive

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device (IED). My every action has to be legally well informed. I'm expected to assist the United States government as needed and directed. I swear to oaths and testify under them, and what all this means is that I'm really not entitled to live the way most people do. It isn't an option for me to be anything other than objective and clinical. I'm not supposed to have personal opinions or emotional reactions to any case, no matter how gruesome or cruel. Even if violence has impacted me directly, such as the attempt on my life four months ago, I'm to be as unmoved as an iron post or a rock. I'm to remain hard in my resolve, calm and cool.

"You're not going to go PTSD on me, are you?" the chief of the Armed Forces Medical Examiners, General John Briggs, said to me after I was almost murdered in my own garage this past February 10. "Shit happens, Kay. The world is full of whack jobs."

"Yes, John. Shit happens. Shit has happened before, and shit will happen again," I replied, as if all were fine and I'd taken everything in stride, when I knew that wasn't what I was feeling inside. I intend to get as many details as I can about what went wrong in Jack Fielding's life, and I want Dawn Kincaid to pay the highest price. Prison with no chance of parole forever.

I glance at my watch without taking my hands off the wheel of the damn van with its bad case of the damn shakes. Maybe I should turn around. The last flight out of here to Boston is in less than two hours. I could make it, but I know I won't be on it. For better or worse, I'm committed, as if I've been taken over by an autopilot, maybe a reckless one, possibly a vengeful one. I know I'm angry. As my FBI forensic psychologist husband put it last night while I was

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cooking dinner in our historic Cambridge home that was built by a well-known transcendentalist, “You’re being tricked, Kay. Possibly set up by others, but what concerns me most is you setting yourself up. What you perceive as your wish to be proactive and helpful is in fact your need to appease your guilt.”

“I’m not the reason Jack is dead,” I said.

“You’ve always felt guilty about him. You tend to feel guilty about a lot of things that have nothing to do with you.”

“I see. When I think I can make a difference, I should never trust it.” I used a pair of surgical scissors to cut the shells off boiled jumbo prawns. “When I decide that taking a risk might produce useful information and help bring about justice, it’s really my feeling guilty.”

“You think it’s your responsibility to fix things. Or prevent them. You always have. Going back to when you were a little girl taking care of your sick father.”

“I certainly can’t prevent anything now.” I pitched shells into the trash and dashed salt into a stainless-steel pot of water boiling on the ceramic-glass induction cooktop that is the hub of my kitchen. “Jack was molested as a boy, and I couldn’t prevent that. And I couldn’t prevent him from ruining his life. And now he’s been murdered and I didn’t stop that, either.” I grabbed a chef’s knife. “I barely prevented my own death, if we’re honest about it.” I diced onion and garlic, the fine steel blade clicking quickly against antibacterial polypropylene. “It’s a lucky accident I’m still around.”

“You should stay the hell out of Savannah,” Benton said, and I told him I had to go and to please open the wine and pour us each a glass, and we drank and disagreed. We picked distractedly at my

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mangia bene, vivi felice cucina, or eat well and live happy cooking, and neither of us was happy. All because of her.

It's been a hellish existence for Kathleen Lawler. Currently serving twenty years for DUI manslaughter, she's been locked up longer than she's been free, going back to the seventies, when she was convicted of sexually molesting a boy who grew up to be my deputy chief medical examiner, Jack Fielding. Now he's dead, shot in the head by their love child, as the media refers to Dawn Kincaid, given up for adoption at birth while her mother was in prison for what she did to conceive her. It's a very long story. I find myself saying that a lot these days, and if I've learned nothing else in life it's that one thing can and will lead to another. Kathleen Lawler's catastrophic tale is a perfect example of what scientists mean when they say that the beat of a butterfly wing causes a hurricane on another part of the planet.

As I drive the loud, lurching rental van through an overgrown marshy terrain that probably didn't look all that different in the age of dinosaurs, I wonder what beat of a butterfly wing, what breath of a disturbance, created Kathleen Lawler and the havoc she has wrought. I imagine her inside a six-by-eight-foot cell with its shiny steel toilet, gray metal bed, and narrow window covered by metal mesh that looks out over a prison yard of coarse grass, concrete picnic tables and benches, and Porta-Johns. I know how many changes of clothing she has, not "free-world clothes," she's explained in e-mails I don't answer, but prison uniforms, trousers, and tops, two sets of each. She's read every book in the prison library at least five times, is a gifted writer, she's let me know, and some months ago she e-mailed a poem she says she wrote about Jack:

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*he came back as air and I as earth
and we found each other not at first.
(it wasn't wrong in reality,
just a technicality
that neither of us heeded
or god knows needed).
fingers, toes of fire.
cold cold steel.
the oven yawns
the gas is on—
left on like the lights of a welcoming motel.*

I've read the poem obsessively, studied it word by word, looking for a buried message, concerned at first that the ominous reference to an oven with gas turned on could suggest that Kathleen Lawler is suicidal. Maybe the idea of her own death is welcome, like a welcoming motel, I offered to Benton, who replied that the poem shows her sociopathy and disordered personality. She believes she did nothing wrong. Having sex with a twelve-year-old boy at a ranch for troubled youths where she was a therapist was a beautiful thing, a blending of pure and perfect love. It was fate. It was their destiny. That's the deluded way she views it, Benton said.

Two weeks ago her communications to me abruptly stopped, and my attorney called with a request. Kathleen Lawler wants to talk to me about Jack Fielding, the protégé I trained during the early days of my career and worked with on and off over a span of twenty years.

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I agreed to meet with her at the Georgia Prison for Women, the GPFW, but only as a friend. I will not be Dr. Kay Scarpetta. I will not be the director of the Cambridge Forensic Center or a medical examiner for the Armed Forces or a forensic expert or an expert in anything. I will be Kay this day, and the only thing Kay and Kathleen have in common is Jack. Whatever we say to each other will not be protected by privilege, and no attorneys, guards, or other prison personnel will be present.

A shift in light, and the dense pine woods thin before opening onto a bleak clearing. What looks like an industrial area is posted with green metal signs warning me that the rural road I'm on is about to end, no trespassing allowed. If one isn't authorized to be here, turn back now. I drive past a salvage yard heaped with twisted and smashed-up trucks and cars, and then a nursery with greenhouses and big pots of ornamental grasses, bamboos, and palms. Straight ahead is an expansive lawn with the letters GPFW neatly shaped by bright beds of petunias and marigolds, as if I've just arrived at a city park or a golf course. The white-columned red-brick administration building is grandly out of context with blue metal-roofed concrete pods enclosed by high fences. Double coils of razor-sharp concertina shine and glint in the sun like scalpel blades.

The GPFW is the model for a number of prisons, I've learned from the careful research I've done. It's regarded as a superior example of enlightened and humane rehabilitation for female felons, many of them trained while in custody to be plumbers, electricians, cosmetologists, woodworkers, mechanics, roofers, landscapers, cooks, and caterers. Inmates maintain the buildings and grounds. They prepare the food and work in the library and in the beauty

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salon, and assist in the medical clinic and publish their own magazine and are expected to at least pass the GED exam while they're behind bars. Everyone here earns her keep and is offered opportunities, except those housed in maximum security, known as Bravo Pod, where Kathleen Lawler was reassigned two weeks ago, about the same time her e-mails to me abruptly stopped.

Parking in a visitor's space, I check my iPhone for messages to make sure there is nothing urgent to attend to, hoping for something from Benton, and there is. "Hot as hell where you are, and supposed to storm. Be careful, and let me know how it goes. I love you," writes my matter-of-fact practical husband, who never fails to give me a weather report or some other useful update when he's thinking about me. I love him, too, and am fine and will call in a few hours, I write him back, as I watch several men in suits and ties emerge from the administration building, escorted by a corrections officer. The men look like lawyers, maybe prison officials, I decide, and I wait until they are driven away in an unmarked car, wondering who they are and what brings them here. I tuck my phone into my shoulder bag, hiding it under the seat, taking nothing with me but my driver's license, an envelope with nothing written on it, and the van keys.

The summer sun presses against me like a heavy, hot hand, and clouds are building in the southwest, boiling up thickly, the air fragrant with lavender mist and summersweet as I follow a concrete sidewalk through blooming shrubs and more tidy flower beds while invisible eyes watch from slitted windows around the prison yard. Inmates have nothing better to do than stare, to look out at a world they can no longer be part of as they gather intelligence more shrewdly than the CIA. I feel a collective consciousness taking in

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my loud white cargo van with its South Carolina plates, and the way I'm dressed, not my usual business suit or investigative field clothes but a pair of khakis, a blue-and-white striped cotton shirt tucked in, and basket-weave loafers with a matching belt. I have on no jewelry except a titanium watch on a black rubber strap and my wedding band. It wouldn't be easy to guess my economic status or who or what I am, except the van doesn't fit with the image I had in mind for this day.

My intention was to look like a middle-aged casually coiffed blond woman who doesn't do anything dramatically important or even interesting in life. But then that damn van! A scuffed-up shuttering white monstrosity with windows tinted so dark they are almost black in back, as if I work for a construction company or make deliveries, or perhaps have come to the GPFW to transport an inmate alive or dead, it occurs to me, as I sense women watching. Most of them I will never meet, although I know the names of a few, those whose infamous cases have been in the news and whose heinous acts have been presented at professional meetings I attend. I resist looking around or letting on that I'm aware of anyone watching as I wonder which dark slash of a window is hers.

How emotional this must be for Kathleen Lawler. I suspect she has thought of little else of late. For people like her, I'm the final connection to those they've lost or killed. I'm the surrogate for their dead.