THE COMPANY WE KEEP

J.M. SMITH



KOTIS PUBLISHING, INC.

First published by Kotis Publishing, Inc. 2026

Copyright © 2026 by J.M. Smith

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious and the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, places, events or localities, buildings, and products is entirely conincidental.

J.M. Smith assets the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks, and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

First edition

979-8-9864522-6-5 (Kindle)

979-8-9864522-7-2 (Paperback)

1

Nora

The alley behind the strip mall reeks of piss, spilled beer, and fresh blood.

I kill the engine of my unmarked Tahoe and sit for a long moment; hands still wrapped around the steering wheel. Two seventeen a.m. Downtown Las Vegas. The hour when the city stops pretending to be glamorous and shows its real teeth. Cracked pavement. Overflowing dumpsters. The sour stink of too many lives lived too close to the edge.

I clip the badge to my belt. The gold shield feels cool and familiar against my hip. I've been in Homicide four years now. Long enough that the initial adrenaline jolt has died down into something quieter, heavier.

I step out into the dark. The alley runs behind a row of failing pawn shops and vape stores that are probably going to be payday loan places in six months. Yellow crime scene tape flutters in the weak breeze, glowing under the single working streetlight.

Frank Delgado is already there. My partner leans against the hood of his own unmarked car, broad shoulders straining yesterday's suit jacket. Flashlight beam cutting lazy arcs through the

shadows. He looks like he woke up thirty minutes ago, which he probably did, but his eyes are sharp when they meet mine.

"Tyler Brooks," he says without preamble, voice low and gravelly. "Thirty-four. Found by a dumpster diver an hour ago. Head split open like a goddamn melon. Brain's missing. Clean work too."

"Hey, Detective Voss," one of the uniforms says as I duck under the tape.

I catch the hint of mockery in his voice and give him a half-smile. I recognize him. Something-Paloma. Academy, more than ten years ago now. He tried to fuck me the night we celebrated after field training started. The memory flickers back. Him pushing me against the wall near the bathrooms, tweaking my nipple through my shirt, trying to kiss me. I shoved him off and mentioned something about his wife wanting to know what he was up to.

I glance back over my shoulder. "How's the wife?"

"Divorced."

"Huh. Why am I not surprised?" I reply, nose scrunched.

The alley is narrow, hemmed in by graffiti-scarred brick and overflowing dumpsters. The single streetlight buzzes overhead, casting everything in sickly orange and deep black. Crime scene investigators have portable lights set up farther down, turning the far end into a harsh, clinical stage.

The smells hit me first. Urine, rotting garbage, and the copper-sweet edge of fresh blood. I've smelled worse, but tonight it clings to the back of my throat.

I move closer, boot soles crunching on broken glass and gravel. Tyler Brooks lies halfway between two dumpsters, slumped against the brick like someone simply set him down and walked away. He'd

been a good-looking man once. Nice clothes, expensive watch still on his wrist, designer sneakers now scuffed with dirt and darker stains.

His head is split open with devastating force. A single, almost surgical cleave runs from forehead to crown. The skull flaps lay peeled back with eerie care. The brain is gone. The cavity left behind is clean, almost respectful in its emptiness.

I crouch beside him. The portable lights paint the scene in clinical white. I can see the precise way the cut was made, the lack of hesitation marks, the way the blood pooled neatly rather than sprayed in panic. This wasn't rage. This was control.

A memory flickers uninvited. My father at the kitchen table years ago, staring at old crime scene photos with that same haunted look in his eyes. Some killers don't want them dead, kid. They want them perfect.

I push the thought down and force myself to catalog every detail. The angle of the wound. The placement of the body. The way the arms had been arranged, almost posed, one hand resting across his chest like he's sleeping. Deliberate.

"Any ID on him besides the wallet?" I ask, voice steady.

"Driver's license, credit card, a few hundred in cash," Frank answers, standing a respectful distance away. "No phone. No keys. Most of the useful stuff looks gone. Coroner's on the way."

I feel the blood rising in my cheeks, my neck and forehead getting flushed. I feel like I'm in the spotlight somehow, being watched. No one in the small crowd beyond the tape stands out. Most of them stare blankly into the darkness or toward the neon strip a mile or two away. Paloma is chatting up a young woman in a pink skirt and knee-high white fuck-me boots. Him eyeing

me would have made more sense, but I can't shake the feeling that someone else is out there. I scan the rooftops and the dark gaps between buildings. Nothing moves. Still, the skin on the back of my neck prickles.

Frank steps closer, lowering his voice. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I think we go the extra mile on this one," I say quietly. "Every print, every fiber. Full workup on the victim. I'll talk to the pathologist too, see if we can get any idea what kind of weapon was used. Something about this feels like I've seen it before."

I don't say the rest out loud. Not yet.

My father had chased ghosts like this for years. Captain Robert Voss, respected, relentless, and ultimately gunned down one rainy February night in 2015. The case is still cold. Some people in the department were quietly relieved when he was gone. I've spent my entire career trying to prove I wasn't just riding his name. Five years in patrol, two brutal years in Sex Crimes, then four hard years earning my detective's badge in Homicide through sheer stubbornness and nights no one else wanted. I'm not going to let this become another file that gathers dust.

The feeling that I'm being watched, scrutinized, stays with me, but I try to push it down.

I nod and step back, giving the crime scene investigators room. I pull my notebook from my bag and begin sketching the scene in quick, rough lines. Position of the body, angle of the wound, placement of the dumpsters. Small details that help me think. That help me breathe.

Frank stays nearby, flashlight sweeping the ground. "You okay, Voss? You've been quiet lately."

I glance up at him. Frank has been my partner for a little more than a year now. He's solid. A little old-school, a little too fond of awful coffee and worse jokes, but he has my back when it counts. He knows about my father. Most of the department does. But he never pushes. For a girl whose dad was murdered almost twelve years ago, he's the closest thing I have to family.

"You smoked on the way here," I respond, ignoring his question, a thin smile on my lips. "Should I tell Maureen?"

"God, no," he replies, waving his plaid tie like it'll fumigate the cigarette smell out of his suit. "She'd kill me. You know that."

"I do. I also know that if you keep smoking and eating like shit, you'll end up dead either way. I don't know which is worse, having to hear Maureen dress you down after I tell her, or finding you dead at your desk after a massive heart attack."

"That woman will be the death of me, Nor, you know that," he says, looking at me and smiling. "She won't even give me the privilege of a heart attack. She wants to do me in herself."

"I'm fine," I say finally. "Just this one feels off. The posing. The wound. It's not random."

He grunts in agreement. "You thinking copycat? Serial?"

The words hang between us. I don't answer right away. Instead, I look back down at Tyler Brooks. The empty cavity where his brain had been stares back at me. A memory surfaces again. My father's voice, late at night, talking about the old Kai Chen case from 1997. Skull split. Brain removed.

I shake it off for now, but the similarities are too specific to ignore. "Let's not jump ahead, Frank. We'll get everything documented. The works."

The crime scene techs move in, their voices low and professional. Short, sharp flashes light up the alley. Evidence markers go down with soft clicks. I step back and watch them work, arms crossed tight over my chest. The city lights of Las Vegas glow in the distance, bright, glittering, and completely indifferent to the man lying dead in this alley.

I joined the department to finish what my father started. I wanted to be the type of cop he'd been before a bullet found him. I still believe in that. Most days.

But nights like this make me wonder how much of him is still inside me, waiting to surface.

Frank comes up beside me again, offering a fresh cup of coffee. It's terrible, burnt and bitter, but I take it anyway.

"You ever think about walking away from all this?" he asks quietly, eyes on the body.

"Every day," I admit. "Then I remember why I stayed."

He nods, understanding. We stand in silence for a while, the only sounds the click of cameras and the distant hum of traffic from the nearby highway. The alley feels alive in the worst way, watching, waiting, holding its breath.

I didn't know it then, but somewhere in the shadows beyond the tape, unseen eyes are fixed on me. Watching. Waiting.



"Voss." Frank's voice cracks through the radio on my shoulder. "Coroner's ETA is twenty. I'm looking for video. You good?"

"Fine," I lie. I stand slowly and close my notebook. My back aches from hours on scene and the desert night wind cuts through my jacket. It carries the distant pulse of the Strip. I scan the alley again. The hairs on my neck are prickling. Someone's watching. I've felt it since I arrived.

I step away from the body. My boots crunch on broken glass. I head back toward my Tahoe parked at the mouth of the alley. The feeling gets heavier with every step. A weight between my shoulder blades. Heavy and knowing. Not some random gawker. Something sharper.

I reach the Tahoe and open the driver's door. I toss my notebook onto the passenger seat. I lean in for a water bottle in the center console. Movement catches my eye. A shadow detaches from the far wall near the dumpsters. Male. Tall. Moving too smoothly for a curious drunk.

"Hey!" I shout. I slam the door and break into a run. "Police! Stop!"

The figure bolts. My heart slams against my chest. He's fast. He ducks through a gap in the chain-link fence into the next alley. I vault the fence after him. Breath burns in my lungs. One block. Then two. The narrow passages twist behind a strip mall's service entrances. Overflowing trash. Graffiti. The distant thump of bass from a nearby club. His footsteps echo ahead. I push harder. Pistol drawn but low.

He rounds another corner into a wider service alley behind a shuttered bar. I follow. Boots pound pavement. The runner is twenty yards ahead now. He glances back once. I'm gaining.

Then a hand clamps over my mouth from behind. It yanks me hard into a recessed doorway between two dumpsters. My back

slams into a solid chest. An arm locks around my waist like iron. I thrash. I drive my elbow back, but he anticipates it and absorbs the blow with a low grunt.

"Easy, Detective," a rough voice murmurs against my ear. Low and controlled. "Not the one you want."

I freeze. The voice is calm. The runner's footsteps fade into the night. My attacker doesn't loosen his hold right away. But his grip isn't cruel. It's protective. I can feel the heat of him through my jacket. The steady rise and fall of his chest against my back. He anchors me against him. A solid wall of muscle. He smells of cold iron, gun oil, and the dry, breathless heat of a desert night. It makes my cop instincts scream.

"Who the hell are you?" I hiss when he finally releases my mouth. My pistol is now pressed against his thigh.

"Jack Harlan." He lets me go slowly. He steps back just enough for me to turn. The weak light from a distant streetlamp catches his face. Sharp jaw. Dark steady eyes. Military-short hair. He's tall. Broad-shouldered. Dressed in black that blends with the shadows. Unarmed, at least visibly. But everything about him screams predator.

I keep the pistol trained on his center mass. "You just let my suspect get away."

"He wasn't your suspect," Jack says. His voice is low and even. "He was bait. Company muscle sent to draw you out. They're watching this scene closer than you think."

I search his face. No tells. No twitch. Just that unnerving calm. "And you know this how?"

"Because I've been watching too." His gaze drops to the badge on my belt. Then back to my eyes. "Tyler Brooks wasn't random.

The weapon, the cuts, the posing. It's a message for you, Nora Voss. Your father's old cases are waking up. And the people who buried them don't want you digging."

My pulse spikes. He knows my name. Knows about my father. The alley feels smaller. The air thicker. I should cuff him. Call it in. Instead, I hold his stare. The pull between us feels electric.

"Why help me?" I demand. I lower the pistol a fraction.

Jack's mouth curves. Not quite a smile. Something sharper. "Because the same shadows that took your father are circling you now. I'm done watching from the sidelines."

He steps closer. Close enough that I catch the faint scar along his lower jaw. The way his eyes darken when they drop to my mouth for half a second. Heat licks low in my belly. Unwelcome and undeniable. This man is danger wrapped in quiet control. And some reckless part of me wants to step closer instead of back.

"Stay out of my way, Harlan," I warn. Even as my body leans toward him.

His voice drops lower. "Too late for that, Detective."

He melts back into the shadows before I can respond. He leaves only the ghost of his touch on my waist and the heavy certainty that nothing about this case or me will ever be the same.

I stand alone in the alley. Heart racing. The distant neon of the Strip pulsing like a heartbeat against the night. The watcher is gone.

But I already know he'll be back.



I jog the last block back toward the crime scene. Chest tight. Jack Harlan's voice is still low in my ear. My boots slap against the pavement. Each step echoes the rapid thud of my pulse. The encounter leaves me rattled. Not just the speed of the runner or the iron grip that pulled me into the shadows, but the way Harlan knew my name, knew about my father, and the unnerving pull I felt when his eyes locked on mine.

Frank is waiting near my Tahoe by the tape line, arms crossed. His face shows concern the moment he spots me. "Voss? What the hell happened? You took off like your ass was on fire."

I slow to a walk, forcing my breathing to even out and wiping sweat from my brow. "False alarm. Thought I saw someone running from the perimeter. Turned out to be nothing." The lie sits heavy on my tongue. I don't mention the man in the shadows, the way his hold felt both perilous and protective, or the way his words about my father's cases still burn in my chest. Frank would dig. And right now, I don't have answers. Only questions and a strange, unwelcome heat low in my gut.

Frank studies me a beat longer, then nods. "Coroner's here. Let's finish processing before the brass starts breathing down our necks."

Dr. Nadia Patel arrives a few minutes later, her practical ponytail swinging as she ducks under the tape with her heavy kit slung over one shoulder. At thirty-five, just a year older than me, and she moves through a crime scene the way some people move through their own kitchens. We've grabbed drinks a handful of times, cheap wine at dive bars after the really bad scenes. She's a friend, but more importantly, she's one of the best investigators and pathologists I've ever worked with.

"Nora," she says, flashing me a quick, tired smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "You look like you could use a coffee. Or a vacation."

"Both," I admit, stepping aside so she can get to the body. "But I'll settle for you telling me this isn't as bad as it looks."

Nadia kneels beside Tyler Brooks without hesitation, her boots crunching on the gravel. The harsh white beams of the crime scene lights carve deep shadows across his ruined skull. She leans in close, gloved fingers gently probing the edges of the wound, her expression shifting from professional calm to something more focused.

"Clean incision," she murmurs, more to her recorder than to us. "Single heavy blow, likely a hatchet or cleaver with a very sharp edge. No hesitation marks. The flaps of the scalp are peeled back with deliberate care." She pauses, tilting her head. "The brain was extracted intact. No tearing around the cranial nerves. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing. This was good work. Craftsmanship."

I crouch down beside her, ignoring the way the gravel digs into my knees. Up close, the emptiness inside Tyler Brooks's skull looks grotesque, a perfect hollow where something vital had been. The edges of the bone are smooth, almost polished. No jagged fractures. No frantic hacking.

Nadia gently turns the body onto its side, checking the back of the neck and shoulder. That's when she pauses.

"There's something here," she says quietly.

She reaches under the collar of Tyler's shirt with two fingers and carefully extracts a small, pristine white business card. It looks absurdly clean against the blood and filth of the alley. No smudges.

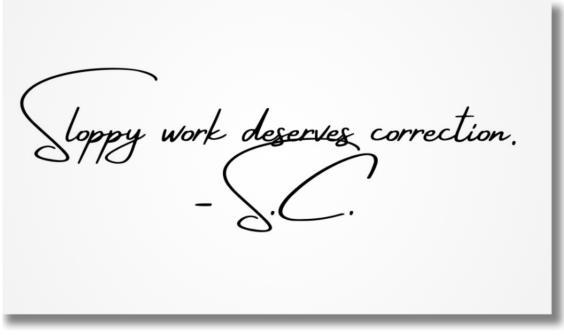
No creases. Like it had been placed there moments before we arrived.

Nadia hands it to me by the edges and it goes into a clear evidence bag. Our eyes meet for a brief second. Hers filled with concern, mine already tightening with dread.

I hold it up to the light.

Elegant, old-fashioned handwriting in black ink.

Sloppy work deserves correction. — S.C.



The words settle over me like cold fingers sliding down my spine. I stare at the card until the letters blur. Blood pounds in my ears. Frank leans in to read it over my shoulder and lets out a low curse.

"Sick bastard," he mutters. "Leaving calling cards now? What the hell is this, some kind of game?"

Nadia straightens, stripping off her gloves. "Whatever it is, it's deliberate. The card was placed with care. Almost like a signature." She glances at me again, softer this time. "You okay, Nora?"

I hand the card to an investigator after I take a picture of it with my cell phone. The alley suddenly feels smaller. The shadows between the buildings deeper. I scan the rooftops again, the dark

gaps where the streetlights don't reach. But the prickle on the back of my neck has turned into a full-body chill.

"I'm fine," I lie, voice steadier than I feel. "Let's make sure we get every print we can find, every fiber. I want this one locked down tight."

"You two will be at autopsy tomorrow?" Nadia asks as the mortuary employees push the victim toward their van.

"Yeah, at least one of us will be," Frank replies. "Depends on whether this blows up in our face and we're tracking down leads."

"We'll be there, Nadia," I respond, earning a glare from Frank as she walks toward her SUV.

As the coroner's team loads Tyler Brooks into the body bag, I step back and look up at the narrow strip of sky visible between the buildings. The Las Vegas lights glow in the distance like a cheap carnival, bright and indifferent. Somewhere out there, someone has just turned a man into a canvas.

And they wanted me to see it.

I tighten my grip on my notebook until the spiral binding cuts into my palm. Four years in Homicide. I've seen monsters like this before.

But this one feels like it's been waiting for me.