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The hall stretched out before him, a seemingly endless expanse of dark corners and closed doors. Seemingly endless, but not. There *was* an end, but would it prove to be his own? And there weren't an infinite number of doors, only three. But in this case, opening them, clearing them, seeing what was beyond them, could take a lifetime.

Vinny Smalldeano sighed, took out his standard-issue Beretta, and assumed the position as he began the long trek down the dangerous hallway. He avoided the stagnant puddles caused by the leaky pipes that stretched above him like a swarm of drooling snakes, and kept sweeping his eyes across the field in front of him, from corner to corner, all too aware that this "danger zone" could erupt into a kill zone at any moment.

His partner was searching the floor below him, two teams of snipers had their lasers trained on the fire escapes, and a recon team watched the front and back doors downstairs, should their subject miraculously elude Smalldeano and his team.

He shook the logistics from his head; part of his training was to rely on the team, not sweat them. He had to trust in their training as much as his own; each team member had a job to do. His was to lead; that's what he was doing.

He avoided another puddle, stepping instead on something soft and squishy. Smelling the foul odor of decay as it wafted up from his tightly-laced black boots, he realized it must have been a dead lizard or rat. He fought the gag reflex, moving forward instead, until he was just shy of the first door. A crooked apartment number hung from one rusty screw, the bottom of a 7 now the top, making the letter "L" instead.

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There was no need to identify himself; this was an abandoned building and the perp was an immediate threat to the safety of himself, the rest of his team, and the ten-year-old girl he'd just snatched from across state lines in West Virginia.

Risking a glance around the moldy frame, he quickly judged the door's weakest point and aimed his foot. He sent the door flying from its rusty hinges, just like he'd been trained. It landed on its side, giving him cover if needed and saving him the trouble of walking across its unsteady surface should it have landed flat on its back.

The rank smell of weeks-old food and even older feces launched an aerial attack on his senses, causing his eyes to water and nostrils to flare. He resisted the impulse to flinch, training his eyes instead on the newest danger zone: the kitchen of the apartment.

His thick, wiry muscles were on high-alert, every cell in his body engulfed in the heady rush of adrenaline that coursed through his veins. Sweat dripped down the collar of his thick bulletproof vest; the gray FBI T-shirt beneath soaked to the core, his dominant abdominal muscles tensed at the ready.

His eyes flicked back and forth, his ears picked up the dripping sounds from the hallway, the settling of dust from his door-kicking, the sweat dripping off his nose onto the cracked linoleum of the claustrophobic foyer.

He was exhausted, emotionally and physically. This wasn't his first floor, but his fifth. Ten floors dotted the leaning tenement building. He and his partner had split them up and were now at the end of their rope. Witnesses had seen the perp dragging the girl in there earlier that morning; no one had seen them leave.

The first 8 floors had been cleared after endless hours of intense, heart-pounding effort. Every broken door, every dead rat, every rank puddle and stale sandwich had left him devoid of energy. His head pounded with a stress headache the size of the Washington monument, which he hoped to see one day from his office at FBI headquarters. As it was, that day seemed as far away as the end of this particular search and seizure.

He rubbed the thought away, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand to try and rid himself of a tiny measure of the pressure forcing a blinding white light across his vision. He blinked, once,

twice, for focus and cleared the kitchen, moving quickly through the deserted living room to the first of two bedrooms.

He alternated his field of vision from the debris on the floor to the shadows in the corners. The day was rapidly dwindling; they were losing the light. If he didn't clear the next two rooms within the hour, night would fall and they'd have to resort to flashlights; he needed the clear light of day to peer into every nook and cranny.

He quickened his pace, crouching to enter the first bedroom and spying two potential causes for concern: a piss-stained mattress leaning against the wall—behind which the perp might be hiding—and a closed closet door.

"Fuck," he whispered softly, and then again and again and again: "fuck, fuck, *fuck!*" The ploy worked; his migraine momentarily subsided. With a clear head and sure purpose, he made quick work of overturning the mattress, behind which lay a family of dust mites and little else. Stealthily he approached the closet; there was no avoiding detection at this range.

Even he could hear his own heart beating; Vinny knew the subject would have heard the mattress clattering to the floor, dead springs falling clear from fabric long since rotted through. His boots could not avoid the broken glass of several dozen burnt pipes and heroin syringes, left behind by the crack heads and users who'd probably called this place home for years.

Vinny neared the closet, which faced a wall mottled with water stains, both natural and manmade. The smell was overpowering, but so too was the gut instinct that this was the magic doorway. The skin of Vinny's testicles was clenched in anticipation, and even his goose bumps had goose bumps. He tried to steady his own breathing, listening carefully, but all he saw was the door in front of him, all he heard was the dripping of water and the pounding of his own heart.

Still, his gut had gotten him this far, through years at the academy, a half dozen years on the street after that, through Quantico and, at last, to the final proving grounds. He navigated the minefield of drug-crazed shooters and federal politics, all with grace and cunning; he knew the perp was here, felt it as clean and cool as the sweat dripping down his thirty-two year old back.

He reached for the door, gun at the ready, eyes big as saucers,

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every tendon flexed, every pore open, mouth agape, ready to yell "Freeze!" There was no kicking in this door, not with the prospect of an unarmed minor in there with the perp. It opened out, and so he would open it out.

He reached for the knob, hand trembling, strong, big, sweaty, but sure. The handle was surprisingly cold to the touch, making him doubt himself, but only momentarily. He began to turn, slowly, slowly, only to....

The wall behind him evaporated in a cloud of dust as rough hands reached to grab his throat. They missed, finding his shoulders instead, but still with enough purchase to drag him back, back; the hands like vice grips, cold and remorseless, as in front of him the doorknob retreated slowly and his whole world fell away.

Back he went, until at last he found his footing and stopped his retreat, the dust of ancient drywall clogging his throat as he picked up his left foot and drove it backward through the wall, hearing a crunch and a curse.

"Shit, Smalldeano, what the hell?"

The voice, familiar.

The hands, released.

Instinctively Vinny turned, only to spy his special schools instructor, Cap Callahan, grimacing as he clutched his offended groin. "Since when the fuck did a prick like you stop knowing how to take a joke?" he asked, his face red, his balding hair plastered to his furrowed brow from endless minutes apparently spent waiting for the perfect moment.

In from the hallway spilled a half-dozen special agents, all wearing Hawaiian shirts and holding pitchers of beer aloft. The closet before him burst open, holding the rest of his team and a frozen, lifeless CPR dummy, representing the child he'd been ordered to rescue. Around her pale, rubber throat hung a handwritten sign that said, "What took you so long?"

"What the fuck?" he spat, adrenaline still surging through his throttled veins. "This was some kind of joke?"

Callahan limped from the wall, kicking drywall as he went. "You think I'd hide in a wall for five hours for a joke? This is your graduation party, asshole. You made it!"

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"I made it?" Vinny asked. "But I thought I still had two weeks of training to go. I thought this field exercise was part of that."

Laughter filled the claustrophobic hallway as more and more agents filed into the room. "Your training was over last week!" Cap said, pouring himself a glass of beer. "Once you nabbed that child pornographer using the new APRHND software we've been tinkering with. This? This was just a lure to get you away from the books and into the bar. The paperwork's all done; your assignment's secure and just waiting for you to sign on the dotted line."

Pats of congratulation peppered his shoulders as his gun was whisked away and replaced with a glass of cold beer. Into his free hand, still trembling, Cap deposited a wilted envelope, stained by sweat and crumpled, no doubt from when Vinny kneed him in the balls.

"Where?" was all Vinny could think to ask.

Cap wasted no time in answering: "DC, my boy. You got your wish; you're going to headquarters."

The room fell away, the jokes, the camaraderie, the beer foam, even the anger of being lured into a fake rescue scenario and wasting five hours and twenty pounds in sweat. It was official: Vinny Smalldeano was the newest member of the FBI's elite Special Circumstances Killer squad, headquartered in none other than Washington, DC. Criminals be damned.