

## Chapter 39

Once he was home from his second visit to the bar, with a slate that Jasber promised him contained everything the enforcers and nothing else, he spent ten minutes going through everything he could remember of Marlot's talk about computer security, which, he decided, was making sure it's not connected to the network so whatever malware is on the slate can't call out and do what it was intended to do.

Once he was done, he still hesitated, holding the slate. If he didn't do this, he could convince himself he hadn't broken the law. If enforcer came to demand what the expense was about, he'd say he hired a specialist to... he sighed. He had no idea what he could say. Of course, explaining why he'd driven around the city making withdrawals at the few kiosks which still offered physical currency, each just under the notification limit, would be even tougher.

He wouldn't have to do this, he reminded himself, if Sleekcoat wasn't being difficult. She was the one forcing his hand.

He inserted the slate and waited for something bad to happen. When all that happened was a series of folders appearing, he accessed them.

Five folders; one for the kill location itself, one for the body, one for Bo, one for his car, and one for his house. They the kill location and the house had their own folders was telling. The lab didn't make that distinction, so Sleekcoat had requested it.

The only reason Trembor could think of was that she wanted to demonstrate his brother had lured the cub to his house. That was why the car was included. She wanted evidence of the cub in it. That she had them also go through the house separately had to mean she wanted to show how the cub had moved through the house on the way to the kill site.

Of course, none of it made sense, considering Herelex and Isenson would have been in the house last night.

He began with the body.

The medical examiner began her report by stating the cause of death; a broken neck. The death had been swift, bruising led her to believe the attacker had been behind the cub. The motion had been precise. Expert, she stated.

Then came the list of hits on the body; whoever had hit the cub had been angry. There were a lot of them, with pictures highlighting the impacts. But they were postmortem. Trembor had to dig back in his memory to his academy courses, but he thought that meant the attacker was angry at what they had done. He called up a search window and was reminded he wasn't connected to the net. He'd look for the research later.

The examiner indicated that the kind of strength needed to break a neck that cleanly marked the killed as being one of the larger species. She didn't list any, but Trembor was certain Sleekcoat was going to point out Bo fit that characteristic.

He didn't want to look at the details about the cub, but he needed some to get an accurate picture. The cub was only months of being of predation age, which would support a claim Bo could have misjudged his age. Trembor saw the cub was classified

under Prey and didn't look at the species. He needed to remain as detached as he could. It was already tough enough since it involved a family member.

He moved on to evidence collected on the body; the cub had had blood under the claws of one hand. The linked report with the DNA tests identified it as that of Bolifen Goldenmane, and Trembor cursed. Another link brought up pictures of Bo's arm, with three thin lines of coagulated blood. The report indicated that the suspect, Bo, didn't have an explanation for them, but theorized he must have gotten them while hanging out with friends. He didn't provide names when asked.

"Stupid. Don't protect them, Bo." Not giving names only made him look like he was hiding something, which he was, but not what Sleekcoat would claim.

Being on that file, he looked for evidence on Bo that he had hit the cub. There was no bruising on his knuckles, but any decent pair of hunting gloves would protect them, and his brother had good ones; a pair of which had been found in the laundry basket with fur on them that matched the cub's. Bo claimed the pair wasn't his, but it was his size, in his laundry basket; even Trembor wouldn't believe that claim. And the lab had found some of Bo's fur inside the gloves, so proving they weren't his would be nearly impossible.

Strand of the cub's fur had also been found inside the truck of Bo's car, which would indicate the cub was dead before reaching the house. Then why... Trembor looked through the Kill room folder. The kitchen was marked as where the cub had died. He'd been found on the prep table; which made no sense. Bo wouldn't leave a body there, even a few hours would deteriorate the meat. His cooler couldn't fit a body, so he'd immediately cut him and store the pieces. Knowing his brother, he'd get into work late rather than do a bad job of preparing the body.

He looked through the house file. Strands of fur had been found going from the door connecting to the garage and leading to the kitchen. Not a lot, enough to claim the cub had shed while moving from one to the other, but that contradicted it was in the trunk unless Sleekcoat claimed he'd been conscious there?

No, not Sleekcoat. It would be some lawyer at that point. But they would base their accusation on her findings, and probably her recommendations.

The fact the evidence indicated the cub had entered the house from the garage raised another question. How had Sleekcoat been informed there even was a body? What he saw at this point would only lead to a missing person report when the cub didn't arrive where he was expected to.

He read through the complete report, hoping someone had been extra attentive to details because if he had to call dispatch, he wasn't sure he could get anyone to answer him and not log that he'd asked about it.

"Yes!" one of the technicians had linked the call that had come into the report line. The voice was young, or female, which he leaned toward. They'd seen the body through the kitchen window and called it in. The person taking the call asked what she was doing looking into a stranger's house, but the caller had disconnected.

"How fucking convenient," Trembor grumbled. The why wouldn't matter at that

point. A body had been reported, the RI's who was in charge of that territory called, and here Trembor was, looking at the files that anyone who didn't know his brother would claim proved without a doubt he was a cub killer. The lawyer wouldn't even bother trying to find out if the caller had actually been at the house or not. Not that there was much on the call, it had come from a public call box. He noted the location so he could try to find her and get some more information.

And not that it was needed at this point, but a car matching Bo's had been seen in the area where the cub lived. It was a witness, without a recording to support it. But even if it was someone lying, the rest would be difficult to fight.

But, because the body was a cub, one of the technicians had gone the extra step of tracking Bo's pad through the transmission towers. Those weren't accurate, but they placed it in the general area where the car had been seen.

Could the location of a pad be faked? What he remembered of his course said no, but technology had come a long way since his time at the academy. But even going old school, all it took was for someone to borrow Bo's pad while he wasn't looking, carry it while they killed the cub and brought the body to Bo's house, then returned it. Like everyone their age, they didn't spend their time looking at their pad, so it would be a few hours before Bo would notice it was missing. Enough to do what had been done.

Trembor leaned back in his chair.

If this wasn't about Bo, what would the evidence tell him?

The time the pad spent in the area the cub lived in indicated stalking. So the kill hadn't been a spur-of-the-moment decision. So close to predation age, the scent wouldn't have told the predator he was stalking a cub. That would take a longer observation, which Bo would take the time to do.

Damn it. Just the evidence.

He'd surprised the cub. The death had been swift, a broken neck. Except there was blood under one hand's claws. So the cub had seen him approaching, got in a lucky swipe, then run? Without cameras, there was no way to know, but that was what the evidence led to. Then the predator caught him, broke the neck, and prepared to pay for his kill, which would be when he found out he was underage.

Where was the ID? Where was the cub's clothing? There had been no mention of them in any of the reports.

The predator realized he'd killed someone underage and... pummeled the body in anger? Trembor could understand getting angry, but lashing out at the victim? Wouldn't that mean the cub led the predator on? He rubbed his temple. This was why he hadn't been interested in vice crimes. There were too many nuances in the why and the how and the who was the actual victim. Violent crimes were much easier to deal with.

The cub was a body; the predator had vented his anger and put the body in the trunk of his car, and drove home. Only the house had other people living there, so he... left the body in the trunk overnight? Then the next morning, once he was alone in the house, he put the body on the prep table, and again, left it there while he went to work?

Other than the obvious problems with that scenario, the lab report hadn't indicated

the level of decomposition leaving a body in a truck overnight would cause. The cold weather might have accounted for it. He didn't remember if Bo's garage was heated or not, but there should have been some sort of deterioration. Maybe it had been rolled into that of the hours on the prep table? This was dealing with lab work, for which Trembor wasn't qualified.

Except, he'd forgotten the report said the cub had died in the kitchen. Which meant he'd been alive in the trunk, through a cold night, without his clothing on? The only way the other occupant wouldn't have known was for the cub to be unconscious the entire time, so drugged? Only there had been no report of drugs. Actually, no toxicology report at all. Sloppy on the lab's part here.

Regardless, the cub was dead on the prep table and it came down to the utter bad luck of having some stranger look into the window before the predator returned home to finish preparing the body. If not for that, it would have been a missing person case.

Trembor saw plenty in there that would slow the case down, but ultimately, unless he could find something conclusive, his brother would be found guilty of killing a cub. And if any of this leaked, someone at the precinct he was being held would take care of him and save the court system the expenses.

What could he fight? What piece of evidence could he prove wasn't real? Or could at least point to someone else. The stalking itself. He needed to show Bo couldn't have been the one doing it. Only that meant finding the so-called friends and getting them to corroborate Bo's presence with them.

Seeing how Trembor was certain this was the work of those friends that wouldn't happen.

He cursed. Cameras? The enforcers had gone around and checked with any stores, but they were enforcers. Not everyone felt like cooperating with them.

It wasn't much, but it was a place to start.