

CHAPTER TWO

Icy Blonde

[Sample chapter from *Termination Notice*. Second Edition
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A brilliant white camera flash lit up the musician's body. Then gloom returned to the crime scene.

It was broad daylight outside, but the dirty windows only allowed a few faint sunbeams to shine in. Particles of dust floated through the pale rays, making them appear smoky. Lights on the electronic control panel — far more red than green now — appeared bright in the shady warehouse.

Yellow and black crime scene tape crossed the entrance doorway, and the scorched metal frame showed recent signs of welding. Conditions weren't optimal for the forensics team, and two strong-armed workmen were busy setting up portable floodlights to provide some much-needed illumination.

The woman examining the body was a moderately attractive redhead in her early thirties. Other technicians shifted to avoid her as she paced around the dead man and

studied the crime scene with attentive eyes.

Her plain black work shoes were wrapped in blue plastic to match her surgical gloves. A laminated name badge clipped to her white lab coat identified her as *Dr. Teresa Vickers*. Like the antique, film-loaded camera hanging from her neck, much about the woman appeared old-fashioned. She had two fountain pens in her breast pocket, well-worn gray trousers below her coattail, and mosaic-patterned marble earrings set in undecorated silver.

"The victim's been dead for some time," Vickers said, her voice clear despite speaking through a facemask.

The doctor kneeled down and used tweezers to take a dried blood sample from the composer's broken finger. She worked quickly but precisely to deposit the flake in a plastic evidence bag, which she then sealed to keep out the dust. Her steady hands and calm professionalism suggested a lot of previous experience.

A man by the control panel — a detective with a brass, number-etched shield clipped on his belt — wafted the air under his nose. He gulped, lips tight as he held his breath.

The policeman's neatly trimmed, dark brown mustache was a shade lighter than his balding hair. His cheap burgundy suit and spot-patterned tie had collected a lot of feathery fluff. The shirt he wore was plain white, bulging around the stomach area. At least ten years older than anyone on the forensics team, he looked far more uncomfortable.

The detective stepped back and turned away to breathe. "I gathered that," was his sarcastic reply to Vickers' analysis. He coughed before continuing. "Could you be a little more precise, Doc? You are supposed to be our forensic expert."

"Just giving you a chance to get settled, Ron."

Vickers paused a moment, then dipped her tweezers in a pool of liquefied flesh under the musician's flattened cheek.

"As you'd probably noticed, the decomposition's started. The body is already bloated, so I'd estimate the time of death as three to four days ago."

"Not a bad guess."

Ron looked a touch less pale than earlier, but a wry smile suggested he hadn't finished with the banter.

"That fits with when our records said he called 911."

Vickers gave him a hard, cold-eyed stare. Her lower face was hidden behind the mask, but it was unlikely she found it amusing.

Ron placed both hands in his trouser pockets and stood upright. The smarmy expression was gone. In the joker's place was a morbid, businesslike policeman.

"So Mister Handsome here didn't have any close friends? Three days, and nobody cared enough to report the guy missing?"

"The puzzles I leave to you." Vickers moved away and pulled down her face mask. "You are supposed to be a detective."

She and Ron shared a grin. Then their faces hardened as a tall, physically fit woman walked into the studio. The late arrival took out a black leather wallet and flashed her police shield at a uniformed cop by the door. She paid little attention to him after that and proceeded directly to the body.

The workmen - now finished setting up the equipment - made way for the humorless, icy-eyed blonde. The woman never deviated from her straight path once. Bathed in industrial-strength floodlights, her formal trouser suit and flat-bottom shoes remained as black as night. A tall female, she didn't require high heels to bolster her presence.

Nobody spoke as the detective took out a pair of clear surgical gloves. "ID?" she asked, pulling the elastic material up to her wrists.

"Justin Norris," Ron said. "Music producer. Or a wannabe rock star. Depends on your taste. I wouldn't recommend listening to his stuff. Not unless you plan on torturing yourself."

He smiled, somewhat hesitantly. The female cop remained flat-lipped and ignored him to concentrate on the body. She showed none of Ron's squeamishness, or any adverse reaction as she walked by the signposted evidence: mobile phone, computer cable, broken beer bottle. The woman spent half a minute pacing around the corpse, then turned to Vickers.

"You verified the C.O.D.?"

Her tone was direct and ungentle. Vickers said nothing, looking somewhat puzzled. Her eyes moved past the detective to her partner, who responded with a warm-faced shrug.

"I know you have a strictly by the book, no assumptions approach, Duvall." Ron spoke slowly, as if testing the proverbial waters. "But strangulation by computer cable seems a safe bet. I'm sure you spotted the marks on his neck, the deep red depression. And we found no sockets here that the cable fits. But if you'd prefer a professional opinion..."

He looked at Vickers. Back in Duvall's unflinching gaze, the forensics woman followed Ron's lead.

"Everything is consistent with asphyxiation. There's some evidence of a struggle, but not much considering how long it would have taken. The only blood we've found belongs to the victim. Which suggests he was overpowered."

“So, the killer’s a strong guy?” Ron asked.

“Above average.” Vickers looked over the broken glass, and the many bottles piled with the trash. “But Norris was a heavy drinker. Likely had been drinking the night of the murder. So...”

Duvall maintained her unsmiling, statue-like pose. “So?”

“I haven’t done a full autopsy, so this is only a hunch. But we might not be looking for a two hundred pound Sumo wrestler. Doubt whether I’d be strong enough to do that, but either of you could have.”

Duvall’s eyes hardened even more at the suggestion. She kept Vickers in her sights, maintaining a silent, accusing glare that almost demanded an apology.

“For example,” she added quickly.

“When you come up with a more plausible suspect, let me know.”

Duvall turned back to her partner. Released from her gaze, Vickers exhaled a relieved sigh and relocated to a quiet, out-of-the-way corner.

Ron directed her to the control panel. Forensics had moved the deceased’s personal items and the murder weapon to the top while they’d been talking.

“The emergency call was made from this phone. Norris wasn’t the original owner. Must have bought it secondhand, which is why we didn’t trace the address sooner. Some cheerful well-wisher left a message. Listen to this.”

Ron tapped some buttons, using arrow keys to highlight *Voice Messages* in a retro font menu. He navigated to the most recently received call and pressed the play key. There was a pause, followed by a heavy breath. A three second delay, and then another.

Duvall gave Ron an unimpressed glance. He raised a calming hand before she could speak and extended his flat

palm at the cellphone.

"The only limit... is ambition," the male caller said. "At Taurus studios... we expect the best."

Duvall flinched back, and her icy, no-nonsense stare disappeared for a moment. Her lower lip dropped ever so slightly. Focused on the phone, Ron didn't notice her unease.

"You didn't... meet... my expectations."

"End of message," a computerized female voice said.

Ron switched off the cellphone and swung round to face his partner. She recovered just in time to greet him with her usual iciness.

"Real creepy, eh? Mysterious, threatening, not on best terms with our stiff. Could be the killer, or at least a good bet. Don't you think?"

"Maybe," Duvall said. "You know my opinion about jumping to conclusions. Find anything else?"

"As it so happens..." Ron turned to shout at a spectacled forensics technician. "You got that note?"

The man brought over a single sheet of paper sealed in a plastic bag. Ron took the evidence and spread it face-up on Norris' desk. He shifted aside to let Duvall see over his shoulder.

A company logo was printed in the upper right corner of the page: a cartoonist's impression of a red bull's head. The creature looked angry and dangerous, with smoking nostrils and gleaming, solid-gold horns. Stenciled underneath that was *TAURUS STUDIOS* in bold black, with hoofprints in place of the three letter Us.

The paper was creased across the center third, as if someone had folded it in two. Duvall moved her gloved hand slowly down the printed text, scanning each line.

We value team players at Taurus, people who put colleagues' well being above their own personal gain. You failed to meet our

standards, Mr. Norris. Consider your employment terminated.

“Seems somebody wasn’t too happy with his job performance,” Ron said. “We found that stuffed in his pocket. That note’s cleaner than anything else in this dump, so we’re assuming the killer left it.” He nodded at the title. “Taurus studios. Rings a bell. Sure I’ve heard that name mentioned somewhere recently.”

Duvall moved her fingers back to the top and browsed the entire letter again.

Ron raised his eyebrows in curiosity. “Already checked the company out. Some big computer game firm. I called to book an appointment with the president, a guy named Adrian Pryce. Apparently, he’s famous, but I never heard of him. Didn’t tell him what it was about. Figured it would be best to surprise him with the bad news.”

Ron looked up at his partner — who hadn’t moved or taken her eyes off the bagged letter.

“You coming?”

“Yes,” Duvall said frostily. “Let’s see what Mister Pryce has to say about this.”