

CHRISTOPHER FLORY

**TRUST  
MISPLACED**

*a Paul Dodge novel*





***TRUST***  
***MISPLACED***

*a Paul Dodge Novel*





# ***TRUST***

# ***MISPLACED***

*a Paul Dodge Novel*

CHRISTOPHER FLORY

 Light Messages  
Torchflame Books

Durham, NC

Copyright © 2021 Christopher Flory

*Trust Misplaced: a Paul Dodge Novel*

Christopher Flory

christopherflorybooks.com

cmflory@christopherflorybooks.com

Published 2021, by Torchflame Books

an Imprint of Light Messages

www.lightmessages.com

Durham, NC 27713 USA

SAN: 920-9298

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-61153-430-6

E-book ISBN: 978-1-61153-431-3

Library of Congress Control Number: to be assigned

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 International Copyright Act, without the prior written permission except in brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

For my brother, Jeff,  
who might not have approved of the content,  
but I am sure would have applauded the accomplishment.  
I miss you.

For my wife, who told me to get a hobby.  
This is what happened.  
Thank you.

Love you both.



# CHAPTER 1

THE MAN SAT IN THE SMALL ROOM, admiring what had taken him nearly a month to assemble. First, he built the room without the landlord catching on or neighbors complaining about the commotion. The noise had been his biggest worry. Landlords rarely just dropped in, but people recognized construction racket, and neighbors called and complained about sounds of hammers and saws coming from surrounding apartments. Working in the evening, mornings, and weekends was out of the question. Too many families were home. He had a four-hour window during the day to work unnoticed. Battery-operated devices were wrapped with a damp towel to deaden the whine from the electric motors. He smuggled construction materials in using the maintenance stairway in the dead of night, away from prying eyes.

Once the man finished the construction, he needed to decorate the room. Two more weeks passed before he found the appropriate items. Not obvious, but not so out of the norm to be absurd. He didn't want people to be dismissive and chalk it up to a Ripley's Believe It or Not! moment. A thousand eyes staring. None too memorable, except her. She was the key. They had to pick her, or this plan wouldn't work.

One last look at his work. The job was nearly finished. He just needed to wipe every available surface for fingerprints. It wouldn't take long, as he made a habit of wearing latex gloves. He never used the bathroom in the apartment for fear of leaving DNA. A quick check for items out of place. He saw nothing.

## TRUST MISPLACED

Smiling at his accomplishment, he headed out the door, wiping the handle as he left.



The sound of his phone ringing shook him from a dead sleep. The ring was irritating, like nails on a chalkboard. That ring meant Detective Renquest, and if he was calling, they had caught another case.

“This is Dodge.”

The voice on the other end was unfamiliar. “This is Officer Jenkins with Metro PD,” the voice said.

“Officer Jenkins? Put Renquest on the damn phone.”

“Detective Renquest asked me to call you and told me—”

Dodge cut him off. “What do you want?”

The man’s voice crackled nervously. “The detective asked me to call you, sir.”

Dodge waited for the officer to offer more information. “I need to know where you’re at, son.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, Agent Dodge.” The young officer gave him the location and told him where to park once he arrived at the scene.

“Tell Renquest I’ll be there in twenty minutes. I need to stop for coffee.” Dodge didn’t enjoy morning calls. They always involved a corpse. A dead body and Detective Renquest having a street cop call to mess with him made for a terrible day. Wearing only boxer shorts, he crawled out of bed and trudged to the bathroom to take care of his morning business.

In his bed, covered in a blanket, a woman awoke.

“Who was that?”

Dodge had a mouth full of toothpaste, which he spit out before answering.

“Dodge, who was that?”

“It was Renquest,” he said. “I have to meet him downtown.”

“Another case?”

“Looks that way.”



“Why can’t people wait until after lunch before starting their workday?”

Dodge agreed. There should be a gentleman’s agreement stating neither party will cause any drama until after noon. The idea didn’t seem unreasonable to him. Heads of criminal organizations and the police department could meet in an unassuming warehouse by the docks to make an agreement. He knew this wasn’t realistic, but a guy could dream.

“Do you still want to meet tonight?” she asked.

“I’ll call and let you know once I know what my role will be.”

Sometimes work with the task force dragged late into the night. It wasn’t uncommon for him to walk through the front door well after midnight. Working sex crimes was a dirty business. Because many sexual crimes happen at night, like rape and sexual assault, it was late-night business. The exception to that rule was when a child was involved. Many times, the people that call the police on child sexual crimes are custodians and teachers, people that see the victim during the daylight hours.

“That’s fine.”

Dodge nodded.

“I’ll let myself out,” she said.

Clothed and clean-shaven, he reappeared from the bathroom. There were two pieces of toilet paper stuck to his face to stop the fresh shave cuts from bleeding. He sat on the bed to put his shoes on, then reached onto the bedside table and pulled out his duty weapon and badge.

Sitting up, the woman grabbed Dodge’s arm. He leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. She plucked the pieces of clotting material stuck to his face. He flinched.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Be careful.”

“Always.”

With that, Dodge walked out. He thought of her lying in the still-warm bed, knowing she would be watching his car’s taillights fade from the window. Being a parole agent gave him a trust factor of just above freezing, so the thought of leaving

## TRUST MISPLACED

anyone alone with his personal property twitched a nerve. It made him feel uncomfortable. But it was different this time. He and this woman were linked by an event neither of them asked to be part of. He hadn't heard from her in a couple of years. Then, out of the blue a week ago, she had walked into the parole office and asked to see him. The two talked for an hour over coffee.

Kelly told him how she had left the streets and gotten clean over a year ago. She was taking classes at the local community college at night. She said there were daytime classes, but night classes gave her something to do at night, a check-and-balance approach. She needed to have something to hold herself accountable so she didn't slip back into old habits. He liked her. He had always wanted her. Then, last night happened. It was easy. She felt comfortable to him. The good and bad memories flooded back. He shook off the thoughts in his head as he approached the area of the crime scene.

Dodge pulled up to the address the police officer had texted him. A standard apartment, the building wasn't the worst he had processed. Crime scenes were often in places most people never wanted to visit, but this one didn't appear to be such from the outside appearance. The building had a brown brick façade with a set of concrete stairs leading up to the front door. A second set of stairs, down and to the left, led to a service entrance built for unloading coal used for heating. The building was originally built for upper-class business owners who couldn't yet afford the high cost of home ownership in the downtown area. Apartments allowed businessmen and their families to live near downtown for convenience and status. Now, the building was mixed housing, with low-income apartments.

Walking up the front steps, Dodge placed his half-smoked cigarette in his pocket after extinguishing it on the sole of his shoe. It was a habit he learned in the Air Force, not leaving trash on the deck. That day, it was crime scene integrity. DNA pulled from a butt left behind could match a suspect in days. No need to muddy the waters with his DNA and give a defense attorney

a chance to poke holes in the case. As Dodge approached the front door, a street cop nodded. He nodded back.

Upon entering the building, he began climbing the stairs. People rarely died on the first floor, especially overweight folks. He was told once there were always three medical examiners for bodies on the second floor and above. One to do the examination and two to carry the gurney. Dodge didn't notice a medical examiner's van when he arrived. Maybe they weren't on scene yet, or they had finished. Hopefully, the detective on scene had waited for him before releasing the body to the coroner. An examination of the crime scene with the victim present made it easier to determine what exactly had happened. Lack of a body made a tough job more difficult. His anger started to build as he stepped onto the second-floor landing.

Working sex crimes wasn't new to Paul Dodge. He spent ten years in the Air Force as an SP, the Air Force's equivalent to a civilian police officer, where he ran into more than his fair share of rapes and sexual assaults. In fact, a case he worked with local law enforcement, for which he received an accommodation, helped him get his current position as a state parole agent working with convicted sex offenders and his spot on the local sex crimes task force. He had never wanted to work in this field but realized he had a knack for it the same way some people excel in sports. A good shortstop can tell which way a batter will hit the ball by his stance in the batter's box. He will pick up on a weight shift from one leg to the other or a quick glance to the outfield by the batter and adjust his defensive stance. That was how Dodge was with a crime scene. He looked at a scene and noticed what others missed. He noticed tiny nuances seasoned detectives with years more experience than him had not seen. He turned the corner and proceeded past the third floor.

Active listening was an important skill in his work. He found that by paying attention to what others around him were talking about, he could extrapolate pieces of information, analyze what he had heard, and use that information to learn what interests a person had. Once he knew what someone cared

## TRUST MISPLACED

about, it was effortless to do the research and insert himself into a conversation. People talk about what interests them. They want acceptance. This is a genuine flaw of human beings and the best way to exploit them.

Dodge continued past a uniformed officer stationed at the landing between the fourth and fifth floors. On the fifth-floor landing, he encountered two officers in full uniform. The first officer made eye contact as Dodge moved off the last step and onto the small landing. Dodge knew the officer and didn't care for him. He guessed the feeling was mutual.

"The detective is in there," the officer said.

Dodge handed the first officer his empty coffee cup of coffee. "Two creams and one sugar, and don't fill it too full," he said, entering the apartment.

"Screw you, Dodge! Who does he think he is?"

The second officer cracked a smile. "Don't worry about him, Jimmy. He's an asshole. No one likes him, not even the detective, but he has to call him because of politics."

The first officer shook his head and tossed the coffee cup on the ground. "Yeah, screw him and his coffee."

Dodge continued past without giving the comments a second thought. He entered the crime scene and into his world.

His examination of a crime scene was routine. First, visually inspect the entire room. What stands out? Are there drugs on the coffee table or a digital scale on a windowsill? Second, check for computers and other digital devices that may contain evidence of a crime. It was common to find emails, text messages, and photos on personal cell phones that documented the hours or minutes before someone died. He saw nothing. There wasn't even a body. Why the hell was he called?

A voice booming from the far corner of the room broke Dodge's concentration.

"Dodge, it's about time." It was Detective Renquest. "You look like hell, man."

He ignored the comment. "What do we have here?"

"We got a call from the guy down at the Center for Missing

and Exploited Children saying they had information on a kiddie porn distribution site.”

Dodge again glanced around the room. “I see no one in handcuffs. Is a victim being questioned or a body lying under this trash?”

“There was no one home when we arrived. A preliminary search has turned up squat.”

Dodge shrugged. He had still not heard why they called him.

Detective Renquest continued, “The analyst received an invitation into a chat room where he met our guy.”

“What guy, and how did you arrive at this specific apartment?”

The two men had worked together long enough to know he liked to tell stories. He even tried to imitate voices. All the voices sounded the same, but Renquest got a chuckle out of it.

“After the chat room, the suspect asked for a meeting to swap kiddie porn movies. This is the address he proposed. Once here, HQ instructed me to call you and have you take the lead on the investigation.”

This surprised Dodge. In his experience, PD always took the lead. His role was always supportive, aiding with profiles and technical knowledge in areas where the detectives were less familiar. Why did the brass defer the investigation to him? The parole agent knew he wouldn’t get an answer from Renquest and turned his attention back to the crime scene.

“Why meet in person? Why not share the files over a secure connection through peer-to-peer software?”

Renquest shrugged. “We got the call from the tech and set up the sting here.”

Everything appeared wrong to Dodge. It was too risky for peddlers of child porn to meet in person; in that, Renquest was correct. Files traded online using untraceable user names and paid for with bitcoin was the norm. It was quick, and no one saw your face. Why the change? He looked around for Renquest, who was instructing an evidence technician on the proper way to work a crime scene. For all his faults, Renquest was as good as

## TRUST MISPLACED

it got for maintaining crime scene integrity. He paid attention to the little details and ran his scene like a general commanding a troop of soldiers in battle. Precise and efficient.

Dodge noticed something different at this crime scene, besides the lack of a body or computers. The place was a trash pit. Whoever had been living there had not made use of either the trash can or recycling container in the kitchen. Food containers and old pizza boxes littered the floor. It was impossible to take a step without hearing the crunch of plastic underfoot. It was one of the filthiest places he ever had to work.

“Get your gloves on,” Dodge said.

“Do you think it will matter?”

Renquest had forgotten his gloves in the car, and his partner handed him an extra pair.

“No gloves, rookie mistake.”

As the two men rifled through mountains of garbage in the room, Dodge wondered why a person who dealt in kiddie porn had no computers. It was uncommon for a child porn offender to not use multiple computers and phones. Dodge reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, selecting an app that picked up Wi-Fi and Bluetooth signals within ten feet. The program ignored any weak, public, or intermittent signals.

“Hot date?” Renquest asked.

“I wanted to test out a new app I installed.”

He walked around the room with his phone held out in front of him, like an old-fashioned Geiger counter.

“Find anything?”

Dodge slipped the phone back into his pocket. “No Wi-Fi signal. How did he plan to trade the material, VHS tapes?”

“Maybe he took the computers with him.”

Dodge was quick to dismiss this theory. Why take his equipment with him if he didn’t know the meeting was a setup? And why didn’t anyone notice a guy carrying multiple computers down five flights of stairs? An evidence tech appeared from the door leading to the bedroom, breaking his concentration.

“You two need to come in here.”



The bedroom resembled the rest of the apartment home. Half-eaten sandwiches and empty gas station fountain soda cups covered the floor. There was a small path cleared through the middle of the room, where the techs and evidence team moved items on the floor, being careful to photograph each piece before placing it in an evidence bag for examination later. It reminded Dodge of a documentary he had watched on one of those animal channels about a colony of ants in the South American jungle, the worker ants foraging for food to bring back to the queen and feed the larva. The worker ants cut a mile-long path through the jungle and devoured everything that got in their way. Evidence techs were the worker ants, and Renquest was the queen.

“What a shithole,” Renquest said.

“If you and Agent Dodge will follow me to the closet, I’ll show you what I found,” the tech said. “Please try to stay on the path.”

The excavated path wasn’t big enough for both men, and neither cared. They both ignored it, making a beeline straight for the closet.

“Detective! Agent!” the tech begged. “Stay on the path, please.”

The two men stood in front of the closet. The doors were economy sliding doors that folded into themselves when moved to the side.

“Don’t worry about the rest of the room,” Dodge told the crime scene tech.

“Why?”

“Whatever we are searching for will be in this closet,” Renquest said.

It was an organized closet. Clothes appeared sorted according to season from left to right, with T-shirts first. Next were long-sleeved dress shirts. Last were sweatshirts and light jackets. Everything faced the same direction. Each hanger was spaced with a one-inch gap between it and the next one.

The tech shook his head, got on his knees, and disappeared

## TRUST MISPLACED

under the dress shirts into the closet. Dodge knelt to one knee and heard a voice echoing from the back wall.

“You’re both wrong. Everything we need to find isn’t in this closet. It’s through the closet.”

The back wall was fashioned into a sliding door using a system of rails and counterweights. A slight amount of pressure in just the correct spot on the door caused it to slide to the right, revealing its secret. Dodge peered up and back at Renquest, who had a puzzled expression on his face.

“What?” Renquest asked.

“It’s a hidden room.”

“A hidden room?”

“Yeah. It’s built into the back of the closet.” Dodge turned his attention back to the closet, reached into his pocket, and turned on a flashlight, shining it toward the discovery.

“While you check out the spank room, I’ll hang out here and make sure the crime scene guys get things wrapped up on time,” Renquest said.

“Of course,” Dodge said as he crawled through the entrance, and the light from his flashlight illuminated more of the space. He and Renquest had been correct. The closet was the key.

# CHAPTER 2

THE MORNING SUN FOUND ITS WAY through the curtains, shielding Dodge's bedroom from the world. It was a crisp fall morning. A single ray of warm light focused on Kelly's cheek as she tried to fight the urge to wake up. Kelly didn't enjoy mornings and thought it was one thing that Dodge liked about her. He typically woke up at five in the morning, using that time to catch up on his casework. Kelly remained in the bedroom, allowing an overworked man to have his time. He would bring her a cup of coffee at half-past eight. They would then decide on plans for that evening.

Kelly wasn't a fan of Dodge's job. This was mainly because their relationship could never evolve, as he was a parole agent and she was a former call girl. But also, because the daily work with sex offenders wore on his psyche and made him paranoid. She used subtle hints to point out these disadvantages about his job and the toll she saw it taking on him.

A firm sense of duty, instilled in him by his service in the Air Force, meant he would never quit. But it also involved ego. Dodge didn't trust anyone else to do the work. The risk was too high to allow someone else to watch over the rapists, child molesters, and sexual deviants he had on his caseload. What if another agent screwed up and someone got hurt? Living with that would be too hard, he would tell her. It was all ego. Deep down, she knew that.

After about five minutes, Kelly opened her eyes and welcomed in the morning. She sat up in bed and saw her robe

## TRUST MISPLACED

on the floor, right where it had fallen last night. Looking around for slippers to ward off the shock of the chilled hardwood, she considered not staying in bed. A glance at the clock on the bedside table alerted her that it was time to get her day started. The clock read 9:07 a.m., almost mocking her for being lazy. Kelly forced herself into the bathroom, where she washed her face, brushed her teeth, and tied her hair into a ponytail. Her hair was often in a ponytail during the day. She only styled it for evening activities. When unmotivated, a baseball cap with her ponytail pulled through the opening in the back worked well. Dodge liked the ballcap look, and she wore her hair that way from time to time to please him.

After putting on clean clothes, she ventured into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. The pot was empty. Kelly reached for the coffee beans and remembered they had meant to pick up coffee filters before returning home, but Dodge had not wanted to stop at the store. She looked around for a coffee filter substitute. Once, she tried to use a piece of paper towel in place of a coffee filter. The only thing that experiment accomplished was clogging the machine and forcing coffee to spill out on the counter.

“I guess I’ll go to the corner store and grab a cup to go.” Kelly grabbed her purse, along with a key ring containing the front-door key. She turned north toward the caffeine dispensary she desperately needed. Kelly noticed her phone vibrating through the sides of her designer purse. She wasn’t expecting a call.

“Why do I keep throwing it in there?” she said. It was a question she had the answer to. The couple had had this conversation a few weeks ago after dinner at Micki Angelo’s, an Italian restaurant downtown. Dodge and the owner had attended the same high school. He always made sure they received a table with a view of all the exits. Kelly didn’t understand Dodge’s obsession with facing the doors in a restaurant. She asked him about it once. He told her he just liked to see who would dine with them that evening. She knew it was a lie and never questioned him about it again.

A shout came from behind her. She felt a firm grasp on

her left arm, right above the elbow, and a force pulling her backward, forcing her to shout in pain. Before Kelly could turn around to see who grabbed her, a bus approached. In an attempt to free her arm from the man's grasp, she jerked it back, losing her balance in the process. Her right foot slipped off the curb, and the bus's rear tire caught her ankle, pulling her under the two sets of rear wheels as the bus passed.

Crowds of onlookers gasped at the gruesome scene. One man attempted to provide CPR, but too much blood was pooled in her mouth and nose. She was dead. Her chest had been crushed by the massive weight of the bus tires rolling over her body. Her neck was twisted, facing the wrong anatomical direction. Her neck looked like a towel that had the water rung out of it. It was a quick death.

In the back of the crowd, a man stood with his phone in the air. Every bystander was looking at the woman. No one had paid any attention to him at all. His repeated practice had paid off. Reach out, make contact with the arm, appearing to grab but pushing slightly, and the bus would do the rest. He had underestimated the force of the initial blast of air as the bus passed. The strength of the blast almost knocked him off balance. He stood still while the crowd reformed over the dead woman's body. Most of the witnesses had their phones out. Everyone was snapping pictures of the gruesome scene. He did the same. A picture wasn't required for the transaction, but it couldn't hurt. Then, he slowly backed away toward the alley.

Once around the corner, the man reached into his pocket and pulled out a different cell phone. He dialed and waited for an answer.

"Yeah, it's me," he said. "It was the girl...I got close enough to smell her perfume. That's how I know. It's done. I'll expect payment as agreed upon."

The man disconnected and dropped the phone on the ground, smashing it with his shoe. His heel ground the device into a pile of broken plastic and glass, then he disappeared down the alley.

# CHAPTER 3

The beam from the flashlight jumped across the walls of the tiny room. Hundreds of faces—men, women, and children of all ages and ethnicities. Finally, it focused on a single photo. The face was pale. Her deep brown eyes stared back at Dodge. The face of the teen girl reminded him of Kelly.

The evidence tech interrupted the silence. “Agent Dodge, have you ever seen a room like this?”

“I doubt anyone has.”

The tech set up a portable lamp, lighting the entire room with the flick of a switch. Photos covered every wall. What appeared to be an unused mattress lay in the middle of the room. While the rest of the apartment was a trash pit, this room was pristine. Based on what Dodge thought this room was used for, it should be considered a hazmat zone.

“You suppose that is where he assaults his victims?” the tech asked, pointing at the mattress.

“Not likely. It looks as if no one has slept there.”

“Maybe this was his spank room.”

“Possibly.”

Pushing with his hands, Dodge spun on his knees and crawled out of the room.

“How do you want me to handle the pictures?”

“Bag and tag them. Have a courier send the box over to my office, and I’ll take a longer look at them today.” Dodge paused. “Make sure you photograph everything before removing any pictures.”



The tech nodded.

Once in the bedroom, the parole agent stood up. His knees popped, causing him to sigh. He could hear Renquest in the living room, barking out orders to the other crime scene techs. He took one last glance at the bedroom, then joined Renquest.

“What did you find?”

“It looks like a spank room, but I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“Is something in particular making you so indecisive?”

Dodge paused. “The room was spotless. The mattress appeared to be new.”

“There was a mattress in there?”

“Yeah, surrounded by hundreds of pictures on the walls.”

“Any kiddie porn?” Renquest asked.

“Not that I saw. There also wasn’t a pattern regarding age or gender.”

“That’s strange. Could the perp be victim neutral?”

“Most sex offenders have specific victimology,” Dodge said.

Renquest nodded because his partner was correct. Most sex offenders had a type. Many offenders prefer prepubescent children, while others choose teens. Still, others picked the elderly. Dodge knew a few offenders that didn’t conform to a specific age group when selecting victims. Both men were rapists, where power was the real gratification, not sex. Both were still in prison.

“If you want the evidence, it’ll have to clear command staff, but I don’t think that’ll be a problem,” Renquest said.

“Call me if you pick up the guy who lives here. I want to be present for the interview.”

“You can do the interview.”

“Let’s wait until we know what we have. For now, I’ll plan on just observing.” Dodge needed to check in at the office and brief Chief Johnson on the case.

It was ten in the morning when he arrived at his office. The parking lot was full of offenders reporting to take drug screens before going to work. It could be hard for people with

## TRUST MISPLACED

felony convictions to find work. Assisting in the job search was one of a parole agent's primary duties. Most of the offenders who reported in the morning worked in the food service industry. Restaurants, from McDonald's to the most luxurious steakhouses, needed bodies to cook, clean vacated tables, serve food, and wash dishes. Restaurant managers didn't care about criminal records or prior drug use, and State Parole provided a steady flow. This was the population that kept the parole office humming during the late-morning hours. Many restaurants didn't open until between 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and parolees could drop a drug test on the way to work.

Taking the last drag from his cigarette, Dodge pinched out the cherry, put the butt in his pocket, and entered the front lobby.

"Morning, Agent Dodge," the security guard said.

The metal detector beeped as he walked between the sensors. The walk-through metal detectors had been purchased after an offender tried to bring a gun into the building when his parole agent filed a violation report concerning his poor performance on supervision. Dodge was in the lobby when the offender arrived and noticed the bulge in his jacket. The guy's hand never touched his gun. The well-trained agent pulled his duty weapon and had sight alignment before the offender finished sweeping his coat for an unobstructed draw. It ended there. The offender was arrested and returned to prison with new convictions for good measure.

Pulling his jacket back, Dodge revealed his weapon. "Morning, Stan."

The elevator doors opened to a chaotic scene involving offenders and agents. It was a battle of wits and stamina over how long the offender could hold out before the agent caved. Dodge didn't love the struggle but thrived on the chaos. Chief Johnson was talking to two suits in his office as Dodge made his way through the myriad of desks.

"Good Morning, Chief," he said, passing the chief's office.

The chief had his usual expression of displeasure, and

Dodge was sure it was his fault. The two men had a tenuous relationship. Each respected the other's abilities, but neither of them excelled at communicating how they felt. The lack of open communication between them often led to arguments on how a parole agent should do his job.

"Where the hell have you been, Dodge? Crap's hitting the fan, and my office is a suit toilet."

"Came straight from the call out this morning, Chief. What's with that?" Dodge nodded toward the two men in the chief's office.

"They are waiting for you. The suits are U.S. Marshals here to talk to you."

"To me or about me?"

"Well, you weren't here, so it was about you."

Chief Johnson didn't enjoy working with the Feds. There would be consequences for the responsible party.

"Any chance you just tell me now?"

"Not a chance in hell. If I have to talk to them, so do you." Chief Johnson had one rule. If he was in the shit, so were you.

"OK. Let me grab a cup of coffee."

Chief Johnson returned to his office, while Dodge poured a cup of coffee and watched the men in the office before joining them. The two men must have had other plans because they headed to the elevator before he reached the office. As Dodge entered Chief Johnson's office, it seemed every eye in the place was on him. He shut the door behind him and pulled the cord hanging by the window. The blinds let out a screech as they dropped to the windowsill. Dodge sat on a sofa across from the chief's desk.

"So, what did they want?"

"They got word of your call out today," Chief Johnson said. "One picture on the wall set off an alert in the Marshals Office."

Dodge was surprised. He had not mentioned the hidden room to anyone since leaving the crime scene.

"How did they hear about it so fast? I came straight here, and the techs were processing it." Not enough time had passed

## TRUST MISPLACED

to finish collecting the evidence. Besides, Renquest always called when the techs finished, giving a timeline for processing the evidence. “They haven’t even finished bagging the place yet,” Dodge said.

“The deputies didn’t say, and I doubt they will share the name of their mole with me,” Chief Johnson said.

*How had the Feds learned about the room, and what implications will it have on my investigation?* Dodge wondered.

“The picture was of a teenage daughter of a local federal judge.”

Chief Johnson’s words snapped Dodge out of his thoughts of marshals and police moles. “What the hell is a picture of a federal judge’s daughter doing in that room?”

“That’s what they hoped you would be able to answer.”

It had surprised Dodge that the U.S. Marshals Office asked for his help. He had had a run-in a few years ago with the local marshals over a fugitive parolee arrested in a bordering state. The marshals had not wanted to pick up and transport the offender due to a clerical error on the arrest warrant, so he used his local media connections and got the story on the nightly news. The story snowballed to a national level. When the cable news outlets picked it up, DC got involved, and the local Assistant U.S. Marshal ended up with egg on his face. They ordered him to transport the prisoner and bear the brunt of the cost. The name Paul Dodge had been a curse word at the federal courthouse since that day.

“What is it they think I can do besides work the case?”

“Do you remember a few years back when the Feds were using actual Department of Corrections offenders to teach profiling techniques to their academy trainees?”

“Yeah. The Feds hit up Smith at Rolling Meadows and, uh, Fernandez at Taylorville,” Dodge answered.

“Well, during that experiment, they met an inmate they think may help with this case,” Chief Johnson said.

Dodge knew Smith and Fernandez, and they were of no use. What other inmates did the Feds talk to who were intelligent

enough to use in a profiling case? Then, it hit him. He felt acid in his stomach rise to his throat. It burned and caused him to clear his airway.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” The chief held his hands out, signaling Dodge to relax, but he was furious. “I won’t talk to that narcissistic fuck. Not for anyone!”

Chief Johnson leaned back in his chair to try and de-escalate the tension. Dodge recognized the gesture, took a deep breath, and stretched out his fingers to let the blood flow to his extremities. He had not even noticed he was making fists so tight his knuckles had turned purple. He gave Dodge a moment.

“That’s what I told them,” he said.

“What else did you tell them?”

“I told them I wouldn’t make you go, and the department, nor anyone else, couldn’t force you to either. Because of your poor attitude and penchant for disobeying orders.”

Dodge forced a smile because he didn’t know what to say.

“Just give it some thought and give me your decision tomorrow,” Chief Johnson said. “Either way, I’ll support your decision.”

“I haven’t said no, but hell, it’s not even lunchtime.”

“Minor victories,” Chief Johnson answered.

Upon returning to his office, Dodge was reminded of the work he had to do by the pile of files he needed to review before appointments started reporting in.