

# EX VIVO

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Cover design by Vincent Lenihan.

The dream of every cell is to become two cells.

Francois Jacob



**MONDAY**



**8:00 PM**

It was just cruel, what they did to the first victim.

Rain was still pouring. I could hear it hitting the glass walls of Northam PD headquarters, hear it from inside, audible underneath the noise of ringing phones, loud voices, shuffling papers. Half the unit was still in the office at this hour. Technical Crimes was busy, and so was Homicide.

There'd been a burglary over the weekend at Lilith Biochemical's R&D center. Some expensive experimental drugs had been stolen. The perps had gotten inside with a forged employee card, grabbed the liquids, and left undetected. The evidence trail had led to some connected homicides, mostly among low-life smugglers and other nobodies, but Technical Crimes still had no clue who the perps were or where they'd gone. I followed my gut and stayed out of the case—I had a feeling it would lead to a dead end, and dead ends don't lead to promotions.

I rose from my desk. There was palpable tension in the stale office air, like everyone was waiting for something bad to happen. This was the type of atmosphere I thrived in—it got my blood pumping in the best way.

I heard a voice behind me.

“Detective.”

I turned around. "Jacobson," I said.

"Late night again? Thought this was supposed to be a slow week for you." Jacobson grinned. "You must be desperate for that promotion."

It *was* a slow week for me. I'd closed a homicide last week, nice and clean, and I was just filing the last few reports now. But I always stayed in the office. That's how I got my pick of the fresh cases. I watched, I listened, I carefully chose the cases that looked the warmest, while cops like Jacobson went home at six most nights and complained about the pay. That's how I got up to Det Two when I was twenty-eight, youngest in NCPD history. I hadn't changed my pace since then. A Det One had retired last month, and there was talk that one of the Det Twos would get picked for promotion soon.

"I don't need the prospect of a promotion to motivate me, Jacobson. I'm just doing my job," I said.

"You've got the best record in both units, sure," he said. "But Det One? You've only been Det Two for three years. Even if you solve the crime of the century, there are at least five veteran Det Twos the Chief would pick over you. If I were you, I'd take it easy."

"If you'd *stop* taking it easy for once, one day you could be like me."

I walked off between the rows of desks, crossed the floor and headed for the elevator.

Jacobson was young, scrawny and doe-eyed. He'd been a Det Three for just six months—six very long, useless months. Not much of a work ethic, and he had zero skills on the street. I wondered why he'd been promoted to detective at all.

I took the elevator down to the basement. The harsh fluorescent lights cast a clinical look over the clean white floor, the neat desks, the meticulously arranged tools, the covered gurneys. This was the autopsy unit. The rooms and hallways near the elevator were empty, but I could hear voices and the sound of technicians at work coming from the back.

I followed the sounds and reached a big room with more steel gurneys. Expensive equipment lined every table and



desk. I saw the technicians huddled around a body. Indistinct conversation, the clinks of metal instruments. I spotted Sadofiev in the center of the huddle.

"Evening, Vash," she said. "Looking for new bodies?"

"Thought I'd drop by," I said. "Who's this?"

"An old lady that patrol picked up by the lake. No ID on her yet. We're waiting on fingerprint results and dental profiling from the lab."

"I was just up at Homicide. Heard nothing about a new case."

"Body just got here an hour ago. Here, look at this." Sadofiev pointed at the corpse's elbow. "See? She seems to be in her eighties, but her skin looks younger on her elbows and knees. If you look at her hands and forearms, the way the skin is stretched is really strange. Her legs too. Her whole body's got this unusual but very consistent stretch pattern."

"Some kind of torture?"

"Possible, but unlikely," Sadofiev said. "The pattern's just so even. Maybe an unusual skin condition. And since the body's so fresh, I doubt it's due to exposure."

I looked at the corpse for a moment. The woman's head was shaved.

"You shave her hair off just now, or was she already like this?" I asked.

"Found her this way," Sadofiev said.

I gave her a knowing look. "You don't think it's...?"

"Of course that crossed my mind," she said. "But again, this stretch pattern makes me think there's something else going on. I'm having some of the techs do tissue tests right now."

"Any suspects? Witnesses?"

"Not really," Sadofiev said. "Someone jogging by the lake saw the body washed up on the shore and called it in. Patrol questioned him for a bit, but apparently he checked out. They must've let him go by now."

"No missing persons reports?" I asked.

"Not for any old ladies."

I looked down at the body again. A couple techs were still fumbling around with some instruments, but the rest had gone off with what presumably were samples. The old woman looked frail, sickly. If Sadofiev had said she were a hundred, I would've believed it. Hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, sagging, wrinkled skin. Her face held a sad expression, frozen in death.

There was something about her that made me feel introspective. I saw a lot of bodies, many worse than this. But something about that expression reminded me of my own body aging and decaying. I guess I hadn't seen anyone so old in a long time.

Sadofiev smiled at me. "Have a coffee with me, Vash. I need a break before I cut her open."

Sadofiev sat me at a lab workbench in an adjacent room. Neat piles of books and papers covered every inch of it. A large monitor displayed charts, figures, reports. Deodorizers and air fresheners did a good, but not perfect, job of masking the faint smell of decay that permeated the air.

Sadofiev returned with coffee and sat down on a stool next to me.

"Congrats on wrapping up your last case," she said.

It was well known that the autopsy unit had the best coffee in the Department. Counterintuitive, I know, but even with the smell of decay and chemicals around, the coffee was superb. Sadofiev had refined taste in everything, from coffee beans to the extremely organized and tidy layout of her unit. The techs loved her despite her demanding, controlling nature—even that part of her personality was strangely endearing. And her smile could disarm anyone.

"Must be quiet up there for you," she said. "It was quiet down here until this body showed up."

"It's too quiet for me. I'm looking for my next thing."

I held my coffee mug close and watched techs hurry past

us.

"I can never get used to how well you run this unit," I said. "Everything is impeccable. I can't tell if the techs respect you or just fear you."

"I've got my own small country down here, and it's a benevolent dictatorship." Sadofiev took a small sip from her mug and smiled. "It's been a while, Vash."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Been very busy until last week. Chief handed me a lot of work these past few months."

"Don't blame the Chief. You've kept yourself busy. He does like you, though..."

"He likes all women, Maddy."

"Not as much as you," she said. "I've seen him look at you while you walk away. You know—that weird, lingering look."

"Whether he stares at me or not, as long as he lets me have my pick of cases, it's all the same to me."

"It's not all sexual," Sadofiev said. "It's clear he respects your skill as a detective too. He recognizes your talent."

I frowned and nodded. "My talent. Yeah, sure."

"Don't pretend to be humble." Sadofiev reached out and rubbed my shoulder. "I know how prideful you are. No need to hide it. You have the right to be arrogant."

"You have the right to be arrogant, Doctor. You're a forensic pathologist. You've got authority. Detectives don't wield any authority at all."

"Well, that's a fair point," she said. "But the Chief's a powerful ally. There's your authority."

A tech ran toward us carrying a laptop. He handed it to Sadofiev and caught his breath.

"Look," he said.

"What am I looking at?" Sadofiev said.

"The ID results."

"What about them?"

"Look at the date of birth."

Sadofiev squinted at the screen. She furrowed her eyebrows.

"Seriously?" she said.

“Yes.”

“They double-checked?”

“Yes,” the tech said. “Her prints were in the database from when she got a background check for a part-time job last year.”

Sadofiev looked puzzled. “Just to make sure, this double zero means 2000, not 1900, right?”

“Yes, 2000,” he said. “There’s no mistake, Doctor.”

I looked at Sadofiev, waiting for an explanation. She sighed and turned the laptop toward me. I read the screen.

“May 9, 2000?” I said.

Sadofiev looked toward the wrinkled corpse in the far room. “She was twenty-two.”

9:14 PM

Sadofiev had just finished the CT scan. The techs wheeled the body back to the other room and took a flurry of photographs. They clipped the fingernails and toenails, organizing them into separate containers to send to Forensics.

Sadofiev geared up and got her tools ready for the autopsy. She started making incisions around the chest. A tech meticulously snapped photos whenever she pulled back a flap of skin. They were thorough.

“Did you grab enough fluid samples?” Sadofiev said. “Vitreous too?”

“I think so,” answered a tech.

“What do you mean *you think so*?” Sadofiev said. “Yes or no?”

“Yes, Doctor,” the tech said.

“No results from the first batch?”

“Not yet.”

“Toxicology?”

“Not yet...”

“Can someone phone the med school at UNortham?” Sadofiev yelled. “Ask if Professor Marceaux’s lab can lend us some analysis help.”

More techs had arrived for support. I inched into the room and kept myself out of the way, quiet, unnoticed. Flashes

from cameras, more clinks of metal tools against metal trays. The stench of decay was stronger now. Sadofiev saw me and smiled again.

“Like what you see?” she said.

“Any detectives on this case yet?” I said.

“Not that I know of.”

“Then I think I just found my next thing.”

“There’s my girl,” Sadofiev said. “When the lab results come in, I’ll let you know first thing. I’ll also run a DNA test to confirm the body’s identity, but even with the Rapid DNA machines we’ve got here, it might take a couple days.”

She dropped her bloody scalpel onto a tray. A tech ran off to fetch more tools.

“I guess your hunch was right, Vash,” Sadofiev said. “It was reversilin.”

“Everything’s connected to reversilin these days,” I said.

“You’re referring to the Lilith burglary?”

“There’s more than just that.”

A tech handed Sadofiev a saw and began prepping the rib cage. I started toward the hallway.

“Off already?” Sadofiev said. “Where to?”

“To mark my territory,” I said.

I went up to the ground floor and stepped outside into the gloomy darkness. The stationhouse was in downtown, close to the financial district. It was still pouring. The streets had that wet asphalt smell. Skyscrapers surrounded me with their steel and glass and wealth. The stationhouse itself was decently tall too—it was police HQ, after all.

The science of anti-aging built Northam City. Northam had just been an average city in the Midwest, basically a Cincinnati along the Great Lakes, until Lilith got big and drew in millions of people. In one short decade, Northam grew to become the third largest city in the country. It was the reversilin capital of the world, ground zero.

Age reversion had been around since the early 2000s, but the procedure was so expensive at the time that only research institutions and the ultra-rich could afford it. Ten years ago it

was finally commercialized thanks to Lilith Biochemical, a massive biotech firm based in Northam.

Lilith had developed and patented reversilin, the key drug needed for age reversion. The company earned billions manufacturing it. Reversilin allowed youth to be transferred from one person to another.

*Transferred.*

For one person to undergo age reversion, you needed someone else to undergo age progression. Donor and recipient.

Of course, donors were financially compensated for the youth they agreed to give. But it wasn't an equal exchange. Even if a donor sold the maximum legal amount of five years, the recipient's biological clock would only be wound back three months. Reversilin procedures—or *exchanges*, as people in Northam called them—were inefficient. That was just a biological reality. Lilith and other institutions worked hard to improve efficiency, but with current technology, the exchange rate was a depressingly low five percent.

But that didn't stop people from selling their time for money.

The rain was getting into my shoes. I walked toward an awning along the side of the stationhouse, my usual smoking spot when the weather was bad and I couldn't use the roof. Water streaked down from my hair in quiet drops, splattering onto the sidewalk.

Someone else was already underneath the awning. I came closer and recognized who it was.

"Evening, Vash," said a bright voice.

Riley Skilling, Detective Second Grade. Maybe my only real friend in the entire Department. She was good police. Riley had beautiful brunette hair and the attention of every man in the stationhouse. She was cheerful and pretty and everybody liked her—even me. Best of all, she was a smoker.

I pulled out a cigarette. Riley lit me.

"Thought you said you'd have a slow week," she said. "What are you up to this late?"

I took a long, slow drag. “Nothing, just gave Sadofiev a visit, and I was—”

“Fishing for a good case,” Riley said. “I know you.”

Riley did know me. We’d worked many cases together over the years. She’d been born and raised in New York, in the Bronx. She still carried a bit of the accent with her. We’d both grown up in rough, working-class neighborhoods—that was one of the many reasons we got along. And despite all the attention she got from the guys, she aggressively shot everyone down. She wasn’t interested in getting involved with anyone on the job. Naturally she developed a reputation for being cold toward men.

Fine by me. That was just another thing I liked about her.

“So you find a case you like?” Riley asked.

I shrugged and exhaled smoke.

“I know that look,” she said. “You’re not going to tell me. I thought we were friends.”

I shook my head and coughed.

Nothing got past Riley. She wasn’t just a pretty face—she had brains to match. She was one of the best detectives in Technical Crimes. You needed some level of technical expertise to even get into Technical Crimes, but Riley had a top-notch engineering background. She was most in her element when it came to cybersecurity, but she could hold her own across any topic from physics to physiology. She was hands down the smartest cop in the Department, and definitely smarter than me.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said. “What’s keeping you here this late?”

“I’ve got my hands full with the Lilith burglary,” Riley said. “Harvey’s got me working weekends too.”

Lilith. That was all everybody was talking about these days.

“Hey, tell me one thing,” Riley said. “How’s McKenna treating you?”

“Uh, pretty well,” I said. “Too well. Why? You hear some-



thing?”

“Just wondering,” she said. “He seems to really like you these days.”

“Yeah, along with every other guy in the stationhouse.”

Riley smirked. “I can’t blame them,” she said. “Look, I got to head back in. You won’t believe the list of suspects we got to sift through. I won’t be sleeping for a while.”

Riley disappeared inside.

I stayed under the awning and finished my cigarette.

I looked up at the Halifax Tower. It stood just a few blocks away. The tallest building in Northam, the city’s symbol of wealth and progress. Over a hundred stories of black aluminum and tinted glass and sharp angles. At times I thought it was beautiful. Other times I thought it was oppressive. In any case, I loved looking at it.

Time to get back to work. I drew out my phone and made a call.

“Vash,” a voice answered.

“Chief,” I said. “Sorry to bother you at this hour. Don’t know if you’ve heard, but a drowned old woman came in just a couple hours ago. They’re doing the autopsy now. I’d like the case—”

“Don’t say another word,” McKenna said. “It’s yours. Where are you now? Near the stationhouse?”

“Just outside.”

“I’m still in my office,” he said. “Come up.”

9:51 PM

McKenna, Chief of Detectives, had a glass office in the corner of Technical Crimes. He was in heated conversation with Det One Harvey. Harvey was a tall man in his forties who always had stubble, a loose tie, and a poor attitude.

I stood outside the office, waiting my turn. McKenna motioned me in after a minute. Harvey got real quiet and did his best not to give me a dirty look.

“Chief,” I said. “I need to inspect patient records of all exchange centers in the city. If you can grant me—”

“No problem,” McKenna said. “Need any help on this case?”

“I’m good for now, sir,” I said.

“Well, if you change your mind, feel free to grab Jacobson.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harvey kept staring at me. McKenna changed the subject.

“Harvey here says he’s made some progress on the Lilith case. Forensics grabbed some prints off the gun found in the canal, so he managed to narrow down the list of suspects...”

Harvey left the room. I looked at McKenna again.

“Don’t mind him,” McKenna said.

Harvey and I hated each other. He was now the most senior detective in the Department after that veteran Det One retired last month. It took Harvey a couple decades to get to where he was now. The job had made him bitter and cynical. Well, I was bitter and cynical too, but he had some animosity

about him. We hadn't worked a case together in a long time, and McKenna had enough sense to keep it that way.

"Been meaning to congratulate you on a job well done. Closing that case last week, I mean," he said. "So you think this new case involves reversilin? The drowned lady?"

"It's a hunch," I said. "Still waiting on the lab work and the autopsy."

A pair of officers knocked on the doorframe, looking to have an urgent word with the Chief.

"I'll be on my way," I said.

I returned to my desk down in Homicide and got to work on my computer. I opened up the exchange center registration database, typed in a query, and sent McKenna an access request.

Reversilin procedures were tightly regulated. You had to visit a licensed hospital or clinic—an exchange center. Reversilin machines were expensive, usually in the tens of millions, and they required significant training to operate. Reversilin itself was unbelievably expensive as well. But despite high initial capital costs, ECs made good money. If a recipient wanted to wind back their clock three months, it would cost them a million dollars. After the clinic took a big cut from that, the donor would receive the remainder, which amounted to roughly two hundred thousand bucks after tax—two hundred grand for five years off your life.

Sounded like a terrible deal to me. But to some people, it was their only way out of poverty—or so they thought.

While I waited for the Chief's approval to come through, I looked at the victim's file Sadofiev had sent me. Stacey Cartright, twenty-two, senior at Northam University. Grew up in Queens. No known medical conditions, no criminal record. She'd gone missing a couple days ago, and her roommate had filed a missing persons report. The PD had tried contacting Stacey's parents, but they were unreachable.

I noted down her parents' names so I could check them for

reversilin usage later.

My access approval came back from McKenna a few minutes later. My query asked for all patients between eighteen and twenty-five that had undergone procedures at ECs in Northam, ranging from Northam General to small family-run clinics and everything in between. No Stacey Cartright had come up. Then I checked based on her date of birth only, and nothing came up either. I expanded my search to the suburbs, to the rest of Northam county. Nothing. Well, progressing one person as much as sixty or so years would be very illegal, so I couldn't expect much in the way of records. I had to get out into the street.

I checked the time. Eleven-thirty. I was the only one still here. I went home.

I had plans to get up early tomorrow. First thing in the morning, I was going to pay a surprise visit to one of Northam's most corrupt doctors.