

# ***A Dream of Death***

**by Harrison Drake,**

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**Acknowledgements**

*A Dream of Death* is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, or organizations are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.



As a serial killer terrorizes London, Ontario, Canada, Detective Lincoln Munroe finds himself at a standstill waiting for the perfect killer to make his first mistake. While the body count rises without any leads, Lincoln finds himself haunted by dreams of discovering skeletal remains in the forest beneath a bloody knife. The dreams seem to come true when Lincoln is called to Algonquin Park to assist an old colleague. There he is tasked with overseeing the excavation of human remains buried more than twenty-five years earlier; remains that will bring to the surface cold cases, a painful past and memories Lincoln had long since forgotten.

*For my family, without whom none of this would be possible.*

## Chapter 1

Two pairs of dead eyes stared up at me, their gaze placid rather than terrified as I would have expected. Had the victims died like that, with an eternal stare of serenity for their murderer? Or had the killer posed their eyes as he did their bodies?

I tossed the crime scene pictures onto the stacks of documents that carpeted the top of my faux mahogany desk, an immovable behemoth of a bygone age. The thought of moving the desk had never struck me before. Even if I could move it there would be nowhere to move it to. The windowless office I shared with my partner left little room for life itself let alone redecorating. Among the files and reference books that tiled my desk I'd found space for only a few scattered family photos, an iPod and small speaker dock, a page-a-day word calendar (today, June seventh, was cornucopia) and Newton's Cradle, my favourite stress reliever.

I had been pouring over crime scene photos that showed nothing new, witness statements from people who had witnessed nothing, the statements of the attending officers, maps of the areas where the women lived, and details of their vehicles, employment, finances and love lives, all of it showed nothing. I knew everything there was to know about these two women now, felt like I knew them better than my own family and friends. The one thing I didn't know was who had killed them and why.

I couldn't get the pictures out of my mind. It wasn't horror. Twelve years in policing, the last five in homicide, had desensitized me to the scent, sight and cold feel of death. I had seen it all: a woman killed in a fiery car crash; a man mutilated

in an industrial accident; a drunken teenager run over by a train; a woman stabbed multiple times by her jealous ex-boyfriend. As horrible as the resulting images were they never remained in my mind past a cold drink and a night with my family. Until these women died and began to stay with me, all hours of the day and night.

Especially the night.

Maybe it was because this was my first serial killer, the first in the London area in over three decades. All the other mayhem I had seen was rooted in connections between the victim and the perpetrator—jealous spouses, enraged workers, altercations at bars, even gang members killing each other for turf. Even the few robberies gone bad, the victim was picked for a recognizable human reason—because they looked like they had money. This killer was choosing victims at random. And might be choosing the next victim right now.

I took a sip of green tea from the “World’s Greatest Dad” mug my son had given me for my birthday in February and took care to set it down on the only visible ring on the desk. Years of abuse had left a fractal pattern of ring-shaped stains around the desktop, evidence of those who held this position before me. The rings were like coasters thrown to the wind to land where they may and no matter what I was doing or how cluttered my desk there was always one to be found. With it came a chance to maintain my corner of the world. At least if my mug caused new damage it wouldn’t look like new damage.

The ring sat between wide angle shots of the decedents, nude and seated on their beds, blankets pulled up to their shoulders. The strip of flesh cut from their necks was hardly visible. The juxtaposition of violence and peace unsettled me and I picked up my mug again, emptied it of the dregs and shuffled the statements to reveal a coaster far from the images of death. The mug was a part of my son’s legacy now and as ridiculous as it may have seemed keeping it away from the macabre photos made me feel like a better father.

My gaze returned to the pictures. I searched them again and again trying to find something that had escaped me, something that could bring me closer to the killer. All I found was pain; the body of a woman in an otherwise perfect setting. There was no doubt in my mind that these women had been killed by the same man—or woman as a female killer was a possibility, and I wasn’t dismissing any possibilities. The positioning of the bodies, the mutilation to the victims, the undoing of the crime—all were identical.

Lost in their eyes, I could hear their voices goading me and berating me for the lack of information we had and the fact we were no closer to catching the killer than we were before he struck.

I needed to get out of the office, regret at sending my partner out to the field made its way past thoughts of misery. The benefit of rank, I thought at the time. Send the ‘rookie’ out to canvass the neighbourhoods and re-interview witnesses whose limited information was now more limited with the passage of time. She didn’t go alone. Nothing freed up police resources like the words ‘serial killer’ and now we had a task force made up of detectives from surrounding areas, a handful of uniformed officers and even a detective inspector from Headquarters leading the charge. I had been left as lead investigator, having been the one who caught each case as it occurred.

I rose from my seat with the utmost care, not wanting to disturb the numerous pages and pictures that hung over the edge of my desk, ready to cascade off at any moment. I picked up my mug in my left hand and with my right turned over any images that showed the decedents. Although I wasn't expecting any visitors, I felt the need to protect what little dignity these women had left.

The wooden door creaked as I opened it then closed it behind me. I hadn't been able to protect their dignity, not at first. I walked down the corridor to the cafeteria, doors passing by, my hand in my pocket jingling change and counting with my ears to ensure there was enough. Crime scene photos and all investigate documents were, in this day and age, available to anyone with access to the service's computer system. We police are no different from the general public—murder brings out the morbid curiosity in us all, and I was certain that officers outside of the case had seen the images as well. The media feeds us murders far and wide and we gather round like hyenas on a scavenged kill rooting for any morsels. I had taken steps to privatize the cases after the second murder, limiting access only to those with direct involvement in the investigations. A case such as this, a serial killer in southwestern Ontario, was too sensitive to risk the dissemination of any information—even to other officers.

A familiar voice stopped me in my tracks. I looked up to see the face of my old partner, now a Staff Sergeant, Jorge 'George' Ramirez.

"What's that, George?" I said.

"I asked you how the case was going. A little lost in thought?"

"A little doesn't touch it," I said.

"Bounce it off me."

This was something we used to do a lot. It helped to have someone to talk to about the case, and even better if your target knew little to begin with. I was always reminded of psychotherapy, me lying on the couch discussing the case with George while he tried to get me to reach new conclusions on my own.

"All right. Two women strangled with a ligature we've never found a trace of. Both nude but not sexually assaulted, propped up against the headboard like they'd fallen asleep reading or watching TV."

"Were the bodies covered?"

"Blankets pulled up to the neck".

"Undoing the crime. Remorse?"

Undoing was the act after the murder where the person tried to cover the body or otherwise make the crime invisible to their eyes. It was most common when the killer and victim were known to each other.

"I don't think so. They were propped up after death for the blood to pool in the lower areas."

"I heard the rumours. He cut the ligature marks out, right?"

"As disturbing as that is, it's also damned practical. He's not leaving us any evidence."

"So he doesn't want to be caught." He paused. "Yet."

I nodded. Serial killers often got to the point where they wanted to be caught, if only to finally get the recognition of having their name attached to their crimes.

"But he wants the bodies found," I said. "He's not trying to hide them. Propped up and covered for the husband to come home and find them. They almost look normal except for the thick red line around their necks."

"Nice, like wrapping up a present. So no blood from the victims?"

"Little," I said. "He wouldn't have gotten any on him."

When a person dies the blood doesn't clot. Instead it pools to the lowest areas of the body, gravity winning a battle the circulatory system had fought for many years. A cut to one of the lowest areas will bleed, but not like a wound on a living person. The blood seeps out in a consistent flow, even a severed artery will only drain not spurt as it would if the person was still alive. A cut from an upper area, like the neck, would leave almost no blood.

The nakedness was practical, too. Taking the victim's clothes meant no traces of fibres or DNA could be lifted from them. He was smart.

"Have you found the knife he used?"

"To cut their throats?"

He nodded.

"He uses one from the victim's house and leaves it on the nightstand. The rope, or chain or whatever it is, he brings with him and takes when he leaves."

"So the ligature is important to him, the knife isn't."

He'd noticed it, too. The ligature was the murder weapon. The knife didn't matter, they were already dead. "Any evidence found at all?"

"None. No prints, must have been wearing gloves. Waiting until after the blood had pooled to cut the flesh out means no castoff, no clothes on the victims, no trace."

"Similarities?"

"Females."

"That's it?"

"So far. Both their men worked night shifts, they were alone at the time."

"He's stalking them, figuring out their schedules."

"And he's making sure they're found right after the murders. The men came home only a few hours later."

"Intelligent and fearless."

"That's what worries me."

"Did I help?" He asked with his annoying and trademarked 'cute' face.

"Yeah, actually you did." I wasn't any closer to solving it, but I felt a little easier getting all the horror out in the open.

"Good. Glad I could help."

He slapped me on the back and continued his journey while I continued mine, lost in thought once more.

"Green tea again?"

The question came as a surprise. I turned my eyes back to the outside world and found I was standing in front of the altar of food and refreshment that was our cafeteria. No one was standing in front of me.

"Always," I said to Patricia, our server, followed by a half smile. The stillness of my eyes belied my feigned attempt at pleasantries. Patricia put a tea bag in my mug with a smile, a real one on her part, and I parted with a portion of my hard earned change. My feet knew the path and brought me to the hot water dispenser. A rush

of water and steam covered the bag, dying the water a pale green. I watched as if it were absolutely fascinating. If I avoided eye contact with those around me perhaps they wouldn't speak to me, ask the question I had come to dread.

"How's it going?"

Yet another failure on my part.

"Nothing new," was all I said before departing for my office deep in thought once more.

I closed the door behind me and expelled a sigh of relief: alone again. The desk across from mine still sat empty. Kara's cleanliness was a marvel to me and brought forth a laugh, an unfamiliar experience as of late. Nothing was out of place on her desk, her name plaque set at the front edge in the precise centre: Kara Jameson, Detective Constable.

Mine was almost buried beneath the clutter—Lincoln Munroe, Detective Sergeant. For a moment I felt a sense of stupid pride for being the ranking officer in the room. The feeling faded as I thought about the size of the room. Besides, Kara, an eight-year veteran of the service with two years already in homicide, had been my partner since her first day in the division. We worked well together even if the apprentice was outshining the master.

I had only been in love with one woman in my life—my wife—but there was something about Kara. She had an unconventional beauty, a razor sharp wit, unmatched intelligence and unyielding determination.

Kara had graduated high school a year early and entered the criminology program at McGill University completing a four year honours degree in just over three years. She was hired as a constable at the very young age of twenty and her rise in the organization was no less impressive. She showed promise from the outset and her abilities were quickly noted by her superiors. Kara was an expert interrogator and, even with little formal training at the time, there were very few from whom she could not get a confession.

Three years into her career she was transferred to the Criminal Investigation Bureau assigned to sexual assault. Three years later I found myself sitting across from her and learning more from her than she did from me. Her Sergeant's stripes couldn't be far away.

The chair molded to my body as I sank into it, leaned back and closed my eyes. An ergonomics review by some workplace health and safety board had forced the service to replace all of our old backbreaking chairs with what was the best use of taxpayers' money I had ever seen or felt. My body and mind relaxed to prepare for the mental onslaught they were about to face. The details of the cases streamed past me, clicking by one by one like a child's Viewfinder.

The victims had almost nothing in common. Twenty-two days had passed between the first two killings—fast by serial killer standards. Going by the textbooks the third had a shorter interval. It had already been a week and we had nothing.

"Lincoln?"

I never heard her come in which was far from unusual, she moved like a cat. I leaned forward, raised my seat to its full, upright position and opened my eyes.

“Just trying to find something else to tie the victims together other than being females with partners who worked the night shift. Coming up empty. Any luck on your end, Kara?”

“Nothing. It’s hard to get more information out of someone when they never had any to give in the first place.”

I rubbed my eyes. She probably thought she woke me up.

“It’s late, Lincoln, almost seven thirty. Call it a day, I’m sure your family misses you.”

I rubbed my eyes again, this time trying to push back the tears of regret which worked their way to the surface. In all my life this was the first time work had come before family, and I knew it was taking its toll on my wife and children.

“You’re right. Go home, get some sleep and I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll bring the first round.”

“Thanks Lincoln,” she said, then walked out the door.

“Bye, Kara,” I said to the door as it swung shut.

Only then did the realization of what she had done strike me. We were on a first name basis—hell, we were close friends by this point—but she still respected the rank structure. There was no way she would leave without permission from me. She got it—by convincing me I needed to go home.

No wonder she was such a good interrogator.

## Chapter 2

I am dreaming.

I have to be.

I find myself flying between trees in a dense forest. The territory is unmistakable—massive conifers, rocky ground and crystal clear rivers. It is familiar, somewhere in the Canadian Shield—somewhere from my youth I can’t remember. The sun shines above me, its light breaking through the trees in ethereal rays. I weave through the trees until a sudden, strong wind blows and a branch strikes me in the head.

My body arches through the air, careening off of the trees in its path until it hits the ground. Yet, I am no longer a part of my body. I watch from above as the calamity unfolds.

My body bounces and rolls to a stop. I hover around my lifeless body inspecting the damage: a gash on the head, too many scrapes and cuts to count, the right forearm bent at an unnatural angle.

Hours pass, my ethereal self beside the corporeal one. I watch as bruises form and scabs cover the wounds and for a moment, a brief second, I see the body as it was many years ago. A young boy lying battered and broken on the forest floor. I look at my hands and see the tired and thickened skin, the light covering of hair, and the dry and cracking knuckles and know that I, this I, remain the same.

The body flashes young again, injuries healing and a cast on the arm. Electricity runs through my form, sparks dance on my skin and my hair stands on end. I

touch my right arm lightly with the index finger of my left and watch a trail of sparks fill the path as I pull my finger away.

And then I begin to fade. But I see my body stirring, coming back to life. Its eyelids twitch and just as the eyes are about to open I snap back into the body looking at the canopy of trees above me.

And for the first time I feel pain. It tears through me and tempts me with death, an end to the pain and peace at last. The pain is everywhere, constant and unyielding. Even the uninjured areas burn hotter than stoked coals.

I try to get up, my arms under my chest in an attempt to raise myself to my knees. My broken right arm gives out under me and I crumble back to the ground. An unnatural sound is the prelude to a scream that brings the birds out of the trees and into the sun-drenched sky. I roll to my back and use my good arm to raise myself to a seated position. A small tree acts as a crutch and helps me to my feet.

At first all my eyes do is wander, my purpose forgotten. My mind has been washed clean and I no longer recall where I am or how I got here. My eyes scan the world and try to find something that will jog my memory. There is nothing. A glade of trees with no end in sight and nothing out of the ordinary save for a glimmering light in the distance. I begin to walk, the light through the trees drawing me in.

The light flashes in a pattern, a repeating series of flashes varying in intensity—dim then bright, bright followed by four more dim flashes, then bright and dim, bright, dim and dim again. Within moments I am upon the light, it shines so bright in the midday sun that I must squint to see the outline of an object hanging from the tree. I reach out for the source of the light and grab it with all I have before I reel back in fresh pain and a resurgence of memories.

A river of blood pours from my hand and bathes the ground below me in crimson. The blood spreads across the forest floor then drifts over exposed roots and around rocks and leaves until not a speck of dirt remains. The flashing light has disappeared now and my focus turns to the object that hangs from a low branch of a large tree as if suspended by an invisible thread.

It is a hunting knife with a wooden handle. Fresh blood drips from the tip of the already blood-stained silver blade. The blood drips off one slow drop after another causing a hollow sound from the ground beneath the knife. I follow the path of the drops to the forest floor below and know that what lies at my feet was what I had come to find: a human skull half buried in the crimson dirt, drops of blood landing on the center of its forehead.

Thunder crashes above me and heavy rain breaks through the trees. The blood is washed from the skull and the dirt returns to its original hue. The sky is all but black now, thick clouds blot out the sun.

A phone rings and my hand reaches for my belt by instinct but comes up empty. I check my pockets with no better luck before noticing my bedside table sitting at the base of the tree. The skull looks up at me then looks at the table where my phone now sits.

“Aren’t you going to answer that?”



## Chapter 3

“Aren’t you going to answer that?” my wife said as she nudged me in the ribs.

It took me a moment to shake loose the remnants of images that still haunted me. I reached out and grabbed the phone from the table beside my bed.

“Detective Munroe,” I tried to say, although it didn’t come out quite clear.

“Detective Munroe?”

Must not have been clear at all. “Yes.”

“This is Constable James Petersen. I’m in Belmont, we’ve had another.”

“It’s 3:30am,” I said, red numbers staring me down from across the room.

“I know, the husband came home from work early. Everything matches though, at least with what I know. You should get here soon though—victim’s husband is a cop, St. Thomas Police. He’s not taking it well. I’ve got a Sergeant with me and they’re sending one of theirs but, Detective, I think you need to be here. ASAP.”

“Give me the address.”

I scribbled the address, directions and Constable’s cell phone number on a pad of paper I kept at the bedside for this very reason. I debated going in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt but I knew this would be an all-day affair culminating in a stint in front of the press cameras. Yesterday’s suit was hanging on the closet door, and although the shirt was in need of pressing it would be covered as long as I left the jacket on.

Dressed, gun unlocked, loaded and strapped on, teeth brushed, wife kissed, note left and out the door within five minutes of hanging up the phone. Not bad, Lincoln, not bad. I reset the security alarm, locked the doors and hopped into my ‘official police vehicle’—a family-owned Honda Odyssey complete with booster seats, juice stains and a Disney Princess CD turned up far too loud. I rocked out for a moment, singing with Pocahontas and her colourful winds, a lame attempt at waking myself up before hitting the open roads. Once I was satisfied that my tone-deaf singing had done the trick I turned off the stereo and dialed Detective Inspector Jane McCaffrey, the woman in charge of this entire investigation. I filled her in on the news and was told to bring Kara along, something I intended to do regardless. My next call was to a zombified Kara. I understood enough of her near-incoherent mumbling to know she got the address and would see me there.

After that it was simple—drive as fast as possible without breaking the province’s “fifty kilometres an hour over the limit and we seize your car and licence” law. Even police weren’t exempt from that one, despite a clause allowing speeding by a police officer in lawful execution of his or her duties. The speedometer sat at a decent forty over as I drove down streets devoid of all traffic but the occasional cab. Luckily London Police weren’t showing the flag at all tonight, dealing with too much call volume to focus on monitoring what little traffic existed.

I took a swig from a half full can of Coke that had been sitting in the van for an indeterminate amount of time and marveled at both its urine-like temperature and water-like lack of carbonation. At least it was still caffeinated.

I planned my route as I drove and did my best to minimize the number of traffic lights that could slow me down. If I had an actual police vehicle, equipped with lights flashing three-hundred and sixty degrees and a siren then I could come to a stop and proceed if safe. Oh well. Being pulled over was too much of a risk to take, too much of a delay when hell was breaking loose.

Forty minutes from my driveway to the crime scene—decent time. Four white and black OPP cruisers and a matching SUV were parked out front, lights flashing in all directions. Two white and blue St. Thomas cruisers sat just down the street. I parked behind the St. Thomas cruiser bearing “Supervisor” and walked up to the scene, badge in hand.

“Detective Munroe,” I said to the officer guarding the front of the residence. He was of Middle Eastern descent, couldn’t have been more than twenty-five and looked younger thanks to a clean-shaven face. He looked as though he had gotten lost on his way to a college costume party.

He nodded his head and noted my name on the crime scene registry with the time of my arrival. 4:17 a.m.

A faint accent as he spoke, “They’re inside, sir”.

I gave a light knock on the door, a warning to anyone standing behind it, and opened it inward. Not a sound. A bit of oil and not a soul would hear the door open. If it was the killer who oiled it, he didn’t miss a detail.

“Munroe. Glad you’re here.” The deep yet upbeat voice was unmistakable, Sergeant Marcus O’Connell.

“Big Red, been a while.” At just over six-foot-three and two-hundred and fifty pounds of imposing, red-headed Irishman, O’Connell’s nickname was inevitable. Then he solidified the moniker with his fondness for the cinnamon flavoured gum of the same name, gum he was chewing as he spoke.

“I know, I know,” he said. “Wish it was under better circumstances.”

“Agreed.”

“Victim is a Jocelyn Dupuis, age twenty-six. Husband is a St. Thomas PD Constable, Derek Franchini, twenty-seven.”

I watched the motion of his jaw as he worked his gum, the angular lines moving up and down like a metronome. The red gum was visible between his teeth and a faint snapping sound emanated from his always open mouth.

“Red?”

He looked in my direction, his jaw still. “Yeah?”

“Lose the gum, swallow it or something. You know how much DNA you’re spreading around, chewing like that?”

Red laughed. “Too much I guess.” He swallowed hard. “By the way, Lincoln, you’re an ass.”

“Something we’ll always agree on.” I clapped him on the back. The sound of my hand on his body armour reverberated through the room. “Let me take a look around and then you can tell me what you know and show me to the victim.”

Red stood by as I made my way through the modern home, an open concept main floor adorned with rich hardwood and faux-marble tile. Bright and clean stainless steel appliances stood in stark contrast to the nearly pure white countertops. The furniture was eclectic, a mix of the new, the old and the borrowed that was often seen in a couple’s first house: a mismatched couch and

chair, his and hers from before they met; a coffee table that looked like the protégé of my desk, ring-shaped stains beginning to multiply on its surface (likely his); and vases and artwork and other décor items (likely hers) that provided that lived in feel. They were planning on staying.

The sod outside was bright green and still showed its seams, a mosaic of grass that had yet to grow together. A single layer of asphalt formed the driveway. They couldn't have been in the home for more than a couple of months, but the house was loved, decorated and adorned with photos of the young and happy couple together. Those passing through do little to the home, fearful of putting holes in the wall that they may have to repair later, fearful of becoming too comfortable in a temporary space. Those who intend to stay make their house a home.

There were no wedding pictures on display—a couple living the sinner's life as my wife and I had done. Religion would not play a key part in their lives, at least not to an extent of following every rule. I saw no religious artifacts or artwork on display as I wandered through the main floor past the living area and into the kitchen and dining area. Everything was clean and well-ordered—not white glove clean but real life clean. Both would be wage earners, too little time to devote to a spotless life. They had not been together long—pictures together were on prominent display, fresh roses sat in a vase on the counter, a “just because” card nestled gently between the flowers.

A black wooden knife block sat on the countertop beside the black and stainless microwave. Numerous handles sprouted from the block—bread knives and cleavers, a santoku, a sharpener and various other large knives as well as a set of eight steak knives. One empty spot in the block glared at me.

I opened the fridge and was greeted by the usual items: low fat yogurt, skim milk, bottles of water, fresh fruit and vegetables, diet Coke; everything a young and health conscious couple could want. That and a dozen beers lined up neatly against the left side of the fridge, labels all turned out. I looked back at everything else and saw it all to be the same way, labels facing out, vegetables and fruit separated and laid out in the crispers to maximize space and keep the food from being crushed by other items.

He was a police officer, that I knew. A trained observer, forced to be meticulous in his reports or face the ire of a savvy defense lawyer or judge. But this behaviour was uncommon, at least for any police officers I knew. So she suffered from a degree of OCD—it couldn't be him with his stained coffee table—and worked somewhere where she had to be perfect, where things had to be neat and ordered or at least could be without anyone believing it to be anything more than a good work ethic. Accounting, secretarial work, finances, or even retail would be the most likely options.

Finished with the main floor I made my way upstairs and entered the first door on my left, as I always did. Maybe I had a degree of OCD myself (an odd form that didn't extend to my desk), although following a set pattern in every residence I searched made my notes more clear, showed consistency and led to much easier testimony in court. The third bedroom, I assumed, had been turned into an office. A single bookshelf sat beside a glass desk surmounted by an old computer. The books varied from bestselling fiction to old university and college texts, a mix of police-related books and accountancy and business texts. Hunting magazines,

women's magazines, and a Bible were tucked in between the fiction. One was religious, one was not, and the religious one felt the need to hide their beliefs. I thought of my wife again. I assumed the Bible belonged to him. She had an analytical mind and would consider herself too rational to believe in a higher power.

The computer was off and a thin layer of dust sat on the keyboard. Now that everyone had cellphones capable of receiving e-mail, surfing the internet, receiving news updates, Tweeting, Facebooking, blogging, whatever, computers were falling by the wayside.

I was beginning to leave the room when I noticed the closet door slightly open, the crack filled by a dark green massive object just behind the door: a gun locker. It had been opened since he got home, a single bloody fingerprint sat on the dial.

"Red, call in and get a CFRO check done," I said shocking him as I broke my contemplative silence. "I need to know what he has. He's a hunter so there'll be a few long guns in there. Find out if he has a pistol."

Red nodded and went downstairs to use his phone where he wouldn't disturb my search.

Next was the spare bedroom, decorated in a Spartan, anonymous manner and not disturbed. Nothing here to pique my interest.

The bathroom yielded little information—his and hers hair products, razors and toothbrushes confirmed that two people lived here. Colour-safe shampoo and conditioner did tell me that the young blonde haired girl in the photos throughout the house was lying to the world. A bottle of contact solution sat on the counter, an expiration date far in the future. I assumed it to be hers. A minimum of twenty-four vision uncorrected is required to be a police officer in Ontario. Did she wear glasses? Would she have been able to see her attacker in the dark?

I went back into the hall and into the master bedroom. The gruesome sight greeted me, the body moved from its macabre tableau on the bed and down to the floor in a failed attempt at resuscitation. The signs of death were obvious, but regardless, he had to try.

The body looked like all the others, stripped nude, lividity in the legs and buttocks, the telltale strip of flesh removed from the neck. A bloody knife, a visual match to those in the block in the kitchen, sat on the bedside table. Above the knife I saw something I could not believe I had missed, my tunnel vision upon entering the room had kept me locked on the body. Red would have told me about it if I hadn't silenced him before surveying the house, then sent him to make the call to our records department.

*"I'm sorry, I didn't know"* was written on the wall above the bedside table. In red. At first, I took to be blood, but it was far too thick and far too smooth. Cautious steps brought me around the body and to the message the killer had left behind.

Lipstick. Red lipstick. The writing was sloppy, but the thickness of the lipstick was nearly uniform. It was not scrawled in haste but done with an effort to be sloppy, using the weak hand. The killer was calm under fire. Whatever the reason he saw fit to leave the note, he thought it out, using his weak hand to avoid a potential match via handwriting analysis. I knew there was little to be gained from the scene aside from this message. The body and its environs would yield no clues, no evidence. A Forensics team would pick through everything in due time,

searching for traces of blood or fibres that could be used to identify the killer. They would find nothing.

I was more interested in the note.

Something had changed the game, something had made the killer think twice about what he had done. Remorse. It was the first glimpse into the killer's fragile psyche that we had been given since all this began.

I looked around, past the crime to the room itself. It was as expected, neat and tidy with only a couple of articles of men's clothing on the floor. The tops of the dressers bore more pictures, small souvenirs from various foreign locales and a small LCD television. Each bedside table had a lamp and a book on it, the newest Harry Potter on hers and an old Robert Ludlum on his. Her side had the alarm clock and a pair of glasses. I checked my watch and found the clock to be only a minute slow.

Something had triggered him. We had no evidence that he searched the residences so it must have been in plain sight. He had either hidden it or taken it with him.

Unless it was something she had said.

But would he still have killed her then?

To protect himself, perhaps.

There was no sign of a struggle. It must have been something he realized after she was dead. Something on the nightstand where he put the knife.

I opened the drawer and found a positive pregnancy test.

So he killed in the dark. The lights came on only after the victim was dead to facilitate his morbid removal of the victim's flesh.

I looked back at the body and saw what I had seen before, a slim, blonde haired female. Five and a half feet tall give or take and no more than a hundred-twenty pounds. Lying down, there were no outward signs of pregnancy and likely none while standing either. She was still in her first trimester, only far enough along to have taken the first test.

"I've got the info you wanted."

I jumped at the sound of Red's voice, so lost in my investigation that I didn't hear him hammering his way up the stairs. Graceful he was not. I closed the drawer before I turned around.

"No registered long guns, not that he has to anyway. Self-registering gun registry at its best. Why pay to register firearms you don't legally have to register?"

I gave Red a simple look, one that said quit waxing political and get to the point.

"A Sig Sauer P229, standard issue. Looks like he bought himself one for some off-duty training."

"He's got it on him," I said. "Where is he now?"

Red looked surprised. "He was sitting on the back deck with his Sergeant, smoking a pack and drinking a beer last I saw him. We haven't let him back in since we got here."

"Let's go," I said, already on my way downstairs.

I exited out the patio doors behind the dining room table and walked out to the deck, bathed in the faint glow of dawn. A young man in civilian clothes sat beside an older man in a St. Thomas police uniform, three chevrons on his shoulders.

“Constable Franchini?” I addressed him as an officer, providing him with something solid to grasp onto. He leaned forward and nodded. “My name is Lincoln Munroe, I’m a detective with Western Region.” He nodded again.

I watched him like prey watches a predator. He sat in a patio chair with a curved mesh back, quite comfortable by appearance, yet he leaned forward away from the back of the chair. It wasn’t a comfortable posture, sitting in that manner took more effort than leaning back or all the way forward. He sat with his arms against his sides, elbows beyond the vertical line of his back, barely moving his left arm as he lifted his beer and smoked his cigarette, both held in the same hand, a technique I doubt I could master. The right arm, the arm facing me, stayed fixed.

That’s where the gun was.

I considered drawing my weapon on him but decided against it. He wasn’t looking to harm anyone other than himself or the man responsible for the murder of his wife.

“Derek,” he said after a slight pause, a swig and a haul. “No Constable, I’m done with the force.”

I didn’t ask, not wanting to contribute to his feelings of hopelessness. I didn’t have to ask.

“Sworn to protect and serve. Fuck that. Couldn’t protect her. None of you fucks could either. We’re a joke, garbage men. We wait for the mess to be made then we come along and clean it up.”

There was nothing I could say to that. Policing is largely reactive, and the proactive work we do—drug busts, prostitution stings, and the tips we act on—rarely relate to murderers.

“Derek, I need you to give me the gun.”

He jerked his head toward me and his right arm moved further back, trying to cover what I hadn’t needed to see.

“It’ll be easier if you give it to us, Derek. You won’t use it on yourself. Maybe you wanted to, but your beliefs won’t allow it.” The Bible was his, I knew it now. “We have a team of detectives on this guy. You won’t find him before we do.”

His eyes turned to his feet, tears forming. “What do I have to live for? She’s dead, she’s fucking dead and she was...”

He cut himself off, unable to say the word he had barely had time to absorb.

“I know.” I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder. “You won’t kill yourself, I know that Derek. And if you kill him, you’ll spend the next twenty-five years in jail. Not a good place for a cop to be. We’ll catch him, I swear to God we’ll catch him. Now please, give me the gun.”

I slid my hand from his shoulder and placed it in front of him, breaking his line of sight. He reached his right hand back and removed the pistol from his waistband, placing it on my open hand with the same gentle care used when passing a sharp knife. His Sergeant sat there, mouth agape.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” Derek said, his head still hung low. “I don’t want them knowing I’m weak.”

“You’re not,” I said, then dropped the magazine from the pistol and racked the slide back, ejecting the chambered round. “You’re human. There’s not a man out there who wouldn’t think of taking his own life after finding what you found, and quite a few who wouldn’t have been able to stop themselves.”

The tear were flowing faster now, dripping onto the wood beneath him and beading on the freshly sealed surface.

"Take some time," I said. "Get some sleep. I'll need you at the station this afternoon. Here's my number," I said as I slipped him a card.

I handed his Sergeant the gun and magazine then pointed to the round on the ground in front of me. I lowered my voice, hoping Derek wouldn't hear me. "Make sure this gets secured and keep an eye on him, alternative is taking him to the hospital under the MHA."

A nod was all I needed. The Mental Health Act allowed police to apprehend a person and transport them to the nearest psychiatric facility if they were deemed to be a danger to themselves or others. Derek's grief and response to it were natural, he needed to be with people who cared about him not stuffed in a small room awaiting a psychiatrist. As long as someone stayed with him, I wasn't worried.

A familiar voice from behind me let me know Kara was here. I briefed her on the details and the inevitable question came, the one I had been asking myself.

"Why the guilt?"

"I don't know." I looked around as if hoping a clue would present itself. "Maybe he or his wife couldn't have kids, maybe he lost a baby, maybe-"

"Maybe he just likes kids."

She had a point. None of the murders had happened in homes with children. The first victim had kids but they had long ago moved out.

"Pro-lifer?"

She cast a glare of pure stupidity in my direction. "A pro-life murderer?"

"You'd be surprised how many people who are pro-life are also for the death penalty."

Kara appeared lost in a tailspin of faulty logic. "We'll figure it out once we catch him, I guess."

All I could do was nod and hope it happened soon.

## **Chapter 4**

Kara and I spent two hours scouring the crime scene while getting in the way of the Forensics team, who in turn got in our way. I didn't expect to find anything. We never had and I knew little had changed. What we were looking for was evidence of the one thing that had changed, the lipstick message. The killer had taken the lipstick, presumably the victim's, with him when he left.

The thought crossed our minds that the killer was a female, purse carried, lipstick inside. But nothing pointed to this. All of the profiling that had been done pointed to a male. Female serial killers were a rarity and those that existed weren't keen on targeting women. But regardless of our beliefs until we knew for certain that the killer was male we couldn't rule out that we were chasing a woman. Or perhaps a couple? The physical force required to subdue the women was more in

keeping with a male, as was the brutality of the killings. But what if the male had an accomplice?

Questions that we couldn't answer filled our minds and conversations both at the scene and in our office following our return to the detachment, fresh beverages and lunch in hand.

"It has to be a man, everything points to a male."

Kara was certain, and while I strongly agreed with her, I held onto my doubts.

"Prove to me that Sasquatch doesn't exist."

"I can't. I just know it doesn't."

"Why?"

"We would have discovered it by now."

I smiled. The argument of skeptics. Not that I believed that cryptids—the Sasquatch, the yeti, the chupacabra—roamed the earth. I just kept asking myself, how can we prove that something doesn't exist? I didn't believe in a higher power but believed in the possibility that one existed if only because it had not been proven not to.

"We have no evidence. How can we rule out a female killer with no evidence to the contrary?"

"I just . . . have a feeling."

"Good," I replied through a mouthful of tea. I swallowed harder than I should have and started coughing. Red faced and eyes filled with tears I composed myself. "Hunches are important, you'd be surprised where a hunch can take you. Just don't let it blind you from other possibilities."

Kara nodded, unable to speak due to her laughing at my misfortune as I began coughing again.

With only a slice of pizza left in the box and no takers amongst us, I closed it up and moved it to the very corner of my desk. The single piece of pizza was the only thing that held it in balance.

I tore the top page of my calendar and revealed the page below it: June 8, 2011—remuneration; payment or reward. I doubted I would find a way to use that one today.

"Twelve forty-two," Kara said aloud, a habit of hers I was still getting used to. "Derek will be in at fourteen hundred for his interview."

I nodded, thinking of the pain he must be in and wondering if his healing process had even begun. How could it? The love of his young life lay on an autopsy table, and the home they shared was under police guard and taped off with a yellow line.

With my years in homicide I knew enough to remark at the stupidity of my prior thought. The family of a murder victim would not be able to begin their healing process, until the killer had been brought to justice—be it rotting in a pine box or in a jail cell.

Another detective had been tasked with speaking to the victim's parents and younger sister, informing them of the death and trying to gather any information they could. Dupuis had been born and raised in London, where she met Franchini at a college party. They hit it off, began dating, he became a police officer, she an accountant. They decided to move south of the city, closer to Franchini's work and away from the high taxes imposed upon Londoners. It was a move that led to her



death. Her family could offer very little: she had no enemies, no jealous ex-boyfriends, no one who would want to do her harm. They couldn't begin to understand it, they didn't want to.

"I want you to do the interview," I said.

"Are you sure? I'm more for interrogations, I don't know if I'll be able to handle a grieving widower."

"Trust me, Kara, you'll do fine. I wouldn't give it to you if I thought you'd screw it up."

"Thanks." There was the smile that could brighten our dank little corner of the world. It had become a rarity although I could not say that I smiled more often, the weight of this case was bearing down on us both. Perhaps it was time for two titans to shrug.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had sent Kara off with a pat on the back and some words of encouragement then sat staring at the new set of pictures for almost an hour. I walked down to the interview room and listened to Kara and Derek talking. Both were crying, going through the box of Kleenex left on the table like someone was going to take it away. Maybe I'd been an ass for sending Kara in there, even though I knew she could handle it and that it would make her a better investigator. She was strong. No one could have survived that interview. I picked up another box of tissues, knocked on the door then entered and apologized for my intrusion. I put the box on the table then leaned into Kara.

"I can take over," I said in a whisper.

"I'm fine," she told me and gave a near imperceptible wave of dismissal. Since I wasn't needed, off to the cafeteria for another green tea and some lunch.

"Lincoln," I heard George say, "empty seat." He pointed at the seat to his left, ignoring the fact that of the six chairs at the table only his was occupied.

"In a minute." I walked to the line to wait for my food. A few minutes later with an egg salad sandwich and a fresh tea in hand I sat at the table across from George.

He asked the dreaded question. "How's it going?"

"Another killing, you probably heard."

"Yeah, cop's wife, eh?"

I nodded. "Kara's interviewing him right now. I got one of the many detectives we have lying around to scribe it."

"Watch the video later or read the Cliff's notes?"

"Both, probably. I just can't wrap my head around this guy."

George nodded at me to go on. Our usual banter.

"The first victim, Jennifer Louise McEachern, nee Patterson. Born July seventeenth, sixty-three, Brandon, Manitoba. Moved to London in eighty-one, went to UWO and Althouse to become a teacher. Taught high school until for twenty years, then took a job as vice-principal at East Elgin High School in Aylmer."

"South of the city like the rest of them."

I grunted agreement. "She and her husband, Brent, moved to Port Stanley. He works at Ford Talbotville. Was going to retire early when the plant closed its doors

this summer but I figure he won't go back. Kids are out of the house now, empty nesters."

"So he found her?"

"Came home after a night shift putting Crown Vics together. Saw her car and figured she was staying home sick until he found her in bed with half her neck missing."

"Fuck."

My thoughts exactly.

"Pronounced at the scene at 7:51 a.m. You should hear his nine-one-one tape, poor guy can't get a word out."

"What'd she look like? Typical blonde?"

"Not at all. White, homely—big nose, thin lips, narrow eyes, round face—short and heavy. Greying brown hair in a bob. Forty-seven but looked older, you know the sun worshiping type, wrinkles and spots."

"Not your usual serial killer victim then. Nothing sexual?"

"Nope, told you that before. Nude when he found her but never slept nude. The clothes she was wearing when he left for the night, yoga pants and an old t-shirt, were never found."

"What about the second one?"

"Daphne Maria Villanueva, born in Bogota, Colombia, December twelveth, eighty-five. Colombian minister father and a Canadian missionary mother. They moved back here a year after she was born. They wanted to get away from the violence, give her a safe place to grow up."

"I bet they're second-guessing that move now."

Stupid comment but the one almost everyone would make. It was the truth and it would plague them for the rest of their lives.

"She went to Toronto for university, came back and took a job at Victoria Hospital as an ER nurse. Got an apartment in Tilsonburg a few blocks from her parents. Moved her Japanese trauma resident boyfriend, Daisuke Takahashi, in a few months later."

"What did mommy and daddy say?"

"Threatened to disown her. No ring and no vows make pious parents unhappy. I should know."

George laughed. "It was in-laws with you, eh?"

"Which makes it worse." In my case, it had even led to pressure from the future wife as well. I had barely escaped having holy water dripped on my forehead.

"Takahashi got home at 8:15 a.m. and found her dead. His nine-one-one call is chilling. Perfect medical jargon in crisp, precise English, I don't even understand half of what he said. A bilateral incision, excision of flesh, signs of strangulation. He knew the cut was postmortem, he saw the petechiae in the eyes, conjunctivae I think he said, knew she'd been strangled. Even said it was cause of death. Then he broke down and his accent appeared, he started panicking and questioning who would do something like that."

"He held together as long as he could, I guess. Maybe hoped he could keep reality at a distance if he treated her like another patient."

“The rest of the call is in Japanese. I had it translated. He tells her how much he loves her and then starts praying. He was still kneeling beside her body when the first officer got there.”

“What about her?”

I knew what he meant. “Young, tall, slim and beautiful. Long dark hair, Hispanic features, deep brown eyes and perfect teeth.” Her light brown skin had shone under the florescent lights in the bedroom, giving an ethereal quality to her final portraits.

Kara came up behind George, her eyes rimmed in red and audible sniffles coming from her nose. I excused myself from George, told him to call me if he thought of anything, and went back to the office with Kara. Kara filled me in on the emotionally devastating interview.

It had gone as expected, with little information gained. Franchini was working when, at eleven at night, he received a phone call from Dupuis, a phone call that for a brief few hours changed his life forever.

“I’m pregnant,” was all she had said when he answered the phone. There was a moment for that to sink in followed by a scream of joy that startled the hell out of the elderly lady Franchini had been dealing with, a poor old widow who was certain she heard someone trying to break in through her balcony—on the eighth floor. Franchini apologized to her and carried on his conversation with the young mother-to-be. They spoke only for a few minutes before Franchini had to excuse himself to the prying questions of his complainant, desperate for some good news to brighten her lonely life.

Franchini finished the call, convinced the old lady she would be safe and to call nine-one-one again if she had any concerns, and tried to return to his duties. It was impossible to focus on policing with thoughts of painting a nursery, buying baby clothes and announcing the good news to all who would listen.

A coffee and conversation with his sergeant, cruisers pulled up beside each other in a desolate parking lot, had been enough to get Franchini sent home, accumulated overtime being used to make up for the few hours he would escape.

He rushed home, excited to wake Dupuis up and talk through the night about what they would name the baby, how they would decorate the room, would they find out the gender, and all the other questions first time parents face.

He didn’t find her peacefully asleep.

He tried to resuscitate her, tried until the first ambulance arrived but there was nothing to be done. Two lives had ended that night, and a third had been destroyed.

We had nothing new to go on other than a timeline. The coroner had estimated time of death at 1:30 a.m., two and a half hours after Dupuis had made her last phone call. A more exact time would come after the autopsy, but the coroner had never been off by more than a half hour.

The interview lasted two hours, countless details of the life of the victim, her habits, her history, her dreams and fears, her family and friends, her likes and dislikes, and yet none of it would help us. He had picked her out of the blue and marked a total stranger for death.

“Go home, get some rest,” I said to Kara after we thanked Franchini for his time, “you’ve earned it.” Franchini had arrived and left in the company of his sergeant, now out of uniform. The Sergeant had taken my words to heart.

“Thanks, Lincoln. Don’t tell anyone about my breakdowns in there.” She couldn’t make eye contact with me, whether she felt she had failed me or she was afraid of any human connection bringing back the tears, I couldn’t tell.

“Policing is only about being tough when you have to be, Kara. We’re all human, and sometimes a human touch and empathy are what are really needed. You shouldn’t be anything but proud of how you handled that interview.”

A feigned smile, no glimmer in the eyes. “Thanks. See you in a couple of days.”

Hopefully not in the middle of the night. Twenty-two days, then eight days. There would be more pictures on my desk before the week was out.

A mandatory day off for us didn’t mean the same for the killer.

## Chapter 5

You’re dreaming again.

Wake up.

The flying isn’t real, none of this is real.

Wake up.

Pinch yourself or something.

Wake up.

Put an end to this.

Wake up.

The trees lie below me once again as I soar through clear blue skies toward a glimmer of light. Would I be spared the bloodbath tonight? The crippling pain? Or would I experience it all again?

Wake up.

Save yourself the pain.

I refuse to dive and instead stay above the trees until the glimmer is right below me. I drift down to the treetops and weave through branches thick with green. My feet find solid ground and I crumple to the dirt below me.

The pain is back.

Wake up.

It tears through my body and I cannot move. I feel myself slipping away again but I hold fast and fight against the pain. With every bit of strength left in me I force myself to stand, to fight the fire that courses through my veins.

The knife turns ahead of me, rotating in the cool breeze, its blade pointing to the skull below. Blood makes its way down the edge of the knife, and as a strong wind blows through the tree the knife swings on its invisible thread.

The blood drips off of the blade and onto the top of the skull, a message forming from the drops. I strain to make it out before it is complete: “Why?”

I read the message before the blood runs into the empty eye sockets.

I look up to see crime scene tape surrounding me and the posts and strings of an archaeological survey at my feet.

The sky goes dark once again, thunder claps and flashes of lightning streak across the clouds. The rain comes down in torrents and soaks me to my core, water rushes down my face and into my eyes. I lower my head and wipe the water away from my face.

The skull remains but it is no longer alone. The dirt has been carefully removed, tools sit beside the shallow grave as rain washes the bones bright white. A bright red heart pounds in the chest, blood from an unknown source pours out from an open wound that pierces the muscle of life. The blood flows into the recesses of the grave covering an errant piece of bone: a missing rib, and another, the end cut off just above the heart.

Wake up.

## Chapter 6

I awoke in a sweat; a dull ache coursed through my body and reminded me of the night's events. The ache was joined by new pain in my chest when my eight-year-old son pounced on it like a jungle cat.

"Daddy," he said, "you don't work today?"

"Nope. I'm all yours today, Link."

He smiled from ear to ear, his crooked teeth gleaming in the morning light.

"Well, all yours and your sister's and your mother's, of course." I reached to his stomach and began tickling him until he fell off the bed in a fit of laughter.

"Mommy's making breakfast. Bacon, eggs and pancakes."

The enthusiasm of children for the simple things in life always warmed my heart, although I found my own enthusiasm growing with the thought of a greasy, home cooked breakfast.

"Give me a couple of minutes. I'll be right down."

"Okay Daddy," he said from the floor where he had landed moments earlier. Link got to his feet, took off out the door and bounded down the stairs, prompting the usual reprimand from his mother about a herd of elephants.

I got out of bed, stretched and tried to push away the aches and pains that lingered. I had never had a dream so real, never felt such pain nor had it linger after I woke up.

Was it true what they said? That your mind can make it real? If you die in a dream do you die in real life?

I wiped the sweat from my brow, took off my damp t-shirt and boxers and stared at the body-shaped stain that marked my place on the bed. I would be yelled at for not making the bed as the last one out of it, but I felt it better to let the sheets dry out before burying them with the comforter. I got dressed in the jeans and polo shirt that lay folded on the floor.

I wandered into the ensuite bathroom and looked into the mirror. These days what looked back at me no longer brought me joy; a tired face that looked older

than my thirty-five years, swollen bags under my red-rimmed green eyes, sallow cheeks and hair desperately in need of a cut. My hair was thick and curled as it grew, a gift from my African-American father. The eyes were from my Irish mother. Luckily the brown skin tone that my father also bestowed upon me helped to hide some of the evidence of my sleeplessness.

The first step was to shave. I hadn't had time yesterday—being woken up at three in the morning by a murder had that effect on a person's hygiene. It was my day off so shaving wasn't required, but I never knew if I would be called in again tonight then forced in front of the press cameras. So begrudgingly, I took out my shave gel, wet my face and lathered up.

When I took a final swipe at the thin strip of shaving cream remaining on my left cheek, the blade took with it a small patch of skin. Red flowed down my cheek.

And I found myself frozen in time.

The slow motion trickle held my gaze as it ran down my face and dropped silently into the sink. Another drop followed with a third taking the plunge a moment later. I looked down into the sink and the word *Why* stared back up at me from the blood.

I blinked and reality came rushing back.

I had never in my life hallucinated before. At least not to my knowledge. But now I began to wonder, had I hallucinated something before and never known it be a mirage? And if not, why was I beginning to see things now?

I realized I had dropped into a half-crouch in front of the mirror. I was trembling. Losing my mind had always been a fear of mine. I had dealt with delusional people and schizophrenics and listened to people rant about the voices in their heads and the creatures and demons that surrounded them. I had always feared that I would one day be on the other side of the fence. No one knows when mental illness will strike and no one is exempt.

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind but the dreams still clung to me. They had reappeared every time I closed my eyes and now they haunted me with my eyes open. A message in blood? And prior to that a message in light, apparently Morse code that I was at a loss to decipher. The closest I got was that it nearly spelled *WHY*, something that would make sense now. I needed to look at it again.

I pulled myself up and wiped my face clean of what water, blood and shave gel remained, then dabbed a square of toilet paper on my fresh wound. It was time to face the family. Having been gone so much the past few weeks and so involved in the case, I found myself drifting away from my wife and children. The more I blamed myself, the more the guilt poured in until I was swimming in a pool of it so deep the bottom was out of sight. Now it was hard to even make eye contact with them without wanting to cry.

I clambered down the steps to the foyer, twinges of pain in my knees, and made my way onto the porch to collect the morning paper. I knew it would be there. It was something my wife hated, along with the flyers that were delivered once a week. She would step over them every time she went out, refusing to pick them up.

The front page was as I expected it to be. The latest murder was above the fold. The article would probably include veiled suggestions that the police weren't doing their jobs.

I went back inside and closed the door, locked it as always, then made my way into the kitchen. Greeted by the smell of fresh cooked bacon and a loving kiss from my wife, my mood lifted. It would not be brought down today. I threw the paper face down on the side of the counter. I wouldn't read it. There was nothing to be gained and too much to be lost.

I took a seat at the table and watched my wife cook. Katarzyna, or Kat as she now preferred, was a beautiful woman just hitting her prime at thirty-five. She remained just as stunning as the day we met. At five-nine, she stood just a couple of inches shorter than me and, when she had heels on, I had to rise to my tiptoes for a kiss. Her long brown hair accentuated the eastern European features that had first mesmerized me when we met in university.

We shared a first year mathematics class at the University of Western Ontario in London. She was, as she eloquently put it as soon as she learned the term, fresh off the boat. Her parents had wanted to send her to Canada for her education in hopes that she would return afterward, get a good job, marry a good Polish man and have lots of beautiful Polish babies. Only one of those four happened.

Her English was quite good—a hell of a lot better than my Polish is now—but it needed some polishing. That's where I came in. After the first week of class, I made a point of sitting next to her whenever I could, chatting with her and complimenting her on her English. Being the nice guy that I was, I offered my assistance both in class and after. It didn't take long before our first date and after that we were inseparable.

After first year we moved in together much to the dismay of her Roman Catholic parents and against some of Kat's own beliefs, beliefs she pushed aside for me. Kat wasn't supposed to fall in love and there was no way she was supposed to stay in Canada, but as she tried to tell her parents: *wszystko dobre, co się dobrze kończy*—all's well that ends well. They chose to disagree. Her father flew over from Warsaw to try to convince her to come back home. His attempts failed, but he left satisfied that I would take care of his daughter—not that she required it—and that we would visit. It was a turnaround neither of us had expected but one that I could not be happier with, especially since our future children would now have their *babcia* and *dziadzio* to visit.

Kat and I got married shortly after finishing our degrees, hers a teaching degree specializing in math and sciences and mine in biological anthropology. It was the odd cultural anthropology and criminal psychology elective that steered me toward my current career. Kat followed her passion and became a teacher at a local high school, molding the minds of impressionable youths and trying to steer them toward a career in science.

At the ages of twenty-seven we welcomed our first-born into the world: Lincoln Charles Munroe the Fifth, a beautiful and healthy baby boy weighing in at seven pounds, nine ounces. Link, as we all called him, was practically my clone—same skin tone and features. His sister followed two years later, the equally beautiful Kasia Agnieszka Munroe. Dark haired and lighter skinned, she bore many of her mother's traits and her telltale height, bursting Kat's womb at the seams with her twenty-three inch birth length.

"Stop staring at me."

"Sorry, Kat. Off in my own little world there."

"It's creepy," she said, then let loose a laugh.

"Is it wrong to stare at my beautiful wife as she waits on me hand and foot?"

My answer came in the form of a wet dishcloth to the face.

"Maybe not, but it's still creepy." From the day I met her I had always loved her accent. Of course I loved it even more when I heard her speak Polish, which she often did with the kids. Eight and six and fluent in Polish while I, with only enough to manage light conversation, struggled to keep up. And now, enrolled in French immersion, the kids would soon be two languages up on their barbarian of a father. I was learning though—having to read the correspondence from the school and help them with their homework left me little choice.

Breakfast was served, hot and greasy and plentiful. A half pound of bacon, three eggs, four pancakes and two glasses of orange juice later I was fueled up and ready to go. It was the first real meal for me in ages, there was no time to eat while at work. By the time I finished and stood up I felt as though I had swallowed a brick.

I took the kids downstairs and turned on the Xbox. Although I would have preferred to play some Mass Effect or maybe Halo online, the kids got their way and we played for an hour and a half with their pet tiger and black panther cubs. I smiled as they waved their arms like madmen in front of the Kinect sensor, throwing balls for their cubs, feeding them, petting them and of course, in Link's case, driving a remote controlled car into them. He would follow it up with a treat for the cub. He found his cub's reaction to being hit funny but felt bad for having hurt his pet. Boys will be boys I guess. Better a virtual animal than having him out throwing rocks at squirrels and frying ants with a magnifying glass.

Abusing animals. The first step most serial killers take. I pushed the thought away and focused on the screen.

Once the kids were bored of their pets, the only ones allowed in our household, we moved out to the backyard. The sun was shining strong this morning, burning off the dew and leaving their playground dry as a bone. I pushed them on the swings until my arms went limp then chased them around the backyard until my legs followed suit. It was going to be a long day followed by the sleep of the just.

I took care of lunch, barbequing burgers and hotdogs while Kat kept watch on the tray of french fries turning golden brown in the oven. Without the word-a-day calendar I had to think hard to remember what day it was. Happy to realize it was Saturday (I had peeked at today's word—relax: rest or engage in an enjoyable activity so as to become less tired or anxious), Kat and I decided to take the kids to the local city pool for an afternoon swim followed by a run through the splash pad. As always, I found myself the wettest.

The kids forced me to stand under a large bucket that filled up with water then dumped its contents onto the heads of unsuspecting targets. It was like watching the toaster, you never knew when you would get hit until the freezing cold water came down in a deluge over your head and shoulders. We tore through the sprinklers, stood beneath a flower that showered us with a refreshing mist and crawled through a tunnel of tubes that sprayed us from all angles, leaving not a patch of clothing dry.

Kat stood on the sidelines laughing and yelling encouragement to the kids as I was put through trials that would make Hercules shiver with apprehension. I let



Kat sit out, not wanting a repeat of the day I bear-hugged her and held her under the bucket. Twelve years married and I have never felt so close to once again being a bachelor.

I walked over to the bench Kat had made her home, a book in her hands and her eyes peering over the top at the chaos in front of her. I took care to sit a short distance from her, keeping her dry and myself out of trouble. I put my cold, wet hand on Kat's bare knee and she shivered slightly.

"I've missed this," she said.

"Me too."

"How much longer do you think it will take, until you catch him?"

"I don't know. We're coming up empty every time. If he keeps going like this... never."

She sensed my feelings of failure and put her hand on mine. "You'll get him, Lincoln. I know you will." She paused. "Just, when it comes time, don't kill him."

I was shocked. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind. I had imagined his arrest many times, particularly parading him in cuffs past the media so the world could see his face. But I never imagined killing him.

"Hopefully it won't come to that."

"You can't. If you do, you'll be no better than him."

I could tell she was becoming upset. I pulled my hand away and looked out to the kids running through the water.

"We sure make cute kids."

Kat laughed. "We could make another one, you know."

We had talked about it in the years after Kasia's birth, but now that she was getting older the topic seemed to have been put to rest. I wanted the kids close together. But maybe Kat was right.

"Girl or boy?" she asked.

I smiled at the thought of either. "A baby."

"Good answer. Anyway, I wouldn't mind some more time off work. Maybe you could take a few months too. Would be a nice break after all of this. I know the kids would love to have you home."

We held hands again as the kids chased each other around for what seemed like hours. Both of our minds were occupied—thoughts of painting the spare bedroom, buying clothes and a crib and introducing the kids to their new sibling.

Maybe she was right.

Cold and wet, we walked home along quiet streets lined with trees and well-kept lawns, praising the warmth of the sun as our clothes began to dry. My phone had yet to ring, a wonderful silence, and I offered prayers to gods I didn't believe in for the silence to last through the night.

A change of clothes later we saddled up our bicycles and strapped on our helmets. It was nearing five o'clock and an afternoon in the sun and water had left our stomachs rumbling. It was a short ride to the best all-you-can-eat sushi joint in town. The kids had been introduced to Japanese food at an early age—teriyaki salmon and inari, edamame and fried pork in ginger sauce by the age of one, raw fish and everything else by the age of two.

This was another minor point of disagreement between Kat and me. She would cite books and websites that forbade raw fish for children. I argued that Japanese

kids eat sushi all the time, which did convince Kat to be more lenient on the suggested age. Now the kids did me proud as Kat looked on in astonishment. Nothing was taboo to them, be it octopus or squid, scallops or flying fish eggs; not even deep-fried capleins (a small, entire and intact fish battered and fried) caused them to turn their noses up as they bit into the heads and tails with delight. Pride as a parent can come from many unforeseen sources.

With the buffet beaten threefold—three times as much food eaten as we had to pay for—we mounted our metal steeds and suffered through the uphill ride home, carrying quite a bit of extra weight. That amount of food eaten in such a short time put us all a near comatose state. It was a wonderful way to end the day, as we all crashed in the family room, Kasia snuggled up in my arms on the couch while we watched cartoon superheroes and villains battle it out over Metro City. It was our fourth time watching Megamind yet it didn't stop me from laughing.

The sun fell beneath the horizon while the movie played, and by the time the credits rolled darkness reigned. A new moon left us with only the pale orange glow of streetlights seeping through the windows. With their teeth brushed and pajamas on, Link and Kasia climbed into bed with Kat and I for our evening story time. We were halfway through our third visit to *The Secret World of Og*, a classic which my parents had read to me.

Three chapters later—I had set the limit at two when we began reading—we tucked the kids into their respective beds and kissed them both goodnight. The night belonged to Kat and I now.

Thirty minutes later I was asleep on the couch with Kat wrapped up in my arms.

## Chapter 7

I awoke a few hours later to find myself still on the couch. Whether I had looked too peaceful to move or Kat had wanted a silent night's sleep I did not know. I rose, folded up the blanket Kat had lovingly draped over me and stumbled into the kitchen. The “clean” light was lit upon the dishwasher—at least Kat had remembered to start it before she went to bed. I removed a tall glass and went to the fridge for juice to remedy my parched throat, a consequence of sleeping with my mouth open and snoring like a banshee. I took hold of the handle then pulled open the fridge. The glass dropped to the ceramic below. It shattered into countless pieces that danced across the floor like droplets of water on a hot surface. It was now a puzzle that would never be put back together.

I stood transfixed, my right hand on the door handle, my left hand upright as though the glass was still there. I stared deep inside the recesses of the refrigerator and the deepest corners of my mind. There, next to the salsa, the skull was staring back at me with an insane grin.

“Link?”

The sound of breaking glass must have been enough to rouse Kat. I never heard her enter the kitchen.

I didn't turn my head or break my stare.

"Link, what are you staring at?"

"The skull. Don't you see it?"

Kat put her left hand on my shoulder and closed the fridge door with her right. I felt a slight pain in my shoulder as she squeezed me tight, trying to wake me up. Sleepwalking would have been a welcome explanation to what I saw. Either that or waking up and finding I had never left the couch. I knew that I would not be so lucky.

"I'm awake," I said, then began to cry. "I'm losing it, Kat. I'm slipping."

I crumpled to the floor and Kat sunk to the cool tile with me. She held me from behind, her arms tight over my shoulders and around my chest.

"You're not, Link. You're not," she said. "It's just this case, it's getting to you."

She was right, she had to be. There was something about the way he deliberately chose strangers and marked them for death. It was a horror I had never seen before.

I should have felt better, the warm arms of the woman I loved around me and a rational explanation whispered in my ear weren't enough. Why would this case take me back to woods I now remembered—woods I had camped in as a child? And why the buried skeleton?

I knew there was something more to it. But what?

## Chapter 8

I awoke to the alarm on my cell phone the next morning feeling strangely refreshed after a dreamless night. The cathartic act of sobbing into my wife's arms must have cleansed my mind.

The killer had not struck that night. It was only six thirty though, and there was still time for someone to come home and find his wife or girlfriend dead. I forced the thought away and tried to focus on something happier; hoping that not thinking it would keep it from happening. The house was silent. Kat had been sound asleep when I left the room. Not even the alarm had made her stir. Link and Kasia would not be up until after I had left, hitting the road an hour after I had risen.

I showered and shaved before donning my standard black suit, a lime green shirt and grey patterned tie the only difference from my last day at work. I was out the door on time, climbing into the red Mini Cooper I had wanted since the new models came out. It was a tight fit for a family of four, but with a van as our second vehicle, Kat agreed that I should have a fun car. She seemed to enjoy it as much as I did. The pickup trucks and giant SUVs that filled the detachment lot dwarfed my Mini, and my coworkers had laughed when I first rolled into the lot with it. But now that gas was rising again, I was the one laughing.

I made it out of the city without difficulty, the light pre-church Sunday traffic keeping the roads clear. The line-up at Tim Horton's was empty as I stopped for a large green tea for myself and a large double-double for Kara. I should have

followed the unwritten rules of the service and let the rookie buy, but it felt uncouth to pin everything on the less senior officer, especially since she was fast becoming as skilled an investigator as I.

I found myself facing Kara and her silver Toyota Prius, the only other economical car in the lot, as she made a right turn and I left into adjacent parking spaces. Kara and I climbed out, she relieved me of her coffee, and we strolled into the office. Our slow pace was still insufficient to keep us from the harsh realities of our work. We talked about our days off and for a moment enjoyed the fact that there were so many detectives on the case. It was nice to be able to take a break—we had both worked through our days off after the first two murders.

The morning briefing went as expected, with little new information to disseminate. Headquarters had approved the overtime to hire on an additional fifteen officers to patrol the area south of London. It was hoped that the increased presence would lead to either an arrest or at least it would deter another killing. There was no shortage of willing officers either. As soon as the e-mail had been sent out, people were scrambling to sign up—the fact that the last victim had been the wife of one of our own had moved people. The overtime hours were welcome as well. Additional cruisers would be spared from surrounding detachments and even the service's helicopter would make a nightly appearance—a front mounted infrared camera scouring the area.

It was almost nine now, and everyone in the meeting was breathing a collective sigh of relief. Quarter after eight had been the latest a murder had been called in.

“Detective Munroe, call dispatch immediately. Detective Munroe, call dispatch.”

The overhead page broke through the chatter in the room and all of us stared at the source of the sound, a speaker set in the ceiling tiles.

Damn it.

I walked to the phone and dialed the extension for dispatch.

“Munroe.”

“Lincoln, it's Jenna. There's been another. One uniform is already on scene, others en route. Are you ready for the address?”

I took out my pen and notebook and gave her the go ahead.

“Four-seventy-five Catherine Street, Ingersoll.”

“Thanks. Let uniform know we're on our way.”

Kara was already ready to go as soon as I hung up the phone. Within minutes we were on the road, an older model brown Chevy Malibu our stylish and obvious police ride. It took us just over twenty minutes to arrive with only a few laws broken. It had been a pretty silent ride, neither one of us knowing what to say. Two days. It had only been two days. Our silence spoke louder than words: the bastard needed to be caught.

I pulled up a few doors down from the address, a red bricked ranch-style home. Two Fords in the driveway a brief distance from the Ford plant were all I needed to see to know where at least one of the homeowners worked. The paramedics had cleared the scene already, leaving three police cruisers and an SUV parked on the street out front of the home. Crime scene tape had already been put out and an officer was standing guard out front of the residence.

The door opened and a uniformed Staff Sergeant I recognized all too well made his way out to the curb. "Real shit show in there," George said, an ineffable choice of words.

"What have we got, George?"

"You sure you want to know?"

"Just give me the details."

"Husband, James McLeod, is retired from Ford. He's pushing seventy and was working the night shift last night. Daughter says he's a Commissionaire, works in London keeping an eye on the downtown cameras. He made it home around eight-thirty and called his daughter. She knew it was him from the caller ID but he wasn't speaking, just breathing heavily."

Not good. Not good at all.

"The old man went silent, so she hung up the phone and called nine-one-one. Ambulance and the first officer, the female inside, got the call and made it here about ten to nine. Thinking they had an unresponsive male inside they went in, the door was unlocked. They could hear a faint beeping sound coming from the upstairs and went up to find an elderly woman in bed—I'm sure you know what she looked like—and the husband on the floor, the phone still in his hand. EMS figures it was a heart attack."

"Please tell me this is a joke."

"Wish it was, Lincoln, wish it was. The daughter came just after they found the bodies. They gave her the bad news and told her she wouldn't be able to go into the house. She lives just around the corner, so she went home to her family. She's... not doing well."

Two dead bodies inside and no one to tell the tale. Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, another murder occurs with the finder deceased and likely no other witnesses. If there was a break to be caught now would be a really good time for it.

I thanked George who said he'd be on scene until the bodies were removed. That would be awhile but crime scenes needed to be held. Kara and I went inside the older home decorated about as one might expect for an elderly couple. Floral patterned drapes and couches, kitchen and dining room furniture reminiscent of a sixties-era diner, doilies on every table surface and pictures from bygone years mixed with new photographs of grandchildren and family. The house had the undeniable smell of a grandmother's home, difficult to place but containing a combination of mothballs, Pine-Sol and the smell that comes from aged stuff; different but not unpleasant, like being in a second-hand book store.

The couple appeared to live comfortably—a nice flatscreen replacing the rabbit-ear model, a well-stocked fridge with better food than I had in mine and a gorgeous and rather new pool in the backyard which I presumed was more for the grandkids. The husband's job seemed to be more of a way to kill time than to make ends meet. Night shift at nearly seventy didn't appeal to me, but if he had worked nights most of his life it would be hard to change.

Nothing was out of place on the main floor. I then checked the basement, opening the door and looking down the steps. The basement was completely unfinished and appeared to be cluttered to a point that even walking would be difficult.

“Leave it ‘til later?”

Kara read my mind. “Yeah, probably nothing down there for us.”

I made my way down the hallway toward the master bedroom, walking on a clear plastic runner that covered the pale green carpet. The body of the husband was visible before I reached the door to the bedroom, his feet just inside the room and his head toward the bed. His shirt was ripped open and electrodes were on his chest, evidence that EMS had tried to resuscitate him.

The woman still sat in the bed, leaning against the headboard and nude as the day she was born. Her lower half was covered by the blankets. The area paramedics were well aware of this case and knew as soon as they entered the room that there was nothing they could do for her. They would have checked for signs of life but left the body otherwise undisturbed.

Kara and I spent hours searching the scene for anything at all, the Forensics team doing the same. No one found anything that would lead us to the killer. Everything was back to normal, as normal as it could be. This killing was exactly like the others, save for the message that came with the third killing.

My phone rang as I was looking through the couple’s personal effects in the main bathroom. Numerous medications prescribed to both of them lined the interior of the medicine cabinet, cluttered the counter and sat hidden away in the drawers. Everything from blood thinners, anti-cholesterol medication and nitroglycerin to ointments, creams, lotions and even Viagra.

“Detective Munroe.”

“Detective, it’s Leonard Heisenberg.”

No further introduction was required. Dr. Heisenberg was the forensic psychologist and behavioural expert for the OPP. He was also a hell of a profiler.

“Go ahead.”

“I’ve been reading through the last case and looking at some of the details. The killer showed a sense of remorse for killing a pregnant woman. It’s likely he feels some guilt for all of the murders but has a reason he considers just. I was just informed that there was another murder, is that correct?”

“I’m at the scene now. An elderly woman, husband died of an apparent heart attack when he found her. There’s nothing else different about this one.”

He paused for a moment, taking in the dual loss of life. “What a shame. Too much for him to handle it would seem.” Another pause. “There is something different here—the time frames. Serial killers tend to speed up as they go along but two days in between killings is rather rare, especially for a murderer who clearly stalks his prey.”

“Unless he’s been keeping tabs on more than one at a time I’d have to agree. It would take time to determine the patterns of the couple and find a woman who’d be alone at night.”

“My professional opinion?”

“Always welcome.”

“His last murder left him unsatisfied. The fact that the young woman was pregnant was too much for him to bear. Though instead of letting his world crash down around him he struck out again in an attempt to regain control. If nothing else is different on this killing, I would believe that he has, in his mind, gotten back on track.”

“What about the husband dying? Wouldn’t that have changed the game for him as well?”

“Not necessarily. He chooses women who have someone living with them. He wants someone to find them, and I believe he wants them to feel agony and helplessness. This man dying as a result would likely bolster the suspect, make him feel as though he had succeeded better than ever before.”

I understood what he was saying but I was missing a major part—what it all meant.

Heisenberg seemed to sense the lingering question. “I believe, and were I a betting man I’d probably put a great deal on it, that he will not strike again for some time. A week or so, possibly up to two.”

A sigh of relief before I spoke. “That’s good news. But unfortunately we still have very little to go on. If this elderly woman was killed in haste, wouldn’t you think he might have made a mistake?”

“Your suspect is a perfectionist. Order is very important to him. He wouldn’t sacrifice his methods even if it meant having to give up a kill. I would hazard that the reason this last victim was elderly was that he was afraid of revisiting his previous crime. By selecting an older woman he didn’t run the risk of murdering another pregnant woman.”

“Thanks Doc.” I needed to ask it again, just to be certain. “So you think we’re on offense for a while?”

“I do. A week, two if you’re lucky. Make them count.”

I had to do it, even if it was just for my benefit. “No uncertainty?”

Heisenberg laughed. “Is that a joke?”

“Only in principle,” I said.

“Clever, Detective.” He was still laughing faintly. “Good luck,” he said.

I pressed “end call” and slid the phone back into its holster on my belt. Kara was pleased when I relayed the doctor’s opinion but I could tell that our thoughts were the same: if he didn’t kill again, would we have any chance to catch him? We had been playing cleanup for so long while waiting for an error—DNA left at the scene, hairs, fibres, a decent eyewitness, anything we could go on—that we weren’t sure we could catch him without another body.

It was a depressing thought and neither of us spoke beyond what was necessary as we finished up at the scene, delegated tasks to the other detectives and uniformed officers that had arrived, and returned to the office. The only satisfaction came from tearing off two pages of my calendar. It was June tenth now. Laconic; concise to the point of seeming rude or mysterious, using or involving the use of a minimum of words. How fitting as we sat in silence, pouring over documents and awaiting news that something had been found.

The call never came.

## Chapter 9

Three days had passed since the last murder and the good doctor's theories were presenting as fact. We all felt that we were in a sort of grace period. It was like the five days of celebration that never existed on the Julian calendar—an unmarked end to the year. Days that time itself forgot.

Spirits in the office were hard to track, high one moment as people thought about the time in between killings, then rock bottom when they realized we had spent the last three days dissecting old case files without seeing anything new.

It was 9:30 a.m. now and I was well into my third green tea. My son's mug was sitting in front of me, steam escaping from its rim. Kara had been silent for the last hour. Her desk was clean as she went through file after file on the computer, an approach I had yet to master.

New photos and documents cluttered my desk with the previous case folders right beside me, ready to pull out for a comparison. There were consistencies: strangulation; the postmortem removal of flesh; the posing of the bodies; the lack of blood; the absence of physical evidence; the borrowed knife left on the bedside table; the woman home alone while her significant other worked the night shift; the rural neighbourhoods; the lack of alarm systems.

We knew the killer had to stalk his victims to make sure they fit his profile, but we didn't know how the killer picked his victims in the first place or how long he stalked them for. None of the regular motives fit. It wasn't sex—the women were stripped, but there were no signs of any sexual contact and the theft of their clothes only meant the killer was cleaning up after himself. It wasn't money—nothing was ever stolen with the singular exception of Dupuis's lipstick, again cleaning up after himself. It wasn't revenge—there was nothing to link the victims together. It wasn't even the sadistic enjoyment of killing—following Dupuis's death and Heisenberg's take on it, the killer didn't seem to enjoy his crimes. All that seemed left was a twisted sense of duty. He was killing for somebody else's good. But whose?

I was pondering this question when my phone rang. I removed it from the holster and checked the call display—private caller. Likely another officer.

"Detective Munroe."

"Link?" I already knew who it was, only one person still called me Link. "It's Chen-Chen."

"I know. Link's my son's name now, Chen."

"Well aware, don't care. You'll always be Link to me. My way of thanking you for dubbing me Chen-Chen."

We both laughed. Talking to Chen always brought me back to our days of training, both at Headquarters in Orillia and at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer.

Not too far from where many of the killings had taken place.

"Shit."

"What?" Chen said.

"I just thought of something, Chen. You know the case I'm on?"

"Everyone does, man. It's big news."

"We've got nothing, no evidence to link to the killer whatsoever. Perfectly clean crime scenes. But it just hit me, what if the killer is a police cadet at Aylmer? They'd know enough about forensics to keep the scene clean, they'd be able to



sneak out at night, kill, and make it back with plenty of time to get back into bed before their podmates woke up.”

Chen didn’t say anything. I swore I could hear wheels grinding.

“It’s possible. That would ruin us if it was true. A police cadet serial killer? Respect for the police would take a nosedive.”

“Yeah, I hope I’m wrong. I probably am.”

“It’s worth checking out though.”

“I guess.” I hesitated, unsure I wanted to ask the question. “So why did you call?”

Chen and I had become very close friends in the thirteen weeks we lived at the college. The dorms there are made up of “pods,” a common living area and bathroom connected to ten small, individual bedrooms. Ten men, two showers, one television, one toilet, thirteen weeks—it made for intimacy. Apparently the women’s pods were nicer but I never found a reason to visit one. Regardless of gender, you either bonded or spent the entire time at each other’s throats. Chen and I bonded.

Chen was born in nineteen-seventy-six to Chinese immigrants who had moved to Toronto from Beijing. Chen’s mother was seven months pregnant when the plane landed. By accident or fate they settled in the Little Italy area of Toronto and, as is often the case with Chinese families, they gave Chen two names: a Chinese name, Yu, and what they believed to be a strong English name given their surroundings—Vincenzo. Growing up, Chen had gone by Vincenzo, Vincent, Vinny and Vin at various points. By the time police college came around he had switched back to Vincent in an attempt to appear professional.

Three weeks into college most of us were using last names for everyone, partly due to the shirts we had to wear in defensive tactics training: white with our last names on them in large black letters. The Vincent fell by the way side and Chen became the moniker applied. We were sitting in the common area watching a football game on the television when I realized if we dropped the ‘Vin’ and the ‘zo’ our dear friend became Chen Chen. It stuck, and made its way with him to his new posting up near Algonquin Park.

Chen and I had taken very similar paths, finding ourselves at homicide desks within a month of each other. We tried to keep in touch, but we’d been able to do it less than we would have liked. Facebook had changed that, making it easy to see what the other was up to and giving us a forum to share photos of our children—another realm in which we showed marked similarities. Chen’s son was born two months before Link and his daughter a week and a half after Kasia.

“I need you out here.”

“What for?” I asked.

“What for?” An echo. “Were you even listening last week?”

I scanned through my memories with little luck. I barely remembered Chen calling me and obviously I had forgotten the topic completely. Something about a missing body?

“I’ve been busy here. Remind me.”

“We’ve got a shallow grave burial in Algonquin Park, looks like an old one. Camper found a skull sticking out of the dirt and called it in. They had to leave the

area to get a cell signal and then couldn't find their way back to it. Took us a week, but we finally found the remains."

My eyes stood unblinking and my heart began to race. I could hear the heavy pounding in my chest. Nothing else existed in the room save for me and the phone.

"I... I..."

"It's alright, Link. I know you're busy. We need you for two days tops. They're excavating the body later today and I was hoping to get you here. You're the only detective we have with a degree in anthropology, not to mention experience on a dig site in university. We've got a professor from University of Ottawa coming to oversee the dig and he's bringing some students to assist."

"So what do you need me for?"

"You're our police perspective. You're uniquely qualified, Link."

I was getting enough control over myself to play it cool. "Flattery will get you nowhere. We're busy as hell here, Chen, I don't know if I can get away."

"My boss has already approved it. The plane is leaving Windsor in twenty minutes and is ready to touch down in London to pick you up. It's on its way to Ottawa to do some traffic enforcement on the four-oh-one there."

I thought of objecting again, but knew I had to go. It wasn't just helping out an old friend or that he'd gone through the trouble of having it approved on his end. The dreams, there had to be a reason they were so realistic. What was I missing? I couldn't understand why I would be having borderline prophetic dreams about what could have been a decades old murder. And Algonquin? Why a place I had never been? All I knew was that I needed to find out more.

"Give me a rundown on the terrain, Chen." The perfect question. He would assume I would be wondering about how to go about the dig.

"Lots of trees, pretty flat though. About a hundred metres tops from a river, fast moving bugger too, wish I'd brought my canoe. It's pretty rocky but there's a decent amount of soil, more than enough to bury a body in."

It was a match. Next question.

"How about the weather?"

"Gorgeous. Not a cloud in the sky and the sun is shining, there's a nice breeze too. Couldn't have asked for a better day."

And the knife? Did the skull talk? These were the questions I couldn't ask. Time to put my visions to the test.

"Chen, you might want to get some tarps ready. You'll be soaked soon."

"What do you mean?"

"It's going to piss down rain like you would not believe."

"What the hell, Link, you a meteorologist now too? Or maybe a psychic? The sky is bluer than I've ever seen and we aren't supposed to get any rain up here for a few more days."

"Don't say I didn't warn you. I'll ring you back if I can make it."

I hung up the phone on a very confused Chen and gave Kara the benefit of being first to hear about the request for my services. My next order of business was to call Detective Inspector McCaffrey and convince her to let me go. It was a hard sell, but with Dr. Heisenberg's theory that we would be without work for a few more days, Kara's undeniable abilities and the additional detectives on the case I

won out. I had to; there was not a chance that I wouldn't be on that plane even if I had to face neglect of duty charges to do it. Of course, it helped that I swore to McCaffrey that if another murder occurred I would be at the scene before the coroner removed the body if it required me chartering a private plane out of my own pocket.

I really hoped that wasn't going to happen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Less than an hour later I was standing on the tarmac at London International Airport awaiting the OPP Cessna 206 Turbo used primarily for traffic enforcement. With a top speed of just over two hundred and sixty kilometres per hour it was also a highly effective means of transport.

Takeoff was nice and smooth for such a small plane, my first experience with anything other than a passenger jet. It was a nice view and the pilot and copilot regaled me with some of the highlights of their careers.

We touched down after only a few hours in the air, landing on a private airstrip not far from the meeting place—a small hotel well within the confines of the park and an hour from the remains. Chen greeted me by holding the hotel door open as I rushed in and out of the pounding, pouring rain.

“What are tomorrow's lottery numbers, you son of a bitch?”

A pleasant greeting. “Check your horoscope, ass-hat. How the hell should I know?”

“Link ‘Nostradamus’ Munroe predicted the weather just fine. I figured he'd be able to give me a leg up on the lotto as well. Looks like you left him back in London and brought boring Link along.”

I slugged Chen in the right shoulder before lacing into him with a tirade of expletives. Old friends and college buddies have a unique way of communicating. Chen and I were no different.

“Seriously, how'd you do it?”

“I don't know, Chen. Just a feeling.”

“Alright, who killed the bastard then?”

Another punch to his shoulder. “For all I know, Chen, it could have been you.”

## Chapter 10

I woke bright and early the next day to the sound of Chen doing his morning calisthenics in the adjoining room. There was an old Chinese proverb he often reminded me of: no one who gets up before sunrise three-hundred and sixty days a year will fail to make his family rich. Chen seemed to live by this. He was the first to rise every day at college, a five kilometre run and forty laps in the pool done before the rest of us even stirred. Not being a morning person, it was one of the few things I hated about Chen.

Without my calendar I had to think for a moment; June fourteen—I wondered what the word of the day had been. I didn't dream again last night, which surprised me; the proximity alone should have been enough to trigger another

entry into my own private hell. But my sound night's sleep may have been the aftereffect of a mickey of scotch split between Chen and I—Glenlivet, a good specimen yet still affordable.

I showered, shaved and got dressed; my black suit packed carefully in my overnight bag. I only brought one shirt and tie—Chen made it clear that I would only be here two days. Despite the terrain we would be facing protocol remained and I had no choice but to wear a suit.

Downstairs Chen and I met in the lobby of the hotel. It was 7:15 a.m.; Chen was never late. "Any new predictions?" he asked as he approached.

"Yeah, you're paying for breakfast."

Chen laughed and nodded. I was right of course, but Chen wouldn't drag me all the way down here then expect me to pay for my meals.

"Obvious," he said. "Any others?"

"Keep asking questions like that, and you'll regret it."

Chen took a fighting stance. "Big words, tough guy."

"Let's go. Those other guys took my plane away. Hopefully you have a car?"

"SUV. We'll need it to get as close to the scene as I'd like to."

We walked out to the parking lot and got into the vehicle, Chen taking the wheel of the black and white Chevrolet Tahoe. The crime scene was a short distance as the crow flies, however the terrain required a more deliberate path and a reduced speed. The conversation was stagnant both during the ride and our early morning meal at a small and out of the way family run restaurant. It amazed me that even here in the midst of what seemed to be a forgotten world, wilderness lost in time, one could still find a good bacon and egg breakfast.

We spoke little and as is often the case it was the words we never said that formed the real conversation. Our breakfast rushed, we were back on the road with little time lost. I knew Chen believed in fate—that everything happened for a reason and that each person had a specific role to play as the wonders and mysteries of the universe unfolded. Perhaps I shouldn't have predicted the downpour of rain; Chen was not one to take such matters lightly.

But... how did I know about the rain? Why did Chen call me out of the blue to assist on a case hundreds of kilometres away while I was in the middle of a serial killer investigation? How did I know the details of the scene and its location? And how, in the midst of a major case, did I get leave to travel to Algonquin Park to assist on an excavation? I often joked with Chen that the universe had better things to do than micromanage the minutiae of my life. But maybe Chen was right.

Or maybe it was all just a coincidence, especially the rain.

No matter how many hours of thought I put into this, I would never be able to determine the reason for it all. There was no choice but to follow along blindly and hope that all would become clear in time. I had my doubts. And my fears. A part of me never wanted to realize the truth, whatever it might be.

Chen was steering us down a narrow road. The thick canopy of trees overhead lent an aura of twilight to the otherwise bright day. A small sedan approached as I was lost in thought, staring out the windshield without an ounce of attention paid. I didn't notice the vehicle's headlights turn on. They didn't draw my attention until they began flashing, drawing my attention outward once again.

It was the same pattern I had seen in my first dream. But this time, the pattern started at a different point. I shifted in my seat, panicked hands rendered useless from a rush of endorphins as I clawed my belt for my cell phone. I removed it and fumbled at the keypad, taking three attempts to unlock the device. I typed 'Morse code' into the internet browser and within seconds I had the Morse code alphabet in front of me. I remembered learning it as a kid, just for fun, but it was long since forgotten.

Deciphering the message was not a simple task, especially since I had to fend off Chen's questions. He hadn't mentioned the lights, and I was going to assume he couldn't see them.

The pattern was clear in my mind. Long, short, long, short, short, short, long, long, short, short, short, short. The problem was where did the pattern begin? How was it broken up into individual letters?

I started at the end—four shorts in a row was an odd combination and limited me to H, II, EEEE, ES, or SE. And that was only if the long before the four shorts wasn't connected.

"Five minutes out, Link."

Chen's announcement caused further panic. I needed to know what it meant, what my dreams were trying to tell me. I worked fast but it was to no avail, there were too many possible combinations. Why had I seen the lights, what triggered my vision? I was thinking about the dreams, about fate, about finding the truth.

That was it, it had to be.

I looked back to the alphabet: T, long; R, short, long, short; U, short, short, long; T, long; H, short, short, short, short. TRUTH.

Stifling a victory cry I checked it again, then verified my findings again and again until we arrived within walking distance of the scene. Chen parked the vehicle and I was left to consider the significance of the message at another time.

\* \* \* \* \*

The road had been rough, rocks and mud and fallen branches in the path of our vehicle. Chen had guided us through and over all of the obstacles with a master's touch and I, I had not noticed a thing. Looking back up the path we had come down I was amazed by my own determination and single minded focus.

Chen escorted me to the scene. Fresh markings on the trees had been left to guide our way. Through the foliage I could make out a yellow line, stark contrast to the green and brown that filled my vision. There were faint voices coming through the trees as well as the footsteps of someone moving through the underbrush. This area was not well-traveled, likely seen by only a few determined hikers and campers each year. Those who did see this area likely came by river—canoes and kayaks being popular methods of travel through the nearly eight thousand square kilometres of the provincial park.

As we approached the scene I was struck by a sense of familiarity. This was my first visit to Algonquin Park, ever, and yet, it felt as though I had been there before. Images flashed in my mind: my father standing strong before the trees as the sun rose in the morning; my father again, weariness in his eyes as he carried me through the woods; and waking up to the sun breaking through the trees, my skin wet with dew.

My father had taken me camping once before when I was just a child. But that had been to Cyprus Lake, a park near Tobermory at the tip of the Bruce Peninsula hundreds of kilometres away. The terrain was similar—rocky ground, coniferous trees, cold, clear waters. I must have been confusing myself, distant memories blurring the lines between the past, present and imagined.

I no longer needed Chen as a guide. I walked a direct line to the skull, following a path I had taken before. The skull was positioned just as I had seen it, the dirt washed away from around it, revealing the white bone. It looked fake, like a skull stolen from a medical classroom, too perfect to be real. I could see only minor damage, cracks and wear caused by the passage of time.

There was no knife dangling above the skull, no message in blood. And much to my delight the skull did not speak to me.

“We haven’t started excavating at all yet,” Chen said. “We only found it again late yesterday. Last week a couple of interior campers had packed up their tents from the night before and were hiking to their next campsite when they came across the skull. Bones are nothing new to hikers in here—deer, bear, wolves, you name it, and having watched too many episodes of CSI, a lot of people assume they’re human. This is the first one I’ve heard of where they were right.”

“Hard to mistake this for an animal skull,” I said.

Chen laughed.

“When they said it was a skull I knew it was a real one. Then it was just a matter of finding it again.”

“How long do you figure the body’s been here?”

“The anthropologist from the University of Ottawa, Dr. Conroy, estimated it was at least ten to fifteen years, given the state of the skull and the complete skeletonization. He was surprised that the body hadn’t been dug up by scavengers, being so close to the surface.”

“When is the doctor due?”

“Right now.”

The reply from behind startled me. This was happening more and more often. My unshakeable detective exterior was falling apart—assuming I had ever had an unshakeable detective exterior. I turned around to see an older male, unkempt hair and beard, standing beside me. Had I not attended university I would have assumed him to be a well-dressed vagrant. I had met a number of professors with similar style, their research far more important than a haircut and shave.

I stretched out my hand and introduced myself. He shook my hand and said, “So you’re the one with the background in anthropology?”

“If you call an honours B.Sc. and a single dig a background. I have a feeling Detective Chen here has been exaggerating my qualifications.”

Conroy smiled. “Don’t worry, Detective. I’m not threatened by you.”

Had it not been for the genuine smile, I wouldn’t have known how to take his comment, the monotone delivery wiping away all possible traces of humour or sarcasm.

“I won’t get in your way. Chen just wants me here to oversee this from a police perspective, evidence gathering and that, I guess.” I looked at Chen. “Why exactly am I here, Chen?”

“You’re an expert, Link,” he said with a wink. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

I shook my head as I made eye contact with Conroy. I was nothing of the kind and these days, so many years since university, all I could be described as was an anthropology enthusiast.

“Address your staff, Detective Munroe,” Conroy said, as he waved his hand in a grand gesture to the dozen young and eager students standing a short distance from us.

“What? Really?”

“Yes, really. Most of these students have only worked archaeological sites. Some have never dug at all. Who better than to direct them on how to perform at a crime scene?”

“Chen?” I said to a mixture of chuckles and shaking heads. “Right.” I felt like I was being interviewed for the OPP all over again, a board of high-ranked officers judging my every word. Then I called the group over and felt more powerful. All of them were fixed on me and awaiting my direction. If only I could get my children to pay attention so well.

“My name is Lincoln Munroe, I’m a detective with the OPP out of London. Detective Chen requested I assist on this case. He is the lead detective and will be the person you will all report to should you find anything of note.” This is a crime scene as I am sure you have all deduced by now. Based on your professor’s estimate we are looking at a murder that occurred when you, and perhaps even I, were still children. The first forty-eight hours after a homicide are the most important to investigators when it comes to gathering evidence and apprehending the suspect. We are well outside of that window.”

I paused for an appreciative chuckle.

“Everything here will be of interest until determined otherwise. If you dig up something you think is garbage, report it to Detective Chen or to me. It may well be that the only evidence is the body itself. Due diligence is obviously necessary. For those of you who have worked on ancient burials this is different. This person’s family is likely still alive and still wondering what happened to their loved one. Think of them as your mother or father and work as if solving their murder depended on you and you alone.”

That brought a few nods.

“Continuity and documentation are of the utmost importance. We will be conducting an excavation of the skeleton and a grid-dig of an area encompassing ten metres square around the burial site. Report to Dr. Conroy for your assignments and further direction. It’s a pleasure to work with all of you.”

I stepped off of my proverbial soapbox to a slap on the back from Chen. Dr. Conroy said, “A forensic anthropological St. Crispin’s Day. Well said, detective.”

The blood rushed to my cheeks as the embarrassment I used to feel speaking in public came rushing back.

\* \* \* \* \*

The dig went on from 8:30 a.m. until nearly 6:00 p.m. We still had light to work by, but I could tell the students were exhausted. The majority of them didn’t seem to mind and were eager to continue working. It was a labour of love for many of them, and those who didn’t enjoy it were apt to rethink their career choice or try to focus on research and teaching. It was not easy work being bent over all day in the

hot sun. The dense leaves above us blocked out much of the sunlight but did little to stifle the heat and humidity that seemed to be trapped at ground level.

We found nothing aside from the skeleton itself. Dr. Conroy had overseen the excavation of the skeleton and had called me over at various times to show me the progress and ask my opinion on things. But he was humouring me. From the way Chen had spoken of him, the man did not need assistance.

"Detective," he said at one point, "I think we have cause of death."

I knelt next to the site to find that the dirt had been cleared from the rib cage. One rib on the left side of the body was missing and the rib above it had been cut through mere centimetres from the sternum. Exactly the same wounds I had seen in my dream.

A surge of adrenaline brought me to my knees. My stomach heaved and I rose against my will, then ran as fast and as far as I could before vomiting on the damp ground. The trees spun around me, twirling in a chaotic dance as my head reeled in pain and I choked on the remnants of my breakfast. I was on my knees again, staring at my loss of control, when I felt the faint touch of a hand on my shoulder.

"Link?"

"I'm fine, Chen. I'm fine."

He tightened his grip.

"Just give me a minute, Chen."

He removed his hand. Light and cautious steps echoed like thunder in my ears as Chen backed away, leaving me to myself.

A few minutes later the nausea had subsided and the throbbing in my ears had faded to little more than a dull drumming. I stood up, brushed the dirt and leaves off of my formerly clean suit and returned to the crime scene.

"Must be the heat," I said, lying through my foul-smelling teeth. "You have any gum, Chen?"

"Sure." He handed me a pack. "Have a few pieces, for our sake."

I forced a smile and turned back to Dr. Conroy. I was just about to ask him to tell me what he had found when Chen interrupted.

"Hey, Link? You sure it's the heat? I mean, hell, aren't your ancestors from the Congo?"

"Only on my father's side Chen. My mother is Irish and hates the heat. Can we get on with this?" Sometimes having detectives for friends makes having friends difficult.

Conroy went back to business, saving me from Chen's interrogation. "Parts of the skeleton have shifted over time, you'll see some parts are higher than others. The skull was the highest point. See here, beneath the skeleton?"

"A tree root?" The root was thicker than my arm and ran the full length of the skeleton.

"Looks like that might have helped push the body to the surface."

Conroy was looking straight at me now as if Chen were no longer there. "It would take a sharp knife and a lot of force to make this cut." Conroy pointed to the severed rib. "It's a clean cut, and although it's too early to say for certain, it's just above where the heart would have been. Cause of death may have been a knife wound to the chest."



A hunting knife, wooden handled with a silver blade. That would be the murder weapon.

"We'll find the missing rib fragments as we dig further. Based on what I can see here, dimensions of the pelvis and the size and shape of the skull, I would say we're looking at a Caucasian male, in his thirties. The wisdom teeth have fully erupted and there is significant wear on them. I should be able to narrow down the age after the bones have been removed and I make it to the morgue. I'll take some soil samples from under the body as well. Once I've done the postmortem I'll send a bone off to CFS for a DNA profile."

"Thanks, doctor," I said as I took my leave feeling more hindrance than help. CFS, The Centre for Forensic Sciences, was located in Toronto and was where police services sent evidence to be analyzed. They were capable of performing DNA matches, analyzing blood samples for drugs or alcohol, and performing a vast number of other tasks as required.

"Can you send the damaged ribs as well? They might be able to get to work identifying the weapon." Conroy looked at me and nodded.

The excavation had gone well. Two thirds of the area had been dug out to a depth of fifteen centimeters. It was unlikely that the murderer would have buried the body in one place and evidence in another. The purpose of searching the area surrounding the body was to attempt to locate anything that may have been discarded by the killer or belonged to the victim and had been buried under years of leaf litter.

Conroy had been right—the rib fragments were at the bottom of the grave, resting on the undamaged ribs. His cause of death was looking accurate; the bones had been cut leaving a smooth edge on either side. Forensic analysis once the skeleton had been removed would assist in determining the weapon used.

There were no other visible injuries on the skeleton to account for cause of death. There were healed breaks on the right femur, left ulna and the index finger and middle finger on the right hand. The victim apparently lived a rough life, and medical records might help identify him.

We broke for the night, the skeleton removed by the coroner, who was less than happy to make the trip. The skeleton would be in the morgue by sundown, the students dosing up on Robaxacet, and Chen and I enjoying a beer or two since the scotch had disappeared the previous night.

Chen promised me that we would be done by noon tomorrow and I would be flying back into London, ready to work the following day. Kara had sent me a few text messages with nothing new to add. She had been following up on the possibility of a police cadet being the culprit but with four hundred students at the police college (nearly three hundred males) it was not an easy task.

It was late by the time I made it back to the hotel room. I only hoped that Kat hadn't decided to put the kids to bed early. The phone rang only twice before I got my answer.

"Daddy," Kasia said.

"Hey, honey. How was your day?"

"Good. We went outside for gym class and played on the climbers. It was fun."

I smiled. "That's awesome. Are you guys getting ready for bed?"

"Yep. Mommy's just going to read to us. Link wants to talk to you. Bye."

I didn't even have time to say bye back before Link was on the phone.

"Guess what?"

"What, buddy?"

"I got two goals in soccer today."

I beamed. "Nice work." He had been practicing hard lately and it had obviously paid off. "I'm proud of you."

"Gotta go, mommy wants the phone. Bye, Daddy."

Again, off the phone before I could respond.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Kat. Good day?"

"Not bad, yourself?"

"Hectic and hot. We should be done fairly early tomorrow, then I'll be on my way home."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

Never underestimate a woman's intuition. I hadn't had the chance to tell her why I needed to go. I guess the details of my dreams that I had filled her in on were enough for her to figure it out.

"Not yet, but there has to be a connection. Why else would I be having these dreams? Everything is coming true. I think I'm remembering..." I hesitated, unable to say it for what it could mean. "...something."

"Well, hurry home. I'll see you tomorrow. Love you."

"Love you too."

I hung up the phone and put my head in my hands. My next call was to Chen's room to cancel on the beers. I was asleep by ten that night, exhausted both physically and mentally.

There would be no sound sleeping tonight, of that I was certain.

## Chapter 11

I enter hell once again and stand alone in the middle of the partially excavated crime scene. The skeleton still lies, unmoving, in the ground. I walk around the area, searching for... something, anything. There's nothing. The knife is absent and the skull is free of blood. My body aches, duller than before but enough to remind me of the pain I had suffered on my previous visits.

I sit down in the dirt beside the skeleton hoping for another message. I am in control, I choose where I go and what I do. I have never had a dream like this.

This time I want to stay.

I walk through my subconscious and dig through memories long since buried. The skull bears no messages, no writing in blood. A knife flashing the word 'truth,' a skull asking the question 'why.' I try to understand the messages. The victim asks why and the knife will lead me to the truth.

I look at my surroundings and can't shake the thought that I have been here before. The area is so familiar, the trees and the river recognizable. I know of no way to prove that my reality and my dreams are one in the same.

Birds chirp overhead and insects fill the breaks with their own music. I sit on the ground, damp to the touch yet leaving me dry. The rushing river and wind in the leaves provide the backing vocals to nature's orchestra. Peaceful, serene, I revel in a dream that has not left me battered and broken.

My quiet reflection is shattered as the day turns to night. A full moon high in the sky brightens the world around me. Screams echo through the trees, two men. Their voices are raised, a muffled argument. One voice is filled with hatred and fear, the other with pure, unbridled rage. I close my eyes and focus to locate the source through the dark.

A branch breaks beside me and I open my eyes. The men are fighting now, a vicious tangle of limbs flailing around on the ground. I see no faces, make out no features—just two silhouettes in a darkened night.

All of the pain comes rushing back and I can't move, my mind slips away and I lose consciousness.

The morning light breaks through the trees when I come to, a mound of disturbed dirt to my right and one of the men standing to my left. Pain distorts my vision and all I see is the blurred shape of a person, tall and well-built. My eyes close against my will and I force myself to keep them open, squinting to see the man in front of me.

He leans down and runs his fingers through my hair before I black out again.

## **Chapter 12**

I awoke with more questions than answers. Mysterious men, a fight that led to the death and burial of one of them and an unknown victor. There was no stopping the onslaught of images and thoughts that ran through my mind.

I sat up and eased my way out of bed, my left arm throbbing between my wrist and elbow. I couldn't move it and it dangled uselessly at my side. The pain reminded me of the only bone I had ever broken, my left ulna at the age of eight.

Of course. How stupid.

It had been on the camping trip with my father that I had broken my arm and suffered numerous other injuries. A tumble down a rocky embankment left me remembering nothing of what had happened before the fall to a while after. "Amnesia," the doctors had told my father. "Common following major trauma. He should regain most of the memories eventually."

I never had, and a thought of that accident hadn't crossed my mind in years. I had been eight years old and in a cast—my only worry was trying to hang out with friends who didn't know what to do with me. I couldn't swim, play ball or ride a bike. The majority of the summer was spent on the couch watching reruns of cartoons and waiting for my bone to mend.

The pieces were beginning to turn over, parts of the picture being revealed while the rest sat blank—brown cardboard backings staring back at me, waiting for me to flip them over and piece them together.

If only there was someone left who could help me. My mother had passed away two years ago after losing her battle with cancer. My father was still alive though only in body. His mind was gone, the advanced stages of Alzheimer's taking everything from him. Thinking of my father filled me with guilt. It had been more than a year since I'd visited him, and it was only as an afterthought that I thought of him anymore. The man I knew had been gone so long he didn't even know his wife had died.

When he had first gone into the nursing home, I had traveled home to Chatham once a week to see him. The visits became less and less frequent as his condition worsened and he began to lose track of my identity. I could be an orderly or a nurse, the cable repairman, a phone technician, a cleaner or a plumber, a priest or a doctor but I was no longer his son to him. He had forgotten me and I, with no excuse other than my own weakness, had forgotten him.

A knock at the door of my hotel room reminded me I had no time to dwell on the past. Chen was waiting for me and before long we pulled up at the scene, the doctor and eight of his students at the ready.

"Sorry about the turnout, boys," Conroy said. "Two had prior engagements and the other two, well, I don't think they're cut out for field work."

"No worries, doc," Chen said. "We don't have much left to do."

Less than a half an hour after our arrival, the team was already hard at work. I excused myself from the scene to take a look at the rest of the surroundings. Following the sound of the river took me to its banks. My reflection shimmered in the water. My left arm still hung by my side—I had managed to hide this from Chen but it glared back at me now, a testament to the power of the mind and the weakness of the body. I walked along the river, followed its path as it wound through the trees and stepped carefully on the loose, mist-sprayed rocks.

Fish danced on the surface as the water broke and swirled into eddies at my feet. I had to fight the urge to dive in. The temperature was climbing again and the moisture that hung in the air told me that this would be another stifling day. I knelt down and dipped my right hand into the water, cupping as much of the cool liquid as a single hand could hold. My hand met my mouth and I drank of the freshest water I had ever tasted, spring water taken right from the source. With my eyes closed it seemed easier to savour the taste as the water rolled down the inside of my throat. My eyes were still closed as I dipped my hand into the water and drank again, then a third time.

I opened my eyes and stood up. My hand was chilled, cold drops of water cascaded onto the rocks below. I shook my hand and the water that escaped turned crimson.

I closed my eyes again and tried to will the hallucination away, forcing myself to realize that it could not be real.

I took a deep breath and was once again ready to face my fears. The blood was gone and a man stood on my left. Did he really exist? He had to be at least sixty-five although he could have passed for older. It took a minute to notice his clothing—a park ranger.

"Sorry if I startled you," he said. He had a country voice, groomed by being raised on the farm listening to western music on the radio. "I've been watching you boys, watching you dig." He must have sensed my apprehension. "Not like that,

boy, I'm no creeper. I always wanted to be a cop, but in my day, well, let's just say I fell short of the standard."

I hadn't noticed his height until I looked down and saw that he was standing on a rock about half a foot taller than mine. The OPP and other police services used to have height requirements, something which had fallen by the wayside many years ago.

"It's interesting what you're doing, of course you're tearing up my park to do it." A smile formed, his lips parted and revealed a set of dentures. "Do you know, is it an adult or a child?"

I wasn't sure if I should answer him, that information was confidential and a major part of the investigation. But something about this old man set my mind at ease. "A man, in his thirties. He's been there a while."

"I wonder if it'll be William Jeffries then."

My ears perked up at the mention of a name to attach to the body. I took a step closer.

"It would have been the summer of eighty-four, end of June or beginning of July," he said. "I hadn't been working here too long at that point. A woman called us—his mother I want to say—saying that he was three days overdue from his camping trip. We knew the area where he'd been staying, I'd asked him as he passed through."

I nodded for him to continue.

"Another ranger and I went looking for him, found his tent still set up but couldn't find any sign of him. We called the police and they did a missing persons report. Never found him, but that isn't rare." He looked around as if wanting my gaze to follow his, nods cast in the direction of the various dangers of the terrain. "People walk off, get lost, get injured. We've even had a few come up here to kill themselves. The next summer a woman got attacked by a bear in this same area, she barely survived. I shot it a few days later. Everyone thought Jeffries had been killed by the bear."

"Any other missing people that stand out?"

"None that would fit the bill." He paused for a moment, "There were two boys went missing a few years before, not far from here. Both of them wandered off from their campsites in the night. The parents found some of their clothes by the river. It can get pretty hot here, and sleeping in a tent isn't something a lot of these kids are used to. I figure they went down to the river to cool off, maybe went in, maybe fell in accidentally while dangling their toes in the water."

"Did anyone ever find their bodies?"

"Not that I know of, but this river runs for miles and it can get going pretty fast. Drains out into a small lake too. Everything's connected in here, if they fell in who knows where they'd end up."

"Come take a closer look at what's going on, just stay outside of the gridlines."

His eyes lit up like a child at Christmas morning. "Thanks, detective."

"Lincoln." I held out my hand.

He took it with a grasp surprisingly firm for the frailty of his body. "Lesley Johnson, nice meeting you."

"You too." We walked back toward the scene as I attempted to work some life back into my left arm. Chen looked surprised to see me return with company, but

Lesley made short work of that, introducing himself to Chen and waving to Dr. Conroy.

"An enthusiast," I told Chen. "And he might have an ID on our skeleton, a missing person from eighty-four."

"William Jeffries," Lesley said. "Had his camp not far from here when he disappeared."

"People thought a bear had gotten him after a woman was attacked in this area the summer after," I said. "Maybe it wasn't a bear, unless Yogi learned how to shovel." Only Chen laughed.

Chen thanked Lesley for the information. "I'll get on the phone to the detachment, have them start pulling records. Maybe we'll get lucky and have some dentals on file for this Jeffries guy."

Chen made his way back to the SUV and I left Lesley to watch the dig, a vicarious yearning for a dream gone by. I walked around the perimeter of the grid myself. The students were hard at work digging out the last of the marked squares of dirt, and so far had brought nothing to our attention.

I weaved through the trees, last year's leaves crumpled under my feet. A gnarled tree stood tall in front of me, a twisted trunk and ragged branches jutting off in all directions. The roots rose out of the ground and dove back under, crossing over each other and growing together.

A glimmer of light caught my eye from underneath one of the roots, something hiding in the darkness.

Instinct drove me at this point. Whatever it was it had to be important, but was it more important to me or to the crime scene? I reached into my pocket—my left arm suddenly working again—and removed a quarter, then knelt down into the dirt. The root scratched against the back of my hand as my fingers wrapped around the object. I slid the coin into the dirt and rubbed it to make it dirty. I held the unknown object between my fingertips then tucked it into the sleeve of my jacket.

"What did you find?" A voice hollered in my direction, "or did your breakfast come up again?"

Now I knew why I had hidden the item. I raised the coin to my eye and answered Chen, "just a quarter, two-thousand-and-six. Definitely not related. Oh, and piss off."

"Roger on both counts," Chen said, but kept walking toward me.

I bladed my body, and hid my right side from Chen. With a slight motion the object dropped from my sleeve into my pants pocket.

Chen talked as he closed the gap between us. "I didn't get much information yet, the missing persons record is still on file. Not much else on this Jeffries guy though. We'll have to wait and see if Conroy or the coroner can make an ID. I have them checking for dentals. If not, maybe we can get some DNA and compare it to any living relatives."

"If that's our guy."

"Always the optimist, Link."

Chen stayed close to me for the remaining hour of the dig, then we drove back to the hotel together. There had been no chance to inspect the object, even answering the call of nature in the woods had prompted Chen to say he had to go

as well, and for whatever reason men see to urinate side-by-side, he had decided to tag along. At least women's bathrooms had separate stalls.

My fingers had traced the outline of the object through my pants numerous times, and left the inside of my pocket lined with dirt. The shape was clear—a watch with a broken metal band. Knowing what it was didn't make it better—I needed to see it, to inspect it.

Patience was a virtue I lacked in droves.

## Chapter 13

I emptied my pocket the moment I entered the hotel room and locked the door behind me. The watch was aged and weathered, I couldn't tell how long it had been hidden beneath the tree root but it must have been years. It was a simple watch—a silver Timex with an inset date counter, two numbers that switched over daily and had to be manually changed in the event of a month with less than thirty-one days.

I wanted to wash the watch clean but it was evidence—stolen evidence, but my training was hard to shake. My fingers rubbed some of the dirt away, just enough to see the details. I turned it over and inspected the back. There was an engraving made more prominent by the dirt that filled the grooves: L.C.M. IV, 1976.

Nausea and dizziness took over and forced me to sit on the toilet beside the sink.

Lincoln Charles Munroe the Fourth. My initials. The year I was born. It was my father's watch, given to him by his father when I was born.

Memories I hadn't touched in years came rushing back. The watch was a symbol that my father never removed—a symbol of family, loyalty and an oath made to a dead man.

I flashed back to my childhood and saw the watch sitting on my father's dresser while he was in the shower—the only time he ever took it off. I slipped the watch onto my thin wrist and closed the clasp, then stood in awe of the shiny silver against my dark skin. My father interrupted me when he walked back into his bedroom dripping wet with a towel around his waist.

"It looks good on you, Lincoln," he had said. "It'll be yours one day, a long time from now. But before then you'll have one of your own."

A confused look crossed my face along with a wide-eyed stare of anticipation.

"Your grandfather gave me that watch the day you were born." He reached for my wrist and undid the clasp, then pointed to the engraving. "Lincoln Charles Munroe the Fourth, nineteen-seventy-six. When you have a son, Lincoln the Fifth, I'll give you a watch like this one with a new inscription for your son and the year he was born. And he'll do the same for his son."

I nodded, happy and proud to be part of such an important family tradition.

"You and I, my father and my grandfather are all named after a very special man, a man who didn't care if people were black or white. One day I'll tell you more about him and what he did for our family." I thought I saw a tear form in his

eye. "It's because of him that we're here, alive and well in a country that accepted us regardless of our skin colour."

At that time I knew little of our family history and even less about what my father was saying. He kept the story close to his heart for a while, waiting until I was old enough to understand the horrors that people of colour had to endure.

My mind moved forward in time, a couple of years later, when I noticed my father wasn't wearing his watch. He wouldn't tell me what had happened to it or why he no longer wore it. "We can't wear these watches anymore, Lincoln, I wish I could explain it to you."

I cried in my bed that night, my face buried in the pillow so my father wouldn't hear me. The tradition that had meant so much to me was gone, along with it the chance of my own engraved watch. As often happens new memories take the place of the old but they are never erased, only buried deeper in the mind waiting to be pulled out.

Then the implications began to hit. My father had lied to me. We never set foot near Tobermory. We had gone to Algonquin... and something had happened, something so horrible my father had lied to me to protect himself and to protect me. It had been my father fighting with the other man in my dream and he had emerged victorious—he ran his hand through my hair to comfort me.

And we were digging the other man up now.

The truth struck hard and made me feel faint again. I was like a child seeing their own blood for the first time, and I was on the verge of passing out. The ceramic tile floor was cold as I lay down upon it. My heart wouldn't have to work so hard to get the blood to my brain this way, perhaps it would be enough to keep me conscious.

The accident on the camping trip, falling down an embankment and breaking my arm—it never happened. Something else happened to cause those injuries, something that led me to suffer blackouts at the same time my father was embroiled in a fight to the death. I needed to know more but I had no idea how to dig deeper.

The only person who knew the answers no longer existed. His body was still here but his mind was gone. Still, I had to try, I had to see if he remembered what had happened.

It only took a few minutes to pack my clothes and necessities. I closed the hotel room door behind me and knocked on Chen's door to say my goodbyes.

After a moment I heard footsteps approach and the deadbolt unlocked. The door opened and Chen stood inside in his boxers, his lean and muscular body inspiring a hint of jealousy. The years had been better to Chen, or perhaps he had been better to his body.

"I was just about to get in the shower. You leaving already?"

"Yeah, I've got a flight out soon. There's been nothing new happening back home but it won't be much longer until the proverbial excrement hits the fan."

"Understood," Chen said. "And Link?"

"Yeah?" The tone of his voice unnerved me.

"I'm your friend, Link. Never hide things from me again."

The fainting feeling came rushing back and it took everything in my power to hold on. "What are you talking about?"



“Your arm, Link. That old injury acting up again?”

I sighed. “Yeah, damn football injury.” The old injury was true, a torn rotator cuff during a high school football game. Of course that injury had been to my right arm, not my left. I praised Chen’s faulty memory.

“No need to hide that shit from me, Link.”

“I know, Chen. Sorry.”

“No worries.” He slapped me on what he thought to be my good shoulder. “Now go catch a murderer.”

“You too,” I said. “And keep me posted on this one. I’m curious to see how it’ll turn out and you know you’ll need my expert crime solving skills.”

“Whatever, Link. I’ll keep you posted. Fifty says I solve mine before you do.”

A hundred says I solve them both.

“A cold case versus a serial killer? I wish I were a betting man, Chen-Chen.”

We hugged as men do, a quick embrace and a slap on the back to cancel it out. I walked out to the waiting cruiser, my limousine to take me to the airfield.

## Chapter 14

I was greeted by two very happy children and a very tired wife upon my return home that night. It was late, nearly nine, and past Link and Kasia’s bedtimes. Kat had kept them up after I called her and told her I’d be home soon. There’s nothing like coming home and having your children sprint to the door and leap into your arms. That alone is reason enough to be a parent.

I had missed them so much and it didn’t take a detective to notice that the feeling was mutual. I fought back tears and picked them both up—a much harder task than it had been a few years prior—then carried them upstairs. They dressed themselves in their favourite pajamas and brushed their teeth before climbing into my bed. Four more chapters of *The Secret World of Og* later, they were both dozing off and I was not far behind. Kat joined us and with her help the children were tucked into the beds and sound asleep within minutes.

Kat came up behind me as I walked down the hall into our bedroom, and hugged me from behind until I felt the air rush. She had always been intuitive to a fault. My emotions were at the breaking point and I couldn’t stop the tears. I turned around and buried my face in her shoulder. Her soft hands caressed my back before she brought one up and ran it through my hair. Images of my father standing above me doing the same flashed upon my closed eyelids and all restraint I had felt by the wayside.

“My dreams, the hallucinations, this murder in Algonquin, it’s all related,” I said between sobs. “I think my father killed the man and I was there.”

“That can’t be true, Link, it can’t be”. She never called me Link, not since the day our son was born.

I took the watch out of my pocket and told her every detail.

“I know how it looks, Lincoln, but there has to be some other explanation. You’re an amazing detective, you’ll figure it out.”

She was trying hard, but it wasn't enough. I knew because I had been trying since I identified the watch.

"And if it was your father," she said, "I don't know. God, what should you do?"

I looked at her, her gentle pale blue eyes beginning to well up with tears as she realized the gravity. "I don't know. This may be one I keep to myself."

"Can you do that? You've got too much integrity for that. Hiding it would tear at you forever."

"He's an old man, and if it was him, that man doesn't exist anymore. Even if he wouldn't understand, I couldn't tell the world he was a killer, I couldn't destroy his legacy. He was, he still is, a good man."

"Even if he killed someone?"

I nodded. "Of course."

"Then there has to be more, keep looking Link." She took me in her arms once more. "I know you, you'll find out the truth and do whatever is right."

Her certainty was incredible, her faith in me unbounded. But there was something in her eyes, something I just couldn't place.

## Chapter 15

Cabin fever was setting in. I had been back in the office for two days and not discovered a single lead. It was wearing us all down, morale was lower than I ever thought possible. We all walked around like the living dead, devoid of emotion as we stumbled through our days, trying to make sense of it all.

Time was closing in on us. And it felt like the walls were too. I could barely breathe, the office seemed smaller. Maybe it was the piles of documents and photographs, banker boxes filled with evidence, that were taking up the air in the room. Or maybe it was the guilt of still not having caught our killer, guilt that intensified every time someone else was found dead.

Life wasn't getting any easier. I had the deaths of four women and an unborn child on my hands as well as another killing to try to solve.

Two days I'd been back and I may as well have stayed home. I was determined to believe that today would be different. The sun was cresting over our house when I pulled out of the driveway. Breakfast was beckoning but cereal just wouldn't cut it today. I needed to treat myself, something greasy and fast handed through a window.

The thought was interrupted by my phone ringing.

"Detective Munroe."

"Lincoln, it's George."

"Seriously?"

I hadn't meant to say that out loud. Although apparently George had found it funny.

"Yep, another one. Something different here, though."

My hopes were rising. Today was the day.

"Perfect," I said. "What's changed?"

George paused. "You know what? I'll leave it for you. Blank slate, eh?"

It was the way George taught me to look at a crime scene. No knowledge going in meant no preconceived notions. And the body was always the last stage of the crime scene. If the body was examined first, it coloured a person's view, made them see nothing but the blood, or the stab wounds, or the bullet holes. View the scene first, collect any evidence, then examine the body.

"All right," I said. "No hints?"

"When have I ever?"

"Right."

I hung up from George and dialed Kara, catching her at home still.

"I was just getting ready to leave," she said. "Where are we going?"

"Glencoe." I gave her the address. "I can pick you up along the way if you want."

"Don't worry about it, I'm going out after work tonight so I'll need my car. See you there?"

"Sounds good."

The drive was short but it gave me time to visualize how to respond. It was mental training, preparing for a scene before arriving. With every possibility run through, there was little that could be a surprise.

Or so I thought.

Kara and I pulled in within a minute of each other. Must have been nice to have had an easier commute. George was standing outside, waiting patiently for our arrival. A constable was standing guard at the front door, and judging by the number of cruisers there was one at the back and two more inside.

"All yours," I said to Kara. She looked at the house from the outside. It was an old farmhouse but I hadn't seen a barn on the property when I pulled up. Either the house had been sold separately from the farmland or the current owners weren't farmers and instead rented out the land to a neighbour.

The house was old, shingles showing signs of water and wind damage, paint peeling from the window frames, broken boards on the porch. The glass sidelight beside the front door had been broken, possibly a long time ago, and a board on the inside kept the weather out.

It was an odd looking house, a mixture of the old and new—a ranch house many years ago with a second floor addition put on later, in a different style. Either that or the original architect had a very eclectic sense of style. The lower half was done in brick, originally red but since painted in a fading yellow, the pallid colour of cooked chicken. The upper floor was done in gray siding, brown fixed window shutters adorning the windows.

A half-moon window in the front door and the decorative wood pieces on the porch and roof peaks lent the appearance of a farmhouse, the square windows and high peaked roof of the second floor looked like a house in the suburbs. I couldn't help but laugh. Architecture was an interest of mine and this, this was like looking at a painting done in collaboration by Leonardo Da Vinci and Jackson Pollock.

"Nice place," I said.

"Uh-huh." Kara's mouth was agape. "Is there anything in the Criminal Code for this?"

"Not that I know of. Bad architecture isn't illegal yet. I'll add it to the Bill I want to send to Parliament."

Kara laughed. My 'Bill' was well known. If only I could get it passed. Being creepy, wearing clothes three sizes too small, and just being stupid would all be illegal.

Kara led the way into the house and I marveled at the choice of furniture. It was a perfect match to the outside of the house. Prints that never should have been within fifty feet of each other were touching—a floral couch and a striped sofa, pushed together at the corners. Another sofa and two recliners were crammed into the other corner of the room, no pattern alike. The furniture was all angled toward the TVs against the large wall. There were six of them, from a small LCD to a large projection style. Kara and I stepped carefully through the cluttered house. Every surface seemed to have some sort of artifact on it, a porcelain doll here, a snowglobe or a wooden craft there, all of it gathering dust.

I'd been in houses like this before. Hoarders. Just like on the documentary channels. People who couldn't get rid of anything and collected everything. It was going to make finding evidence like jumping in a haystack and getting the needle in the rear.

The kitchen was no different. I probably could have put together table settings for five or six different families with pots and pans as well. Likely some to spare. The cupboards were overflowing with non-perishables, bought on sale in mass quantities and stored well past their 'best before' dates.

The fridge was much the same. Somewhat disappointing for me since there was nothing new to find, nothing new to learn about the residents. There was a strong smell in the fridge, something had gone bad, but finding it would have been impossible—I had never known there were so many different types of relish.

"This is insane," Kara said, looking around in shock.

"First hoarder house?"

"Oh yeah. I didn't think those shows were real, I figured they had to put extra stuff in there. You know, make it worth watching."

"If only that were true."

Kara and I walked down the hallway toward the bathroom and original bedrooms. The bedroom doors were both opened slightly but wouldn't give as we pushed our way in. I stuck my head in one door and couldn't believe my eyes. There wasn't a piece of carpet visible and boxes were piled to the ceiling in spots. Boxes were stuck behind the door, giving me only about a foot to squeeze through. If I'd had anywhere to go.

I looked back at Kara who was just pulling her head out of the other bedroom.

"Let me guess," I said. "No way to get in?"

"None at all. I guess we can rule out these rooms."

"What about the bathroom?"

Kara took a few steps down the hall and opened the door. It bounced back at her immediately.

"I can see the mirror," she said. "There's no space in here either."

"Hopefully the upstairs one isn't as cluttered."

"Either that or there had better be an outhouse."

I nodded. "Upstairs?"

"Lead the way," she said.

I gestured gallantly. "Ladies first."

"You mean, rookies first."

"Yeah, that too."

I heard Kara mutter something under her breath. At least I knew she was just kidding.

We were greeted by a uniform when we reached the top of the stairs.

"Detectives. Standing room only."

There was a thin path through the hall toward the other rooms, nothing more, nothing less. If someone dropped a match in here, the place would be in flames in minutes and burn for months.

"Any space up here at all?"

"Just in the master bedroom, Sir. It's actually clean, that and the ensuite."

"I guess they needed somewhere to live," Kara said. "Where's the husband?"

"Out back with another officer."

I nodded and followed Kara into the master bedroom. We breathed a collective sigh of relief. I felt like I could relax, I'd had to suck in what little gut I had just to weave through the house.

I thought back to what George had said, about there being something different. I thought he had been talking about the house.

Then I saw her.

Lying flat on her back in the bed. The other women had been found like this as well, moved down from a seated position by the husband or boyfriend when they tried to save them.

But this was different. George was right.

This wasn't our killer.

"What do you see?"

Kara looked around. "It's not him."

I nodded. "Run me through it."

"Right. Her throat is intact, ligature mark on the neck. Whatever was used was smooth, thin." She glanced at the other side of the bed, to an orange cord sticking out from under the folded back comforter.

"There," she said. "An extension cord."

I nodded.

Kara walked over to the woman's side of the bed. She lay there, nude and uncovered before us.

"Female, Caucasian, forty to forty-five. Average height, maybe five-foot-six. Heavy, probably two hundred pounds. Brown hair, brown eyes."

Kara moved down to the woman's hands and turned them over.

"Fuck, Lincoln. She's warm."

I took off my latex gloves and touched the woman's skin. Kara wasn't kidding. She was warm, for a corpse. The other women had been cold by the time we got to them. I looked at my watch. 7:15 a.m. Most of the killings happened around one or two in the morning.

Kara lifted the woman's arm and we both watched as it fell back toward the bed, completely limp. Next, Kara started manipulating her fingers, bending the fingers of her right hand into a fist and back out.

"There's no rigor. She hasn't been dead long."

Rigor mortis usually began to set in within three hours after death. The shortening of the muscles led to the joints and extremities becoming tense, almost immovable. Full rigor was reached at around seven hours and lasted for up to three days.

She'd been dead less than three hours, one if my uneducated estimate on the body temperature was correct.

"Look at the scar on the top of her wrist," I said.

"Carpal tunnel surgery. Desk job."

I nodded. "What else do you see?"

"The lividity. It's faint but it's there all down her right side." She put her hands under the body and rolled it away from her. "More pronounced on the back. She was moved."

I was proud of her. She really was a hell of a detective. The blood had pooled briefly on the right side, meaning that when she died she was lying on her side. She was later, and not much later, moved on to her back. The lividity in the back was darker, evidence she'd been left there longer.

"So?"

"Let's go arrest the husband," Kara said.

"We have enough?"

"No signs of forced entry, he had the opportunity."

"Motive?"

"Not sure yet. Let's go talk to him."

I followed Kara downstairs and out the back door. The husband was sitting, his head in his hands.

His hands. On the edges of his hands, just below his pinky fingers, were bruises. The same shape and size as the bruises on the victim's neck, just much fainter.

Kara saw it too.

"Sir?" Kara looked at the man, directly in the eyes as he moved his hands away.

"Morris, Morris White."

"Mr. White, I'm sorry for your loss," she said. "What was your wife's name?"

"Brenda."

"Was it him? Was it The Strangler?"

She didn't even look back at me. She knew what she was doing.

"Morris White, you're under arrest for the first degree murder of your spouse, Brenda White."

"What? What the fuck are you talking about? I was at work, he killed her. It had to be him." Anger, no tears.

"Please, sir. You'll have your chance to speak. I need to read you some things."

He was getting upset, frustrated, aggressive. I moved behind him and took hold of his hands, then clicked my handcuffs into place.

Kara read Morris his Right to Counsel and the Caution to Charged Person. It was the same thing as what was always on TV, just different words. You have the right to a lawyer. If you can't afford a lawyer, one will be provided for you. You have the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you. We Canadians just felt the need to make it far longer than that, just to cover it all off and be polite at the same time.

Morris was still yelling, protesting his innocence as we dragged him out to a waiting cruiser. The officer took custody and secured him in the back of the car. The look on the officer's face was priceless, not only was he tasked with the all-important job of transporting a murder suspect, he was dealing with one incapable of exercising his right to remain silent.

With a rap on the trunk of the car the officer left for the detachment. Kara and I followed the officer, my Mini and her Prius pretending to be official police vehicles.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later Morris was booked into cells and on the phone with the lawyer of his choice. It was against the rules for us to ask about the conversation, lawyer-client privileges and all. It didn't matter though, the gist of the conversation was always the same: shut up, don't tell the cops a thing.

Kara wanted to handle the interrogation and I was more than happy to give her the chance to do so. As much as I loved making people sweat, and slowly getting a confession out of them, watching Kara in action was a thing of beauty. The Sergeant in cells, Jack Kristoff, was familiar with Kara's near-legendary ability and it wasn't long before he and I each had fifty dollars on the table. I gave Kara thirty minutes to crack Morris, he gave her only twenty.

Morris's clothes had been seized once he arrived in cells so that they could be tested for DNA evidence. The next step was convincing him to give a DNA sample. It was something Kara could hopefully take care of in the interview.

I sat in the viewing room, watched the interview room on closed circuit cameras and prepared to listen to the interrogation.

A moment later the interview room door opened and Morris walked in, dressed in an orange jumpsuit, followed close behind by Kara. Morris's handcuffs had been removed. He was in secure custody now and had calmed down significantly. If he was a threat, the cuffs would go back on before he even knew what was happening.

"Morris White, my name is Kara Jameson. I'm a Detective with the OPP homicide unit."

Morris nodded.

"Everything in this room is subject to audio and video recording. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah."

"You've been afforded the opportunity to speak to a lawyer, is that right?"

"Yeah, I talked to him."

"Good. I'm just going to review your rights again, okay?"

A grunt.

Kara read the rights and caution again along with a secondary caution, basically stating that if Morris had talked to anyone else in authority that it was not to influence him into making a statement. That way if the transport officer had told him he'd better talk or else, we were covered off.

"Right. I understand."

"Tell me about yourself."

"Why?"

"Because I like to know who I'm speaking with. I want to understand how we could have gotten to this position. You've said you're innocent, I want to believe you."

"Okay. Umm, I'm forty-nine. I work in London at a high school as a night janitor. Been doing it for over twenty years. My wife worked at London Life, a secretary."

Worked. Past tense.

"We've got no kids, tried but it wasn't in the cards for us. So we travel instead, as much as we can. She likes to relax on a beach, I like to fish. I don't know, not much else. We're pretty simple people."

"How was work last night?"

"About regular. Got there at ten, worked until six. Not much going on at the school, just the usual cleaning. When I came home I found Brenda dead."

"Tell me about that."

"She sleeps light. I snore so I stay up for a bit when I get home, until she gets up so I don't bother her. Today I was really tired though, so I went up to get into bed. The light was on and the covers were back and she was... dead."

He was getting upset, wiping at tears I couldn't see.

"I saw the cord beside her and I knew it was The Strangler. I seen him in the papers and on the news. Said he strangles women when their husbands are at work."

'Seen'. One of my biggest pet peeves. It's not about what you seen, it's about what you *saw*.

"What happened to your hands?"

"Oh," he said as he looked down. "That? Um, I was tying some things down with rope at work. Must have been tying too tight."

"What kind of rope?"

"Kind? The thick stuff, triple-braid."

He answered the question honestly. Triple-braid was likely the type of rope he used at work. It just wasn't what he'd used last night.

"Doesn't look like it was from triple-braid."

"It was, I had gloves on so maybe that makes it look different."

"Look, Morris. Time to level with me."

She was going for the kill already. I was about to lose my bet.

"Okay," she said. "You look like a smart guy, probably like to watch CSI?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"So you know what we can do, right?"

He looked away from Kara, put his hands on his knees to try to stop them from bouncing.

"I guess, yeah."

"I bet those bruises are a perfect match to the cord found on your bed. I bet your DNA is all over that cord."

Morris was crying hard now, fear not sorrow. His nose was starting to run and I could hear him sniffing.

"What I want to know is, how did you know how to stage the murder so perfectly?"

"What?"



He wiped at his nose then wiped the back of the hand on his jumpsuit.

"You killed your wife, Morris. It's obvious to me, and it was obvious to my partner. Maybe she nagged you one too many times, maybe it was the hoarding, I'm guessing it was her stuff. Or maybe you just wanted to get rid of her, collect the insurance and move on."

Silence.

Kara's voice was rising, almost to a yell.

"Is that it? Insurance money? She worked at London Life, right, so she probably had a decent plan. Some money from work as well? You're probably looking at a cool half a mil, maybe even more. What about the mortgage, will that be paid off too? I'm sure you thought about that. Car loans, line of credit, anything else? You kill your wife, strangle the fucking life out of her just to cash in on some coin? What did you think when the life was draining out of her, when she struggled? Did you like it? Or was it just business?"

And all he did was shake his head.

"You don't seem like a serial killer to me, maybe the kind of guy who kills his wife, but not a serial killer. I've seen some serious shit in my days, a woman stabbed over thirty times, another one burned to death, one that her asshole husband threw acid on, burned away her face."

Morris cringed.

"This is nothing like that. You're not a bad guy, things just got a little hard, right? But right now, I look at your wife's murder and the other four, and well, it doesn't take a genius."

Almost all was fair in interrogations. We could lie, we could suggest evidence but never lie about it. If we had a surveillance tape that we hadn't watched or that the suspect wasn't on it was against the rules to say that he was. But it was fine to say we hadn't had a chance to watch it, would there be any reason you would be on it?

My favourite was bringing in a bankers box marked with the occurrence number and name of the deceased. Never once would I talk about it, mention it in any way or even look at it. It would just sit there like the elephant in the room, making the suspect wonder just how much dirt we had on him.

"So tell me, why did you kill the other four women too?"

"I didn't kill them. I swear I didn't kill those women." He bared his teeth, breathing heavily through tightly stretched lips. "There's no fucking way you can prove that."

"Okay, Morris," Kara said, calm as when she started. "I believe you. But tell me this. I've been yelling at you for killing your wife, accusing you of doing it just to cash in on some insurance money and you barely bat an eye, you don't yell or anything. But when I accuse you of something you didn't do, you freak out, start swearing at me saying you didn't do it."

A stutter.

"You're looking at first degree, Morris. Twenty-five years minimum. Tell me what happened, maybe it was heat of the moment, maybe you just snapped. Second degree is a lot better."

He took a deep breath, but didn't speak.

“Look, Morris. I know you fucking killed her. And I’ll be able to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. This killing, it’s nothing like the other four.”

“Fuck.”

And he was done. Fifteen minutes.

“Every morning when I got home there was more shit piled up in the house, in the fucking bedroom too. All I wanted was one goddamned room that I could actually walk in. Is that too much to ask for, for Christ’s sake? When she’d leave for work I’d take all the boxes and put them in the other rooms but there was no more space left.

“I came home early this morning, got the job done and felt like sneaking out. Left around five. When I came into the bedroom there was shit everywhere, boxes and boxes of shit. I don’t know where the fuck it came from or how it got there. I snapped. I grabbed the cord from on top of one of the boxes, came up behind her and put it around her neck. She barely put up a fight. When I was done I was scared shitless, didn’t know what to do. Then I figured I could blame it on The Strangler.”

Kara reached out and touched Morris’s leg. “I knew you weren’t a bad guy. Now, how do you feel?”

Morris paused for a moment. “Free.”

“Because you confessed?”

“Because I’m finally rid of her.”

Morris was taken back to his cell and Kara joined me in the viewing room.

“Bitch,” I said once she walked in.

“Whoa, what did I do?”

“You just cost me fifty bucks. I figured you’d take half an hour, Kristoff said no more than twenty minutes. You know you could have made him sweat longer.”

“He wasn’t worth it.”

That was a point I couldn’t argue with.

\* \* \* \* \*

I settled into bed that night, ready to sleep the sleep of the just, when my phone rang. A private number. The glaring red numbers across the room told me it was just after midnight. I knew the phone call would be important, but it was too early for another killing.

I answered the phone, my voice still rough. “Yeah?”

“It’s Kara. I got your message.”

Message? When had I left that?

“I know you said you’d be home around nine but I was out with a couple of friends, and holy shit look at the time. Sorry, Link.”

Yet another person calling me Link today. Kat I could understand, but for Kara it was out of character.

The last message I had left for her was the day I flew back in from Algonquin.

“Have you been drinking?”

“I’ve had a couple.” She paused. “What gave it away?”

“You swore and you called me Link. I could spot it in my sleep.” And I practically had.

"Oh my God, sorry Detective." She stammered trying to regain face only she thought she had lost.

"Kara, calm down, it's fine. Why'd you call?"

"Um, oh yeah, I forgot to tell you today I checked up on the police college idea. Nothing yet, but we've got the staff there checking through the cameras to see if anyone left and came back on the nights of the killings. If they went out all four nights around the right time, it should be enough to get them in for questioning at least. Hard to believe it might be someone from OPC."

"Well, remember, it's just a possibility, but with how little we've got we need to check it out."

"Right, would fit though. How else would they know enough to leave no evidence behind?"

My thoughts exactly.

"Look, I'm off to bed," I said. "We've got an early morning ahead of us. Have a glass of water or two and some Tylenol and get some sleep. I doubt Grant will be happy with you talking to another man so late." Grant was her boyfriend, an OPP constable working patrol.

"He's working night shift tonight, I'm all alone. Should sleep well without his snoring."

I laughed and thought of how well Kat must have slept the past two nights. "See you in the morning. I'll get you an extra-large coffee, you'll need it."

"Thanks, Lincoln. Good night."

I hung up the phone and drifted back to sleep.

## Chapter 16

I walk through the forest yet again. It's dark and there's no moon to guide my path. A faint glow in the distance is all I have to see by, and I spend a lot of time on the ground, the roots and rocks bringing me to my knees. As I feel my way through the forest, the light grows brighter and soon it separates into four distinct glows.

It is a house deep in the middle of the woods. Light pours through its windows. The ground turns solid—level paving stones lead up to the front door. Fear grips me as I approach, unsure of what lies in wait.

A solid wood door, no windows through which I can see inside. A brass door knocker hangs on the top half just below a small peephole. My hand finds the handle, lit by the illuminated doorbell beside it. I press down on the latch, but the door is locked. I take the knocker in hand and sound three loud knocks that echo through the forest.

The door opens to a uniformed officer standing inside the sparse foyer. Two pairs of women's shoes sit on the floor behind the door.

I never get the chance to speak.

"You'll never make it in time," the constable says. "She's already dead."

## Chapter 17

I was out of bed, dressed in whatever was lying on the floor and down the stairs before I even realized I was awake. My untied shoelaces bounced as I ran out the door, keys in hand to my waiting vehicle. At least I had remembered my phone.

I had only been to Kara's once before—she had invited my family and I for dinner after getting posted to homicide. I hoped I'd still be able to find her house. I revved the engine and drove down empty streets toward the west edge of the city. Kara lived in Delaware, just outside of the city limits in OPP territory. Which made for a woman living in a rural area, home alone, her boyfriend working the night shift. Shit. No alarm system. "Not worth the money," she had said. I raced out Oxford Street over the bridge that had been built only a few years ago that connected the old edge of the city with the new edge—a developing neighbourhood. I arrived at Westdel Bourne only minutes later, turned left and drove south on the dimly lit road, my brights the only lights leading the way.

It was difficult driving while I dialed Kara's cellphone one-handed. Her voice mail picked up each time after three rings. I brought my phone up to face level and dialed dispatch. The phone rang and my eyes returned to the road just in time to see a deer standing in front of me.

I swerved hard, missed the paralyzed animal by a hair then careened toward the shoulder. My tires hit the soft gravel and the steering wheel spun beneath my hands, instinct taking over. The car fishtailed, rocks and stones flying up and bouncing off the undercarriage. I slid and spun then came to a stop in the middle of the road facing the way I had come.

"Hello? Hello?"

I had dialed the non-emergency line, a number given only to police. The voice on the other end sounded worried and its repeated greetings helped me locate my phone under the gas pedal. I must have dropped it when I went for the wheel.

"Hello?"

"It's Munroe."

"Hello, Detective. Everything okay?"

"Look, I'm not sure. I need Kara's phone number at home, she's not answering her phone. She's on her own tonight."

"Is she in danger?"

I turned the car around and began speeding back toward Kara's, the engine's whine audible to the dispatcher. "I don't know anything right now. I'm almost at her house. She's probably just sleeping and left her phone in her purse."

"Okay." Apprehension filled her voice. "Her number is five-one-nine-six-four-two-three-one-two-nine. Did you get that?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Lincoln, I've got a car nearby. I'll send them your way, alright?"

"Sure, but no lights and sirens. I'm probably overreacting as it is."

"Okay. They're about ten minutes out. Maybe a little more."

"Thanks." I hung up the phone.

I squealed around the curve onto Longwoods Road, ignoring the stop sign and only tapping the brakes. It didn't take long to make it into Delaware. My fingers tried to dial Kara's number, but tremors that rocked my hands slowed me down. I turned onto Victoria Street, made a quick left on Prince of Wales Avenue then turned again onto Prince Albert Street. Kara's house was just a short distance away.

My phone rang in my lap but I kept driving. If Kara picked up I would answer but until then getting there was my only goal.

Four rings sounded before the answering machine picked up.

I pulled into the driveway and jumped out of the car just in time to hear a loud scream coming from the upstairs bedroom.

I was unarmed.

Damn. My flight from the house had been so fast that getting my gun never even struck my mind. The door was only a short distance away and the gap closed in just a few strides. It was unlocked. The door swung open without a sound and I could hear a fight upstairs. I took the stairs in the dark three at a time and burst into Kara's room to find her on the floor, her attacker on top of her trying to strangle her. She was kicking hard, her hands underneath the rope he had pressed against her neck, keeping it from doing its job.

The man looked back at me, giving Kara the opportunity she needed to drive her knee full force into his groin. He rolled off of her and I grabbed onto his collar then pulled him to the ground.

Kara was crying, fear gripping her and holding her immobile.

"Call nine-one-one," I yelled.

My voice brought her back. Kara crawled to the bedside table and picked up the phone. She tucked it between her shoulder and ear and reached under the bed. Her gun. She was going for her gun.

The man flailed and fought against me. Three punches to the side of his head were not enough to slow him down, his hands still grabbed at me and at the floor. My eyes were on Kara putting the magazine into her pistol when I felt a sharp pain in my side and fell backwards.

The man got up, leapt over me and sprinted for the door. My hand shot out and grabbed his leg. It wasn't enough to stop him but it slowed him down as I heard the familiar sound of a handgun slide racking before three gunshots rang out in the night.

He yelled out in pain but continued running, his heavy footsteps sounding down the stairs. The room was dark, only a faint glow came through the windows, and I couldn't see as I reached to my side and felt the handle of a knife sticking out. Despite all of my training, I grabbed the handle, pulled the blade out and threw it to the floor.

"Stay on the phone," I told Kara, "get everyone here." I took the gun from her hand and bolted down the steps, my right hand holding her pistol and my left pressed against my side to stop the bleeding. I ran out into the night and my eyes panned back and forth, still adjusting to the darkness. I saw the outline of a man to the north as he sprinted down the street, his right arm clutching his left shoulder.

My legs became pistons, pumping in perfect time with one another as the distance between us shortened. We were within twenty metres of each other as he approached the intersection ahead. If he rounded the corner, if I lost sight of him, he could be gone forever.

I released the pressure from my wound, stopped, brought the gun to eye level in both hands. The sights lined up in the center of his back, it was a shot that couldn't miss.

*You'll be no better than him.*

I watched him round the corner before I lowered the gun and ran again.

It was too late. He was gone.

Sirens sounded in the distance informing me that the cavalry was on its way.

He couldn't hide forever.

I turned around and sprinted back to Kara, cursing myself for not having taken the shot. It would have been justified and not just because the man had attempted to kill Kara and stabbed me. I was authorized to use lethal force to prevent serious bodily harm or death to others, even if it meant shooting an unarmed man in the back. Honourable? No, but justified. But I had hesitated, and because of that, other women were now at risk.

I made it to Kara's driveway as the first cruiser pulled up, lights flashing and sirens blaring. "It's me, Munroe," I yelled over the noise. "He went west on the next street, radio it in. Get canine and an ambulance out here and go after him."

The car sped off as fast as it had arrived and I ran inside and up the stairs to find Kara. I turned on the lights and found her still sitting on the floor where I had left her, the phone in her hand and an empty gun case at her feet. A bloody knife sat a few feet away.

"I got him," she said.

I turned my head and saw blood sprayed on the wall and a long hole torn in the drywall as the bullet skimmed along before burying itself deep into a wooden stud.

"Nice shot." I took the phone from her hand and sat down beside her then wrapped my arms around her. Blood from my shirt transferred onto hers, a thin white nightshirt that accentuated her form perfectly. The shirt showed her subtle curves, her nipples visible through the semi-sheer fabric. It was horrible of me to be thinking like that, but seeing how beautiful and strong she was in light of the situation drew me to her even more. She wore a necklace now—a red ligature mark along the front of her throat, the only place the rope had made contact as she tried to hold her attacker back.

The rope. I looked around and saw it sticking out from under her bed.

We had all the evidence we needed now. The killer's blood and the murder weapon. It would only be a matter of time until he was in custody.

"Link... I... um... you... I...", she tried with all the strength she had left to speak but the words would not come out. I knew what she wanted to say, she wanted to thank me for saving her life, for coming to her rescue.

"Quiet," I said as I held her tighter.

She turned her face toward me, her green eyes looked deep into mine. She leaned in and her soft lips met mine.

I froze, my mind uncertain of what to do. But then my body, which knew what it needed, returned her kiss, our lips parting and our tongues entwining. Our kiss

lasted for only a moment before the sound of a man clearing his throat forced us to break apart.

It was Red. As inappropriate as he usually was, his voice was gentle now. "Situations like this can make people do crazy things. Not that I saw anything."

With that he left the room. I turned back to Kara and our eyes met once more but the passion and spontaneity were gone. I helped her to her feet and handed her a hooded sweater that had been hanging on the bedpost.

"We're going to have a lot of work ahead of us. I need to call Kat, just to let her know where I am and what's happened." She looked frantic. My lips curved up at the corners. "Most of what happened."

My hand found Kara's and I helped her to her feet. She was still in shock.

"You're bleeding," she said. "I didn't even notice." Her eyes went to the bloody knife on the floor. "Oh God, he stabbed you? Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine, Kara. The bleeding's almost gone. I don't think he hit anything internal. We need to get you checked out." A person who survives being choked or strangled can seem fine at first only to develop sometimes fatal complications much later. A trip to the hospital might be required, and I would be right beside her, riding in the ambulance awaiting a number of stitches.

"Are you sure you're okay, Link?"

There it was again, the short form of my name. We had shared something special, not the kiss but the near death experience. It was a bond that would never be broken.

"Trust me, I'm fine. Look at me. I just chased that asshole down the street then sprinted back here. If it were serious I'd be white as a sheet right now. Stop worrying about me."

I helped Kara down the stairs and found the paramedics coming in through the front door. Red had taken down their names and stalled them for a moment in case Kara and I had renewed our... inappropriate actions. The medics saw my bloodstained shirt and were on me in an instant. "Give me some gauze and tend to her," was all I had to say.

I put pressure on my wound and watched as they checked Kara over. She was an attractive woman, something that was not news to me, but my attraction to her had always been on a level of admiration and respect for her abilities and drive. As my eyes fixed upon her, sitting on her couch calmly in the midst of chaos, I saw another side of her, one I had ignored. I saw her as a woman in the simplest sense. I have never believed in love at first sight. Lust, yes, but you can't love a person based on their appearance alone. It's getting to know someone, learning about them, their character, their dreams, and their lives that makes us fall in love with them. Looks can start the chemicals but chemistry doesn't last for long.

But I knew Kara. So to suddenly see her, not as a partner, not as a friend, but as the beautiful young woman that she was, stirred more than chemistry.

I gazed at her face, her features holding me in place. Brown hair streaked with natural highlights of auburn, a high forehead marked by eyebrows that angled down in the middle, drawing attention to her small nose and large round green eyes. Her lips were full and her mouth wide, widening even more as she smiled. A smattering of freckles dotted her nose and cheeks and all this sat atop a petite and

delicate frame. She wasn't a supermodel, but she had a unique and unconventional beauty.

Kara turned and looked at me, catching me staring at her, watching her. She smiled wide; it was a pure and genuine smile that always warmed my heart.

I heard Red's voice again, saying that people do crazy things in crazy situations. Maybe he was right—maybe this was just the adrenaline, the fear, the pain and the thought of losing someone important.

Kat entered my mind and guilt flowed in. I loved her, I always would love her and nothing would change that. I could never tell her what had happened. Even given the circumstances, it would break her heart and Kara and I, nothing could ever happen again. I respected Kat too much for that. This was an accident, it had to be.

The paramedics decided that they would take Kara to the hospital, and I, of course had no choice in the matter. I liaised with Red, asked him to hold the scene and get other detectives out along with the forensics team. The blood on the wall and the rope would need to be tested.

"Understood. I'll call you if we find anything. And Lincoln?"

"Yes?"

"I hate to say it... but he got away for now."

I clenched my teeth. My reply was not to Red. "We'll get him Kara, I promise."

The ride to the hospital seemed shorter than it was. Kara and I were both stable, the paramedics had taped some gauze over my wound, and we sat in the back together under the not so watchful eye of one paramedic. He seemed to think Kara and I were a couple and allowed us some privacy. We didn't speak the entire ride—I took her hand in mine and gently rubbed its back with my thumb. I found it hard to look at her now, what had happened and the consequences were becoming real to me.

The ambulance pulled down the ramp to the emergency room entrance and Kara and I exited out the back, her hand still in mine. I began walking toward the door and tried to let go of her hand, but she pulled me back. Her eyes met mine again.

"How did you know?"

"I'm not sure. I had a dream, and in it someone told me I was too late, 'she was already dead'. I woke up and thought about how you were home alone, living out of town, and that Grant was on night shift. I figured my dream was talking about you."

"Do you always believe your dreams are telling you the truth?"

"Only lately, but that's a story for another day."

She hated the cryptic answer, I could see it in her eyes but she didn't push it.

"My cellphone died and I forgot to plug it in," she said. "You must have called the house, the phone rang beside my bed and woke me up. He was standing over me. If you hadn't called, I never would have got my hands under the rope."

I didn't speak, just gripped her hand tighter then let go. We entered the hospital, and between my stab wound and being recognized as police we were tended to in short order. The police work very closely with hospital staff, often spending entire shifts in the hospital guarding patients or bringing people in for mental health evaluations. Our treatment would never jeopardize anyone else, but



we can jump the queue in non-emergencies. Besides, in this case, we had a killer to catch. The longer we stayed in the hospital the further he got away.

Kara was examined to ensure that there was no major damage to her throat or esophagus. She received a clean bill of health. I on the other hand was not so lucky. The trauma doctor wanted to run a number of tests to ensure that I had not suffered any internal injuries. It was David vs. Goliath in terms of medical knowledge, but I had stubborn on my side.

"I'm not staying for any tests. It's been over an hour now, the bleeding is minimal, just stitch me up and let me get on my way."

"I can't do that, Detective. If an organ even got nicked it could cause serious problems."

"With all due respect, Doctor, I don't give a shit. Either stitch me up or I'll go down the street to the drugstore, buy a needle and thread and do it myself. You can't keep me here." I was livid now, every moment counted, including these, which were running down the drain.

"Actually, I can, if I think you're a danger to yourself, which you are right now."

He was right, I'd forgotten the mandatory psych eval rule. Time for a different approach. "Nice wedding band, Doctor. Platinum?"

"Yes." Confusion.

"Do you have kids?" I assumed not, the ring had barely begun to dull.

"Not yet."

"So right now your wife is home alone?"

More confusion. "Yes. Why?"

"Because the killer we're trying to catch, you may have heard of him, the papers are calling him The Strangler—very original—preys on women who are home alone while their husbands or boyfriends are working nights." A nervous look. "He escaped from us after failing to kill my partner and I. Last time he made a mistake he killed again almost the next day. How many more shifts are you on for?"

"I see your point, Detective. But if you bleed out internally, how do you expect to catch him?"

"Touché. My wife is home alone now as well, and I can't do my job from in here. Stitch me up and if I get worse I know who to call to get back here. Please."

He nodded then walked away and returned with a suture kit. Twelve stitches later and with orders not to move around too much, I was on my way out the door with Kara by my side. A cruiser was waiting to take us back to the place where we had both almost met our end.

## Chapter 18

We spent the rest of that day trying to disassociate from reality. Kara was searching her own house, ducking under crime scene tape and showing her badge to the officer guarding the front door just to get in. It could not have been easy for her, her quiet existence thrown into chaos. She had called Grant, the boyfriend I had instantly become jealous of, to tell him what had happened and to let him

know that he'd have to find another place to stay during the day before heading back into work that night.

Grant had not taken the news of Kara's near death well. He had not turned into the white knight riding to her rescue, and offered little in the way of compassion or sympathy.

I recognized the symptoms. He had shut down. The fight or flight response is one of the most basic systems wired into us, no amount of civilization can erase millions of years of instinct. Grant had chosen to flee. Kara took it well, even seemed relieved that she would be alone and wouldn't have to describe her ordeal or keep saying that she was fine.

My call to Kat was short and sweet. I apologized for running out in the night and not having called her but that I somehow knew Kara was in trouble. I told her about the killer, about how he'd tried to kill Kara but had gotten away. I left out the part about me being stabbed—no need to worry her.

We searched Kara's house, seized the rope and took a blood sample from the wall, then raced down the 401 to Toronto. We arrived at the Centre for Forensics Science in the heart of the city and moved through with purpose, delivering the evidence and seeking DNA results as fast as possible.

The possibility that our suspect had no criminal record scared me. If his DNA was not already on file we would still have little to go on. I was not a pleasant person by this time, demanding that the blood be tested against all known offenders and if no result was found it was to be tested against offenders with eleven of thirteen matching alleles—a familial search. That could be enough to link the killer by direct lineage to another offender, a son or daughter if he had one. The rope was to be swabbed and tested for DNA as well then compared to samples obtained from the victims.

These were all complex, involved processes and, unlike on television, could not be done within minutes. I would have the results by tomorrow they told me—twenty-four hours was the fastest turnaround time regardless of my telling the scientists to take over the DNA lab and forgo all other cases.

A bruise was forming on Kara's neck, and the rope in a plastic evidence bag was a perfect match and a constant reminder. She had been happy to get it out of the car and out of her mind.

Technically, I had driven to Toronto against doctor's orders, but I wasn't sure if Kara's level of concentration was suitable for highway driving. She remembered as we passed through Mississauga that I wasn't supposed to be driving, that I wasn't supposed to be doing anything at all if I wanted to keep my stitches in, and she made me promise to let her drive on the way home. I had little choice—Kara had stubborn working for her, too.

We stopped in Kitchener on the way home, getting dinner at a Viet-Thai restaurant with unbeatable pad thai and tom yum soup. Kara and I both had the pad thai, I added a soup and we split an order of deep fried spring rolls and BBQ pork fresh rolls. To drink, given that we were working and unable to enjoy any adult beverages, we each had a bubble tea—a mix of fruit and tea with tapioca beads at the bottom. It was a more expensive meal than we usually allowed ourselves on the OPP's dime, but given what we'd endured, the province could foot the bill.

We left the restaurant after ten. Red lights streamed ahead of us, white toward us as we drove down the highway. We had been driving for only a few minutes when my phone rang, something it had been doing all day. It was Kat calling. I had ignored her calls many times today, not wanting to explain everything to her again, not wanting to hear the worry in her voice.

Not wanting to face my guilt.

I pressed 'ignore' and put the phone away. Within seconds it rang again. I almost didn't even look at it, but the call display showed a different name: Chen-Chen.

I answered the call as fast as I could. "Chen? What have you got?"

"I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

"After the day I've had Chen, I don't have small talk in me."

Chen knew what that was like. The job wore on a person and some days were too much to handle. Granted Chen had never had a day like mine.

"Okay. That park ranger, he was right about our guy. William Jeffries; born April sixteen, nineteen-forty-six. Reported missing July twenty-fifth, nineteen-eighty-four. Coroner determined cause of death to be a stab wound through the back, severed the two ribs and tore through the heart. Would have been a long blade and wide too, like a hunting knife."

I already knew that. "What else?"

"Here's the kicker. His date of birth had been entered wrong on the missing persons file. We got medical records that matched the old injuries, checked the right date of birth and found a bit more."

"You going to share?"

"You know me, I like suspense. He had two convictions from the early seventies for masturbating in public and in seventy-seven he was arrested and questioned in an attempted abduction of a seven-year-old boy. Cops liked him for it but they didn't have enough evidence, had to cut him loose."

Makes sense. If I was his last intended victim and my father interrupted him... I'm surprised there was anything left of the body.

"Interesting. Not many people would have missed this guy then?"

"Just his family. They said he was a perfect angel."

"Of course they did. Would you tell your parents if you got arrested for milking it in public?"

Kara looked over at me and tried not to laugh. I looked back at her and mouthed the words, "I'll explain."

"My dad would have lopped it off if I did that," Chen said. "Anyway, that's all we've got so far. Still looking into who might have killed him. I hope he's still alive so I can shake his hand."

Lincoln Charles Munroe the Third. "I'm sure you'll find the guy, definitely did some kids a favour."

"Yeah, I'll let you know what else we find."

"Thanks, Chen."

I hung up the phone and put it back in its place on my belt. "That murder in Algonquin," I said to Kara, "the guy was a public masturbator and may have been into kids as well."

"Ahhh. Parents thought he was a stand-up guy?"

“Don’t they always?”

We shared a laugh, the first one today and for a moment everything seemed right with the world.

An hour later we were parked outside of Kara’s house. She was keeping the unmarked car overnight on account of hers being in a sealed garage.

“Where are you staying?”

“They’re putting me up in a hotel for the night. The Ramada by the 401.” I must have looked concerned. “Don’t worry, I’ll be armed and there will be a cruiser at each end of the hotel. I’ll have a radio on me as well.” She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, “I’ll be safe.”

I put my hand on her thigh but couldn’t speak. I didn’t want to acknowledge my fears, it was easier to get out of the car. “I’ll see you in the morning then, shoot anything that moves.”

“I will.”

I shut the door behind me. My own car was still in the driveway. I wanted to just sit behind the wheel for a few minutes, to try to compose myself before returning home, but I knew Kara would wait for me to get on my way before she left. I wondered who was protecting whom at this point. I backed out of the driveway and started down the street, Kara was right behind me. We stayed like that, a convoy of two, until we reached Wonderland Road.

She went south and I turned north then drove until she was out of view and pulled into the nearest parking lot. I turned off the car, shut down every light and turned off the radio. I sat in silence, but my mind was anything but. Thoughts raged about in my head and forced me to turn the car back on, turn up the radio and keep driving.

No matter how fast I drove I would never escape what I was really afraid of.

## **Chapter 19**

As late as I returned home that night, Kat was still awake.

My intentions had been to update her frequently during the day—she was the worrying type—but I had either forgotten or not wanted to. My day and the night before had been too busy, too intense, for me to remember to do anything. Kara and I had developed tunnel vision, our eyes and minds focused on one thing and one thing only: catching the killer. There was another focus in there, one we tried to push away. Everything else was secondary, even my family. It pained me as I walked in the door, like walking into an alternate reality I had forgotten existed.

So much had changed in these past few weeks. Once the perfect family man, I was losing myself to this case, to my work, to my past, and now to my partner. My family had become an afterthought, if I even thought of them at all. I had been away from home before on courses and cases, and I had always debated if there was another way to fulfill my duties at work. If there was a way to stay home—to work only the hours I needed to work—I found it. My family had been everything to me, and even leaving for two or three days made me feel like I had abandoned

them. Yet when Chen called, I only phoned in a quick goodbye before I was on the plane and gone.

That wasn't all. I had broken my vows to my wife and put our entire existence in danger. Kat and the kids deserved so much more, I just couldn't find it in me to give it to them. So much had been lost in the past few weeks, so much of myself, that I no longer knew the man I saw when I looked in the mirror—when I was even capable of doing so. My eyes were so full of sadness, fear, doubt and confusion that I couldn't bear to look into them.

I was surprised anyone else was able to. Especially Kara. She saw through this new me, this abomination. If only Kat could have done the same.

"I've been calling you all day," she started as I walked in the door just past midnight. "You could've at least picked up, told me you were still alive."

"I'm sorry. I got lost in the case, there's been so much to take in, so much to do."

"I don't care, Lincoln. Your family always came first. Do you even remember us anymore?"

If one knife wound wasn't enough, now she was plunging the dagger of guilt into me. I wanted to cry, I should have cried. A month before I would have, but now there was nothing left.

"I know. It's tearing me apart. I've barely seen the kids lately but this case, Algonquin, Kara, it's too much."

"Deal with it. Your family needs you."

"So does everyone out there. This guy keeps on killing. What if you're next? Think about that one."

She paused, the thought sinking in.

"You said he only kills women who are home alone."

"So far. He attacked Kara. You think that was fucking random?" My anger was getting the better of me, it did that now whenever I thought of Kara and what he had done—what he tried to do.

"I... don't... know..." stuttering now, fearing she could be next. Saving yourself by scaring the shit out of your wife. Well done, Lincoln.

"You could be next for all we know, he targeted Kara. He wanted to send us a message. Maybe he's pissed off now that he got stopped." My blood pressure was rising, my face was getting warm. "Maybe he'll change his game plan, stop coming after women. I stopped him, how do you think he feels about me?"

She was pale now, her hands shaking.

Her eyes moved to my side, to a drop of fresh blood that stained my shirt. "You're bleeding. What happened?"

I hadn't told her, it would have been too much. "I'm fine, just some stitches, but... he stabbed me."

She turned and sat on the stairs in the foyer. "You never even told me. I'm your wife, Lincoln. I should have been there beside you in the hospital holding your hand."

"I didn't want to worry you."

"That's my right." She folded her arms across her chest.

"I'm sorry, I should have called. It'll be over soon."

“How long do we have to wait?” Her edginess was coming back. “How long until the kids get their father back?”

“We’ll get him,” I said.

“And then what? You’ve still got your past to figure out. Back to Algonquin and your murderer father?”

“Fuck you.”

She froze, I had never spoken to her like that. But, at least at the moment, I wasn’t sorry. Maybe that would come later.

“If you came to me,” I said, “and told me you thought your father killed someone while you were there—just a kid for Christ’s sake—that it was making you hallucinate, that you had to work on the crime scene, I’d be a little more supportive. My world is crumbling around me, and it turns out the pillar I thought I had at home is made of fucking sand.”

I turned to walk away.

“Never swear at me again,” she shouted at my back, “and do not take the Lord’s name in vain in this house.”

That wasn’t what really bothered her, but in her pain she held on to the only thing she had left to believe in. Still, I was stunned. I had to turn back. “Born again, are we? Going to church twice a year or whenever it’s convenient isn’t enough anymore?”

“Every Sunday you work, Lincoln, I go. And I take the kids with me.”

This was news. We had always said we would let the kids make their own decisions about religion. I believed if you raised a child Christian, they would remain Christian, Buddhist, Buddhist or Muslim, Muslim. I wanted the children to be informed of all viewpoints so that when the time came they could make their own decision.

“Anything else that you’re brainwashing them about? And we really thought we should have another?”

“Get out,” was her answer. “Get out.”

I didn’t think twice. I walked past her and went upstairs first into Kasia’s room. I roused her, kissed her on the head and told her I loved her but that I would be busy at work for the next couple of days. I don’t know if she got it all, she was notorious for being difficult to wake up. Link woke up more easily and said he’d miss me before telling me to go out and get the bad guys. Life was still a game to him, a game that I was losing.

Kat still stood by the door when I returned downstairs, standing guard and waiting for me to leave. I didn’t speak to her, I didn’t look at her. I set the house alarm—my last caring act—then walked out the door letting her slam it behind me.

I only had one place to go.

## Chapter 20

I stood outside the door to Kara's hotel room—the night clerk had given me her room number once I flashed my badge. And I stood there for a good ten minutes, frozen in place wondering if I should knock or just quietly get my own room.

I filled my lungs before I raised my hand to the door and knocked twice. A part of me hoped she wouldn't answer, that something would stop me from taking this next step so I wouldn't have to try to stop myself. Footsteps approached the door then the light behind the peephole disappeared. A moment later I heard the lock turn.

Neither of us spoke. Our eyes met and stayed fixed, hers shining like emeralds in the dimly lit corridor. Both of us were waiting, waiting for someone to make the next move. In the end, it was Kara, maybe because she was stronger or maybe because she had less to lose. With a loaded gun in her right hand she took mine in her left. A gentle pull brought me into the room.

"Kat kicked me out." I moved back toward the door. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come here."

"Stay. Please." I saw the fear in her eyes. "Sleep on the couch if you want, I can't be alone. I thought it would be better but it's not. I can't... I keep seeing him on top of me, the hatred in his eyes."

I nodded.

Kara sat down on the edge of the bed. "I called Grant, asked him to come here, take the night off. They would have given it to him. He said he couldn't... more like he wouldn't. What a judge of character I was on that one."

I took a few steps and sat down beside her. "Everyone handles things differently, you know that."

"He can't even talk to me, we've been together over a year. My boyfriend can't handle it but you're here."

I didn't want to be rude but the truth needed to be said. "I'm here because Kat kicked me out, I didn't know where else to go."

"That's not the only reason, Link." She gave a coy smile. "You don't have to say it. Why did she kick you out anyway, did you tell her?"

"No. We had a fight about how little I've been home, how distant I've become, other things. I hadn't even told her I'd been stabbed. She had to find out from blood on my shirt. Then it turned to the kids and religion. I swore at her and stormed out."

Kara laughed, not the reaction I was expecting. "How the hell did it turn to God?"

"She started pulling some holier-than-thou thing. I couldn't deal with it. Maybe she was right, but I just wasn't in the mood. The religious part wasn't why she was pissed... it's just all she has to hold on to."

"You're a good man, she'll come around."

"Do you want her to? Do I?"

Kara just shrugged, both of us speechless.

\* \* \* \* \*

The couch was uncomfortable but safe. As long as I stayed on this side of the room, this side of the imaginary line on the floor, my marriage was safe as well. I

tossed and turned before falling asleep only to wake up with a jolt a few minutes later.

I saw him every time I closed my eyes—straddling Kara, the rope to her throat. I felt the knife enter me and I saw him running down the street.

I saw the shot I never took.

I shifted my focus to happier times but they would fade to black to be quickly replaced.

I dozed off again and woke what seemed like seconds later to Kara screaming. The blankets hit the floor and I ran to her side. There was no one else in the room—it had just been a nightmare. I took the gun from her hand—grabbed from the nightstand by instinct—and held her hand tight in mine, the fingers of my other hand running through her hair. Tears flowed from her eyes soaking the pillow beneath her.

“I can’t turn it off,” she said through her pain.

“I know, neither can I.”

“Lie with me? Please?”

I shouldn’t have, I knew I shouldn’t have. But I looked at her, her beauty and strength contrasting with her fragility—I couldn’t leave her on her own even if I would only be a few steps away. I climbed on to the bed behind her and laid down on top of the comforter, a barrier between us. I moved closer to her, lay with my front to her back and wrapped my arm around her.

I felt her heart pounding and the wetness of sweat as it beaded on her skin and I knew she was terrified. I just didn’t know what of.

She moved backwards closer to me, her body and mine snug to one another. The thin comforter and two layers of clothing were all that separated us. The thought lingered in my mind and brought with it a visceral excitement.

Kara must have noticed. She turned over to face me and our lips met for the second time. There was nothing to stop us this time, no one to walk in and no willpower to speak of for either of us.

We kissed like teenagers, our mouths attached to each other for an eternity before her warm hands slid under the edge of my t-shirt and pulled it over my head. Her fingers ran over the bandage on my side as she sat up and removed her shirt. Her breasts gave an almost imperceptible bounce as her shirt broke free.

Without words she told me to get off of the comforter and pull it back to join in her in the bed. I did, and our mouths met again, our hands joining in the fray. We caressed each other; my hands explored her breasts, slid down the soft skin of her back and up to the ligature marks on her neck. We had no reason to hide our wounds from each other, they had been what had brought us together and we wore them well.

We took the next step together, our hands moving lower as we continued our caresses. Our minds were lost in the moment and all reason had been thrown to the wind. I no longer thought of Kat or questioned my actions, I was lost once again and this time the feeling was to be enjoyed.

Kara broke the kiss for just a moment, her mouth moving to my ear and a whisper escaping. It was a simple command and one I was eager to follow. The covers were off the bed in an instant and I was above Kara looking down at her beauty. I stared into her eyes as she guided me into her waiting body. We reached



a perfect rhythm, our bodies moving in unison as sweat rolled off our skin and the sheets crumpled on the bed. I didn't want to take my eyes off of her. We would kiss for a minute then break apart again our eyes meeting once more, permanent smiles etched upon our faces.

We were joined from our head to our feet as I pressed myself into her with abandon until we reached a mutual point of no return. My rhythmic movement turned into a series of unattractive spasms and jerks before our motion ceased, our bodies separated and we lay on our backs beside each other exhausted in every way. Not a word was shared.

Our hands clasped together and we drifted off to a restful and dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 21

The DNA results came in shortly after Kara and I arrived at the office in the morning. We hadn't spoken of the previous night. Furtive glances were enough to fill the void where words would not go. It was as if speaking of it would cheapen it somehow. The alarm on Kara's phone had woken us after far too little sleep and we had showered together, a lack of time preventing us from rekindling our physicality. I saw her then in full light, her naked body presented to me and mine to her. She was as beautiful as I had imagined—her petite well-built frame and lightly tanned skin made her look like a goddess, a creature so beautiful that man was never supposed to look upon her and live to tell the tale.

And yet, there was an adolescent awkwardness to it all. I felt it and it seemed that she did too. I pulled myself away from my memories and fantasies and we looked over the test results as the calendar stared back at me: June nineteenth, twenty-eleven. Eldritch.

"What's that?"

"Huh?"

"You said 'eldritch' or something."

I must have said it aloud. "Oh, word of the day. Means strange or unearthly."

"Wonderful," she said. "I can sleep well tonight now that I know that. Can we focus on these?"

She handed me the test results.

They were conclusive. DNA on the rope had matched each of the victims. It was the murder weapon used in each case. But in addition to DNA hits on the rope for Kara and the four victims, there was an unidentified female source. We had another victim out there, one that had never been found. The lack of a male donor confirmed that the killer had been wearing gloves.

The blood didn't trace back to anyone on its own but the familial search yielded a hit, a twenty-seven year old inmate by the name of Michael Saunders—serving fourteen months at Millhaven in Kingston for sexually assaulting a coworker. As a result of his conviction a DNA sample was taken and put on file, and now it told us to look for his father. I searched our records for Michael and found nothing.

The next step was to log into the PIP server—the Police Information Portal—a file-sharing system set up between numerous Canadian police services. This allowed me to gain access to their reports and anything on file for a person, down to a car accident or by-law ticket. I searched through old files as Kara began checking other means to locate information on Michael, using the Ministry of Transportation database to find a driver's licence, registered vehicles, any means at all to locate his father—our suspect.

I poured through numerous police records for Michael, a troublemaker in London since the age of sixteen. The reports led me to two important pieces of information: Michael's father was James Michael Saunders, born July seventeenth, nineteen-sixty.

Our killer had a name.

I gave Kara the information and she began searching for anything she could find on James. Meanwhile I read a report from February of two-thousand—a suicide. Michael woke up in the morning to get ready for school and couldn't find his mother. He searched the house for her, wondering where she would be when her car was still in the driveway. The last place Michael checked was the garage, and there he found his mother, hanging from the rafters.

James had been working night shift at a local factory at the time and was on his way home. He arrived to numerous police cars, an ambulance and a fire truck.

And there was our missing victim—Nathalie Saunders, James's wife. Just to make sure, I called the Centre for Forensic Sciences and requested a comparison of the unknown sample and Michael's DNA. I had my answer within an hour. It was a familial match.

The rope we had recovered, the rope used to kill four women and that nearly killed Kara, was the rope Nathalie Saunders had hung herself with.

The question of how James Saunders managed to keep the rope was one I couldn't answer. A rope used in a hanging is always seized as evidence. The report stated that Michael had cut his mother down, sawing through the rope with a steak knife. Had he inadvertently cut a piece off of the rope, a piece that had not been recovered by the responding officers? Or had the rest of the rope been left up, her DNA on it from tying it to the rafters? James had had an airtight alibi and the coroner ruled the death a suicide. The thought that James had killed Nathalie then hung her from a different rope didn't escape me but it didn't fit the evidence.

No, his wife's suicide was the trigger. It had festered for years before turning him into a killer.

Kara found an address and Saunders's driver's licence photo. I had barely seen him in the dark and I couldn't be satisfied but the picture that stared at me from the computer fit the man I had seen. Within fifteen minutes undercover OPP and London detectives were staking out the address located in a neighbourhood in London's south end. Within two hours we had our warrants—to search and seize any evidence found within the residence or the suspect's vehicle, a black ninety-six Chevrolet Blazer.

Kara and I left the courthouse in downtown London and drove as fast as we could to Saunders's address, warrants in hand. Uniformed officers and emergency response team members had arrived to assist, and the door was breached with a

metal ram. The house was cleared first, the tactical team sweeping the entire residence and ensuring that there was no one inside.

Now it was time to prove our case.

It couldn't have been easier. As methodical as the killer was at his scenes, he lacked any intelligence at his home. Books on forensics, police investigations, true crime stories and unsolved murders lined the book shelves, along with every season of every recent forensics and police television show and dozens of similar movies. The top shelf was the gold mine—a number of handwritten journals. I took one down, opened it to a random page and read aloud.

"I hate killing women but it's the only way to make men realize the truth. Women are weak, they can't protect themselves. It's up to us to protect them, to save them from themselves. Every woman I kill, every pure life I take will remind men of their sacred duty: to protect the lives of those who can't protect themselves."

"Arrogant prick," Kara said as I flipped to another page.

"I have never been so sorry as tonight. The woman I killed was pregnant, another sacred life growing within her. Her life had purpose, she was fulfilling her role as a woman and I ended her life. Women should be held sacred, that's why this is hard for me to do, but if I don't, how many more women will needlessly kill themselves? Our lives have changed too much, women shouldn't be allowed to work, they should remain home to care for the children. That way they can avoid the evils of the world and remain pure."

"Motherfucker."

I had never heard Kara swear like that. Her face grew red contrasting the purple bruise on her throat she didn't try to cover.

The diaries would give us everything we needed—they were a confession written in the killer's own hand detailing his every crime. We weren't prepared for such a monumental find but we were even less prepared for what we found next.

I opened the fridge as I always do at crime scenes—it's amazing what you can learn about a person from the contents of their fridge. Organized versus disorganized, expired or rotten versus fresh, stocked or empty, organic, local, vegan. It was a tool of mine, one that fell deep into the realm of pseudoscience but one I stuck with none the less.

The fridge and its contents meant nothing to me after I opened the freezer. Sitting directly in front of my face on a package of frozen hamburger meat were four Ziploc bags, each one containing a piece of flesh the exact size of what had been removed from each of the victims. The imprint of a rope identical to the murder weapon was visible through the plastic bags.

Kara saw what I was looking at and the colour in her face shifted from red to near-green. She had seen far worse at other crime scenes, but it wasn't the grisly nature of our discovery that was affecting her; it was the thought of how close she came to having her own flesh sitting in a bag in Saunders's freezer. Her right hand rubbed the bruise on her neck as she stared at the bags.

I put them back and closed the door.

Saunders was nowhere to be found, his house was empty and his car gone. A provincial alert was put out with his name and date of birth, description, vehicle and the simple fact he was wanted on four counts of first-degree murder and two

counts of attempted murder. Other charges—breaking and entering, committing an indecency to a human body, anything else we could hit him with—would come later.

Detectives were at work having a Canada-wide warrant issued for Saunders's arrest, and the borders had been notified and his passport flagged. If he tried to leave the country, we'd find out. The man may have escaped us for weeks but he wouldn't be able to run for long. That night his face would be broadcast on every news program around the continent, even featuring on CNN. Newspapers would carry his photograph on the front page. If we were wrong, if he wasn't the killer, we'd pay out the libel settlement later. In the meantime we had a killer who needed to be caught.

## Chapter 22

Tearing apart Saunders's home had taken us the entirety of the day well into the evening. The house was still under guard, but it appeared we had everything we could gather: the disgusting frozen trophies, the journals, internet printouts on how to commit the perfect crime, and a bloodstained t-shirt with a small tear in the left sleeve, a tear caused by one of the rounds fired by Kara.

More than enough.

Our sights were now set on bringing Saunders in—dead or alive. I had experienced firsthand that he would not go down without a fight, and I expected that whoever found him would face the same result. Saunders alone would be the one to decide how he faced justice—in a court before a jury of his peers or in a body bag. With a number of stitches in my side and a bruise across Kara's neck, our anger got the better of both of us.

We wanted him dead.

We left the house just before ten that night. Kara and I checked out with the officer guarding the front of the scene and were just about to get into the car when a man screaming broke the silence. The sound seemed to come from the house beside Saunders's and Kara and I took off at a run.

The door was locked, but the screaming continued. I pushed Kara aside and was about to kick the door down when she yelled at me to stop.

My stitches.

I had forgotten. The officer guarding Saunders's house came running, and with a single kick the door swung open. He returned to his post and Kara and I entered the house, guns drawn.

I heard sobs coming from upstairs and made my way up slowly but deliberately. I knew what I would find but I refused to think it. I reached the landing at the top of the stairs and smelled a faint but familiar odour. A few more steps and I could see into the master bedroom, to a man crying over the body of a woman propped up in her bed.

Shit.

I holstered my gun and heard Kara's click into place as well.

"Police," I said, and the man turned around. His eyes met mine and he dropped to the floor, head in hands. I walked up to the woman and gently touched her cold skin. She was long dead. There was nothing to be done. I turned back to the man to speak to him, but what I saw next brought me to my knees beside him.

Another message, this one written on the wall beside the door I had just come through.

*"You should have killed me when you had the chance. Now I'm not the only one with blood on my hands."*

A tube of lipstick sat on the dresser below the message, the end ground down to a nub. The handwriting was exactly the same. It was him. Nausea ran through me.

This woman's death was my fault. I should have shot him.

Why didn't I?

Kat's voice played through my head, "You'll be just like him." And at that moment, I hated her.

I fought for composure, stood up and looked at the body. So much was different. Her neck was intact—bruising in the shape of hands stood out against her pale skin. She was still dressed—a pair of yoga pants and a loose-fitting t-shirt. And with her neck intact there was no knife on the bedside table.

He knew we were on to him, he had no reason to try to cover his crime, to get rid of the evidence.

I had to leave. I couldn't look at the facts clinically, couldn't be in there, couldn't... The guilt was rising and it filled me with despair. This poor broken man was a widower now because of me.

"I'm going to go out, notify London," I managed to say. "This is their jurisdiction, their case." Great, he'd kept it simple for us by keeping his crimes in OPP territory. Now with this one in London we'd be looking at a multi-jurisdictional task force.

Kara nodded and continued to console the husband, who couldn't stop crying.

I made my way back down the stairs, seeing things I hadn't noticed on my way up. There were family photos everywhere—a man, a woman, a son and a daughter. The pictures at the top of the stairs were the new ones, photos of the couple on a cruise ship, at both their children's graduations, at their daughter's wedding. As I walked down the stairs I stepped backwards in time—a teenaged boy with pimples standing beside his father, a large fish hanging from his hand; a young girl with braces relaxing at the beach. Each step brought more guilt, more pain. And then I saw it.

It was a picture of Link and Kasia standing on either side of Mickey Mouse, Cinderella's Castle a majestic backdrop. Link was flanked by Kat and I stood beside Kasia, my hand on her shoulder. I started to cry and, as the tears ran down my face, the photo began to drip away. The picture of my family disappeared and the dead woman, her husband and kids stared back at me, Mickey in the middle and the castle behind them.

I ran out the door and vomited on a rose bush. The officer at Saunders's house came to my side and asked me if I was all right.

I wiped my mouth with my sleeve and dried my eyes with my hand. "He killed his neighbour, too."

"Fuck. I'll call it in, Detective."

"Thanks."

I sat down on the step and barely moved until the cavalry arrived. The only movement I made was to put my hand on my pistol as my guilt drove me toward the breaking point.

With a single shot I could redeem myself.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was still lost in thought in the passenger seat of our car when Kara opened the door. I looked at my watch—it had been nearly two hours since I left the house.

“Link?”

I turned and looked at Kara with red-rimmed eyes.

“Are you okay?”

I couldn’t speak, I just nodded.

“I was a little worried about you when you never came back in but I figured you were out dealing with London Police.”

“She’s dead because of me.”

Kara opened her mouth to talk but I didn’t give her a chance.

“Don’t argue it, you know it’s true. I had a clean shot and I didn’t take it. She should still be alive right now.” I didn’t want to know, but a part of me had to. “What’s her name?”

“Sarah Heiser.”

I nodded for her to go on.

“Fifty-two years old. Husband is Steve, forty-nine. And their kids, Rachel, twenty-five, and Daniel, twenty-three. The kids are both living out of town now. Steve left two nights ago for a fishing trip and just got back in tonight to find her dead.”

I started to cry again. Maybe I should have left her nameless and never known about her but I needed to, I needed to know what I had done.

What I had allowed to happen.

I saw her clearly in my mind, an attractive older woman, slender and tall, with long brown hair. Her face grew younger and I saw Kat staring back at me. It was too much.

“I need to go home,” I said.

“Okay. I’ll be a few minutes getting things in order. Just wait here.”

She left me, and I was alone again.

## Chapter 23

It was nearly two by the time I made it home. The kids were sound asleep, but I had to see them. Kasia was lying across her bed with the covers completely off of her and I managed to smile at the sight. I picked her up, placed her back into bed properly and covered her without her waking up. A kiss on her forehead and it was time to see Link. He was lying on his side on the far side of the bed and facing the wall. I tried to maneuver to see his face but I couldn’t find a position that wouldn’t wake him up. I wanted to roll him over but he didn’t sleep as soundly as Kasia. I had no choice but to give up.

Kat and I hadn't spoken of our fight; we tried to make it like it hadn't existed when I called her earlier from Saunders's house. The tension in her voice told me that a lot was being left unsaid.

But now I needed someone to talk to. I walked into our room and to her side of the bed and gently shook her awake.

"Link? What time is it?"

"Almost two. I need to talk to you."

"Everything's fine. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Not about that."

She pulled the covers off of her—she always kept them up to her chin—and I saw hand-shaped bruises around her neck. I turned away and couldn't look at her.

"What's wrong?"

"He killed again, Kat. Another woman is dead."

"It's okay, you'll get him soon."

I started to cry. "It's not okay. It's not even close to okay. She's dead because of me."

"Oh, Lincoln, don't say that."

"I should have killed him, Kat. I should have fucking killed him. Why did you have to tell me not to? All I could hear was your voice when I had my gun on him."

I could tell she was processing it. Did she still think she was right? Did she have any regrets? Where was her God now?

"You're not responsible for what he does. It's not your fault."

"I'm responsible for what I do, and I didn't stop him when I could have. She had two kids, older now, but as far apart as Kasia and Link. There was a picture in the house, the family at Disney standing with Mickey. When I saw it, it was our picture, it was us standing there."

Kat was crying now, our tears falling onto the sheets and mixing in one stain.

"And then I saw her, clear as day in my mind, and next thing I knew it was you I was seeing. And now..."

I still couldn't look at her. I tried again, turning my head slightly until I could see her neck in my peripheral vision. The bruises were still there. "And now when I look at you, there are bruises on your neck, hand prints just like on hers."

She wrapped her arms around me and held me tight against her chest, my head resting on her shoulder.

"Kat, if there's a next time, I'm not going to hesitate."

She squeezed me tighter and I knew she still disagreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up a few hours later and left the house—Kara and I had decided to meet early to get started on the case. We were researching anywhere Saunders might have gone to lay low: family, friends, and coworkers, anywhere a person might be able to hide. I had to focus on getting him, it was the only thing keeping me from collapsing.

Our first step though was to go back to his house to search for address books, e-mail contacts, anything else that could point us in the right direction. After meeting at the office we took a car from the garage and made our exit, Kara driving

for one of the first times. It wasn't a chauvinistic thing by any means, I just made a horrible passenger. So many years of driving had made me unable to sit still in a passenger seat, and I would often get nauseous. But since I'd been stabbed, Kara refused to allow me to drive—my range of movement was limited by the desire not to tear my stitches out.

We found nothing at the house to help us. There were some family contacts out of town that prompted messages to police services in those areas. They would send officers to check the residences for us, getting back to us as soon as possible. But the entries for family were faded and no fresh entries had been written in. Saunders appeared to be a recluse with no close family or friends to speak of. His self-professed destiny had consumed him.

The fact that there had been nothing on the system for Saunders since his wife's suicide in two-thousand baffled me. How could someone like him stay under the radar? I called Millhaven Penitentiary and told them who I was, what I was investigating and the urgency of the matter. Five minutes later I was on the phone with Michael, Saunders's son.

"You the cop after my dad?"

"You know?"

"Yeah, we still get the news in here. Have you got him yet?"

"Not yet. I'm hoping you can help. We need to know where he might have gone."

Michael laughed. "All too fucking happy to help. The guy's a piece of shit. I always knew it. Three weeks after my mom died, he decided he was going to see his brother in the States, never came back. I was seventeen and on my own."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't bother. I've had enough of cops and sympathy. You guys just use it get what you want and then you throw us back in a fucking cell."

"Still."

"Aw, hell, it was my own damned fault. I got a chunk of my mom's insurance money. Had to find a place to live after the bank took the house. I somehow managed to finish high school. Tried to go to college but I couldn't cope, started drinking heavily. I found a shitty job and held that for the last eight years until I got drunk at a work party and wound up doing some stupid shit that put me in here."

"Look, Michael, I really am sorry for you all right? You seriously got the short end of the stick."

"Yeah," he paused. "Well... thanks... I guess. Look, he lived at his brother's until about a year ago, when he came back to London. I didn't have much contact with him, a phone call here and there, a Christmas or birthday present when he'd remember or when he wasn't locked up in a psych ward."

"Psych ward?"

"Yeah, he fucking lost it. About three months after he left me. He was in and out for a while. I heard he did some time down there too, an assault and a DUI or something."

"Where does your uncle live?"

"Missouri, umm, I think he's in Pleasant Hill still."

"Thanks, Michael."

"Hey, Detective?"



“Yeah.”

“He came up a few months ago to visit me, was rambling about how he was going to make everything better. Said he was going to make it so my mom didn’t die in vain. It didn’t make sense so I cut the visit short.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I didn’t know what he was talking about until I saw the news. So catch the fucker, I don’t even care if you kill him.”

Even his son agreed with me. I thanked Michael again and hung up the phone.

Kara and I left Saunders’s just after noon. Our stomachs were drowning out the car radio, prompting me to suggest we get a bite to eat. We drove down Commissioners Road to Wharncliffe Road and turned north, stopping just after the next set of lights. I had frequented this place during my patrol days, taking any opportunity I could to venture into London for the best shawarmas in the area. I had introduced Kara to them after she was transferred to homicide and thereby started her love affair with the garlic laden food. Perhaps a part of me was trying to prevent another amorous moment, a moment my guilt-ridden heart could not handle right now. Garlic breath would do the trick.

We ate in near silence, not because we had little to discuss but that we had too much. A crowded place was suited neither to discussing a high profile investigation or a marital indiscretion. The flavourful food was a boon to us both, settling our stomachs and providing us the energy we would need for what would be another long day at the office. Lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, onions, pickled cabbage and turnip, tahini sauce, hummus and garlic sauce wrapped in a pita loaded with chicken. It was messy food but well worth the risk of dropping sauce on a clean suit. Alone in the cruiser I would wear a napkin as a bib, but I refrained today to prevent myself from being embarrassed in front of...

What was she now? She was more than my partner, my coworker but still somewhat less than a lover, a mistress, a girlfriend. It may have been semantics but there appeared to be no word for the limbo we found ourselves in.

We finished our meals and spent ample time enjoying each other’s company in silence and imagined solitude, the other diners invisible, before we left the restaurant.

Kara saw it first as we walked to the car: an older model black Chevy Blazer with a single occupant who looked a lot like our suspect. She yelled and pointed and we moved. Within seconds we were in the car, Kara driving yet again and me trying to hide the blood that was seeping through my shirt—I had torn my stitches running to the car.

Damn.

Kara took off after the vehicle, nearly causing multiple accidents as she crossed traffic and headed south. My radio was in my hand and I was relaying the directions and details to dispatch, who were notifying London Police.

Kara caught up to the vehicle after it turned right onto Commissioners Road heading west through the city. I could just make out the plate, squinting hard to see it.

“Bravo-Juliet-Sierra-Tango-three-four-eight,” I stated into the radio. Not the right plate. Dispatch provided me with the registered owner’s details including a nearby address. The plates were registered to the same make, model, colour and

year as Saunders's vehicle. He could have easily stolen the plates, switching his own for someone else's.

"Get someone to the registered owner's address—with lights and sirens—and see if he's got Saunders's plates on his car." Not that we were going to give up the chase. I knew it was Saunders driving and Kara did too.

And he knew we were behind him. At the last second he veered left across oncoming traffic and ducked into a side street.

Kara followed him as best she could, but we didn't have lights or sirens, so traffic was slow to get out of our way. In fact, we were in violation of every policy the service had regarding pursuits—with one key exception. Exigent circumstances. Saunders had to be caught, and that need outweighed the risk to the public caused by a pursuit in an unmarked car.

The chase took us down various side streets, with Kara slowly gaining on Saunders. We may not have had lights and sirens but Saunders had an SUV—high center of gravity, lousy handling and weak brakes. As we pulled closer he kept taking more and more risks until he spun out on a tight corner and slammed hard into a parked car.

He was out and running before the collision was over and I was out before Kara came to a stop. I threw her the radio and told her to call it in.

Saunders was running like a desperate man, but I had desperation on my side, too. The chase took us through front yards, over fences into backyards, through gardens and over more fences. I ran on pure adrenaline, keeping pace with him at every turn but not gaining ground.

As the pursuit went on I could see Saunders starting to lose steam, slowing down, and I began to gain on him despite the warm, sticky wetness that pressed my shirt against my side.

Saunders hopped over a low chain-link fence then ran down the side of a house.

I followed close behind him losing sight of him for just a moment as he rounded the front of the building.

The corner was right in front of me when I was caught off guard by a garbage can that came flying out from behind the wall, knocking me over and bringing me down hard. My ankle twisted as I fell and the telltale crack of bone breaking filled my ears.

The pain hadn't started yet. I saw Saunders running across the street, ready to run between the next row of houses and out of my sight.

I rolled onto my back, drew my firearm from my holster and held it in both hands, my feet facing toward Saunders, my head up and my gun pointing between my bent knees. As soon as I had my sights lined up I yelled, "Saunders, stop or I'll shoot."

Clichéd, yet true. He did as directed and turned to face me, hands above his head. I saw his eyes between my sights as he stared me down.

"You won't," he said. "I'm unarmed."

"Doesn't matter, you're a murderer. You need to be stopped."

"Then go ahead." His gaze flickered and I knew he was ready to chance it, to call my bluff.

"Don't—"

But it was too late. Saunders spun and began to run again.

I squeezed off a shot. Then another. Then I kept firing until he finally fell.

I stayed on the ground—the pain was starting to radiate up from my ankle, growing worse by the moment—and held my gun in my right hand, ready to fire again if I needed to. With my left hand I removed my cell phone and called it in, connecting with London Police dispatch. I gave them my location, as best as I could guess after the chase.

“Shots fired, the suspect is down. I need ambulances here now. I’m fine, but my ankle is broken.”

I had heard sirens as I chased Saunders and now that they knew where we were they were closing in. Kara was first to arrive. She got out of the car and ran toward me.

I waved her off. “Cover off on him until someone else gets here. I’m not much use here.”

Kara did as I asked, getting within fifteen feet of Saunders and drawing her gun on him, ready to shoot again if he presented a threat. He hadn’t moved since he went down. He was either dead, unconscious or a very good actor.

Kara put her gun away within seconds of drawing it. I knew what that meant.

Saunders was dead. Visibly and obviously.

My gun went back into my holster and I strained to get up, putting as little weight as possible on my ankle. Even the slightest pressure brought unimaginable pain. I leaned against a tree in the front yard and waited, my left leg in the air, my foot hanging at an unnatural angle.

The first officer on scene took position at the body, the next came to my assistance. The first ambulance arrived next and was directed to Saunders, but there was nothing they could do.

With the officer’s help I was able to hobble over to where Kara stood, seeing now what she saw. I counted five bullet holes in Saunders’s back and one in the back of his head. There was no surviving that. Kara slipped her shoulders under my other arm and she and the officer practically carried me back to the car. They set me inside the open door with my feet hanging out. Residents had started coming out of their homes, and the next responding officers positioned their cruisers to block the body, preventing people from seeing what lay on their street. A quiet neighbourhood shattered by death, something Saunders had been responsible for on five separate occasions.

I had always wondered how I would feel if I had to kill someone. I assumed it would be hard to handle. I had always told Kat to monitor me if I killed someone in case taking the life of another human took its toll on me in ways I didn’t recognize. Even if I was saving my own life or someone else’s, even if the person by all merits deserved to die, I assumed I would feel guilty.

Now I’d shot an unarmed man in the back, and I felt nothing but relief.

## Chapter 24

The rest of the day went as expected. I was transported to hospital by an ambulance once the scene was secure and my gun had been taken for the investigation. That was protocol in the event of an officer-involved shooting, and the rest of the protocol was well under way. The province's Special Investigations Unit, the SIU, was already on their way down. The unit was responsible for investigating any serious injuries or death sustained by civilians as a result of police actions. They were our watchdog and, in cases of criminality, they were the ones who would bring charges against the officer or officers involved.

I knew I had done nothing wrong but at the same time fear was taking over. Officers were to be interviewed within days as the unit tried to determine if any fault lay in the hands of the police. In this case I was the only subject officer as no one else had even seen the shooting.

Kara was one of the witness officers, witness to the events preceding, and would have to detail everything from the time we spotted the vehicle until I took off on foot. Without a radio I had been out of contact from when I left the car until I called dispatch from my cellphone after stopping Saunders. Those minutes would need to be accounted for, and I was the only one who could do that.

Giving an interview to the SIU was voluntary, but I didn't even consider refusing. The Criminal Code of Canada protects police officers using force in execution of their duties, as long as it is not excessive. But the only way to invoke that section of the Code was to articulate my actions, give my why to the what they already knew.

Police in Canada are not allowed to unionize, but we do have associations. The Ontario Provincial Police Association is responsible for hiring lawyers for officers should it be required, and they provide support in numerous ways, including being present at SIU interviews.

But I would go it alone. There was no reason to have someone present, someone 'protecting my interests'. I was capable of that on my own.

I had plenty of time to think about what I would say in the interview while waiting in the hospital; how I could best explain my actions and choices. It was a few hours before I had my X-rays and a doctor had reviewed them. Then I got the bad news. The break was severe, a displaced fracture of both the tibia and fibula, and would require surgery. I never had a chance to ask when.

Today.

There was no other option. With pins and plates and screws or some combination of the three I would never again go through an airport security checkpoint on the first try.

I took out my phone, breaking the cardinal hospital rule of no cell phones, and dialed Kat.

"Hello?" Her usual answer, she was quite certain it was me but the "private number" showing up on her call display always made her question the caller.

"Hey, it's me."

"Everything all right?"

My voice must have given it away.

"Not exactly. I got him, Kat, it's over. But I'm back in the hospital."

A loud sigh. "What did you do now?" She was worried, I could hear it in her voice, but the fact that I was calling her and talking to her meant it couldn't be serious.

"Broken ankle. He threw a garbage can back at me while I was chasing him."

"So, a cast and you'll be home?"

"It's a bit more broken than that. Surgery, a cast and I'll be home, probably tomorrow."

"Surgery?"

I paused. "I did a real number on it, Kat, screwed it up like only I can do."

"Don't worry about it, just come back home. Everything will be all right. I'm coming up now to see you."

I smiled to myself at the U-turn we had taken and apparently I smiled to the older woman across the pod, lying alone in her hospital bed. She returned the smile.

"There's no point now," I said. "They're bringing me in soon, I'll call you when I'm out of surgery. If it's not too late, can you bring the kids up?"

"Of course," she said, "I'd be glad to. You sure you don't want me up there now? I'll get a sitter or bring the kids."

"Thanks, babe, but you'll just be waiting for me. I don't know, they might have to put me under. I'll call. I love you."

"I know you do. And you know I love you."

"I know." The doctor walked in and stood at the side of my bed, an unhappy glare directed at my phone. "Oops, I've got to go Kat, doctor's here."

I didn't get to hear her response before I shut my phone off at the doctor's behest. I'm sure it was "good luck" or something to that effect. The time-worn stage adage of break a leg likely wouldn't have been her first choice of words.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up a few hours later groggy and with little memory of what had happened. The last thing that stayed in my mind was being told to count to ten. I looked down to my feet and saw one looking back up at me, the other shrouded in fibreglass. I felt nothing; the morphine dripping into my IV was having the desired effect. I pressed the call button at the side of the bed and waited for a nurse to come by.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Ten-thirty."

A minute later I was breaking the rules again and on the phone with Kat. The kids were sound asleep, and I wouldn't be getting my visit from them tonight. Tears clouded my eyes as their images appeared before me. I had wanted nothing more than to see them. Kat apologized and even under the influence of painkillers there was logic in the argument against waking two children up and dragging them to a hospital in the middle of the night.

"I'll be up as soon as I can get someone over to watch the kids."

"Thanks." I hung up the phone and lay back in my bed, ready to fall asleep again. It seemed like only moments before I was awoken by a hand placed lightly on my leg.

"Kat?"

"No, it's me, Kara."

I could feel her hurt as she pulled her hand away.

"Sorry, I was just talking to Kat."

"It's okay. She is your wife, after all."

Neither of us spoke for a moment, an awkward silence filling the curtain-enclosed area we found ourselves in.

"So what happened today?" I said, the first to break the silence.

"We searched his car. It was his, stolen plates like we figured. He had notes, photos, and maps for two other women. Looks like he was planning on killing one tonight and the other tomorrow night."

"He knew he was running out of time. He was on a spree."

"Seems that way. SIU is here, I had my interview already."

I wanted to ask her how it went, what they said but I knew she wouldn't answer. It wasn't supposed to be discussed with other officers involved in the case, a rule set in place to prevent corroboration of details. Not that everyone obeyed the rule, but I knew Kara would.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, it wasn't fun. First one I've been in. I guess it'll be yours too."

I nodded. "When do they want me in?"

"As soon as you're back on your feet." She stopped for a moment. "Sorry, not the right thing to say. I had Francisco Reales in there with me, he said he'd be your rep as well."

"No," I said. "I shot him on my own, I'll answer for it on my own."

"Are you sure? I mean, I know they want to clear you for this, Link, but why go it alone if you don't have to?"

I took her hand in mine and looked deep into her eyes, "I'll be fine, don't worry about me."

"Am I interrupting something?"

It was Kat. And the last bricks came tumbling down. Kara and I pulled our hands away from each other quickly, an action that made it obvious that Kat had, in fact, interrupted something. Kara gave me a nod and walked out of the room with Kat's eyes following her every step.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I said, lying to my wife yet again. "She just felt bad about my ankle and what happened today and she was stressed out from her SIU interview."

Kat didn't buy it. "I thought things would get better between us, it seemed that way on the phone. You came home, everything was going to go back to normal."

I tried to maintain eye contact with her but I lacked the strength.

"Are you fucking her?"

She was beyond angry. Kat never swore. Then I realized this wasn't a swear word. It was just a verb.

The words knotted in my throat as I tried to speak, I couldn't lie to her. All I could do was nod.

She didn't cry, not even a flinch. She had known it was coming for only a brief moment but she had prepared for it.

"You're not the man I married," she said, her face devoid of emotion. "You've forgotten your family, gone back on your vows, and you've killed a man."

"I had to," I said.

"I saw it on the news, Link, shot in the back. You shot an unarmed man in the back, and you try to tell me you had to?"

"He was going to kill again, I was the only one there." I pointed to my ankle. "I couldn't chase him anymore."

"You murdered someone, whether they were a killer or not. God does not look kindly on killers."

"Don't start spouting that religious bullshit on me again. He had to be stopped one way or another."

"Don't you even feel badly? Don't you feel guilty? Don't you wish it had happened differently?"

"Of course I do. I didn't get into this job wanting to kill people. If I could have caught him I would have. But do I feel bad or guilty? Not at all. I saved lives today, Kat, something your God should be happy about. And the only guilt I feel is for not killing him sooner, for letting another woman die."

"What does your mistress think? Is she happy he's dead?"

"What the hell do you think? He almost killed her for Christ's sake."

I never saw the slap coming. She swung fast and hit me hard across the jaw. Her expression never changed, she refused to show how much I was hurting her.

"I'll bring the kids by tomorrow," she said evenly. "After that I'm taking them home with me for a few weeks. You need some time to figure out where we go from here and so do I."

"Home? Poland?"

She nodded.

"I won't allow it. You can't take them out of the country without my permission."

"Then I'll go on my own and leave them with you." She slapped my cast twice, sending pain up my leg that made the morphine feel like children's Tylenol. "Think you can take care of them?"

I hated to concede, but she had a point. If she was going, they were too.

"Fine. Type up a letter and bring it tomorrow, I'll sign it. Four weeks, Kat. I want them back in four weeks. And do me a favour; bring me some clothes that will fit over my cast. Please."

She left without a goodbye and I cried myself to sleep.

## Chapter 25

Kat kept her word and brought the kids by as I lay in a hospital bed eating my so-called breakfast. Kasia and Link came running up to me when they saw me, Kasia worried about my cast and Link going on about how cool it was.

"I'm going to get a coffee, kids, I'll be back in a bit," Kat had told them within moments of arriving.

The kids shared their excitement with me about their impending trip, happy to be going to see their *babcia and dziadzio*.

"It's too bad you can't come, daddy," Link had said, "but mommy says you have to stay home and get better."

"She's right, Link." I had been lying so much lately, to myself and my family, that it almost felt natural. "You'll only be gone for a few weeks and I'll be a lot better when you get back."

"Will you still have this?" Kasia touched my cast, feather-light.

"Yeah, I need it for about six weeks honey, maybe longer."

"That sucks, dad." Link again. "It's summer soon."

"I know, bud, but after the six weeks I can get a walking cast. I won't be running around but we'll be able to play."

Both their eyes lit up, happy to know I wouldn't be bedridden for the entire summer. I pulled them into the bed with me and we sat and talked about what we would do this summer once they got back and everything they wanted to do while in Poland. They hadn't been back in two years and Kasia remembered little of the last trip, but that didn't diminish her excitement.

Half an hour later Kat came back. She didn't speak to me as she handed me a piece of paper and a pen. I read it over, simple and to the point: "I, Lincoln Munroe IV, provide permission for my spouse, Katarzyna Munroe, to take our children, Kasia Munroe and Lincoln Munroe V, to Poland for a period of four weeks beginning June twenty-two, two-thousand-one."

I signed below where Kat had typed my name. "You leave tomorrow?"

"I found a substitute for the last few days of school and I'm taking the kids out. I told them my mother was sick, they didn't question it."

I nodded. At least I wasn't the only one lying.

"It's time to go, kids," she said. "We have a lot to pack."

I was smothered in hugs and kisses before Kasia and Link hopped off the bed. "Get better daddy," Kasia yelled followed by a "love you" from both.

"I love you too," I said. "Have fun and call me lots."

"We will," Link assured me as they walked out the door leaving me alone again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kara picked me up four hours later after I was discharged with a prescription for Percocet I had no intention of filling. I had seen too many people fall prey to opiates and I was determined I would not be one of them.

We spoke little until I was sitting in her car, my crutches secured in the trunk. "She's gone," I said at last.

"What do you mean?"

"She took the kids and went back to Poland, just for a few weeks."

"I'm sorry, Lincoln. I really am."

I knew she was, but at the same time I knew she had a ray of hope inside, the thought that we could be together now. I knew because the same feeling rested inside me. It was a feeling I had to chase away; my marriage was hanging on the precipice and needed to be pulled to safety.

"She knows everything now," I said, "but I wonder if it was me killing Saunders that hurt her more."

"Really?"



"Yeah, an affront to God apparently. I guess the, 'Though shall not kill,' ranks higher on the list than, 'Though shall not commit adultery'."

"Then she's an idiot, Link."

I didn't argue.

"I mean, you didn't have a choice and you saved the lives of at least two women."

"I know, I stand behind what I did. She'll never accept it though."

"Her problem. If doing your job tears you two apart, maybe it's for the best."

I gave a nod but wasn't sure. I wasn't ready for it to be over yet.

"Where to?"

"The detachment. SIU still there?"

Kara nodded.

"Time to get it over with," I said.

We talked about the case as she drove. I guess we wouldn't be needing the task force now, at least not to the extent I was expecting. But that was the least of my worries. It was all over the news and internet now—the media had wasted no time. They knew Saunders was the killer and they knew more details than I wanted them to know about how he was killed. How I had killed him.

I had been the public face of the case in the news. An African-American detective shooting a man in a residential area in the middle of the day led to a number of witnesses willing to tell their story. And it didn't take long for the press to put two and two together. The debate in the comments section of the newspaper's website was raging between those praising me and those demonizing me. I wondered if Kat had posted, accusing her husband of murder.

It didn't matter to me. There were those who would never back the police no matter what had happened, no matter how many lives had been saved. Granted shooting an unarmed man in the back did not sound good on its face.

We arrived at the detachment and I met with investigator Jonathan Tsang. He would be conducting my interview, which would be audio and videotaped. There were no secrets, nothing was off the record. Fifteen minutes, he had said, grab a coffee and meet me in the interview room. My heart was pounding as Kara and I sat in the cafeteria, a green tea in my hand to calm my nerves.

Kara took my hand in hers, my pulse throbbing against her soft skin.

"Try to calm down, Link, you did nothing wrong."

"I know," I said, my blood still racing. "How do you feel when you're off duty, just driving along, and a cop pulls out behind you?"

She laughed. "Like I've done something wrong."

"Even as cops we feel it, that's all this is."

"They want to clear you, Link, I know they do. You did good."

I smiled and finished my tea. The clock on the wall told me it was time to walk. Kara caught me looking at the clock and stood up beside me. "I'll walk you down."

No argument, she was my pillar now.

She saw me to the door and stood close as I hobbled my way along, then waited to make sure no one was looking before kissing me gently on the cheek. "I'll be in the office when you're done," she said. "You'll be fine."

No words, no gestures. I opened the door and walked in to face my fear.

## Chapter 26

“Investigator Jonathan Tsang with subject officer Detective Sergeant Lincoln Charles Munroe the Fourth, Western Region OPP homicide. Audio and video recording is active. Do you understand, Detective?”

“Yes.”

Standard disclaimer, audio and video recorded. It was a video I would be shown once this was all over.

“You have waived the right to have a representative from your association or legal counsel present?”

“I have.”

“Are you prepared to begin?”

“Yes.”

“Take me through the events of June twentieth.”

“Where do you want me to begin?”

“Wherever you feel is relevant.”

It was the same as every interview I had conducted on witnesses, the same questions. Except I was on the other side now. It would start off easy.

I began with lunch, then Kara spotting the vehicle.

“Kara drove, we started following the car and I called in the plate. Found out it was registered to someone other than Saunders.”

“Why didn’t you stop then?”

“Kara had seen the driver, said he looked a lot like Saunders. I didn’t get a good look but the driver was definitely similar. I guess it was a hunch, I knew it was him.”

“You just knew?”

“Yeah, I can’t explain it really. Instinct, I guess.”

Tsang nodded. “Continue?”

“I had them dispatch someone Code One to check on the registered owner’s vehicle, see if the plates had been stolen or switched.”

“Code One for plates?”

He was questioning the order to send someone lights and sirens.

“We needed to know and we needed to know right away. Sending someone Code One to determine if the plates were stolen was reasonable given the entirety of the situation we were facing. It outweighed the risk to public safety.”

He said nothing so I carried on. “He knew it was us behind him, just like I knew it was him. We hadn’t found out about the plates before he tried to lose us. Kara took off after him and I called in the details of the pursuit.”

“In an unmarked vehicle with no lights and sirens?”

“Him taking off confirmed it for us. Apprehending a serial killer was more important than the province’s policies on pursuits. Exigent circumstances.”

“Okay. And?”

“Kara kept driving, following him down side streets, the traffic wasn’t too heavy and the roads and weather were clear. I don’t know how long we followed him for,

Kara would know, she would have had to go back and determine the length of the pursuit."

"Three kilometres. Go on."

"Saunders hit a parked car and took off running. I tossed the radio to Kara and told her to call it in then took off after him."

"Do you know where you were?"

"Somewhere around Andover Drive. West of there, south of Commissioners and north of Southdale."

"And you didn't take the radio with you?"

"It didn't cross my mind, I wanted my hands free when I was chasing him. I knew what he was capable of." I lifted my shirt to show Tsang the stitches in my side.

"Detective Sergeant Munroe lifts shirt showing injury allegedly caused by suspect Saunders."

"Thank you," I said. "Wouldn't the video have made that clear enough?"

"Continue please, Detective."

Apparently recognizing sarcasm was not a hiring requirement for an SIU investigator.

"Saunders ran through a backyard on the right side of the street. I was close behind him the whole way, I couldn't gain any ground on him but I wasn't losing any either. We went over some fences through backyards and came out on another street. We ran down it briefly before he took off back into the backyards on the side of the road we had come from. I stayed behind him until we came into a pie-shaped backyard. We were on a court or a crescent, I knew that at the time. We went out and across the street, it was the corner of a crescent and went into the backyards of more houses. I don't know exactly where we went, it happened so fast. I might be able to retrace it."

"It may be necessary."

"We were back into regular yards, rectangles with square fences when he hopped the last fence and ran down the side of the garage. I got over the fence but lost sight of him as he rounded the corner. I was just about to round the corner when a garbage can came out at me and knocked me down. I heard bone cracking and knew my ankle was gone.

"Saunders was running across the street and I knew I had to stop him. He had killed five women, almost killed Kara and stabbed me. Nothing was going to stop him from killing again. I could hear the sirens in the distance and knew that officers were closing in but I couldn't take the risk. We had officers on scene fast after he tried to kill Kara and he got away. I couldn't let that happen again. I had the chance to shoot him then and I didn't. Now another woman is dead, and it's because of me.

"I drew my pistol, took aim and fired until he fell. I never took my gun off of him after that. I got my phone out and called it in. Kara was first on scene and she covered off on him. She put her gun away quickly. I knew then that he was dead."

"How far away was he when you fired?"

"About twenty metres, sixty to seventy feet maybe."

"A long shot. Did you think about your backdrop?"

The backdrop was what was behind the target—what I would have hit—if I had missed or if a bullet had over penetrated.

“There was a house across the street. I was elevated being at the peak of the driveway and the next house was at my level. Saunders was below me, not much but enough that my rounds would have hit the driveway and lawn of the next house.”

“And you thought about this at the time?”

“Of course I did. I weighed everything before taking the shot. It was a split second decision, Tsang, but a well thought out one.”

“How many times did you fire?”

“As many as were required to subdue the target. I didn’t count.”

“Can you estimate?”

I was starting to get annoyed now. I had told him what had happened. The number of rounds was obvious, count the holes in Saunders back and the one in his skull, count the missing rounds from my magazine. I knew I’d hit him six times, but I had I fired more? Had I missed? I closed my eyes and reviewed the incident, watching Saunders run away from me in slow motion as I pulled the trigger. If my memory was correct I counted six shots, but could I trust myself? I imagined it again, hearing the gunshots echoing on the houses as Saunders fell to the ground.

This time I was not alone. A man stood over me, silhouetted in the afternoon sun, his hand reaching for my forehead.

My eyes sprang open and startled Tsang, causing him to lean back in his chair. But what nearly made me fall out of my chair was the phrase “Why?” written in blood on Tsang’s forehead and a hunting knife dangling above his head.

I brought the heels of my palms to my eyes and tried to rub the hallucinations away. I opened my eyes and they were still there. No longer could I make eye contact, the sign of a truthful person. Not while Tsang bore the message, not while a bloody knife hung above his head, Damocles in a business suit sitting before me.

“Detective?”

My head hung in my hands. “I don’t know, six. Count the bullets, I didn’t miss.”

“Are you sure? How do you know you didn’t?”

My pulse was rising. Sweat beaded on my forehead and dripped past my hands onto my lap. My father’s image stood in front of me when I lifted my head, his hand reaching out.

“Because I didn’t miss, I couldn’t miss. He was going to kill him.”

Tsang stopped. He looked at me, at my eyes filled with fear and confusion as they gazed upon the wall where my father stood and shook his head.

“I’m confused, Detective. Who was he going to kill?”

“What?”

“You said he was going to kill him. All the victims were women. Who was he going to kill?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t even remember saying it, the reason for saying it was even farther gone. I lowered my head again and began to cry, lost in myself and unaware of my surroundings. A hand reached out and rested on my shoulder. I placed my hand on top of it and cried even harder, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t have a choice.”

"Detective," Tsang said as he pulled his hand away, "I think I have everything I need right now. I'm going to be recommending psychological counseling for post-traumatic stress."

I didn't hear him; I heard nothing but the wind swirling through the trees, the rush of water in the distance and the calls of birds singing to the rising sun. "I had to stop him, I... I had the knife. I had to stop him."

Tsang turned the video camera off and left the room. He came back a few minutes later with Kara but I was still lost, revisiting horrors that could only be old memories.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up the next morning with a pounding headache and an unquenchable thirst. It took me a minute to recognize my surroundings; I was in Kara's bedroom, in her bed, in just my boxers and a t-shirt.

Kara must have heard me sit up and she came into the room with a book in her hand.

"Never thought you'd wake up," she said.

I tried to speak but my throat was too dry, only a few raspy words escaped. Kara brought me a bottle of water and watched as I drank the majority of it without a breath.

"Did we... did we..."

"I slept on the couch. What do you remember?"

"Breaking down in the SIU interview. That was it."

"Yeah, I brought you back here. I was thinking about taking you to the hospital, you were right out of it. You kept rambling to yourself, I couldn't understand what you were saying."

"What about the interview?"

"Tsang said he had what he needed. I told him you'd been on morphine and were in a lot of pain. I think they figure that was the cause of you losing it."

I brought my hand up and clutched my head.

"Sorry Link, I know you didn't want them but I got your prescription filled and gave you a Perc last night. Figured you needed it. Need another?"

"No. Just some Tylenol. Flush the pills."

"Okay, sorry. I was just trying to help."

"I know," I said, but that didn't lessen my anger.

"What you said in the interview, do you remember it?"

I thought back, trying to force myself to remember but the last thing in my mind was telling Tsang how many shots I had fired.

"Nothing past how many shots."

"Tsang said you had a break down and got confused, said you started talking about things that didn't make sense. He wouldn't tell me much more, confidentiality and all that bullshit."

It began to resurface. I remembered seeing my father, seeing the knife above Tsang's head, the message in blood on his forehead. "He wouldn't tell you anything I said?"

"No." She looked worried, "I think he knows about us, I couldn't hide my concern for you. The way he looked at me, he had to know."

"It's fine, Kara." She was sitting on the edge of the bed now, her hand on my leg. I took her hand in mine, "if it wasn't for that he probably wouldn't have told you anything."

"You're right." She took a deep breath. "They've put you on administrative leave. Tsang told them you need psychiatric counseling."

"I need more than just that."

Kara looked surprised. "Is everything okay?"

"No. Let me get dressed and eat something, and I'll tell you everything I know."

She left the room puzzled, unsure of what I was talking about.

She and I had the same realization at the same time. My clothes and crutches were across the room. Kara was back in the room before I could call for her.

"You need some help?"

A feeling of helplessness overwhelmed me, I couldn't even dress myself now. "Thanks," I said as she handed me the pair of shorts Kat had brought to the hospital. I wanted to do it myself, to regain the independence I had lost, but Kara slid my shorts over my cast and my good leg and then let me pull them up. Bending probably wasn't the best idea with new stitches. She handed me my crutches and helped me out of the bed. Getting down the stairs took some effort, but Kara went down backwards in front of me, ready to help if it was required.

I took a seat at the breakfast bar in the kitchen and Kara asked me what I wanted, ready to prepare a breakfast of champions should I have requested it.

"Just some cereal," I said.

"Multigrain Cheerios or Oatmeal Crisp?"

I wanted to ask if she had any Lucky Charms or Cap'n Crunch but I already knew the answer. Health conscious and without kids kept her away from the sugary cereals I was used to.

"Oatmeal Crisp I guess."

"Orange juice or milk?"

"Scotch?"

She laughed. "It's twelve o'clock somewhere, I guess."

"Pour yourself one too, you'll probably need it." I hated to worry her like that, but I was right, a tale such as mine needed an analgesic to wash it down.

Kara took my advice, popping the top off of a bottle of beer. I ate my cereal before the ice had even started to dilute my drink. I didn't have the heart to tell her I preferred my scotch neat. With an empty cereal bowl staring back at me, I started talking.

"I started having dreams a couple of weeks ago, while the case was in full swing. I dreamed I was in the forest somewhere, flying over the rivers and trees toward a glimmering light. The light was flashing a message in Morse code, 'truth' I later figured out. When I went down to the light I crashed into the trees and found myself outside of my body watching my broken form on the ground.

"It took me a while to come to, and when I did I snapped back into my body. I fought the pain and found the source of the light: a hunting knife dangling from an invisible string over a human skull peering out from the dirt."

Kara shifted in her seat.

"The next dream was similar except the skull had a message for me, 'why?' written in blood on its forehead. The body had been excavated partially as well,

and a rib and a piece of another were missing. After that I started hallucinating, moving into my dreamworld during the day sometimes.

"When Chen called about the body found in Algonquin I somehow knew that was what my dreams had been telling me. He had called before, before I had the first dream. I forgot all about the call, someone had found the body but couldn't locate it again to show the cops. Took them a while to find it again."

I took a sip of my scotch.

"In my dreams I had seen the area the body had been located in, a river nearby. It had always started to rain in my dreams, from a clear sky to a downpour in seconds. I warned Chen about the rain and he laughed, said it was sunny. Turns out I was right, it was pouring when I got there."

Kara appeared to be having a hard time with this; the idea of precognition was something she didn't believe in.

"When we got to the scene the next day everything began to fit together. The body was in the same place I had seen it in my dream, skeletonized in a shallow grave decades old. When the anthropologist had cleared the dirt away I saw the missing ribs and I began to vomit. It was all coming true."

"That night I dreamed of two men fighting while I was lying on the ground in pain, my left arm broken. The injuries in my dreams, they were the same as what I had suffered when I fell down a small ravine on a camping trip with my father. I was eight at the time, he told me we had gone to Tobermory. I kept drifting in and out of consciousness in the dream, finally seeing the victor standing over me. I couldn't see who it was but he reached out to touch me.

"We went back the next day. No other evidence had turned up to that point. I talked to a park ranger who gave us a lead on the deceased—"

"The public masturbator and pedophile?"

"Yeah, said that guy had gone missing in the area in eighty-four and two kids a few years earlier. I was wandering around and saw something glimmering. I knew it was important so I took it, lying to Chen about what I had found. It was my father's watch. LMIV, nineteen-seventy-six engraved on the back."

"Oh God," Kara said.

I ignored it, a vestigial saying and as meaningless as a gasp. "I knew what had happened. I had been hurt somehow, probably by the person my father was fighting and he killed him. His watch must have broken off in the fight. It was him standing over me at the end."

"Your father killed this guy?"

"I think so."

"Even if he did, that guy was going to kill you and your father. Those missing kids, they've got to be from him."

I hadn't even thought about that. How could a trained mind have missed something so simple?

"Your father must have interrupted him, he didn't do anything wrong."

"Until he chose not to report it and buried the body."

"He was protecting you."

"Kara, if this comes out, what will they do to him? He's got Alzheimer's so bad he can't remember anything. Jail would kill him."

"Then leave it, don't tell anyone."

"And if they figure it out? And know that I knew? I'd be done."

She stopped for a moment, the thought obvious to her. How could someone who covered up a murder be a police officer? My job, my family, my life, it was all on the line.

"I need to know the truth," I said. "Once I do, I'll come clean."

"I'll be right beside you when you do," she said and I knew she was speaking the truth.

We sat for a while, unsure of what to say. I told her I needed to call Chen, to tell him about the missing kids. Kara brought me the phone and I dialed the number I knew by heart.

"Chen."

"It's Link," I said, slipping into the name of my childhood before I'd realized it.

"How's it going? Heard you got your guy. Nice shooting."

"Thanks. Look, I want to talk about your case. Heard enough about mine to last a lifetime."

Chen apologized, sincerity in his voice.

"Those missing kids the ranger talked about, have you looked into them?"

"Same thought I had, Link. We're pulling the reports right now. Should have them soon."

"If it was him, he probably camped in the same spot each year," I said.

"What's your suggestion?"

"You won't like it."

"The mosquitoes will."

"Yeah. Get the team together again and head back up there, get some search trained officers and metal detectors. Hopefully you won't need to dig the whole area out if the kids had metal buttons or anything."

"How wide?"

"Start with a hundred meter radius from the body then move out from there, don't cross the river."

"Saves some area. You coming to help?"

"I'd love to Chen, but they've got me on leave right now, broke my ankle chasing Saunders down." There was no reason for Chen to know about my mental instability.

"Shit. You all right?"

"Nothing a few screws and a plate couldn't fix."

"Ouch. Oh hey, almost forgot. I got a hold of the old guestbook from the closest ranger station, looking at who had signed it around the time Jeffries went missing."

"Any leads?" I knew where this was going and I didn't like it.

"None yet, but your handwriting sucked."

"Seriously?" I strained to appear shocked. "Is that the summer I was there?"

"Looks like," Chen said, no hint of anything beyond mere coincidence in his voice.

"Wow, almost forgot about that camping trip. A little hiking, a little fishing. It was a good time."

"Yeah, your dad signed it right above you. How's he doing by the way?"

"Not good, doesn't remember me at all anymore."



“Sorry, Link. I remember him at graduation, no one else’s dad looked so proud seeing their kid in uniform.”

He was right, my dad had been beaming. “Thanks, Chen. Means a lot.”

“Anyway, Link, I’ve got to run. Still want me to keep you posted?”

“Definitely. Thanks, Chen.”

I hung up the phone.

Kara looked at me, her eyes filled with worry. “He knows you were there?”

“Yes, but I don’t think he suspects anything yet. Just a bizarre coincidence as far as he’s concerned. He already thought about the missing boys and is expanding the search. They’ll find the bodies soon, I’m sure of it.”

Kara stood up and walked behind where I sat, then wrapped her arms around my chest and squeezed. “It’ll be fine, Link,” she said but her voice lacked the conviction of her words.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house was empty when Kara brought me home that evening. Kat and the kids would be in the air right now, high above the Atlantic Ocean on their way to Warsaw.

I tried not to think about it. It hurt too much. I had never gone more than a couple of days without seeing the kids, four weeks was going to kill me.

Four weeks without seeing Kat on the other hand filled me with relief, we both needed some time apart—time to think about my mistakes and find a way to prove to her that they would never be repeated, and time for Kat to try to find a way to forgive me or at least to accept my transgressions.

It was starting to get late and hobbling around on crutches was wearing me down. I decided to go to bed early, ready to face another day tomorrow. I questioned what the night would bring: a restful sleep or a return to my nightmares? I hoped for the latter, a chance to further understand what had happened.

As they say, be careful what you wish for.

## Chapter 27

I walk amongst trees, through groups of people who cannot see me.

They are hard at work. The heat, humidity and insects wear them down. A red flag marks the grave where Jeffries’s body was removed. They are far from it, the search taking them further and further away from the empty hole.

My eyes cast back and forth as I walk. I recognize many of the workers—the anthropologist, his students, Chen. The river rages in the background, filled beyond capacity by heavy rains. A voice shouts across the roars and splashes—someone has found something. I run toward the sound and find a man on bended knee, hands rooting through the dirt, metal detector on the ground beside him. I kneel down beside him and he continues working.

I don’t exist. I am a ghost.

His hand strikes something hard and he pulls it from the soil. He takes a tool from the ground beside him and begins brushing at the object, removing years of dirt. A toy car, red paint worn away and rust taking over. A Ford Mustang, 1967 by the looks of it.

I remember the days as a child when my most prized possessions never left my pockets. Sometimes they stayed with me as I slept. The body would be found nearby.

A quiet voice behind me catches my attention and I turn. A large oak tree stands among the pines and spruces, and beneath it are two young boys, sitting with their backs against the wide trunk. The lowest branch is just above their heads, bending almost to touch them before rising back toward the sky.

The boys wave to me.

They can see me.

I walk toward them with cautious steps, a ghost afraid of other apparitions. I study them as I walk, their hairstyles and clothing remind me of my youth. They speak to each other in voices so low I hear nothing. I'm close now, only a few steps away. Their eyes meet mine, smiles on their faces.

"Thank you," they say as one.

They fade into the air and leave me standing alone again. The searchers are still far away. I want to stay, I want to wait until they find the boys, but I feel myself being pulled away.

## Chapter 28

The clock showed 10:27 when I awoke. I couldn't remember the last time I had slept that late. The house was silent as I reached beside the bed and grabbed my crutches. The bustle of activity that usually filled the home was gone, and with it my happiness. I sat on the edge of the bed and mourned, wondering if Kat and the kids had arrived in Warsaw safely and if Link and Kasia were enjoying themselves.

I needed to call Chen, to share what I had seen in a way that would neither alert nor alarm him. I pushed aside my moment of self-loathing, rolled toward the phone on the bedside table, picked it up, and dialed Chen's number.

"Chen?" I said, as I heard someone pick up. Didn't even wait for a 'hello.'

"Nope, it's Aidan." He paused, looking at the display. "Uncle Link?"

I had forgotten. There was someone else who called me Link. "Hey, buddy. It's been a while. How are things?"

"Good. School's over and it's summer now."

He was speeding up as he talked, his excitement getting the better of him. So much like Link.

"Awesome. Maybe we can come visit you guys this summer."

"Really?" Then triple speed, "Can I talk to Link right now?"

I almost said 'sure.' Then I almost cried.

"Link's in Poland with his mom and Kasia. I broke my ankle and couldn't go this time. He'll be back in a few weeks, then I'll have him give you a call."

"Cool." Bored now. "I'll get my dad."

"Thanks, Aidan. Have fun."

The sound of the phone hitting the floor sent a shockwave through my ear followed by some muffled hollering from Chen.

"Hey, Link. Wish that kid would put the phone on the table or the couch or something. You should see my hardwood. How goes it?"

"It goes. You?"

"Heading back to the scene in a couple of minutes, we're starting the search after lunch. Couldn't get the team out any earlier today. Any tips on the weather?"

I was far from in the mood to deal with Chen's quips. "No, but thoughts on the crime scene. Look for any sort of natural landmark, a large rock, an out of place tree, a hanging limb, something that would be around year after year. I have a feeling he buried the boys together, using the same spot each time."

"Okay." I could hear Chen reaching for a notepad. Even with a memory like a bank vault he always made notes. "Anything else?"

"You'll have to go deeper this time. Jeffries wouldn't have been in a rush." The thought of his victims struck me, bringing with it the feelings that come from seeing a child's casket. "And he wouldn't have had to dig as large a grave. Whoever killed him didn't have the time to dig deep."

Chen was scribbling, the notepad held close to his face. His pen was by far the loudest at college and it was a wonder his paper held up. Chen did everything with determination.

"Thanks." The notepad slapped on the table.

"Good luck," I said. "Bye, Chen."

"Have a good one, Link."

A knock at the door came as I put the phone down. I had forgotten—Kara said she would stop by in the morning to see if I needed anything. I didn't think I would, but she insisted.

But things had changed through the night. She was my confidante and my dream had left me with something to ask her about.

I made it down the stairs by the end of the third set of knocks and unlocked the door. Kara stepped in, a bottle of Glenmorangie in her right hand and a six-pack in her left.

My surprise was obvious, my confusion clear.

"It's your turn to sit," she said. "I figure you'll need a drink as well."

I had no idea what to say, possibilities ran through my head. Was it something to do with us? With the SIU investigation? Did the plane crash?

When ridiculous thoughts took the place of reasonable ones, I decided to accept my fate.

We made our way into the living room and I fell onto the couch. My crutches bounced on the hardwood floor and the sound echoed through the silent house.

Kara came in a moment later, scotch on the rocks again. I'd have to break it to her at some point. Ice just diluted the taste, took away from the subtle characteristics of the single malt. I accepted the glass and Kara sat down on the loveseat perpendicular to the couch. Deep within was a desire to sit beside her but she had other intentions. She wanted eye contact.

"Link, what I'm going to tell you I've only ever told a few people."

I felt guiltily relieved. It was about her, not about us or the investigation, and Kat and the kids were fine.

"You shared what may be your darkest secret with me yesterday, I need to share mine."

I didn't speak, I just nodded.

"My mother was killed..." She paused, pain evident in her face.

"I know, Kara."

"No, you don't. I lied to everyone. It wasn't a car accident. She was murdered. They never caught her killer."

"I'm sorry," I said and reached for her hand. She accepted the gesture, holding tight.

"I was six when it happened although my father didn't tell me the truth until ten years later. She was beaten, raped, and left for dead in a ditch at the side of the road."

I had no idea what to say. 'I'm sorry' sounded hollow, but so did everything else I thought to say.

"That's why I wanted to become a cop, Link." She took a long drink of her beer. "I only applied to the OPP, never even thought of working somewhere else. We lived in Dutton at the time. It's still an open OPP case, a cold one now."

"Have you read it?"

"Yeah, I pull up the file probably once a month. Nothing's really been done on it in the eight years I've been on. They had a couple of tips come in, but nothing that panned out."

"They're stuck."

"May never get unstuck. Every moment I have I think about the case, I review the details. I've followed leads off-duty, revisited the scene, followed suspects."

"You don't have to tell me this, Kara."

"Yes, I do. I've been holding it in for too long."

I understood that. It must have been how my father felt, a secret kept for nearly thirty years. To his benefit, he no longer remembered it.

"What you did, stopping Saunders, what you think your father did, I hope someone did that to my mom's killer. If they find him, if he's still alive, I'll probably kill him myself."

I placed my weight on my good leg and shifted across the gap between the couches to sit down beside Kara. I held her close.

"That's not you, Kara, you're not like that. Line of duty, sure, but you wouldn't hunt someone down."

"I wish I was as sure as you." She leaned her head against my shoulder. "For twelve years I've wanted to see his face, I've wanted him standing in front of me. Ever since my father told me the truth I've thought about killing him. I've killed him hundreds of times in hundreds of different ways."

"How does it feel?"

"Wonderful. I visualize it and whether it's quick or drawn out it feels good. How did you feel when you killed Saunders?"

"Relieved. Forgetting about the other women, the ones he killed and was going to kill, he attacked you. That was enough for me to take the shot."

Kara looked up at me and I knew what she was thinking. I pulled myself away from her.

"I'm sorry, I can't."

"Why not?"

"If I kiss you I won't be able to stop. I can't do it." I looked away from her, unable to meet her eyes. "Kara, I have to get Kat back."

"Do you still love her?"

"I do. We have our differences but I do."

"She'll never accept you. Killing a man, sleeping with me."

"I know." My hand rose to my face. "But I have to try."

"I hope you're not trying just for the kids. We've seen too many domestics, too many people screwing the kids up worse by staying together for them."

"I love her, Kara."

"Do you love me?"

Her eyes were getting wet, and the sight of it made mine a mirror image. "Of course I do. You know that."

"But not enough?"

"It's not that easy. I wish it was."

The subject was too painful, I had to try to change it. "I had another dream last night."

I could tell she wasn't interested but she nodded for me to continue anyway.

"I was at the scene in Algonquin; people were searching the area for the boys. Someone found a toy car. I heard a voice and turned around, there were two young boys a ways away. When I walked up to them they told me 'Thank you'."

I could tell that Kara was intrigued, her lack of interest had given way to curiosity.

"Kara, what if I'm the one who killed Jeffries? I saw him and my father fighting, maybe my dad was losing and I plunged the knife into his back?"

"After having been beaten?"

"The autopsy said the stab wound went through his back, severed two ribs and cut through the heart. If my father had been underneath him, he wouldn't have had enough strength to stab him through the back like that."

"Maybe he stabbed him while he was on the ground, got on top of him or something."

"I don't know, I'd rather think he killed him in the heat of the fight rather than stabbing him while he lay on the ground."

"You wouldn't have been strong enough, Link. You were only eight and you had been beaten severely. A broken arm, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, you're right."

"Your dreams are important, but who knows what it meant. You were obviously the last one Jeffries abducted, and your father stopped him. Maybe they're thanking you for that, or maybe they're thanking you for helping to find them. You know, putting their spirits to rest, the whole unfinished business thing."

"Maybe you're right."

"Or maybe it's about you, you're putting your own memories to rest."

"Yeah, maybe." Though my memories still didn't feel very rested.

Kara stood up from the couch. "I need to get going."

I knew why she was leaving but I chose not to argue it. I felt even worse than when I had woken up. I had betrayed my wife and children and forced them halfway across the world. Now I had hurt the only person who was standing by me.

"Please, don't go." I tried to take her hand as she began to walk away.

"I have to. You want me here as a friend, I can't be that to you right now. I'm not ready to go back to that." She broke eye contact. "I may never be."

All I could do was watch her leave, but I'd been getting good at that. I'd had a hell of a lot of practice. I was losing everything that meant anything to me. Ruining my life seemed to be my only competency.

The only person I had left to turn to didn't even know who I was.

\* \* \* \* \*

I made my way out to my car and put my crutches in the back seat. The roof supported me as I hopped into the driver's seat. My right ankle was fine, driving would not be a problem. I reviewed the directions in my head then charted a course for somewhere I had avoided for far too long.

I backed out of the driveway and began my journey, arriving a little more than an hour later in the parking lot of my father's nursing home in Chatham. The trip to the front door was easy once I worked out how to get out of the car and retrieve my crutches. I entered into the secure area between two set of doors. The clerk at the front desk saw me and unlocked the doors. They closed behind me and I heard them lock again.

But of course, the security was necessary. The facility was primarily for patients in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's. The patients had a tendency to wander if left unattended and an errant patient would be a major liability for the home. I approached the desk and was pleasantly greeted by a young black woman.

"I'm here to see Lincoln Munroe," I told her.

"And your name?"

"Lincoln Munroe."

She looked confused for a moment before I added, "I'm his son."

"He's just finishing lunch. Do you want me to bring him here?"

I nodded and looked around at the beautiful lobby with its high glass ceiling and many trees, plants and flowers. A large aquarium sat between the lobby and a sitting area filled with colourful salt water fish. It was all very serene and I could feel myself beginning to relax.

"That would be great," I said.

I took a seat in a leather chair, resting my crutches against the table to my left. I found myself mesmerized by the fish darting in and out of the coral and rocks. I was lost in their flashing colours when a nurse brought my father in.

He had changed so much since I last saw him. His hair was all gray now and longer than I recalled. I wondered if he wouldn't let the nurses cut it, if he had lost the ability to comprehend what they were doing. Gray stubble covered his face, which was all but unrecognizable. He had lost a lot of weight, literally down to just skin and bones. It was most striking in his face, the gauntness of his appearance unnerved me.

His deep brown eyes had not changed, but there wasn't much of him left in them. He looked like little more than a shell to me. My father's body, propped up and made to move by invisible strings. I was surprised when he broke the silence.

"Hello."

"Hi."

I wanted to call him dad but I wasn't sure how he would react.

"I love those fish too. You did a good job."

Something new, I had never been the aquarium care person before.

"Glad you like them," I said. The nurse eased him down in the chair beside me then left us to ourselves. "The little yellow ones have always been my favourite." It didn't matter what I said, I was just happy to carry on a conversation with him.

"Me too. Them and the blue ones."

"I've missed you, dad."

He looked confused but didn't say anything, he just kept watching the fish.

I didn't know what to say, there were so many questions I wanted to ask, but he wouldn't have had the answers to any of them. There were so many things I wanted to tell him, but he wouldn't understand. So we sat beside each other for two hours watching the fish swim by and back again, occasionally sharing some observation of them with each other.

Even if he didn't know who I was, even if I couldn't talk to him as my father I was happy just to sit with him, to share a simple moment. It was hard, but everything important always is. I had given up on him a long time ago, the first piece of my life that I had lost, and it was time to get him back. He would be the first step in regaining my life, in bringing back the things that meant so much to me. But it would be a victory I would revel in alone, spending time with a man who didn't know me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I returned to the nursing home every day for a week, just watching the fish with my father. Each day he gave me a new identity—a nurse, a gardener, a boyhood friend—but each day we sat together. As the days went by, we spoke more and more, branching out from the topic of the fish to other topics, the weather, the food at the home, the attractive nurses who happened by. My father had changed. As far as I had been aware, he never cast a glance in another woman's direction while my mother was alive.

I laughed as he commented on the young woman who had let me in my first day here and said that a roving eye would cause no harm. Youth seemed to flow back into him as he watched her walk by, smiling coyly at her and winking at me as she smiled back. I felt sympathy for the nurses, dealing with amorous old men on a daily basis, but for the most part they didn't seem to mind. My father, unlike some of the other residents, kept his hands to himself.

Once a gentleman, always a gentleman.

Every day for a week I came, the hour-long drive a time of reflection and meditation. I would arrive and sit with my father, alone but together. I brought DVDs on the last day, his favourite television show now compiled on a few mirrored discs. It was MacGyver and it was something he and I had always watched—the exploits of a man using brains over brawn. I commandeered the

television from an old woman who had fallen asleep through a rerun of *Murder, She Wrote* and slid the DVD into the home's ancient machine. Good thing I didn't bring a BluRay.

As soon as the theme music started, my father's eyes brightened and he turned to face the set. We sat on either side of a leather sofa, only an arm's reach away but still so far apart.

"I love this show," he said. "Didn't know it was still on."

MacGyver he remembered, his son he forgot. I tried to hide the tears, but there was nothing I could do to stop them as they trickled down my face from the opening theme until the show ended. His eyes stood in stark contrast to mine, wide open and glued to the television with the admiration and awe of a child.

"That was great," he said when the credits rolled. His eyes met mine, his gaze reflected in the streaks of moisture on my cheeks.

"You all right, kid?"

I nodded and forced a smile.

"I'm fine. Just fine."

"Good." His hand moved to rest on my knee. "You seemed pretty upset."

"Yeah. I'm good though. Not sure I can really talk about it."

I wanted to but I saw no point. I would confuse him, I would scare him and I might lose what little we had together.

"Buck up, then," he said.

It was a phrase he had always used when I was a kid. 'Buck up' when I fell out of a tree, 'buck up' to my first bee sting, 'buck up' to skinned knees and sprained ankles. It had always come with a tight and loving hug, a reminder of the duality of my father.

"It's almost lunch anyway, shouldn't you be getting to work?"

I was the kitchen help today.

"I guess so," I said.

I stood up and excused myself then walked to the exit. Tears streamed down my face. I felt like I had been within sight of my destination only to have the road give out beneath me. No matter how close I got, he'd always be miles away.

\* \* \* \* \*

I returned home that night mentally exhausted—the constant emotional pain was wearing me down and I found that I had little left to give. Link and Kasia had called in the morning—afternoon their time—and I was secretly thankful that they would not be calling again. As much joy as their little voices brought me, rest and relaxation were the only things on my itinerary.

The answering machine light was flashing when I walked into the kitchen, a red light blinking in the corner of the room. It required no investigation—it would be Kara wanting to talk, wanting to sort out what little remained of our relationship. I loved her, there was no denying that, but my wife and my family were my everything. If only I knew what to do to make things right.

These thoughts paired with thoughts of my father were too much to bear, and, for the first time in my life, I turned to help to drown them out. The first drink went down smooth and the rest slid down unabated, the path already lubricated.



The sun was still up when I finished the bottle, its near final lights pouring through the rear windows of our home.

My home.

I was alone here now, a single person in an empty house. The floors above and below were devoid of life, no one downstairs watching television in the finished basement, no children upstairs preparing for bed.

The bottle clanked as I set it down on the quartz countertop. The glass had made its way into the sink some time ago. I looked at the bottle and felt a slight pang of sorrow; it had been a birthday gift from Chen and was a bottle I only drank from on special occasions. There was nothing special about today, nothing to celebrate, and yet there I sat with a belly full of expensive single malt scotch lamenting the messes I had made.

The stairs were uneven as I took ginger steps up them, the handrail keeping me steady. The master bedroom was in a sad state of affairs—the bed unmade, sheets rumpled and piles of clothing lying on the floor. There was no reason to clean it, no one to complain about the clutter.

I made my way down the hall to the kids' bedrooms and marveled at the contrast. Kat had cleaned before she left, tidied the rooms and made the beds. They sat in front of me like a hermetically sealed museum exhibit of years gone by; an unchanging glimpse of how life had once been.

I lay down on the floor and the unforgiving berber carpet began to leave patterns on my exposed skin. The view of their rooms held me fast as I imagined them sound asleep within. My mind had changed since returning home, and now speaking to them seemed like the only option. But it was the middle of the night there, and there were two things Kat hated: being woken up in the middle of the night and drunkenness. A combination would not be the way to win her back.

I fell asleep on the floor outside Link and Kasia's rooms, awaking many hours later to the first rays of sun breaking through the darkness. A pounding headache was my reward for stupidity and self-contempt, and I did not wear it well.

A familiar feeling in my stomach brought me to the bathroom, staring into a porcelain bowl as the manifestation of my grief and pain flowed out of me in torrents.

## Chapter 29

That day I did little of anything. My father would have to wait for me to pull myself together. The fact that he wouldn't miss me didn't help. My body was devoid of energy and I left the couch only for washroom breaks, taking in a *Mythbusters* marathon on *Discovery Channel*. Sustenance came in the form of pizza delivered for lunch and Chinese delivered for dinner. I saw no reason to cook a meal fit for a king only to have it eaten by a jester.

The night brought clear skies and more stars than I knew existed. It had been years since I'd given the stars their due, the art of stargazing lost as time went on. The air was warm as I stepped out onto the deck, my bare foot feeling the wooden

boards beneath them and the protruding nail I had been intending to hammer down. My hands were full of promise and responsibility, two cans of Coke and not a drop of alcohol.

I stood in the darkness, the lights out in the houses to my left and right and nothing but woods behind me. The moon had waned to nothingness and the stars found no competition as they shone down upon me, constellations I had long ago forgotten reappeared as I stared.

I draped a towel over the railing beside the hot tub that was rarely used for its intended purpose. The kids had commandeered it as a pool, and the lack of steam that greeted me as I opened it told me that they had last been in it. The water was warm but far from hot. I turned it up to a suitable temperature, preparing to never notice the change, a frog in a pot of water brought slowly to a boil.

I peeled away my shorts and t-shirt. A glance in all directions satisfied me that I was alone, and my boxers landed in a crumpled mass at my feet. I stood before the universe as I had been born, staring into the abyss of space for only a moment. My shyness then took hold of me and I climbed into the water, safe beneath the surface. If only they'd had waterproof casts when I was a kid, the summer of eighty-four would have been much more fun.

The lights of the hot tub always soothed me as they morphed from one colour into the next. Tonight I left them off, the glow they cast on my naked body left me unable to hide. Also, the stars shone brighter without the lights on—the faint colour would have hung in the steam that was beginning to form.

The phone rang inside but I had no intention of trying to reach it in time. I had found a place of peace at last, and no force on earth would cause me to leave before I was ready. The first can of Coke was empty and placed upon the side of the hot tub before I slid down deep. Bubbling water cascaded around my neck. I saw the stars in their entirety now, every single light in the sky visible to me from this vantage point.

A bolt of light shot across the sky above me and I thought of Link and the first time he saw a shooting star. I explained the science to him but it was beyond the cares of a then seven-year-old. All he was interested in was his wish.

I had so much to wish for but I could not bring myself to do it, to utter what I wanted, what I needed. No miracle would bring my family back to me, no fire in the night had the power to erase what I had done. I was on my own, alone in a universe full of mistakes.

An hour or more later both Cokes were finished. Sweat beaded on my head and my feet and hands were wrinkled; it was time to get out. My eyes wandered all around me to ensure the coast was clear before I clambered out of the water and draped the towel around my dripping body. I closed the hot tub and secured the lid then went inside, my clothes left for another day.

## **Chapter 30**

Two days later I woke early and made the drive once more to Chatham. I arrived to a sad look from the object of my father's affection. "He's not doing so well today, Mr. Munroe. There's a bit of a cold going through here. He's up in his room if you still want to see him."

I nodded and she gave me his room number. It saddened me to think that I had forgotten it. The hallway was simple, a straight line laid out in green carpet, lights on the walls guiding me until I found my father's room. The door was open and a nurse stood beside his bed checking his temperature. I gave a soft knock.

"Oh, hello," the nurse said. "I'll just be a minute."

He removed the thermometer from my father's ear, looked at it, then trashed the probe and placed the device back in the pocket of his scrubs.

"He's a little warm still, should be fine in a couple of days. Lincoln," he said as he tapped my father on the shoulder, "you have a visitor."

They never announced who was visiting. It would only confuse my father if he had said, "your son is here". I pulled his armchair over to the side of the bed and sat down, my eyes never leaving his weakened body. He was a shadow of his former self—just over half the weight I remembered, half the man I saw in my dreams.

But despite the withered body, as I looked at him lying in the bed half awake, I found myself in awe of him once again. His strength had astounded me when I was a child, and now even as death, as implacable as it was, approached him, he did not seem to waver. This illness would not take him. He would stand fast and rise again, ready to fight another day like he had fought for me.

It didn't matter whether he had killed Jeffries or I had. He fought for my life. He saved me. As I sat watching him, I felt helpless; it was a favour I could not return. I wanted to hold him, to lie beside him in the bed as I had done as a child while he read to me. Instead I would read to him, my words soothing him to sleep. I would say "I love you" before he drifted off to sleep and he would counter with "you", starting a battle that would not end until one of us gave in—the word "me" the coda said in concession.

It was a waking dream that I could not fulfill. My presence in his bed would terrify him, my words would have an effect opposite to what I had intended.

"Dad," I said. "I wish you knew me still. There's so much I need to ask you, so much I wish I could tell you. I'm so far gone I don't know how to get back. Everything is falling apart."

I choked back tears as I spoke to a man who seemed not to hear my words.

"I know something happened, years ago Dad. If only you could remember."

I took his hand in mine, feeling his bones and tendons through the onion skin of his flesh. His eyes opened and I saw in them something I had not seen for years: a spark of understanding, of recognition, of unabated love. He moved his lips to speak but found no words. I saw the strain behind his eyes, the thoughts forming slowly in his addled mind.

"Lincoln," he said.

My face was wet instantly, salted droplets rolling down my cheeks.

"Dad? You remember?"

"I'm sorry." His eyes were welling up, tears I had hardly ever seen before dripped down, staining his pillow. "I did it for you."

I could hear the dryness in his mouth, his lips looked as though they would crack if he smiled. I reached for a glass of water on the nightstand and helped him take a drink. The man he was to me right then, only a damp sponge on a stick raised to his parched lips would have sufficed.

"I wanted to tell you, Link, before it was too late. I was scared, scared what you would think of me. You've made me proud, son."

I was sobbing at this point, my nose running as the tears flowed forward and back.

"It's okay, Dad, it doesn't matter anymore."

"Well, you deserve to know the truth, but I'm too weak. I've always been too weak."

Both of my hands now held his not wanting to let go for fear that this moment, a miraculous moment, would end.

"I love you, Lincoln."

His eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep. He had gone too soon.

I sat back in the chair and closed my eyes, unable to believe what had happened. He had broken through, fought past the disease and spoken to me, remembered me. I had never thought it possible, but it happened.

I opened my eyes again and looked upon my father, sound asleep in a bed far too large for his slight frame. His face was dry and there was not a spot on the pillow below his head. I refused to believe I had dreamed it, refused to believe it wasn't real. My face was still wet, my shirt soaked at the collar and my nose running.

I stood up and leaned over the bed, kissing my father on the forehead. "I love you," I whispered as I stood back up.

His eyes moved beneath his eyelids and his mouth opened a crack. "You."

"Me," I said.

A slight smile formed on his face as he peacefully slept.

## **Chapter 31**

The drive home took far longer than it should have as I pulled over on the highway twice. There were no windshield wipers to clear my eyes. The weather always intrigued me, how our emotions are so closely tied to it: a rainy day brings us down, a sunny day boosts our spirits.

Today the weather seemed to be reacting to me.

It had been sunny when I drove down to Chatham and now, as I drove home with tears in my eyes, the clouds grew dark and the rain began to fall. When the tears became too thick to see through and I found myself stopped on the shoulder, the rain came down in a deluge, drops the size of golf balls pounding on the roof and windshield.

The rain didn't cease as I pulled into the driveway and stepped out of the car. I made no attempt to move quickly to evade the water. Instead I stood in it, looking to the sky for answers as the water poured over me. My clothing became heavy

and dragged down on my shoulders. I was fixated, unwilling or unable to move for minutes until my phone ringing broke through. I answered the phone, hoping it hadn't been ruined in the rain. It was a call I had to take.

"Kara?"

"No, it's Chen."

A bolt of lightning struck in the distance and the thunder rolled in.

"Sounds like this weather is province-wide," he said. "We found the bodies, Link, buried beside a large rock."

I could only mumble a sound of understanding. At least it had been a rock, not the tree in my dreams.

"The rain came in right after, with any luck we'll excavate tomorrow. The one boy's clothing was pretty intact, took a sample from what looked to be his underwear and it's on its way to CFS right now."

The killer's DNA, Jeffries's DNA, would be on it.

It was a fate I had narrowly missed.

"Good job, Chen."

"Keep you posted?"

"Sure, thanks." I hung up the phone.

I dialed Kara next but there was no answer. Her home number yielded the same result. I would have left a message if I'd had any idea what to say.

I unlocked the door and stepped inside trailing water behind me. My clothes clung to my body. I wrestled them off and left them in a heap at the door then walked upstairs to the bathroom and toweled myself dry.

The pillow was soft beneath my head as I fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone rang beside my head and woke me to face the red glare of my alarm clock: 9:07 p.m. I had slept through the rest of the afternoon and nearly into the night. The phone rang again, reminding me of its presence.

"Hello?"

"Link, it's Kara."

A million questions came to mind but only one was important.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm great, better than great."

She sounded incredible, a new woman.

"I spent some time thinking, Link, a lot of time." I waited, holding my breath. I heard no breathing on the other end either. "I don't want to be that woman, the one that breaks up the marriage and ruins everyone's life."

"You wouldn't be doing it alone." 'It takes two to tango' sounded too clichéd.

"Doesn't matter. You're right, Link, you need to stay with Kat. Make it work. If you can't, I'll still be here... for a while anyway."

"Thanks, Kara."

My heart was breaking. I felt like such an ass, blamed myself for the entire thing. If only things hadn't happened the way they did—if only I hadn't been so weak.

"I saw my father again today."

I had to speak, eager to share my news and apprehensive of what it might mean.

She said nothing, waited for me to continue.

“He recognized me, Kara. He spoke to me and apologized for what had happened. He slipped away again before he could tell me what happened.”

“Don’t stop going. Maybe you can get him to break through again.”

“I hope so. He remembered it. Christ, he remembered. I need to know the truth.”

Neither of us knew what to say, and we each hung up in near silence. I took hold of my crutches and brought myself out of the bed and downstairs. I was still nude and saw no reason to dress, the hot tub and stress relief were my only destinations for the night. Pouring a dram of scotch into a glass, I made my way outside with a single crutch and a desire not to spill my drink.

The water wrapped around me as I sunk into it, its warmth soothing my body and mind. With glass in hand I raised my arm to the sky, a toast to myself, to my father and to the universe or whatever power had given us that one moment together. Maybe that power could grant us one more.

I sipped the drink, not wanting a repeat of the last time my emotions left me thirsty. The stars in the night sky disappeared before my eyes behind thin wisps of clouds only to reappear later. If I focused on the clouds, barely moving in the windless night, the stars themselves seemed to move as the clouds stood still.

Everything comes down to perspective.

## Chapter 32

The phone woke me the next morning just after seven. I didn’t want to answer it, I just wanted to sleep. I rolled over and checked the caller ID. My father’s retirement home.

“Hello?”

“Lincoln? It’s Anita.” She was the woman I had first seen when I returned to visit my father, the one that drew the attention of my father’s roving eye. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but your father passed away last night.”

A lump formed in my throat and I couldn’t speak. She waited. The professional in me, who had made calls and visits like this, recognized her silence as a sign of experience. It took a minute before I was able to speak.

“Was it the fever?”

“The doctor thinks so, he was getting very weak.”

I had investigated dozens of deaths from a variety of causes: homicide, suicide, natural causes. The role of the police was simple: determine if there was anything suspicious, assist the family, await the coroner’s attendance and, if the coroner deemed it natural, help the family get in contact with a funeral home. Once the body was removed, my job was done.

Now, faced with the terrible news I was used to bringing to others, I was lost. Their role had become mine and I didn’t know what to do.

“What’s next?”

"There's a very good funeral home in town. We can call them if you like. Your father didn't have anything arranged."

"Okay," I said. "Call them, please. Should I come down?"

"It's not necessary. The funeral director will likely have your father removed before you would arrive. I'll have them call you and you can arrange to see him there, if you'd like."

"I'd like that," I said. "Thank you."

I hung up the phone and cried myself back to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

My father was buried three days later. I had called Kat and the kids to tell them, but there was no reason for them to come home. Link had only met my father a few times and Kasia never. Once the Alzheimer's took hold, Kat and I felt it would be too difficult for them to understand.

Kat wanted to come, to stand by me, but I told her to stay. The kids were enjoying themselves and I didn't want to spoil that. And I wasn't ready for her to come back yet, there was still more I had to do to prepare myself.

My knees weren't used to begging. Practice would make perfect.

The church was full of people—friends and family I hadn't seen in years and a number of coworkers who had come to give their condolences. I made the rounds, accepting their sympathy and thanking them for coming. It was still hard to accept. I had just come back into his life and now he was gone. The things we take for granted.

The time came for me to speak. I made my way to the front of the church, laid my crutches beside the altar and rested on it just enough to support my weight.

"I lost my father a long time ago," I said. "Many of you knew of his battle with Alzheimer's disease that left him a shadow of himself. I gave up on him years ago, finding too much pain in never being recognized when I went to visit. I was selfish, and it was out of selfishness that I recently found myself back at the nursing home trying to reconnect with him.

"I spent a lot of time with him in his last few weeks and I was able to see in him the man I had once known, the man I had always loved and looked up to. He did so much for me, took huge risks in order to protect me. Right or wrong, his reasons were just."

I looked out over the crowd and saw the familiar faces I had needed to see. Kara sat with her eyes fixed to me as if channeling the strength I would need to finish the eulogy, and Chen sat, hat in hand, in his dress uniform. I looked back down at the altar.

"The last time I saw him, he was lying in his bed sick with a fever. Maybe I dreamed it, maybe somehow the fever broke through the barriers, but he knew me, he spoke to me as his son for the first time in years. Even though I have barely set foot in a church in all my years and question the nature of miracles, I know that somehow, wherever it came from, I was given one. I should have known then that it was the last time I would see him. It was as if he had one last thing he needed to do, one thing he needed to say before he could finish his journey.

"Thank you all for coming; you have honoured his life with your presence and kind words."

I made my way back to the first pew, taking a seat beside Kara. Her hand on my leg told me I had done well and I hoped, if my father was listening, I had done him and his legacy proud.

The service finished and everyone began to file out of the church. Only very close family and friends would be attending the internment. Kara and I were last to leave and we took her car, Kara driving behind the hearse to the burial plot. The preacher spoke, read verses from the Bible and shook some dirt over the casket once it had been lowered into the ground.

I stood transfixed on the grave, an open hole with my father lying inside it. As time went on Kara and I were left alone with my father's body, the gravestone bearing a fresh inscription of his life and death.

Beloved son, father and husband. October 26, 1936—July 2, 2011.

Piles of dirt surrounded the grave and two shovels lay off to the side. I walked over to one of the shovels and traded it for a crutch. I was able to balance well enough on my cast now.

I dug into the dirt and spread the first pile on to the casket, a cacophony of sounds as dirt and rocks hit the wooden exterior. I kept shoveling until the casket disappeared beneath the dirt. Kara joined me, the other shovel in her hands, helping me fill the grave and say goodbye to my father in my own way.

Death wasn't clean. He had dirtied his hands for me once, and now I would do it for him.

The sun was setting as the last pile of dirt disappeared. A mound of fresh soil and a stone were all that remained, an eternal marker to my father's life. I knelt down in the grass and pressed my hand into the mound of dirt.

"Goodbye," I said, and removed my hand, leaving the print behind. I stood up and looked at the fading sun, bright orange as it fell beneath the horizon. Kara put her arm around my waist and I reciprocated. She had stood fast as my pillar today.

We brushed the dirt off of ourselves and stepped into the car. The next step, and it was one I was dreading, was returning to the nursing home to collect my father's belongings. I had buried my father beside my mother, in a cemetery in Chatham not far from the house I grew up in. It was only a short drive to the nursing home and the few minutes passed almost instantly.

I wanted to do it myself—go in, get what I needed and get out—but I couldn't. Kara had to help, I couldn't carry a thing and still use my crutches. Anita had called yesterday and told me everything was packed up and that there wasn't much. She was right.

When we walked into his room, I saw what remained of him—two boxes and a duffle bag. There was a faint smell in the air, aftershave or something, but it was enough to bring the memories flooding back. I began to cry, short-lived tears interrupted by a knock on the open door.

"Mr. Munroe?"

"Oh." I rubbed the tears away. "Hi, Anita."

"When we were packing everything, I found a letter in his drawer. I'm assuming it's for you. It's inside the smaller box, right on top."

"Thanks, I'll take a look at it."



"I just wanted to let you know. Sometimes people don't look in the boxes for a while. It's too painful, maybe."

I could see that she was getting upset. As painful as it was for family to go through the boxes, it was probably just as painful for her to pack them. In the last few years she'd seen my father a thousand times more than I had.

I walked up to Anita and took her hand in mine. "Thank you, for everything." For taking care of him when I couldn't, for seeing him every day when it had been too painful for me, for being strong when I was weak.

Anita smiled and nodded then turned and walked down the hall back to her desk in the lobby. She had barely taken her first step before I had the box open and the letter in my hand.

I stared at the yellowed envelope, the faded ink, the unmistakable handwriting—"Lincoln" on the front in my father's sloppy yet distinguished cursive. I held the letter up to the light but nothing showed through. I flipped the envelope over and smiled at the red wax seal, an 'L' pressed into the wax. How old-fashioned.

The wax crumbled as I opened the envelope and removed the hand-written letter.

"Lincoln," I read aloud. "I'm sorry I never told you the truth. I'm a coward and if you're reading this I've gone to the grave a coward. Our camping trip, we were in Algonquin Park, summer of eighty-four. You walked away from the tent one night, I never understood why, but I woke to you screaming. The moon was full, enough light to see by. I ran after you, trying to find you in the night."

I paused and Kara stayed silent, waiting for me to regain my composure and continue.

"I searched and searched and couldn't find you. Then I heard you scream again and a man yelling. He called you a filthy nigger, said that you ruined everything, that he wanted a white boy. There was so much anger in his voice, and it made me so angry to hear him call you that after everything our family has gone through. When I got to him, you were lying on the ground, unconscious and beaten. He was cutting your pants off, Lincoln, with a large knife. I had no choice. I jumped on him and hit him as hard as I could.

"We fell to the ground fighting. I was losing, he was stronger than me. He'd dropped the knife when I hit him."

The letter stopped here, briefly at least. It was a slight break, imperceptible to some perhaps. Like the way the ink that followed was just barely darker, the writing more deliberate.

"I managed to get him off of me, and I rolled for the knife. He had gotten up and tried to jump on top of me but I rolled out of the way. I stabbed him in the back, Lincoln."

I couldn't breathe. Reality had knocked the wind out of me.

"I buried him while you lay there, unconscious. I found a shovel in his tent, I could only assume what he was going to do with it. I finished burying him as the sun was coming up, then threw the knife in the river. I packed up his camp and woke you up. You never asked about the extra backpack. I threw it in the first dumpster I found along the way to the hospital. I told them you fell down a ravine. The scar on my chest, Lincoln, the one I never told you about, was from the fight. I wore it proudly, Lincoln."

I remembered the scar, a raised line on the right side of his chest. I'd asked about it but never got an answer.

"I'm sorry, Lincoln. I always told myself I was protecting you but now I wonder if I was only protecting myself by keeping it a secret. I didn't want you to know what had happened, you never asked and you never seemed to remember, but I never wanted to face what I had done, hiding it like that. I've done many things in my life I regret but nothing more than keeping this from you. I hope you can forgive me. I love you, Dad."

I used my sleeve to dry my eyes and wipe my nose. We didn't speak for minutes, the silence of her understanding comforting me.

"Looks like I got my man," I said at last.

"What are you going to do?"

"Head to Orillia tomorrow and tell the Commissioner."

"You think it's a good idea to go right to the top?"

"I have to. Thanks for standing by me."

I didn't give her a chance to protest or say goodbye. There was too much going through my mind for me to deal with Kara's concerns as well. I knew what I had to do. I would relax tonight, raise a glass to my father, who did what he thought best, and tomorrow, tomorrow I would let the truth be known after so many years.

But first, I had another confession to make. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my father's watch. It had just felt right to have it during the funeral, and now I passed it to Kara.

"I found this at the crime scene in Algonquin. It's my father's."

"You took it?" She was incredulous. I was responsible for the deaths of two men but taking evidence from a murder scene was apparently my greatest crime.

"I had to, or at least I thought I did. I knew it meant something."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take it to Chen. They're excavating the bodies of the two boys tomorrow. I-"

"Are you going to tell him everything?"

"I have to. Chen and I have known each other a long time. I'll give him the watch and hope he logs it into evidence like he found it that day."

"And your prints?"

"It's too dirty to lift anything from."

"You're still asking him to lie, to risk his job."

I nodded, words were not needed.

"What about a trial?"

"There won't be one, so no judge or jury to convince of the evidence. I was only eight, they can't charge me. And my father's dead now."

"And what about then, it was a long time ago. Could they charge you?"

Kara was concerned. In the event of a cold case, people are tried under the law as it stood on the date of the offence.

"The Young Offender's Act came in a couple of months before, changed the age from seven to twelve for being able to charge a child."

Kara forced a slight smile. "You've thought about this."

"I had to. I'm going to leave first thing in the morning."

"Let me come, Link." She took my hand as I stood above her. "I'll support you. As a friend or a partner. Whatever you need."

"Thanks."

I held my hand out—I needed the watch back. It would be hard to give it to Chen. It was a piece of my father I didn't want to let go of.

## Chapter 33

Kara picked me up at five the next morning. She said she would drive and I chose not to argue. We could switch later if she grew tired. It didn't hurt that Kara's Prius was much better on gas.

An hour down the 401 heading for Toronto, the conversation became very personal. "The things Jeffries said to you, did you get that a lot?"

I hated to even repeat the word. "Nigger?"

"Yes, that."

"Sometimes as a child. It was the late seventies and early eighties, mostly kids trying out new words. They didn't know what it meant. A few adults said it too, generally to our family as a whole. My mom got 'nigger-lover' a few times, too."

"I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to apologize for. But thanks anyway. Have you ever wondered about my name? It's not exactly common."

"Sometimes, all the Roman numerals mean it's obviously a family name."

I cast her a look of pure stupidity. "Well done, Detective." I received a well-deserved punch to the left shoulder.

"My great-great-grandfather Charles and grandmother Hettie were born into slavery in Maryland in the eighteen-thirties," I said.

A quiet gasp, the usual response when I mentioned my family's slave heritage.

"They worked on the same plantation and fell in love. They wanted their children to be free, so they fled along the Underground Railroad in eighteen-fifty-nine, a dangerous and long journey for them since Hettie was a few months pregnant at the time. They made it through Delaware and into Philadelphia before making the trek through the mountains to New York.

"They had spent one day with a white family in New York, a light on a hitching post telling them the house was safe—abolitionists fighting to help slaves. They traveled by night and that night they heard bounty hunters in the distance with their dogs. They were getting closer, so Charles ran ahead and led them away from Hettie and the rest of the group, saving them from capture. He was caught, beaten and brought back to the plantation. Hettie and the rest made it across Lake Erie to Canada and settled in Chatham."

"What happened to Charles?"

"He was beaten regularly once he was back on the plantation—the usual punishment for an escapee. He heard that Hettie had made it, the abolitionists relaying messages back and forth, and it kept him going. He tried to escape again but was caught a short distance from the plantation."

The look in Kara's eyes was familiar, a feeling of guilt and horror.

"Lincoln passed the Emancipation Declaration in eighteen-sixty-three, but Maryland was loyal to the Union during the Civil War. The state didn't outlaw slavery until November sixty-four. Charles made the journey in the middle of winter, arriving in early the next year. His daughter, Mary Ann, was five years old."

"Their second son was born two summers later. Lincoln had passed the Thirteenth Amendment several months earlier finalizing the total abolition of slavery. The son was named Lincoln Charles Munroe as a result. Every first-born son since then has been Lincoln."

"Chatham was a great place to grow up, a large black community. It was one of the Canadian stops on the railroad, a lot of former slaves settled there and others moved on to Toronto or further afield. As soon as they set foot in Canada, slaves were free, there was no fear of being returned to their American masters, and they had the right to vote and own land."

"I see."

It was all Kara could say.

"Once I was old enough to understand, my father told me the story like his father had told him. It was engrained in us, our ancestors' strength and resolve. My parents had it harder as well, interracial marriages were becoming much more common in the seventies, but many still hated the idea. Either way, I wouldn't want to have seen my father's face when Jeffries called me a nigger."

"I would've killed him too."

"I guess I destroyed his fantasy. He wanted a little white boy to rape and kill. Maybe it kept me alive longer, maybe he beat me more."

Kara put her hand on my lap and I knew that the topic was becoming too much for her. We had had enough sad stories, silence was the better option.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was approaching nine in the morning when we reached the hotel Chen and I had stayed at. From there, my memory had to serve me to get us to the scene. I had the watch in a plastic bag, ready to hand over. We made it to the scene less than an hour later, the path worn down from numerous vehicles taking it in the past weeks. I felt badly for every jolt the small car took and figured I would be on the hook for any repairs. Had I remembered this, I would have had Kara take my van.

Chen was easy to find. He was the only one in a suit.

Dr. Conroy and his students were dressed for the weather and the work; t-shirts, shorts and high boots. We stayed back in the car, it would be best if only Chen saw me. I was off duty and on leave for psychiatric reasons, injury and stress. My presence at a crime scene hours from my home would be difficult to explain. Chen looked over at the car and was then startled by his phone ringing.

"Hello?"

"It's Link," I said. "I'm in the car you're staring at."

"What?"

"Quiet, Chen. I'm not here, just come to the passenger side for a chat."

I hung up the phone and watched as Chen put his away then did as he was told. I rolled the window down.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Long story," I said, speaking the undeniable truth. "First off, Vincenzo Chen meet Kara Jameson, my partner. Kara, Chen-Chen."

They nodded at each other and exchanged the required pleasantries.

I made eye contact with Chen. "Remember when I first got here, you had the idea I was psychic, asked me who the killer was and I jokingly said maybe it was you?"

"Yeah?"

"I was really close."

I'd expected Chen's laughter. I took out the letter my father had written and handed it to Chen.

"Holy fuck," was all he could say.

"When I was here I took this, found it on the ground not far from Jeffries's body. It's my father's watch." I handed Chen the bag and he stared at the dirt covered item within. "I'm on my way to the Commissioner after this to tell him everything. Almost everything." I looked down at the watch now in Chen's hand. "I have a huge favour to ask of you."

Chen nodded and smiled. "I won't say anything until I get the report."

He dumped the watch out of the bag and onto the ground.

"Hey, look what I just found." He pointed to the watch on the ground. "Wonder if it's important."

Kara and I both let slide a chuckle. With Chen, it was all in the delivery.

"Thanks, Chen. I owe you." I reached out my hand.

"Yeah, you do." Chen took my hand in his and leaned in giving the best hug he could with a car door in the way.

"Good luck."

## Chapter 34

We spoke little as we drove from Algonquin Park to Orillia, to the OPP Headquarters. It occurred to me that the Commissioner might not be in the building when we arrived. But I was starting to believe in Chen's idea of fate. Not that I was ready to accept that everything was preordained, but maybe certain things were inescapable. The old adage of fate dealing the cards and us being responsible for the hand we played seemed to fit.

Headquarters loomed in front of us as we pulled into the parking lot just after noon. The sun was high in the cloudless sky and beating in through the car's moon roof. Kara parked the car and neither of us moved. If she was waiting for me, she would have to sit for a while longer.

My nerves were shot now, and I found myself shaking uncontrollably, fearful of what I was about to do. Kara took my hand and steadied it, her unspoken words telling me she was ready whenever I was.

A few minutes later I stepped out of the car and took my crutches from the back seat, then stood outside staring at the large building in front of me; the Lincoln M. Alexander building, named for one of Ontario's former Lieutenant Governors.

The OPP flag flapped in the breeze high above me beside a Canadian flag and the flag of the province of Ontario. The movement of the flags had my gaze locked and I never noticed Kara come around beside me until her hand was on my shoulder.

"I'm ready," I said, and we began walking, a slow march to an unknown fate.

It took some time to get an audience with the Commissioner, something not commonly granted to an officer walking in off the street. The Saunders case had made my name well-known in the department and may have assisted as did my constant repetition of the word 'urgent'.

"So what happens from here?"

I shrugged. "If I get to keep my job I'll be seeing you soon, if not... I don't know. I guess I can always collect pogeys."

Kara laughed. She couldn't see me collecting government unemployment handouts any more than I could.

"I'm leaving for Poland tomorrow," I said. "I have a lot to fix and I can't do it from here."

Kara nodded, searching for the right words. 'Grand romantic gesture' would have worked.

We sat in silence for a while, waiting impatiently. I watched the people walking through the busy offices, the nerve centre of a massive organization. And then I saw him.

He walked toward me, resplendent in an OPP brass uniform. It was a face I hadn't seen for thirty years, and a face I can't believe I had forgotten.

William Jeffries.

The world around me crumbled into darkness.

I am lying down, warm in a sleeping bag, with my father snoring loudly beside me. The rush of the river fills my ears and I know why I have woken up. I unzip the door of the tent and walk a short distance, halfway between the tent and the river. Standing in front of a large tree I lower my sweatpants.

A branch cracks behind me, but before I can turn I feel a large, strong hand cover my mouth and I'm being lifted off the ground. I try to fight, to break away, but he's too strong. I can't scream, I can't bite, my mouth is clamped shut.

I don't know where he's taking me, the trees all look the same. He runs with me in his arms for what seems like forever, the full moon casting its glow on his face through breaks in the trees. He looks down at me and I see rage in his eyes, his hand clenches tighter.

"Fucking nigger," he says.

I'm crying, the tears make his hand wet and he has to adjust his grip. Every time he does I try to scream but he always cuts it short.

All of a sudden he throws me to the ground. I land hard on the rocks and tree roots. Blood and urine wet my clothing.

"Filthy nigger." He's screaming now as he kicks me again and again. I cover my head with my arms and I hear a loud crack. The pain is too much to bear and I start to black out, then I see his boot coming at my head again.

When I come to, someone is yelling. It's my father's voice. He's found me. I'm safe. I struggle to sit up, to look around for him, but there's blood in my eyes and

it hurts to move. He crashes to the ground not far from me, I can almost reach him. The man is on top of him, choking him.

I reach for him, I have to help him. My hand feels something cold and sharp.  
A knife.

I take it in my right hand and force myself to my feet. The pain fades as I stand and leap onto the man's back, plunging the knife in as hard as I can.

My father's face shines like an angel's in the moonglow, a look of pain and pride. The man flails and I start to fall backwards. I see the tip of the knife sticking out of his chest as he turns, then everything goes black again.

The world forms again and the face is gone, the Commissioner stands in his place.

"Detectives Munroe and Jameson. Amazing job on the Saunders case. There's not a cop alive who wouldn't give everything for a case like that."

His eyes turned directly to me.

"What brings you here?"

That scar. On my father's chest. He couldn't possibly have gotten that if he stabbed Jeffries in the back. I had put the knife in so hard I'd stabbed my father, too. It was me.

It had been me all along.

That's why the memories were surfacing now. I had been hunting someone who targeted people at random—like I had been targeted. Then I had killed the man. It was all too close to the secrets I'd kept buried all these years.

I was aware the Commissioner was looking at me oddly, waiting for a response.

My palms were sweating, my blood rushing and I felt as though I was going to faint. At the same time, I felt... free. I knew the truth now, and I was free of a burden I hadn't realized I'd been carrying for my entire adult life.

"I'm here to confess to a killing."

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