ANGELICA DESANTIS



THE

PERFECT DOSE

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The Signature

The interpretation office at Torrey Mesa had two windows, both facing a parking structure, and on the second Tuesday of January the light through them was flat and gray, the kind of morning that made the screens look brighter than the room. Claire Bennett read case files better in bad light. Good light invited daydreaming; this light kept her at her desk.

The Morales file came to her through the lab's standing contract with the California Highway Patrol, and it had been waiting in the review queue since the holidays. She opened it sequence first, verdict never: collision on the last Thursday of November, on State Route 52. A man named Walter Greer had been changing a tire beside his pickup on the shoulder. A car driven by Elena Morales crossed the white line and hit him. He died there, on the asphalt, before the ambulance arrived. The CHP collision report was in the file, and the reconstruction that went with it, and the drug-recognition evaluation done that night at the hospital, and the officer's notes from the scene. All of it in the folder. She would get to each piece.

She started with the number that was hers to interpret: the lab result, run in December on the blood the hospital drew a few minutes before midnight on the night of the crash. A prescription sleep medication, reported in nanograms per milliliter, confirmed on a second instrument, quality control clean, chain of custody unbroken. She

checked the batch, the calibration, the internal standards, the analyst's initials. All of it was exactly what it should be. The number was real. If anyone ever doubted the number, she could defend it in a courtroom in her sleep, and had.

Then she sat with the number and asked it the only question that mattered, the question the CHP had sent the lab to answer: what did it say about the moment Elena Morales's car crossed that line?

A man had been changing a tire, standing in the wrong three feet of California at the wrong hour. The reconstruction put the car's path precisely: it drifted, a slow angle across the lane line onto the shoulder, no braking at all, no swerve, no overcorrection. It told her the geometry of the drift and nothing about its cause. Asleep at the wheel, or reaching for a phone, or dazzled by oncoming headlights, or checking a mirror for a truck she'd have to merge past. The sheet didn't say. Sheets never said.

And the number. The number said the woman had taken a sleep medication at some point before the draw, a few minutes before midnight. It did not say when. It did not say how much she'd taken, only how much remained in her blood more than an hour after the crash, after whatever her body had used and cleared. It did not say what that concentration had done to her at the moment of impact, or whether it had been higher then, or lower, or doing anything at all. Claire knew the pharmacokinetics the way she knew her commute: the drug peaked, it fell, it hung around in blood long after it stopped mattering to a brain. A number drawn late could be the tail of a night's sleep or the crest of a bad decision, and the instrument could not tell those two lives apart.

That was what the drug-recognition evaluation was for — an officer trained to look at eyes and balance and behavior that same night — and what the officer's notes were for, and the driving itself, which was evidence too, the geometry of a slow drift that could belong to a hundred explanations. The

CHP had gathered all of it into this folder and sent it to her lab, and now the folder waited for her to say the one sentence that would bind the number to the death.

She took off her reading glasses, which she disliked and needed, and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

The result is real, she thought. Whatever I write about it, the number doesn't change. It's the conclusion that has to be written, and conclusions are written by a person, and the person here is me.

Outside, someone pulled out of the parking structure with a long scrape of tires on concrete. Naomi's office was down the hall; the draft would go into the review queue with Naomi's name on it. Claire put her glasses back on and began to write.

* * *

The draft took her two hours. She wrote the summary first, then the methods, then the table of findings with its one confirmed number sitting in its row like a coin on a counter. The interpretation she wrote last, and she wrote it in one pass: the findings were consistent with impairment by the detected medication, and the concentration detected established that Elena Morales was impaired at the time of the collision. She read the sentence twice, changed "while driving" to "at the time of the collision" because it sounded more forensic, and released the draft to review.

Naomi came to her office before lunch, carrying a printout with the page corner folded down. Naomi still printed things. She stood in the doorway holding the paper the way a server holds a check she is sorry to bring.

"Do you have a minute," she said. It was not a question.

"For you, two."

Naomi came in and set the page on the desk, folded corner toward Claire, and put one finger on the interpretation

paragraph. “This sentence. The one that establishes impairment.”

“What about it?”

“It goes past the data.” Naomi’s voice was flat and unhurried, the voice she used for calibration failures. “You know it does. The medication is detectable in blood for a long window after the effect is gone. Anyone who takes it for three nights running has a measurable level on the fourth morning, and that person can drive to work and park the car and answer email. The number we have was drawn close to midnight, more than an hour after the collision. Whatever the concentration was at impact, we don’t know it. Could have been higher. Could have been lower. We cannot back-extrapolate from one late draw and pretend it’s a photograph of the moment she crossed the line.”

Claire leaned back. “It’s not a trace finding.”

“It’s a number from later,” Naomi said. “That’s all it is. Whether she was impaired when she drove — that comes from the driving, from the officers at the scene, from the drug-recognition evaluation that same night. That’s what the DRE is for. That’s what the reconstruction is for. Our result supports the possibility of impairment. It doesn’t establish it, and the word ‘establish’ is doing all the work in that sentence, and it’s doing work we didn’t pay for.” She straightened the page so its edge ran parallel with the desk. “Limit it. Say the findings are consistent with impairment and that the interpretation of driving behavior rests with the evaluation. It’s still a strong report. It hands the CHP everything the science can hand them.”

Claire looked at the sentence over Naomi’s finger. The sentence she had built in one pass, the one that would bind the number to the death, the one that would make the folder an answer instead of a hedge.

And the worst part, the part she kept off her face, was that Naomi was right. She knew the pharmacokinetics cold:

the peak, the fall, the long detectable tail. She had said as much to herself an hour ago, sitting with the number, asking it what it could say. A late draw is a late draw. One point on a curve tells you nothing about the rest of the curve, and she could no more photograph the moment of impact from that number than she could from a receipt for gasoline.

But Naomi said "consistent with" the way other people said "I'm sorry for your loss," and Claire had spent her career being the one who did not say it. Consistent-with reports got read and set aside. They got the lab a polite thank-you and a call to the DRE's sergeant. Reports with a spine got called about. Got asked back. Got the officer's voice on the phone saying, Dr. Bennett, we read your report, can you walk us through it — and there she was, walking them through it, the expert whose folders closed.

"You're being over-cautious," she said. "This is why defense attorneys think a tox report is a suggestion. Every level we report is hours after something. If we hedge every late draw, we might as well stamp 'inconclusive' on the whole discipline."

"We report levels," Naomi said. "You wrote a conclusion about a person. The level doesn't know what the person did with the car." She picked up the page again. "I'm asking you to change one sentence. I'll note my comment in the review log either way. It's your signature on it."

"I know whose signature it is," Claire said.

Naomi looked at her for a moment, the look of a woman deciding whether to spend more words, and decided not to. "Think about it before you release it," she said, and went back down the hall with her printout.

Claire sat with the draft on her screen. The number was still real. The number would stay real no matter what the sentence said. And Naomi was right about the curve, the tail, the gap between the shoulder and the midnight draw — right in the narrow, defensible, thankless way she was alw-

ays right, the way that kept the lab accredited and Claire's inbox full of cases the CHP wanted closed.

* * *

She thought about it over a sandwich at her desk, which was what Naomi had asked and not what Naomi had meant. The sentence sat on her screen with the cursor blinking after the period, patient as a signature line.

And there it was, the whole case against the sentence, laid out by a woman down the hall with a folded page corner, and none of it touched the reason she had written it.

Because the sentence would be read by the CHP, and the CHP had a dead man and a driver and a folder, and the folder needed a center. Give them "consistent with" and they had a number that might mean anything; give them "establishes" and they had a case they could file, a family they could face, a highway that had an explanation. Claire had watched the lab's hedged reports travel out and come back with nothing attached — no follow-up call, no request for her at a preliminary hearing, no officer asking for the person who wrote it. She had watched Naomi's careful, correct, narrowing language travel out and disappear, the way competent work disappears, and she had spent years being the report that did not disappear.

That was the part she could not have explained to Naomi without sounding worse than she was. It was not that she believed the sentence. She knew the sentence overstated. She signed it anyway because the sentence was useful, and because the alternative was to stand in Naomi's office and say, you're right, limit it — and Naomi would log the correction, and the corrected report would go out under Claire's signature with Naomi's reasoning inside it, and the next hard case would come to the lab and someone would say, run it past Naomi first, and one day Claire would be the

second reader. The one who checked. The one whose name was on the review log.

She had outranked that person since graduate school. She did not intend to become her at thirty-four over one verb.

Early in the afternoon she opened the release screen. The system asked for her credentials and her delegated authority code, and she gave it both, and then the screen asked, in the lab's flat phrasing, whether the report had completed technical review. It had. Naomi's objection was in the review log where objections lived, recorded and advisory and answerable by no one, a note in a drawer in a building in Sorrento Valley, and the signature field was Claire's alone. Philip Agnew could amend a report. Naomi could not. The delegation was hers, earned, and it meant exactly this: that when the lab spoke, it spoke in her sentences.

She typed her passphrase and clicked the signature block. The system stamped the file and, a minute later, reported it released to the California Highway Patrol evidence unit. Sent. She looked at the confirmation line for a moment. The number was still real. The woman had still taken the medication. What the sentence claimed about the moment the car crossed the line was the one thing in the folder no instrument had measured, and it now belonged to the state of California with her name under it.

She closed the file and took the next case in the queue.

Nathan was home first, as he usually was, and she came in past six to the smell of onions in the pan and the radio going low on the counter. He was at the stove in the socks he changed into the second he walked in the door, and he turned with the spoon and said, "Survive the day?"

"Signed off a bad one," she said. "Fatal crash, the CHP's. Took me all morning."

"Anything you can talk about?"

"You know the rules. Courtroom stuff, maybe, someday. Tonight it's just a hard case closed."

"Then it's closed," he said, and went back to the onions, and she poured herself a glass of wine at the counter and watched him cook, his shoulders easy, his whole face certain that a closed case was a finished thing.

At the table he told her about a tolerance problem at Calder, a housing that kept coming back a hair out of spec, and she nodded in the right places, and somewhere under the talk of housings the sentence was at the CHP evidence unit and wherever the CHP routed its copies, doing its work without her.

"Hard case," Nathan said, reaching over to press the last of the rice onto her plate because she hadn't taken enough, which was his way of saying he was glad she was home. "The highway people are lucky they have you. You actually settle things. Most people just measure."

She said thank you and ate what he'd given her.

End of sample

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