



Kill

NEAL BAER

Former Executive Producers of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*

JONATHAN
GREENE

Switch

Kill Switch

PROLOGUE



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You could tell a thunderstorm was close. The air was thick with humidity, the clouds approaching from Lake Ontario an angry gray. Though Upstate New York was known for its long, harsh winters, any Rochester native will tell you a summer storm can wreak more havoc in ten minutes than a foot of snow falling over ten hours. But these were the dog days of the summer of '89. The two eight-year-old girls jumping rope in the driveway of a large white colonial at 55 Burt Street in the Park Avenue district hadn't noticed what was coming.

The dark-haired girl who lived in the house saw the car first—a gleaming white BMW speeding toward them. It suddenly screeched to a stop in front of the driveway. A man in his late forties, wearing a polo shirt and shorts, jumped out, obviously agitated.

The man said his name was Mr. Winslow and he needed to talk to them. The dark-haired girl blinked, taking a step back, sensing something was wrong. Mr. Winslow turned to Amy, the dark-haired girl's friend. He said he worked with Amy's dad, and in one excited breath Mr. Winslow told Amy her father had been in a terrible accident. He was driving through the construction area to rebuild the notorious "Can of Worms" interchange when a concrete piling crashed down onto his car. He said that her father was rushed to Strong Memorial Hospital, and he'd come to take Amy there.

Amy started to cry and follow Mr. Winslow to his car. But the dark-

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haired girl sensed something she couldn't explain. Before she even knew she was saying it, she asked Mr. Winslow who had sent him.

The question caught Mr. Winslow off guard. He gave the dark-haired girl a look and told her his boss sent him to pick up Amy. Amy assured her friend it was okay. Mr. Winslow wasn't a stranger.

But the dark-haired girl couldn't shake the feeling in the pit of her stomach. She remembered the warnings from her mother, who said she asked too many questions, a habit that was going to get her into trouble someday. But the dark-haired girl had to know more.

So she asked Mr. Winslow why he wasn't wearing a suit like Amy's father did if he had come straight from work. Mr. Winslow answered that he'd been at the driving range when the boss called him there.

Then she asked how he knew Amy was at this house and not her own.

Mr. Winslow let out a deep breath, then said his boss had called Amy's mother. She told him about their playdate. He then quickly opened the passenger door. They had to get to the hospital.

But the dark-haired girl's questions now bothered Amy. She said she was going inside to call her mother.

The dark-haired girl turned and raced up to the house. She assumed Amy was behind her until she heard a sudden rush of footsteps.

She turned back just as Amy screamed. Mr. Winslow had picked Amy up and was shoving her into the front seat of his car.

The dark-haired girl's screams were drowned out by a succession of thunderclaps and the downpour that followed. As the rain soaked through her clothes, she was too scared to move. All she could do was stand there and watch the BMW drive away.

PART I

CHAPTER 1



Present Day

On any given day, the ten separate jails that make up New York City's Rikers Island correctional facility hold between fifteen and eighteen thousand inmates, making it the world's largest penal colony. Of those inmates, some three thousand are classified as mentally ill. That whopping number makes Rikers one of the largest mental institutions in the United States and the best place for a budding forensic psychiatrist like Claire Waters to study the criminal mind.

Claire had worked toward this day for over a decade. After breezing through four years of medical school at Harvard, she completed an internship and residency in psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, considered one of the best and most selective programs in the country. She went on to a prestigious research position at the National Institutes of Health because she wanted to dissect and study the brains of criminals.

But slicing through gray matter and staining slides of neurons every day for three years didn't give her the answers she was looking for. She knew she had to see patients again. Now she was about to begin the last stage of her training, a fellowship in forensic psychiatry, where she'd treat some of the sickest and most twisted minds humanity could imagine.

Most days Claire was a master at hiding in plain sight. She wore her shoulder-length dark brown hair straight, the bangs just long enough to veil questioning green eyes. She never wore lipstick, eye shadow, or blush—anything that might call attention to her beauty.

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On the subway, at Starbucks, or just walking down the street, she blended in.

But today was different. Instead of her usual soft, well-worn jeans and comfortable, familiar flats, she wore a new, olive green Diane von Furstenberg suit and black Louboutin pumps, neither of which she could afford. The heels protruding from those trademark red soles made a staccato *click-clack* on the mottled concrete floor of Rikers Island, reverberating against the muddy-brown cinder-block walls, each step reminding her that there was nowhere to hide. Claire felt miserable in her wool suit. What had she been thinking when she bought it? July in New York City was always sticky hot, and the air inside the narrow corridor leading to the cell block was thick with the stench of men who desperately needed a shower.

Claire wore this costume to impress the director of her program, Dr. Paul Curtin, who, despite the oppressive heat, looked remarkably cool in his blue pinstriped Armani suit as he walked beside her. In his midfifties, Curtin drew attention with his wavy silver hair and slate-blue eyes. Claire was taller than average at five-seven, not including the heels she wore, but Curtin towered over her with his well-built six-two frame.

He was watching her every move, which only made things worse because she almost always was nervous before the first interview with a new patient. She tried to focus on the case file he'd given her, but her hair was a liability today, swinging into her face and obstructing her view. She was a runner, trim and in great shape, but she struggled to keep up with the man who made sure to tell her that he was a triathlete who ran the New York City Marathon every year.

I'd like to see him walk in these ridiculous shoes and read at the same time, she thought.

"His name is Todd Quimby," Curtin said, his voice coming from a half foot above her head. "Ten months into a one-year sentence for forcible touching."

"What did he do?" Claire asked, thumbing through the file. She was increasingly anxious with each step but was determined not to show it. *He gave me Quimby's file only moments before our session because he wants to know right off the bat if I've got the chops,* Claire thought.

"He pulled his pants down in front of a bunch of secretaries."

“In their office?”

“At a diner. They’d just ordered a plate of mozzarella sticks when Quimby served up his own.”

“That’s indecent exposure, not touching,” said Claire.

“Weenie waving is called ‘public lewdness’ in New York State, Dr. Waters. Mr. Quimby crossed the line when one of the ladies pointed out the meager size of his ‘portion,’ and he tried to get her to eat it.”

Claire forced a little smile at his attempt at humor as a guard unlocked the security door and they entered the cell block. Claire turned her attention to the old newspaper clippings in the file. CARNY KILLER GETS LIFE read the front-page headline from the *Daily Nonpareil* of Council Bluffs, Iowa. The 1985 story had two photos. One was of Beth Quimby, an attractive woman in her late thirties leaving a courtroom in a baggy jumpsuit; the other was of Beth’s handsome son Todd, age nine, being comforted by two police officers on the day of the shooting. Claire wondered whether Todd’s murdering bitch of a mother gave a damn that her one grandiose act of violence had also killed any chance for her son to have a normal life.

“Whoo-hoo. Yo, baby, let me beast that.”

“Bring that kitty over here and I’ll give it a good workout.”

Claire looked up and saw a dozen inmates leering at her from inside their cells. She wasn’t sure whether to smile nonchalantly or act tough in response to their vulgar catcalls. *Rats in cages. At least that’s something I’m used to.*

“Ignore it,” Curtin said evenly. “Every one of them would screw their eighty-year-old great-aunt if they could.”

Claire realized that he was as comfortable in this hellhole as she wasn’t.

“This Mr. Quimby’s first time through the system?” Curtin asked.

Claire knew this was a pop quiz; he already had the answer and was testing her again. She flipped through the file and quickly found what she needed.

“No. He has a string of prior arrests. Possession of cocaine, ecstasy, crystal meth; criminal trespass; fourth-degree stalking; third-degree sexual abuse . . .”

“Which tells us . . . ?” he asked sharply.

“Um, seemingly minor offenses moving toward the sexual indicate a rapist in the making,” Claire replied.

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“He’s a wannabe, all right,” Curtin said. “And your job is to stop him from becoming one.”

They turned a corner, arriving at a secure door marked NORTH INFIRMARY COMMAND—PSYCHIATRIC WING. Curtin pushed the buzzer beside it.

“Doctors Curtin and Waters,” he said, holding his ID badge up to an overhead security camera. A buzzer sounded. Curtin pulled the door open and stepped through, neglecting to hold it for Claire. Fortunately, she caught the door just as it was about to slam shut. One more piece of evidence in the case she was building against her new mentor. The charge: jerk in the first degree with a lesser included offense of arrogant bastard.

Deep down, though, Claire understood. She thought of the insults she’d weathered throughout her academic career, the hazing every doctor had to endure. It didn’t matter that she’d graduated with honors near the top of her medical school class—she got it just as bad as everyone else. She remembered the nurses who assured her that every first-year psych resident had to bathe the delusional homeless patients. Then, as she naïvely sponged one down, hearing those same nurses laugh outside the door because she “fell for it.”

Though she survived every one of those rites of passage and skated through residency, Claire felt lost when it was over. She thought she needed to know more about the dark recesses of the human mind before she took complete responsibility for patients. So at thirty, she decided to apply to one of the most prestigious research fellowships in the country—the National Institutes of Health—where she was immediately accepted and began her study of the neuronal basis of violence and how mental illness was so intimately linked to criminal behavior. She’d treated hundreds of patients with depression, mania, schizophrenia, the whole spectrum of psychiatric disorders, and was convinced that chemical and structural abnormalities in the brain caused the impulses that drove so many people to commit crimes.

Claire Waters was drawn to the patients most psychiatrists labeled as untreatable, hopeless cases with seemingly irreparable minds. Now, as she walked past the prison cells, quickly studying each man’s face, she thought, *They’re not hopeless. We’re just not asking the*

right questions. She was determined to find the right questions in her research, a groundbreaking way of seeing psychopaths not as evil automatons with no conscience, but as individuals who had never felt fear and couldn't see it in others. Even as children, many of the inmates on the psych ward had tortured animals or hurt other kids because, Claire reasoned, they had a profound attention deficit that made it hard, if not impossible, for them to respond to frightening situations. Maybe, just maybe, if Claire and her colleagues could reprogram the circuitry in their brains, they would be able to recognize fear in others, which would prevent them from committing crimes in the future—if and when they were ever released from prison.

It was this groundbreaking work that put Claire on Curtin's radar. He recruited her from NIH with the lure of his prestigious fellowship and the chance to work with, as he called them, "the lepers of the mind." And she had taken his bait.

"I want to fix them, or at least understand them," Claire told Curtin the first time they met when he came to her lab in Washington, DC. "They didn't choose to be the way they are, just like none of us choose our parents or our childhood."

"If you truly want to make a difference, then come with me," he said. "You will help more people in three years in my program than you will in a decade buried in some government lab. And if you get through it, you'll be able to write your own ticket to any job you want."

She will help more people. The words echoed in her mind. So she'd accepted Curtin's offer. And yet here, in the prison, Curtin was aggressively questioning her as if she were a first-year med student. Which she now realized was exactly how he intended to treat her.

Claire decided then that she would beat Curtin at his game. She would always be prepared for anything he tossed at her.

"What else can you tell me about Mr. Quimby that's relevant?" Curtin asked, not missing a beat. He kept his pace, even though she had fallen behind. It was on her to keep up, and she was having a hard time. She told herself to walk faster, think faster, find the answers.

"Once Quimby's mother was convicted," Claire responded, trying

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not to glance down at the file, “his paternal grandmother was awarded custody of him. She brought him here to New York to live with her, in the same apartment where his father was raised.”

“School records?” queried Curtin.

“Straight D student. No college.”

“Employment?”

“All menial jobs,” answered Claire. “Dishwasher, building janitor, security guard. Drove a cab until his first arrest six years ago, after which his hack license was revoked. Since then, he’s spent most of his time in and out of jail.”

“Social history?”

“Lived alone in a studio in Alphabet City. Never married.”

“Psych workup?”

“Jail therapy records aren’t in the folder.”

For the first time since Claire arrived at Rikers Island, she locked eyes with Curtin. From the look on his face, Claire thought he was going to lay into her for not having the answers. But Curtin chose another target.

“Of course you don’t have his records,” Curtin said. “They’re still letting the inmates run the asylum.”

Claire knew his cliché carried more than a kernel of truth. In fact, it came from the part of Curtin that Claire had sensed from the beginning wasn’t superficial bullshit, the true believer in him Claire both identified with and admired.

Seven years earlier, New York City had contracted with the nation’s largest for-profit provider of prison medical services to run the infirmary at Rikers Island. Their idea of quality patient care was to pay certain inmates thirty-nine cents an hour to make sure their cellies on suicide watch didn’t off themselves. In short order, the result was six “hang-ups” in six months, the worst jail-suicide record in the country.

At the time, Curtin’s star was on the rise. Already in demand as an expert witness, he’d written two books about his groundbreaking research in forensic psychiatry, both of which sold hundreds of thousands of copies. This success led to TV appearances on CNN and what used to be known as Court TV to discuss high-profile criminal trials. His natural gift at gallows humor and his ability to make people laugh about subjects as macabre as anorexia and necrophilia had se-

cured him spots on the talk-show circuit; he'd done *Dave, Jay*, and *Oprab* numerous times. In less than a decade, Curtin had become known as "the Dr. Oz of Forensic Psychiatry" or, as his detractors in the psychiatric community preferred, "the Jerry Springer for Serial Killers."

But when pressed, even Curtin's detractors would admit his skill as a showman produced results. He'd convinced numerous juries in execution-happy states to spare the lives of capital defendants whose mental illness drove them to commit murder. And his honesty was without question. More than once, some shyster would try retaining Curtin to confirm a client's bogus insanity defense. Proving he was more than just a highly paid mercenary, Curtin would not only refuse to commit what amounted to perjury, but he also offered in each case to testify *against* the defendant.

Within his profession, however, Curtin's reputation as the real deal stemmed from something deeper. He believed he could prevent the mentally ill from committing crimes by attacking the problem at its source. And he had at his doorstep the perfect laboratory to prove it.

Curtin viewed the suicide rate among the prisoners at Rikers Island as a moral outrage, a failure of the profession he loved. He knew most of the Psychiatric Wing's inmates had never committed a violent crime and was convinced that early intervention could prevent them from ever doing so. Using his name and prestige to bombard politicians and bureaucrats, he offered the media his services with assurances that he and the students in his fellowship program could make a difference. The city, threatened with state and federal investigations and buried in a PR crisis, was hardly in a position to refuse.

Five years later, suicides at Rikers were at an all-time low, and the recidivism rate among Curtin's patients was one-tenth the jail average. Even the number of mentally ill inmates plummeted because Curtin had convinced the powers-that-be to parole many of his patients, with two conditions: They had to continue psychotherapy, and they had to stay on their meds. The plan seemed to be working, in no small part due to the quality of students Curtin chose for his fellowship.

As they stopped in front of a door marked PATIENT INTERVIEW, Claire Waters knew it was her chance to prove herself fit to reside among

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Curtin's worthy. This was the moment she had dreaded and driven herself toward for almost ten years. She was both exhilarated and terrified, which she somehow successfully hid under the thinnest veneer of calm. But she knew she'd be all right because she had the gift: the natural ability to put people at ease, to draw out their darkest secrets. Even those she barely knew would sense her deep empathy and open up to her. She was determined to show Curtin her power to connect with the sickest souls.

"What you're about to do is like nothing you've ever done as a psychiatrist before," Curtin said. "Dr. Fairborn and I will be observing you."

"I know," answered Claire.

"Are you ready, Doctor?" Curtin asked.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

Curtin smiled.

"Go get him."