

In this fast-paced suspense novel, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) is struggling to keep a key witness alive as they work to bring down a brutal drug cartel operating out of Naval Base Coronado in San Diego, CA.

leaving the canoe club

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LEAVING THE CANOE CLUB

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mathew lee gill

prelude
sunday, june 6

Anderson Monk took a great deal of comfort in the mingled rhythms of his daily run; the persistent slapping of his dark gray and gold size fourteen Nikes on the asphalt, the ragged rasp of his breath, the pounding pulse in his veins. He lived for this daily ritual, a chance to exorcise the frustrations of the day and start the evening fresh. For about forty-five minutes a day this stretch of road was his best friend. Forty-five minutes with nothing to prove and no one to impress. Just him, the road and the trees.

The events of the last day and a half demanded the forced expulsion of energy and stress that welled up in his chest. The decision had been difficult to make, but his fear and desire for self-preservation, coupled with his anger at having been used for so long, finally drove him into action. He was going to cover his backside and he was going to do it as quietly as he possibly could. He'd even put in leave papers so that no one would expect him around the ship for the next couple of days. The Navy had a tendency to take notice when sailors unexpectedly missed a muster or a watch. He hoped the ploy worked; that it would give him the head start he knew he'd need. Although not an overly religious man, he prayed for success. There was no future in the alternative.

He smiled briefly and took a deep breath – his massive chest expanding and stretching the blue material of his t-shirt. The sun was still well above the horizon, the shadows had yet to begin their long run into night and the heat of the day lingered. Sweat ran freely from his always close-cropped blonde hair. He raised a hand to swipe the stinging sweat out of his eyes.

Anderson – Monk to everyone who knew him – was not a classically handsome man. He had some of the features: broad shoulders and a thick chest, massive arms and sweeping height. He cut a fairly impressive figure. His bright blue eyes reflected his emotions much the same way as the open ocean reflects clouds; crystal blue on the sunny days and murky gray on the stormy ones. His smile, though not overly joyful, could in fact be quite disarming.

But there was something in the way he looked at people that made them nervous, a casually predatory glint that sent chills. The way his granite jaw set when he was angry, the tendons standing out like cables with his thick eyebrows draw into a sharp V; it was intimidating. The thick white scar running down his tanned cheek and neck, a garish souvenir from a car accident at the age of seventeen, did nothing to soften his visage. All things

being equal, which, more often than not, they weren't, people tended not to push their luck with the large, fierce-looking man; choosing instead, placation as a means of self-preservation.

It was that intimidation factor that got him noticed by Noah and his crew.

It was Noah's money that lured him into the morass through which he found himself struggling.

Monk's Navy salary paled in comparison to the cash he brought in bouncing at the club and it was nothing if not laughable, chump change, really, when put up against the money he pulled down running collections and enforcement. The jobs were simple really, requiring little thought or imagination. It was physical, sometimes brutal, work convincing people to pay their debts. He was good at it, though. Good at physical and better at brutal.

Not being the curious sort helped with that too. He never asked questions, never wondered about the debts he collected or the threats he fulfilled. They gave him a name and an address and reason to pay the visit; and he did it. Now he felt like kicking his own ass for being so stupid.

Down the block and around the corner he ran, willpower pushing his thick legs faster and faster as the gunshots echoed through his brain. He struggled with his mind for days after witnessing the triple homicide. Anderson Monk wanted no part of what he had seen, wanted no part of the world he knew he was already caught up in. He wanted nothing to do with drugs or smuggling or murder. He was a fighter, not a killer. And damn sure not some pusher. He dreamed of the days when he was just a sailor who bounced at a club on the side; the days before all of the craziness and duplicity he now wore like an uncomfortable second skin.

The gears of Monk's dim memory clicked almost audibly as he catalogued the events of the past three and a half years. Every beating he delivered, every person he escorted or intimidated, every package he handed off; they were all suspect now. He was pissed that he could be so stupid as to allow himself to wade so deeply into this mess. His anger was tempered by his fear and the knowledge that he was in over his head. Uncertainty stayed his hand and only thirty-six hours earlier he finally broke down and called the NCIS, arranged to give himself up and turn states' evidence.

Relief flowed through him as he thought of that and worry sloughed off of him like a tired skin. In thirteen hours he would be in protective custody. Less than a day and he could unload his conscience and get a little revenge on those who had used him. His worries about the choices he had made and the fears of what tomorrow would bring disappeared, all lost in the steady rhythm of his feet.

The asphalt turned, pushing away from the street and heading into the park. Monk sped along the broad, tree-lined path, knowing it was only a matter of time before he lost the light, which shone brightly through the leaves of the close branches.

It was such an incredible evening for a run.

Peaceful.

Pain exploded along the side and back of Monk's head, sending him reeling off the narrow running path and into the bushes. Starbursts filled his vision. He shook his head, trying to get his eyes to focus. Twigs snapped behind him and Monk spun around, off balance, to face his attacker only to catch the solid butt of an aluminum bat squarely between the eyes. The lights went out with thunderclap.

Monk woke with a start, acrid fumes working their way into his brain and forcing him from the comfortable darkness. He wondered, not for the first time, if it had all been a dream. But with the first shallow breath, the blinding pain rushed back in, crashing over him in overpowering waves. Fighting through the fiery haze clouding his mind, he tried to take a mental inventory of his injuries. His thick arms, bound over his head and bearing the majority of his body weight, had long ago gone numb, but every turn and jerk of his body brought new explosions of pain blazing down from his shoulders. He knew that at a minimum they were dislocated. His shallow gasps were raspy with blood. His stretched rib cage had taken a severe beating and the broken bones ground and clicked with each breath.

Monk lifted his excruciatingly heavy head and tried to look around. His left eye was swollen shut and his right was blurry with blood and sweat. He was not altogether sure where he was or how long he had been there. He was unconscious when they brought him in. He knew it had to be somewhere down by the water, probably in one of the industrial warehouses that lined the harbor – when he first woke up he could smell the salt in the air and he could hear the boat traffic, whistles and horns and wakes, echoing as though his captors were holding him in a large cavern. But that was before they smashed his nose, breaking and turning it into a hopeless mess smeared across his face; before the painful ringing in his ears drowned out everything but his ragged breathing. There were no real expectations of getting out of this predicament, but it was nice to know where you were going to die.

A blur of motion to his right and a wrecking ball collided with his skull.

Black spots danced around the edges of his vision as fire raced along his jaw line, through his tortured shoulders, settling in his chest. The thick muscles of his torso seized up with the rush of pain, cramping and squeezing his lungs until drawing breath was impossible. He could taste the copper sliding down the back of his throat as he gasped for air. Pain mounted on pain, and for the third time that night, the acid in his gullet betrayed him and he vomited bile and blood down over his chin and onto his chest. He shuddered through the spasms; the chains binding him upright jingling like wind chimes. Starved for oxygen, his field of vision turned murky and started to fade into darkness.

Monk's head snapped up painfully as the acrid salts passed under his nose. He dry heaved and gasped in pain, the muscles in his chest relaxing enough to let his lungs expand. He was so tired. He just wanted to fall to the cement floor and – well, he wasn't sure what the “and” was, but he would agree to just about anything at this point to end this sadistic game.

“Wakie, wakie, there Mr. Monk.” The voice was taunting, ominous.

Monk could barely lift his head to look at the person talking to him. All he could make out was a pale shadow – blurred lines that were as familiar as the voice. He shuddered again and leaned away from the man in front of him, despite the agony that rolled throughout him at the movement.

“What did you and the agent talk about, Monk?”

Monk tried to reply, but his throat denied him, allowing only a muffled gurgle to escape his mouth.

“C'mon, Monk! Talk to me. It's the only way any of this is gonna get any better for you.”

“Nuthin'!” Monk slurred through battered lips. “I didn't say nuthin' to nobody!”

Blood rolled freely down his chin, connecting the individual flecks of blood on his t-shirt and staining it a brilliant crimson.

“Nuthin', huh?” The voice was mocking. “I know you talked to him, Monk. I wanna know what the two of you talked about. What arrangements the two of you made. How long you've been feeding him information about us.”

Monk wanted to respond, but his strength was tapped. It was all he could do to shake his head in a negative response. He thought about begging, but that had failed miserably some time ago. And the goons beating him had no real sense of mercy – no matter what he said they would just keep on going until he died. And giving up the ghost was rapidly overtaking this ass beating as the option of choice. His head hung heavy and low. He silently contemplated the designs his blood was making as it dripped and splattered on the floor around his feet.

Three meaty blows to his kidneys roused Monk from his grim reverie. Black stars and brilliant colors commingled in his vision.

“I can do this all night, Monk. I’ll give you a fuckin’ blood transfusion to keep your dumb ass alive if I have to. You’re gonna tell me what I wanna know.”

The bored tone of voice shook Monk to his core. He was dead already – it was just going to take a lot of time and pain to prove it. And though he thought he was past it, panic took a hold of him and he began to shake as he struggled to find the strength to loose himself from his bonds.

“No reply? After all this, you think I’m jokin’? Fine. Fuck you! Take a knee, Joey.”

Monk shook his head crazily, finally finding his voice as the bat arced down and slammed into his kneecap with an audible crack. Shoulders and ribs and face forgotten, Monk screamed through blood and acid as his leg collapsed beneath him.

And everything went black.

Again, the acrid salts caused his head to jerk violently as they forced him back into consciousness. And the six foot three inch, two hundred sixty seven pound knuckle-breaker mechanic began to weep.

“I believe you, Monk. I don’t think you talked to the NCIS.”

A chance – Monk thought, nodding his head as vigorously as he could. Somewhere within him there was still some small glimmer of hope alive.

“But that’s just because you didn’t have a chance!”

A hand reached through the haze around his head and grabbed a hold of his face. It was like a vice, fingers pushing through the skin and grinding the bones underneath it. Monk’s head was yanked so that he was looking up. Blood and sweat and tears stole what little vision he had left, leaving him only a smear of disjointed colors.

“You brought this on yourself, you sack of shit! And after everything that’s been done for you – the money, the favors – you turned on us. Fuck you, Monk! What’d you think? We wouldn’t find you out? That you’d fuck us and live to walk away?”

Monk tried to shake his head, but the disembodied hand wouldn’t let him.

“You’re through, Monk.” The hand disappeared.

His head slumped down to his chest, Anderson Monk had time for one thought; a curse sworn of hot blood and sorrow for the day he met Noah Lawson.

“Make sure it has to be a closed casket service.”

monday, june 7

chapter 1

The digital buzz cut through the comfortable darkness, preternaturally loud in the stillness of the room.

Special Agent James Storenn grunted and rolled over, not even close to being awake. The multicolored cotton sheets, a gray smear in the pre-morning half-light, were knotted about his tired body. Bleary eyed, he turned his head and looked over at the alarm clock next to his bed, trying to force the blurry red lines to resemble numbers. 4:05am.

“Who the hell...?” he started.

The phone screamed at him again, demanding to be answered. Whoever it was, they obviously weren’t giving up.

Huffing unhappily, he reached over and fumbled with the receiver, knocking it from its cradle and onto the carpeted floor. Swearing under his breath, he groped around under the edge of the bed until he felt the smooth plastic of the handset. It belched out another uncomfortably loud ring. Eyes still closed, James pressed down on the talk button just to shut the thing up.

“Yeah?!” he asked, his tired voice gravelly and harsh.

The familiar voice was filled with worry that was thick enough to penetrate the haze filling his head. Jessica shouldn’t be calling this early in the morning. Not with the clipped tones and tightness that wrapped themselves around the words pouring from the receiver. James tried to blink past the sleep in his eyes, find some focus.

“Slow down, Jess. What happened?”

For once, his imagination didn’t even come close to how profane the reality actually was. At Jessica’s first three words, James’ face blanched and his knuckles turned white, his grip on the phone tightening to the point of pain. His stomach turned and his mouth began to sweat. James was wide awake. His hand began to shake as he listened the details being relayed to him. He was suddenly quite sure he was going to throw up.

“I’m on my way,” he muttered, his mouth sweating profusely.

Slamming the receiver down, James Storenn jumped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. This was no way to start the day.

chapter 2

The scene was as bloody as it was populated with police officers. A small army of blue uniforms manned the doors to the warehouse and the crime scene barrier, keeping away members of the press and curious passers-by. James always wondered at the numbers of ‘curious passers-by’ that seemed to materialize at crime scenes, no matter the time of day or remoteness of location. That most base of human drives amazed him - the compulsion to see the train wreck, that seminal need to view the suffering of others - he simply didn’t understand the attraction.

Blue-jacketed members of the San Diego City Police Crime Scene Unit walked the broad interior of the yellow-taped boundary, their white-booted feet stepping carefully as they marked and gathered evidence. A veritable forest of little yellow evidence flags and tape lay in their wake, marking their various findings. James studied the area with an experienced eye, needing no help to discern where the majority of the violence had taken place; a garish pool of black blood marked the dirty floor beneath a length of chain that hung from the ceiling.

“I didn’t see you come in,” Lieutenant Jessica Muir said from behind him.

He jumped at the sound of her voice cutting through the steady hum of procedure that surrounded them, cursing himself for it. He smiled a sheepish half grin as Jessica slipped past him, leading the way towards the dark stain. She stepped lightly, keeping to the path marked by the Crime Scene officers. James followed the bright yellow SDPD on her windbreaker, letting her gold detective’s shield answer any questions of access.

“They’re picking up blood spatter as far as thirty feet away.” Her normally sweet voice was hard. “No murder weapon on the scene, but there was obvious blunt force trauma. I’m guessing it was a bat or a pipe, maybe a tire iron; something you could take a full swing with. They were thorough, whatever they used. I’d be surprised if the ME’s office found something that hadn’t been either broken or ruptured.”

“That bad, huh?”

She nodded gravely.

“Verdin’s boys already pick up the body?”

“Said he’d have some word later on today or tomorrow with more details. He ruled out accidental death, obviously, but for now all he’s giving us is an approximate time of death. We’ll have to wait on the exact cause of death.”

James expected nothing more. If there was one thing you could say about the county Coroner's office, it was deliberate in the calls it made. There were no wild guesses or improvable hypotheses. If science couldn't prove it, it wasn't an answer.

"So what's our TOD?"

"Between three and four this morning."

James did the math in his head while he looked over the pool of congealing blood. Nine hours between the time Anderson Monk disappeared and the Coroner's estimation of time of death. Nine hours was a long time to stay alive when someone was working to change that. It was an eternity. James could feel the ball of anger and disgust growing in his stomach as he thought about it. He could only imagine the kind of animal it would take to do something like that. What was really pissing him off was the fact that it shouldn't have happened in the first place. The two police officers covering Petty Officer Monk should have been more than enough to ensure that he was able to hand himself over in one piece. He looked around, hoping to catch sight of either one of them lurking in the shadows.

"Where are Kamiski and Hafner?" he asked evenly. His face was hot with blood as he tried to maintain his temper.

Jessica stopped short. Her back was still to him and he watched her shoulders tense as she turned. "They were here earlier, two of the first to arrive. I sent them home about fifteen minutes ago."

James watched her brace for the eruption. He wanted to be angry at her for letting them go, use it as an excuse to vent his fury. But she was right to get her officers away from the scene. As much as he wanted to shove their noses in the shit they had left for him to clean up, castigating them in front of their fellow officers and the various media representatives would do nothing for the case and even less for the task force.

Jessica placed a hand on his arm. "They know, James. Believe me, they know."

James decided to take her word on it; Kamiski and Hafner were officers out of her department. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, trying to steel himself to the frustration so that he could look at the crime scene objectively. When he let the breath go and opened his eye, Jessica was still there in front of him, a curious look painted on her face. James just shrugged, biting back the frustration.

"Let's see what we have going on here."

Jessica shadowed him as he circled the central portion of the crime scene. His nose wrinkled in disgust. The closer he looked, the nastier the scene appeared. The blood beneath the chain was churned and frothy with smears running all directions. Monk had tried to escape – not that it did him

any discernible good. There was waste and food mixed into the gore. The strong smell almost emptied James' stomach.

"What happened to Petty Officer Monk's shoes?"

Jessica shrugged. "Not sure."

James continued as though he hadn't heard her. "He was running when they lost him but there is a clear outline of a bare foot in there. Considering Belk and Johnson, any similarities?"

Jessica referred to her notes and shook her head. "I didn't write anything down. Near as I can tell, the feet were untouched. As for the shoes, I'll get a hold of the CSU and see what they have."

James nodded, satisfied, and leaned in closer. He swept his arm in a semi-circle, indicating the blood on the floor. "What's this pool – four feet across? Maybe four-and-a-half? Pattern in the middle is obviously from Monk. We've got three sets of prints going around the outside."

Jessica nodded. Only two distinct sets of shoe prints stood out, smearing the blood around the perimeter but three were visible marching, crimson, towards the door.

James stared at the markings in the blood for a few more seconds and then followed the footfalls across the floor. "Three guys walked out of here," he said softly. "Two big bastards that did all the work, at least at the end, and another there to watch. See how the shoe prints there in the blood are twisted, kind of like a ball player taking a swing. The prints are big, both of them. Judging by the shoe sizes and the length of the stride for each set, I'd put the both of them at about six foot four." He leaned over the pool, pointing at a swirl pattern. "See how this one runs clockwise? That guy's a lefty."

James could hear the scratching as Jessica scribbled in her notebook, trying to capture every word he said. James knew that no matter what was on the tape recorder in his pocket, they'd be using Jessica's notes when they sat down to reconstruct the scene. Most cops used recorders, but Jessica didn't trust them completely – they always ate the tape or had dead batteries. And so she continued with her notes as he talked.

"The other guy, the watcher; his shoes are different. They're not athletic shoes, they're more like loafers, maybe boat shoes. There's no mark in the pool of blood where he would have stepped in, but he left bloody footprints here in front of the chains and part of the way out. He got in close at some point. Don't know what for but I don't think he was doing any of the attacking. He was the controller. See how long the other strides are heading out of here? Those guys were in a hurry. This guy's stride was short; he strolled out of here. No hurry at all. That's the guy I want to get my hands on: the one that strolled outta here."

James' cell phone interrupted him. He unhooked it from his belt and checked the number. He groaned audibly, letting it ring twice more before finally answering it.

"Storenn."

He could feel Jessica's eyes on him as he listened to the familiar voice on the other end of the line. He turned his back so that she would not see the anger in his face; she already felt bad about this, no use in rubbing it in.

"I know, Vince. I'll be in as soon as I'm done here." His voice was not far from shaking. It was all he could do to not throw the phone across the broad room. He snapped it closed and reattached it to his belt. He paused for a moment before turning around.

"Bad news?" Jessica asked.

"No worse than this," James replied quietly, scanning the scene again. He knew that he was not going to be able to get his head back in the game until he went in and talked to the office. "Make sure the records are thorough. I want good sketches, photos and tape. You've got this, Jess."

She nodded. It was a statement, not a question.

"Give me a call when you finish up."

She looked at him evenly. "You do the same."

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