

## **BENT STEEPLE**

G. Wells Taylor

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**For Janet Lanctot**

*With respect and considered a promise kept.*

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### **Prologue**

The fire had burned down to an even orange flame when it exploded. There was a sudden cracking noise, a cloud of cinders and a fist-sized coal shot out. The missile rocketed toward Kelly and her breath caught. Before she could flinch, membranous wings clawed open, grabbed the air. The coal—now the flying thing—swooped once around her head and disappeared into the frozen night.

Her eyes followed the blur until vertigo pulled and she had to grab her knees to keep from falling off her improvised chair. The wet logs grouped by the fire made slippery furniture. Bracing her legs, she realized that the beer was getting to her—definitely; she’d have to slow down soon. Her balance was going. She chuckled and then looked across the fire at her companions. They were gaping at her.

“What?” She frowned, searching their shadowed faces. Some instinctive memory brought a hand up. She swatted the air in front of her. “What?”

“Holy shit, sweetie!” her boyfriend Randy howled. “You *must* be wasted!” He laughed. “That bat almost took your eyes out!”

“What bat?” Kelly struggled to regain her composure. She straightened her back then gathered her long hair behind her shoulders with a left and right swing of her head. She squinted into the icy pine branches above. The tall red trunks disappeared into ragged darkness.

“Wasn’t a bat, anyway.” She tried to recover, remembering only a flame-etched shape. “Too cold...it was a blue jay!”

“A *blue jay*? Ah Kelly!” Mike Keeshig was her older brother. He slapped his thigh and took a long pull on his Old Milwaukee. The American beer tasted bitter and cheap, but he preferred spending his money on the ladies at the Sweetwater Inn. Beer was all the same anyway if it was cold enough. He chuckled, scanning the shadows overhead with his large brown eyes. The wind had the high branches swaying; they knocked against each other with hollow tones. Stars showed in a few jagged gaps, burning in the dark blue winter sky. “Was a bat—I saw it. A big one too!”

“Nah,” Kelly said, grabbing a fresh can of beer from a hole in the snow beside her—she almost tumbled off her seat again. Their snowmobiles had run down a good flat place for a fire near an old fence line. The cedar rails burned hot and the parked machines formed a good windbreak across their backs. They were miles from the highway with nothing around them but snow, shadows and bush. “Was a whisky jack then...”

“Ah shit sister, some Indian you are,” Mike chuckled, pushing his black hair from his face. “Grandfather is right. We’re not fit to hunt poodles!”

“Grandfather never hunted no bats!” Kelly stabbed a finger across the fire. “What do you know anyway? You couldn’t hit a bat with a baseball!” She laughed at her own joke.

“Only a bat flies that close to a fire, blind like they are,” Mike said, scowling.

“True,” Randy agreed, nudging Mike’s elbow. He was hesitant to join the discussion knowing how angry Kelly could get when she was opposed. But he shrugged and hoped she was drunk enough to forget it. “And owls would hate the light.” He started asking Mike for a smoke but his friend suddenly shot a hand upward, pointing.

“There!” Mike lurched to his feet—trying to steady his footing on the uneven snow—his beers were getting on top of him too. “Right there.”

All three watched a black, finger-winged creature flap out of the shadows. In the flickering firelight they could see it was a bat—the venous membranes crimson. It was a big one too and in the queer light its eyes reflected red.

In the open silence of the frozen forest, against the low crackle of flames they could hear the leathery snap of its wings as it crossed the fire pit. The light tossed a creepy shadow high on the trees as it came straight at Kelly again. Her eyes were wide, glinting orange. Her whole body leaned away. There was no doubt she saw it this time.

Then there was a loud *snap*—something strong—like a flag blowing in a windstorm and the hard blunt shape of an owl hurtled across the open space. Its broad wings smothered the branches overhead with darkness. Talons reached out like demon’s hands and tore the bat from its flight. The smaller creature disappeared behind a flurry of feathers. The owl, crisp wings hissing in the frigid air, climbed the wind out of sight, into the high branches of the pines beyond the reach of firelight.

“Did you see that?” Randy was up dancing and pointing into the trees in his excitement.

“Course. Course.” Kelly snapped out of her paralysis, took a couple of hesitant steps toward him, and then ran for the shelter of his arms. Randy watched the trees, sucking foam from the top of his beer can. He’d dropped it when the owl attacked.

“But I never saw nothing like it before.” Mike put his hands over his hat brim to shield his eyes, moved well away from the fire studying the branches against the stars. “No bat and owl—that’s crazy!” He chuckled, “Blue jay! Kelly, for Christ’s sake.”

“Do you think...” Kelly started, but was silenced when a tattered scream tore the night. The sound bounced off the frozen bark, off the snow and crackled in the hard winter air around them. Before they could react or speak, there was a powerful ripping sound high up in the trees—a gushing wet rending noise—and then nothing.

Mike pointed. Fifteen feet from them, at the edge of the firelight, a crisp pattering crackle began—something dripping—followed by a heavy thump. A branch maybe, some pinecones, had fallen and broken the surface of the snow. They shielded their eyes against a spangled curtain of frost that drifted down on them.

Mike pulled his flashlight out of his pocket, played the yellow beam past the edge of the firelight in time to see a dark stain burning through the surface of the snow, collapsing it—and then he gasped. A big brown wing with white-flecked feathers lay at the base of the tree. The torn stump steamed, a tangle of wet, ripped muscle.

“Holy shit!” Randy moaned, tightening his grip on Kelly.

She backed up to the fire, pulling Randy with her, gasping a warning as Mike walked toward the mess in the snow. He grunted, inspecting the stains and turned the light to the ruined wing. Then the flashlight beam slid up the giant tree trunks and into the branches. In the yellow light they could see thin dustings of snow falling on him.

“Forget it, Mike!” Kelly called after him. Her breath was coming in gasps. She tightened her grip on Randy. Adrenaline was washing the alcohol out of her system. She didn’t want anything to do with this *Crocodile Hunter* shit—you know how that ended up! Then a strangled cry burst from Mike and he dropped his flashlight. His bulky silhouette suddenly barreled through the snow toward them.

“No fucking owl! No fucking BAT!” he cried as he passed them, and then jumped onto his snowmobile. “Go. Go. Go. NOW!” Mike shouted, turning his sled’s engine over. The machine roared twice and he was tearing over the snow to the north.

Kelly looked at Randy, jaw hanging stupidly—their expressions twisted over Mike’s behavior. *Is he kidding?* Then a rain of drifting snow, branches and twigs started falling on them—knocking new plumes of sparks from the fire. Their disbelieving looks dropped when heavy, scabbling sounds came from the trees directly above them.

They looked up.

Something was moving through the high branches backlit by a half moon that rode the snow clouds like a sailing ship. Something *big*, and it was climbing down.

They ran.

Kelly’s snowmobile started right away. Randy’s hesitated—died—started and stopped before he swore and leapt behind Kelly on her Yamaha. The pair roared away from the fire into the winter night.

Neither turned to see the large dark shape move effortlessly out of the tree. They didn’t see the silhouette shifting against the blaze.

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## SECRETS

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## Chapter 1

Blood sprayed out of the dog's mouth every time it barked. Pink froth steamed on its muzzle. The ice and snow clung to its feet like crimson wax. The big German Shepherd danced and whirled at the end of its rusty chain. Constable Sloan frowned, watching it from inside the cruiser. He didn't dislike dogs; he hated them. His ankles and shins chronicled the history of this long-held animosity. Dog bites and the threat of a serious mauling were a part of life for him. Years of approaching houses dressed in a uniform made it a constant threat. So far, the grip of his gun was free of any notches; but there was still time. He was open to the idea.

The complaint had come from a bitchy neighbor who lived a quarter-mile away from the Morelli place. The dog had been barking night and day since Tuesday. That made it roughly a fifty-hour jag. Sloan knew the complainant was a shit-disturber. An old widow who lived alone at her family farm, Mrs. Leland needed attention. There had been other complaints over the years about trespassers and the like but Sloan, or whoever investigated, had only ever found evidence of animal activity. That was to be expected since Redbridge was surrounded by hundreds of square miles of bush. In this case, the winter would have kept her windows closed, and with the distance the dog's barking couldn't have been more than an annoying echo. Likely, she just wanted company, and it was easy to pick on the Morellis, an odd little family who kept to themselves. They'd lived in the area for over thirty years, but their isolation only greased the wheels of the rumor mill. They were their own worst enemies.

It was clear that their pet was in distress. The dog's tortured bark reminded Sloan of broken machinery winding down. A dry repetitive hack was skewered by a painful whine—there was clicking too, when it whimpered, like a piece of cartilage in its throat had torn loose. Sloan pulled at the zipper of his police-issue parka, sneering at its high-tech woven shell and the piss poor insulating properties of its lining. It was minus twenty out there with a wind chill that would bring it to thirty below.

"Made in Pakistan," he grumbled, pulling down the earflaps of his matching synthetic sheepskin hat. "What the hell do they know about Canadian winters?"

He picked up the microphone, toggled twice and said, "41-20 call."

"Call 41-20, go ahead," the dispatcher's voice buzzed with static. *More cutbacks...*

"Mary, it's Sloan—ah shit, 41-20." Sloan sighed remembering the credo: *Pride in Professionalism*. "Sorry, *dispatch*." A hint of sarcasm entered his tone. "41-20 call. I'm on scene at the Morelli place."

"Call 41-20, 10-4," Mary Rourke replied. She was a nitpicker who had reported his lapses in protocol in the past. Pretty too, but he'd screwed that option by making a drunken pass at her not long after his divorce. What are Christmas parties *for*?

"Regarding the noise complaint..." he reported, watching the agitated dog leap and turn like a force of nature. Blood fanned the air in a scarlet arc. "The Morellis' dog, 'Kaz,' is injured and going apeshit." *Ah, fuck. Why don't you just report yourself? Save Miss Bitch the trouble.* "Sorry, dispatch. We better get animal control out here."

"Call 41-20, 10-4," the dispatcher affirmed.

“41-20 call, I’m checking it out. Stand by.” Sloan frowned at the woman’s detached efficiency. *Doesn’t she know that bullshit just makes the job harder?* The protocol eroded the sense of brotherhood he’d once felt on the force. At least dispatch hadn’t been outsourced to India—*yet*. He grumbled petulantly and then clipped the mike back onto the dash. He climbed out of the cruiser.

A cold wind tore across the twenty flat acres around the Morellis’ farmhouse and barn. It bit into his face and his shoulders hunched against the chill. A thumping noise to his left brought his eyes up. The tattered old windmill was spinning wildly. Its rusted blades cut the frozen air with a low rasping murmur—a dull metallic shriek and thump shook the tower sporadically.

Sloan watched it shake against the cool blue morning sky. The whirling blades were hypnotic.

But Kaz’s struggle brought him around. The dog would bark painfully and then hurtle across the ice with all his strength until the chain cracked and snapped him to the ground. Then he’d do it again. The chain was wrapped around a massive maple tree across the driveway from the house. The steel links had chewed the bark off the trunk from the roots to about four feet up.

It was an eerie scene. No cars. No sign of habitation. The windmill shrieked and thumped again.

Strangely, Kaz had only glanced when Sloan’s cruiser pulled up, before turning back to the house to continue his gory bark and dance. Sloan had met Kaz before—pretty much every time there’d been a complaint. *He was the usual suspect*. The dog chased cars in the summer—promised murder to snowmobilers in the winter—lots of warnings were given. Finally the Morellis were told to keep Kaz chained at all times. In the past, Kaz went ballistic any time Sloan pulled into the driveway.

There were more serious incidents too. Before he was chained up, Kaz was suspected when calves were found mutilated, their throats and bellies torn out. The dog was big enough to kill a hundred and fifty pound calf. His aggressive attitude, wild eyes and the fangs he flashed at everything made it easy to blame him. But they couldn’t prove anything. When livestock killings happened after the dog was chained, it became a general rumor that it was wolves all along. Wolves, even though nothing was eaten: the calves were left to bleed out in the clover.

But, Kaz had been tied up in compliance with the order and Sloan had not returned to the Morelli place in what, two years? The Morellis were a strange couple, no question about that—but out of sight, out of mind. Sloan puzzled over some memories of the Morellis’ daughter. Pretty little thing with dark eyes—a few years behind him in high school. But she ran away while Sloan was training to be a cop. *And that’s been rewarding hasn’t it?*

“Easy, boy,” Sloan whispered, started forward a few steps—and then halted. A sharp rise in the driveway had hidden the true extent of the animal’s distress. A wedge-shaped bloodstain had sprayed about twenty feet from Kaz’s icy, piss-colored run to the house. *Holy shit, Kaz what’s keeping you going?* Blood, saliva and foam dripped from the dog’s mouth, had formed a heavy mask of ice that hung from his jowls. A wide band of raw and torn skin was exposed beneath his collar.

“Shit!” But the dog didn’t even glance at him. It barked, sprayed blood and lunged at the red brick farmhouse. The chain snapped tight and flipped him back. The dog sprang up and repeated the trick.

“Dumb dog,” Sloan turned muttering. The side door of the house was open. *Shit!* The frame was cracked like the door had been forced. A shiver ran up his spine, shuddered over his scalp. *Time for stealth mode!* He drew his gun, flipped the safety off. The wind was running from the east, and the door opened onto it. The house was barely two stories tall; it would be a freezer in there. He started toward the building, gun ready.

When he got between Kaz and the house, the big shepherd finally noticed him. It savaged the air howling and spattering blood, putting up a new, impossible show of ferocity. Baring its teeth at Sloan, the dog slammed recklessly against the chain and flipped on its back again. It slashed the sky with its fangs before leaping to its feet and lunging again. The chain thudded dully—sawed off splinters of wood and shook the maple tree, sent vibrations through the ground to Sloan’s feet.

“Easy Kaz, we’re on the same side...” Sloan hissed, setting his boot on the bottom stair. The lights were off inside, nothing.

“North Bay Police Services!” he shouted over the dog’s savagery. *Excellence in Policing.* “Constable Sloan. Anybody here?”

Nothing—just Kaz clawing up onto his feet and lunging. There was a thump and howl. The dog raked the bloodstained ice, got to his feet again.

Sloan climbed the stairs and crossed the small porch. Through the open door he saw a long drift of snow angling across the floor toward the far corner of the room. It pointed at two doors, one led out; the other must have opened on a bathroom. A quick glance left and right showed that otherwise the building was entirely open—a single room. He edged his way in.

A canopied double bed was shoved against the far wall dangerously close to a wood stove. To his left Sloan saw a sink, countertop and antique collection of kitchen appliances. At a right angle to that was a small living area—two ratty looking comfy chairs, a couch and a television. A quick glance up to the right showed a cantilevered piece of floor—a platform—no more than eight feet on a side. Just over the lip of this he could see a pair of small brass bed knobs. *That’s where the girl used to sleep.* A ladder led down from that to a fridge. Its right side was pressed against the back of a loveseat placed on a large throw rug. The pictures on the walls were strange: a mallard duck on yellowed newsprint under glass, an oil painting of a city street, an embroidered poem—the *Serenity Prayer*. There was a window in each wall. The blinds were pulled down and the curtains closed.

“Anybody home?” he asked the shadows, and took a few tentative steps into the room. Kaz thumped and howled again. A trickle of sweat ran between Sloan’s shoulder blades. *Dedicated to service, committed to community.*

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he made out a long pair of clothing racks jammed into a narrow space at the foot of the bed. There was silk and brocade and ribbons. It was all the fancy finery that Mrs. Morelli wore. Everyone had seen her in the stuff—like a character out of a movie, ridiculously overdressed walking the gravel roads, or crossing the rough fields. Just more weird shit for people to throw back at her. His eye followed this tangle of cloth and chrome until it disappeared behind the bed’s yellowed

canopy. A gust of wind entered the house and shifted the hanging material enough to expose a set of painted toenails protruding from a woman's shoe.

Sloan's teeth locked. He turned his gun on the drapery. Adrenaline flew along his nerves. He could see through the gauzy material. The foot led to a woman's calf—everything else was obscured by the canopy.

"Mrs. Morelli?" He took a step forward—sniffed the air. Spices? Perfume? Rot?

"Mrs. Morelli?" he whispered, now a few feet from the canopy.

Kaz continued to rage. The dog coughed a slick bloody bark followed by another rush and clunk as the chain pulled tight. Steeling himself, Sloan held his gun level, stepped in close and pulled the canopy aside.

Mrs. Morelli was wearing one of her finest gowns. White silk with some kind of small semiprecious stones outlined the shape of her neck and shoulders. The material fell provocatively away from her breasts, draped over her hips and thighs. She was sitting on a plain wooden chair between the racks of dresses. Her dark eyes were open, and her long, narrow nose touched the white veil that hung over her face. The material cascaded past her pursed red lips and came to rest against the shining collar of her dress. *She looked so young, but she had to be pushing sixty.*

Sloan had grown up running through these fields and back roads, had seen her over the many years, and she was unchanged. A fine layer of frost gave her face a magical look beneath the veil.

Then his focus shifted to the red-blue wound on her throat, maybe two inches long. Three small drops of blood had frozen in their downward course to her breast. Her hands were clasped in her lap.

"Mrs. Morelli?"

A muscular thrashing weight fell on Sloan's shoulders. Fangs tore at his collar; claws raked his spine. He fell forward against the mattress, thrusting at the bedpost for leverage. A snarling mouth ripped at his head as he found purchase. Sloan dug his boots into the frost-tinged carpet and twisted.

He fired four times pointblank before Kaz stopped snapping at him. They rolled off the bed together onto the floor. A cold hand squeezed Sloan's heart, his breathing stopped—his wrist ached from the gun's recoil. Time slowed and his mind cycled terror. Then his breath returned in one enormous panicked gasp. He coughed, took another breath and registered the clammy sweat that covered his chest.

A stunned moment later, he heaved the big dog off his legs. Its heavy body rolled over, tangled itself in the length of chain it had dragged into the house.

A quick look showed that Mrs. Morelli was undisturbed. Her frozen face had watched the attack without emotion. A fresh film of frost twinkled on her veil. Sloan slapped at the back of his neck with his free hand; it came away bloody.

"Damn..." He climbed unsteadily to his feet, staggered across the room and out of the house—fell hard on the icy steps. The cold wind snatched his breath away. He got up and lurched toward the cruiser. He dropped into the car, grabbed the mike.

"It's Sloan—" He felt a final powerful surge of adrenaline turn his thoughts white. "Mary, shots fired." He choked on a frigid breath of air. The panic was leaving—his neck throbbed. "Get me some help out here."

"Call 41-20," Mary responded. "Back up is on the way. Stay with me, Harry."

"Dog attacked me and I shot him," Sloan gasped into the mike.

“Okay, hang on,” came the reply. He imagined her snapping off directions, voices answering—he could only hear a buzz and crackle from the radio, then: “Any sign of the Morellis?”

“Don’t know about Mr. Morelli.” Sloan struggled to control his breathing; he clutched the gun to his chest and cast about the snowy fields for any sign of life or death. “But his wife’s frozen solid.”

## Chapter 2

Fergus rode back up the big hill. There were so many trees on either side of the road that the snow never got deep enough to trap his tricycle’s fat tires—especially with Mr. Travers driving his orange grader along it every time it snowed. The low thick branches formed a protected tunnel that kept the cold wind from making drifts. Even if it sometimes did, Fergus had a special way of pedaling to get through deeper stuff. By shifting his weight over the big front wheel, he could go faster than the kids ever thought he could.

Fergus’ breath billowed out in a smoky plume. It was cold, but he still rode the big hill. He did it every day, and never got tired—well, never admitted it. He’d grunt against the strain on the way up, crow happily at the top and then speed back down screaming with delight. His bad leg did get sore from all the pedaling, and the twisted toes on his left foot ached where they gripped the thick sole of his boot, but it was worth it.

The whooshing ride down was always fun—better and faster in the summer with gravel kicking up from his tires and leaves wagging green flags overhead. He loved the way the warm breeze made his thick hair shiver like curly grass. It always brought a smile to his face, pulled his big yellow teeth out in glee. But that was the summer. No one would see him smiling now. A heavy gray scarf was wrapped around his head and neck so many times his mom said he looked like a mummy. He didn’t think he looked like her at all.

Today there was a special urgency to his fun. The air had a new dry chill to it, the wind was shifting and he knew what that meant. His mom said the deep of winter was coming on, and the pine trees would start cracking and the blowing snow would rush in—night would be way longer than the daytime and people would grumble getting out of bed and grumble all day long. Fergus would grumble too.

He reached the top of the hill and turned the tricycle. Its name was *Superglider*. His mom ordered it from a special place that made things for sons like Fergus. It was red with white stripes on it. There was a big wire carrier on the front and a wide flat step on the back where he could put passengers—though he rarely did. Well, sometimes little Serena Bourke rode back there but only in the summer when it was safe and never *ever* down the hill. The *Superglider* could go like the wind when he peddled hard, or when he came flying down the hill. Fergus was sure that the *Superglider* was the best tricycle in town. The other kids that played on the hill in winter and summer all thought so too. Some tried to make fun at first, but the *Superglider* really went fast and they all ended up clapping their hands and shouting with pleasure.

From the top of the hill Fergus could almost see where the road bent back to town. It looked like a frosty white worm crawling through the gray shadows of the forest

overhang. He looked behind him to where his mom said the road would meet the distant highway—only trees, and snowbanks—*no cars*.

He could go. He could ride. He could scream.

Fergus didn't think about what people said. Everyone from town was mostly nice to him—and other kids came with him on their bikes in the summer and toboggans in the winter—though he never went much past the hill. And everybody knew him—so he just kept to his business, struggling up the hill and laughing all the way back down. He didn't care when sometimes travelers got lost and took the road to town. They came over the hill in their shiny cars and stared at him with their big round eyes caught in the slanted windshields. But Fergus just smiled and laughed from his perch on the *Superglider*. He giggled over a beard of drool when their mouths went wide with shock. He laughed because he knew something that they could never know and he could never tell them.

Fergus had a special way of seeing things. By squinting his eyes and looking very hard, he could gaze past the simple frightened looks and see their lives in the distance, and where they ended, and how. Fergus didn't know how he could do it, but he could.

Fergus liked going up and down the hill almost as much as he liked his coloring books. His mom said he would have been a Picasso—whatever that was—if not for all the trouble he had. He liked to draw pictures of everything—even kids playing, though it sometimes made him sad. Fergus wasn't sure he always got their faces right—it was so long ago. But rubbing his crayons all over an open white page drew Fergus away from nightmares when he had them and lifted him out of the discomforts of his body.

He knew he looked broken and bent as he chugged along on the *Superglider* but at least you could see what was wrong with him. You didn't need to look in a special way with special eyes to understand how God had shaped him. The *marks*—that's what the old minister called them when he whispered with Fergus' mom downstairs. He told her quite sadly that the marks were clearly etched on Fergus' body, survivor though he be. He was *marked* and Fergus knew that was all the people in the cars could see. They saw the marks and nothing more.

Fergus had lived this simple life for many years. His mother knew how many, and she told him; but numbers were itchy little things that wouldn't stay put when they got into his head. Like the busy ants under the back porch moving in jittery lines over the sand, numbers looked too much alike to tell apart, and when he did learn one he had to use it quickly before it slipped back out again. It wasn't worth the work. Time and numbers were just too ticklish for him to focus on, so he did whatever he was doing until something changed. He knew very well what day and night was, and that was as much as he needed to know. So he rode up and down the big hill until he heard his mother's call echo through the trees in the river valley. Sometimes the call meant lunch, and sometimes it meant supper and sleep. That was fine with Fergus because he liked them all.

At his mother's call, he would turn his tricycle and take one last giggling ride down the hill, gliding on the memory of the whooshing wind until he got to the bend in the road. Then Fergus' smile would fall away and the corners of his eyes would grow tight with apprehension. He'd bite down on his breath, and pump the pedals as hard as he could and go as fast as he could. For the road wound by the old church, with its gray, fake-shingled walls and rusted steel roof. Fergus' breath would catch as he pedaled the *Superglider* through the shadow of the iron steeple that bent over the road like a dying tree.

Fergus hated going by the old church because bad things had happened there. Once a long time before he had made the mistake of squinting his eyes and looking at the building in his special way. Then he saw much more than the distant lives and endings of travelers. He saw something horrible with a black tongue and bulging eyes hanging from the steeple. It pointed a bony finger at him and tried to shriek past its swollen lips. Fergus saw hunched and twisted shapes shamble in and out of the building clutching bloody pieces of living things in their claw-like hands. They pushed the quivering flesh into toothless yellow mouths. When Fergus looked away, he saw an endless gray dead land going on and on and on over the hills and there were no trees. On the cold bare ground he saw the bodies of everyone he knew and all the others that went along the twisting gravel road past the hill. And the kids too, they were there, and among their corpses he had seen his own.

“Fergus,” he stuttered to steady his nerves as he rode past. Scratching the black stubble under his scarf, he consoled himself again. “Fergus.”

### Chapter 3

It was cold. The bitter wind ate through the synthetic fabric of Sloan’s gloves, coat and stupid hat. He knew he looked like Constable *Poindexter* in the headgear—flaps up or down it was a no-win situation.

“Friggin’ management,” he growled, the chill eating up whatever bravado Kaz’s attack had left him. It was cold, and his neck hurt. He flapped his arms, as his colleagues did—a *chorus line of Constable Poindexters*. Counting himself, four of North Bay’s finest danced on the ice-covered driveway to keep the blood flowing.

*Compassion for those in need.*

“And we get pity,” Sloan whispered, glancing at Mrs. Morelli’s body bag one last time. Tinted windows in the hearse’s rear door gave the black shape an ominous look. She’d frozen solid in a sitting position so they had a tough time getting her into the bag. They couldn’t close the zipper completely so another bag was wrapped over the open section to cover her knees. *Not perfect, but it resembles dignity*. A shiver rolled over his shoulders. *That wound on her neck*, Sloan thought. *Weird*.

The hearse honked and Sloan jumped. The long vehicle squeezed past three police cruisers trailing a cloud of exhaust then hit the concession road and headed toward town. The forensics man on shift, Don Beatty, drove Guy Patrick the coroner down the same road when they left about thirty minutes before. They got to the scene at noon and stayed almost two hours. The cold had everyone hurrying. Don took a pile of pictures and notes while Patrick went over the body before releasing it and calling in the removal service. Martin’s Funeral home sent the hearse.

Campbell Clark, a local pathologist who usually jumped at anything intriguing, would appreciate the head start whenever he got back from fishing on Turtle Lake. Guy said it would be a day or two before the body thawed enough to open up.

With the cold coming on, no one wanted to wait around for the detective on duty to answer his page. Jordan Corbeil was a decade younger than Sloan, and had held the position with the service for five years. They’d never seen eye to eye, and it was witnessing that dickhead’s politicking with management that made Sloan glad he stayed

in uniform. Everyone on the street knew that Corbeil had been promoted past his abilities; but he was a talker, and he didn't mind hiding his inadequacies behind the hard work of others.

Sloan had worked around enough crime scenes to know the steps and there was a time he considered making a run for detective. Sadly, he had the aptitude, but not the right attitude. He'd leave that to the ass-kisser. Corbeil was on duty, but had failed to answer any pages. So as acting-Sergeant for the shift, Sloan had called in the troops to process the crime scene. Corbeil would be pissed about it, but that didn't worry Sloan. *Answer your page, asshole!*

Animal Control had hauled Kaz's body away, lots of photos of that too. One of *those* officers, skinny Jane Morrison, looking pale and vegan had twisted her lips scornfully at him after a similar look at his gun. Sloan wanted to suggest she could fuck herself, but Jane loved that kind of thing. She'd already filed a complaint against him once when he shot a cat that was suspected of having rabies. He joked that it was also running a meth lab but Miss Morrison did not find that funny.

So he smiled at her and hoped she'd fuck herself anyway. Probably had to. *They wouldn't be lining up for that bony ass.*

Sloan cursed the wind. His collar was up and the synthetic fur rasped against the bandages on his neck. The wounds were superficial but hurt like hell. The dog bite had been cleaned and dressed by the ambulance attendants. They took a quick circus sideshow look at Mrs. Morelli and left when the Animal Control van threatened to park them in. He didn't mention his sore wrist and thumb. His gun's recoil had given them a painful twist but Sloan knew it was just a matter of time before his peers started razzing about Kaz getting the drop on him.

He was in no mood for it, and they could tell. For now, his scowl and the sight of Mrs. Morelli's corpse had them spooked enough to avoid the dark humor. Whatever her idiosyncrasies, Mrs. Morelli was a neighbor, and none of them saw enough death to be flippant about it—especially death that might be murder.

There wouldn't be an autopsy for several days. The pathologist was due back from ice fishing Saturday afternoon. Sloan knew that because Clark had invited him along. He needed the break, the beer and company, but he had child support and spousal to pay, and his ex would not accept pickerel or white fish instead of cash. Bitching about it had already cost him more money so he had to grin and bear it. Sloan picked up every extra shift he could get. It left him without a social life, but at least his son, Sam, could visit him in a three-bedroom house, not a shitty apartment, a trailer or a pop-up van. It took most of the satisfaction out of the job though, and got him thinking about early retirement. He could get a little cottage and fish away the days with a beer in hand. *Now tell me the one about the three bears, Sloansky...*

Constable John Lavigne stood beside him. The younger man's body was thin and wiry, and seemed to be shivering with cold, but Sloan knew it was probably just nerves. Rookie was a walking panic attack. He had been on the force for two years but they continued to call him "rookie" because he still had his opening night jitters. He was a good officer for the most part—obsessively so—but Sloan had plenty of reservations about him. The other constables on scene, Sheila Barnes and Carl Henrich, had been on the force for almost as long as Sloan. They were trudging back to double-check the barn for any sign of Mr. Morelli.

Morelli's old black Ford pickup was missing. There was just a patch of thawed ice in the snow, tire tracks and kicked up drifts behind the house where it had been parked. The cellar doors were shoveled clear and locked on the inside. Sloan and Rookie were looking for another way into the basement when Don arrived with the coroner.

Mr. Morelli was an odd ball. Over the years, Sloan had come to think that everyone had met him, *once*, and not again. Usually in the evening or early morning. Always off the beaten path: a concession road in his truck hauling tires or wire or posts, or hiking along a line of fence, maybe sitting by a neighbor's cow pond. Sloan had passed his truck many times, had waved to him as well. But they'd never met on his visits about Kaz—Mrs. Morelli had received the order to chain the dog with a pretty flip of her hair and a smile. Morelli managed to be out every time. Funny too, because Sloan had made a mental note to introduce himself to Morelli, but it always seemed to get misplaced.

*Deep voice with an accent*, they said of Mr. Morelli. *Didn't talk much*. A pale-complexioned fellow, black hair, broad shouldered—and those that met him in the summer said he needed a bath. That could have been excused if Morelli had actually worked his farm, raising sheep maybe, pigs or goats. The thin layer of soil on the rocky Canadian Shield wouldn't let you grow much else this far north. Most people wondered what he did on the farm, and where he came by his money. Mrs. Morelli purchased dresses, jewelry, silverware or whatever she wanted when she came into North Bay every other week. She never came in with Mr. Morelli—with her daughter years ago, yes, before she ran away.

But you could count on two things from the local people: they wouldn't ask you your business and they were sure to talk about nothing else. They didn't like Morelli's accent, those that could remember it. That started the old saw about foreigners coming over here to buy up good farms, marry our girls and lie around like princes on money they made from crime or worse. People whispered *Mafia*. They looked to his wife, Margaret Stewart, for the recognizable. She came from somewhere that nobody could remember—the consensus was Montreal or Sault Ste. Marie.

"Morelli's going to run!" Sloan spat into the wind. His mood was sliding farther south. "Friggin' Kaz!" He knew this whole thing would end up with the provincial police or some other municipal force or the Feds—*fuckin' RCMP*—chasing Morelli down and charging him with second or third degree murder, maybe manslaughter—"my wife and I had a fight, officer, and I'm under a lot of stress—*blah, blah, blah!*" *Friggin' Canadian laws!* Morelli would hire a lawyer; prove he'd been crazy for years and get set up in a rubber room at a Regional Health Center. Out in a couple of years for passing the right tests. Justice was the only satisfaction Sloan could eke from his job, and if he couldn't get it, it wasn't worth missing weekends with Sam. The boy was having trouble in school since his mother started dating.

"Fuckin' *bitch!*" Sloan snarled.

"What's that Harry?" Rookie's face twisted up in puzzlement—he was chewing a hunk of chocolate bar.

"Nothing, Rookie." Sloan kicked at the ice, slapped at his arms and shoulders. "No-friggin-thing."

"So what now?" Rookie watched the concession road where the hearse had turned south.

“Our boys are watching for Morelli in North Bay. The OPP are sending a detective in and looking for Morelli on the highways. *We* search for him on the property.” Sloan dug into his pocket for a pack of gum. “Twenty frozen acres. He’s not here.”

“Think he’s dead?” Rookie slid his chocolate bar away and lit a cigarette—Sloan had managed to quit smoking and stay quit for three weeks. He found his gum, tore the wrappers off two pieces and chewed, then shrugged to answer Rookie’s question.

There was a sudden *thump*, Rookie’s hand slapped at his gun belt. In that instant he transformed into a miniature Clint Eastwood having a panic attack. Sloan pointed at the windmill. The thin man’s eyes rolled up and focused on the grating noise as the old blades chewed the air.

“You shoot me...” Sloan walked toward the house. “And I’ll kill you.”

“Harry!” A voice, Henrich’s was distorted by the cold January wind. “Sloan!”

With an angry glance at Rookie, Sloan hurried to the far corner of the house. He saw the other constables standing on the frozen gravel in front of the barn—waving. The doors gaped wide—darkness yawned behind them.

“Harry!” they called again.

“Come on,” Sloan growled at Rookie. Distantly, a touch of humor tweaked him, when he saw Rookie take an awkward half-puff, take another and then throw the cigarette away—he took a step and then went back to put it out with his boot. *What a rookie!*

The ice crackled and popped underfoot as they ran the hundred feet to the barn. Cold air burned his lungs and cut into the lines on his face. As he got close, Sloan could tell by the strain in Henrich’s big German features that something bad had happened. Barnes looked scared. That wasn’t like her. They always joked how unfair it was that she had the biggest balls in the service. Sloan remembered a time she squared off with four drunk and disorderly moose hunters and took them into custody—all of them bloody and torn, her too. She was first to speak.

“A body.” Barnes’ dark eyes flashed, the lids fluttered. She was struggling for control. Her gloves were curled into fists and thumped her thighs.

“A body?” Sloan stepped up, almost slipped on a hump of ice. He looked up at the gray sky resisting the ramifications of that revelation. *You weren’t thinking clearly—failed to expand the perimeter of the crime scene...* A light cascade of flakes was descending. Too cold for a squall for now, but the forecast said it was going to warm up a bit, bring on the possibility of a blizzard. *Okay. “Shit...”*

“Yep, Shit.” The veins on Henrich’s nose stood out and his breath smoked. “We came up here when Don and Guy were doing their thing, but we didn’t dig.”

“Dig? Is it Morelli?” Sloan moved cautiously toward the barn. The darkness inside pulled at him.

“Don’t think so.” Henrich winced.

“There’s more... there’s...” Barnes’ voice choked off. Her hand fluttered, kept coming back to her gun belt. “Something bad...”

“In here...” Henrich finished her sentence. “You got to look, Harry.”

“Damn,” Sloan muttered. He’d already released Mrs. Morelli’s body. *You’re going to hear about that.* “Shit!” He followed them into the barn with Rookie and immediately smelled half-frozen manure, old stuff. But the Morellis didn’t keep any livestock. Then Sloan remembered that up until last year they wintered some of Kyle Desjardin’s herd, beef.

Sloan looked over at Rookie, could see him shaking his hands, cracking his knuckles. He pulled the catch off his holstered gun.

“Smells bad, Harry.” Rookie jerked his nose ahead of him. A stench accompanied the manure, something darker—sweeter and fouler.

“Sheila saw a hand—a couple fingers...” Henrich continued, leading Sloan deeper into the barn past empty stalls, and then across frozen earth toward the back wall. Barnes and Rookie turned on their flashlights and ran them over a hulking wall of dried manure pushed against the rear of the foundation. The shit ran the entire width of the building, sixty feet, and was almost piled to the rafters, nine feet overhead. A filthy tractor was parked beside it—the bucket crusted with manure.

“I found a shovel...” Henrich snatched it up from where he’d left it on the floor.

Sloan stopped. He could see where the hard outer layer of manure had been knocked off to reveal the line of a jaw and throat—the sleeve of a rotting t-shirt. A body, on its back, trapped in layers of manure. The corpse was stained black. Henrich prodded the wall with his shovel, knocked more of the solid facing off; the smell rolled upward.

“Stop that...” Sloan was about to finish: *I’ve got to call forensics back...* But Barnes spoke.

“We thought it was Morelli, until we saw this.” She slid her flash about five feet along the wall. Four female fingers poked out of the black manure; they looked porcelain. “The daughter?”

Henrich moved over, probed the pile near the fingers; his shovel exposed a thumb and wrist. Sloan was again assaulted by the stench.

“Stop it...” he ordered, as Henrich became possessed by curiosity or madness, pushing the shovel into the mound in the direction that the forearm would run away from the wrist. “Henrich!”

There was a low snapping sound, and a quiet rumble. The thick wall of manure shifted.

“Watch it!” Sloan grabbed Barnes’ coat and leapt back. Henrich heaved himself away stiff-legged as the entire hardened facing of manure collapsed.

Clouds of dust rolled over Sloan. Decay stained his senses. He could taste manure and rot. He shook Barnes’ shoulder and gave Henrich a tap with his boot. She grunted; he grumbled. Sloan slapped out for the flashlight and regained his feet.

Rookie was screaming. Sloan stabbed at the dust and darkness with the flashlight’s beam. The stench was overpowering. There were tears in his eyes.

Rookie was on his back and buried to the sternum. His flashlight was gone. He was pushing at the ugly pile that pressed him down.

“Christ!” was all Sloan could manage to say. A thick black sludge had burst past the frozen crust of manure and with it had come bodies. *Lots of bodies*. Rookie kept screaming as the flashlight beam fell on eyeless faces and twisted limbs. His voice tore the air—ripping his vocal cords—breaking them like Kaz’s. He tried to swim out of the rotting muck. Slipping, unable to claw free, he struggled in the avalanche. All around and over him were tangled limbs and rotting bodies. A thick warm mist rose in the chill air.

## Chapter 4

Fergus was tired of his pictures so he tossed the big red crayon into his coloring box. That's what his mom called the little wicker basket she gave him for that purpose. It held pencils and washable markers too, and some paperclips for squeezing things together. The big crayons were his favorite. Crayons required lots of work to make a solid color and he liked his colors bright and bold. The big ones did the job faster and anyway the damage from his sickness left his hands too shaky for working with fiddly little crayons. The big ones gave him the bright colors he liked and let him draw lots of pictures before his wrists got tired.

Fergus drew whatever he wanted. Sometimes he just colored shapes he saw in his mind, and other times he copied things from books: animals, cars and trees and stuff. Other times too, he'd draw things he saw in dreams, or remembered. Other things he drew, only Fergus could see when he squinted his eyes in his special way and looked past people into their shadows. He drew those things sometimes because he didn't know what they were and other times because he wanted to remember he had seen them. He avoided drawing scary things if he could because they scared him—although there were times the pictures didn't frighten him until he was finished.

Most times though, he tried to draw the things he saw in the village or on TV like old buildings, fire trucks, trains and machines. Fergus wasn't any good at faces, so he didn't even try to draw the people he sometimes saw. He drew kids though, but those were mostly playmates from long ago—kids he could only see in his dreams now. He remembered them mainly from what they played with back then. A pogo stick—that was Steven Sharpe's; the bike with the big carrier and the colorful streamers was Jean Morin's so the girl who rode it in the picture was Jean Morin. It worked like that, and if anybody ever asked about the pictures, as his mother sometimes did, he'd explain.

"Fergus," he'd say pointing to a skipping rope, and "Fergus," he'd continue tapping at a picture of little Carrine Patterson doing Double Dutch. Carrine left when the other kids did. All of them were crying too.

He set his drawing book and papers on the bedroom floor beside his coloring box then selected a few other toys and climbed up onto his bed. The night outside the window beside him was black and the corners were white with frost. Some time, a day that had happened before—lots of sleeps and hill rides in the past—his mother had brought a big box of toys that she said she found at a yard sale over in a place he understood to be somewhere else—past the top of the big hill. She had said a name, but he couldn't remember or understand it. He knew it wasn't *the village* so he thought that was enough. But they were great toys made of plastic shaped to look like strange little men and women in colorful suits with weird hats and masks—some like hockey masks, and helmets like that too. None of it looked comfortable though. The clothes were so tight, he could see every muscle and bone and shape underneath.

One time in the summer, feeling hot in his own felt pants and coat but unable to summon up the ambition to remove *them*; he had pitied the strange little figures and tried to take their clothes off. But he couldn't find buttons, or zippers or anything—not even the edges of collars or coats—nothing he could pry up and look behind, so he quit eventually. He decided that the clothes weren't clothes at all and were really more like the little people's skins.

Fergus laid out a group of them beside him on the bed—his favorites. There was *Fergus*, the white man with the blanket on his back; and *Fergus*, the curly haired man in

Montreal Canadian colors; and *Fergus*, the furry blue man; and *Fergus*, the woman in white with a green face. He didn't know what to do with them when he had them out, but he would talk to them in his way, and they answered as they could.

The wind howled so loud outside his window that it drowned out the noise of his mother's hockey game. She was watching the TV downstairs with the sound way up, and would be wrapped in her flowered blanket in her favorite chair. Her dirty quilted slippers would be sticking out the bottom, and her hands would be sticking out the sides—one to hold a big tub of buttered popcorn, the other to bring a beer up to her red painted lips. Fergus liked to sit on the floor by the chair and play with her slippers and wait for her to ask him to get her a new beer. He liked to help her because she helped him.

The wind moaned again and the thick black hair on his arms and legs prickled at the memory of the cold outside. This day it had been so cold and the wind so biting that he had just started going up and down the hill when his mother had called him home. He'd heard her voice echo across the frozen air and set off at once, wondering what would be waiting for him. There was no lunch or supper or bed, only TV—a puppet show: she called it. Puppets were furry people with eyes the size of eggs.

Fergus remembered the earthy smell of beer and cigarettes as she hugged him, and rubbed her big warm hands over his when he first came in. She pressed her palms against his ears until they tingled painfully and he hooted. His mother had clicked her tongue disapprovingly, muttering a sad, "Oh my Fergus, you're freezing" before switching around the TV channels until she found the puppet show that Fergus recognized but did not understand. He enjoyed it when the furry people moved around and jumped and flailed their arms, but they talked about mysteries in their funny voices. Always about the numbers and letters—the *mysteries*—Fergus found it tiring.

Now he sat on his bed with his plastic people knowing that his mother would soon call up "bedtime" to him. His covers were already pulled back, and his thick flannel sheets exposed. He held his hands before him—he was already tired of the plastic people's vacant stares—and he studied the hairy knuckles wishing he could be out on his tricycle whooshing down the hill cold or nighttime or not.

One time his mother asked him to watch the hockey game with her—not just play with her slippers and get her new beers from the fridge when she asked, and always obliging Fergus tried. His mother loved hockey, and when she watched it she wore her blue and white Maple Leafs shirt.

"For luck, Fergus," she always said, her small eyes jumping from him to the TV and back. "Lord knows they need it." The little men on skates whizzing back and forth against the white had caused Fergus' eyes to water. He did not understand it, and his poor mother did not understand his questions when he asked them.

"Fergus?" he had asked, pointing at the screen. He shook his head stabbing at the figures of the two hockey men. They were fighting. His mother only wrinkled up her dark eyes and clutched the blanket she had across her knees.

"Fergus," she had said over her tub of popcorn, "that one, he's an *enforcer*."

Fergus just frowned and tried to explain.

"Fergus," he said, pointing as the striped men stopped the hockey men from fighting.

"No Fergus," his mother said finally, taking a long drink of beer—her oxygen machine whirred beside her. Fergus hated the noise *and* the machine, but she didn't

smoke as much since she got it—and mostly only outside. “You wouldn’t do that. You’re not a fighter.”

So Fergus only sighed. Most times she understood what he said but not always—especially when it was about things that happened outside his day-to-day life. He tried his best to explain it, in as simple a way as he could. It was clear to him that the men should not be fighting and he knew that they would stop if people would give them more of the little black things that they chased on the ice. Maybe one each, maybe two—there must be lots out there in the world—lots like gravel on the hill and pinecones on trees—*lots*.

“Fergus!” he had said, exasperated, hoping she’d understand.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” his mother scolded, looking cross and pointing at him over the top of her empty beer bottle.

Fergus just shrugged and went to get her a new beer. It was easier to just play with her slippers anyway.

Now in his room upstairs he listened to the wind outside and a chill ran over him despite his flannel pajamas. The wind was howling like a thing with hair and big teeth, the same thing that would eat the girl in red if she wasn’t so smart. He knew its name, but the word was chased away by a shiver. Then it crept back whining: Wolf.

And he said it out loud: “Fergus.”

The wind howled again, and he climbed under his blankets whether his mother told him to or not. The howling reminded him of something else—something he was starting to see in his dreams again. Something that made him think of the bent steeple—and the things that happened long ago, and made him what he was.

He knew that something was happening out there with the cold and snow—far away for now but not forever. Something that he could tell was coming closer. It was a thing he had not heard or felt for many days of riding up and down the hill: many, many, many. Even from before his arms and legs were hairy—when he was small and soft and stupid like the other kids who were gone. But *it* was coming.

“Fergus,” he said, hoping that saying the name aloud would make him feel better. The wind only howled in answer and pushed on the window with a thump and crackle. He pulled his blankets up around his ears. No. Saying it out loud only frightened him more so Fergus wouldn’t say it out loud again. Instead, he tried to think of the happy times on the hill on his *Superglider*, and he decided to say that out loud, to the toys, to the window, to his bedside lamp. Maybe to hear it would make them all feel better.

“Fergus,” he said, smiling around the word. “Fergus.”

But it didn’t work. Talking about the hill just reminded him of the ride home, and the turn in the road where the church with the bent steeple was.

“Fergus,” he whispered a poem he dimly remembered, “Fergus.” His voice was muffled by the sheets. He hoped he would sleep soon, but he was afraid of what the dreams would show him. He might see it again, like the hairy thing in the story with the girl in red—he wouldn’t say the name. But this thing was different from the one in the stories. It was worse. He knew this thing was coming—and it was hungry.

## Chapter 5

The car almost rolled over when it took the corner. This simple fact was lost to the driver who was too drunk to notice such little details. Instead of panic, she was lost in thought, churning her otherwise pretty lips into a scowl, chewing over angry words; the recipient unknown to her conscious mind—the true debate lay beneath, stretched over time to a dark place behind a door and a crying girl. She kicked the gas pedal instinctively, pouring the Grand Am's power into the turn, wrenching the vehicle off the soft shoulder and out of the building spin.

Music pounded out of the speakers, a sampled Rap/rock hybrid, just modern enough to feel dangerous, but with enough stolen classic riffs to remind her of her own time. She'd borrowed the disk from her oldest daughter Janey. The music completely drowned the distant whoop of a police siren: her motivation for speed.

The open highway and her powerful car gave her a mile-long lead on her pursuers. The road left the coast and followed the curve of the river before it shot her over a bridge and through a line of trees, houses and trailers. Her adopted hometown of Crystal River was just big enough to get lost in, but she would have to work fast. She'd spent the evening in Spring Hill, about thirty miles to the south. It was bigger and gave her some anonymity compared to the limited entertainments in Crystal River. The *Spring* was a great place for a business owner to spread her wings and howl when the mood hit. And the mood had hit her like a Mack truck. There would be no witnesses to her recklessness.

She had picked up the cruiser about five miles from home. It appeared in her rearview like distant red heat lightning. She wasn't too drunk to realize that if the light got any closer, it would mean her license and the car, a muscular 2000 Pontiac Grand Am she called the "Beast." She was going so fast when she passed them, that they couldn't have more than a rough description of a black car howling north along the highway. Until they actually saw her plates, she could still get home and avoid detection, and keep her license and the Beast and her freedom.

Down in Flamingo's Bar & Grill at the *Spring* things got out of hand again. A few tequilas on top of numerous White Russians had loosened her to the point where a vicious argument with her girlfriend, Audrey, started that ended with her breaking up with her boyfriend, Terry. She had caught them kissing. *It's not what you think!* Cigarette clamped between her glossy lips, she'd given them both the evil eye—*deochi* her asshole stepfather called it—yeah, she'd had lots of reasons to give her stepfather the *deochi* too—yeah, lots! Then Lee had stormed out of the bar and rode the Beast full out toward the highway.

She gunned the engine, really poured it on. Crystal River was too small for this sort of shit—the population: four thousand. That was why she picked it, but small usually meant simple at least and that was all she wanted for herself, and for her girls. However, there were times when business slowed, when life got stale—as the seasons changed and the snowbirds flew back north—when her clients started running their wrinkly red lips over the same old stories, that she craved a change. Then her mood would turn to shadow, and even *her* optimism failed—and she had a lot of optimism. When it got that bad, she started snapping at the kids, even coming close to blows with Janey. If she wasn't careful—if she didn't do something to stem the tide—the nightmares would return—real grippers that had her waking soaked with sweat and shrieking over the TV, sometimes with the girls banging on her door. She kept it locked.

Janey tried to put the fires out. The next in line, Jeannie, was struggling with kleptomania. The youngest, Carrie, dreamt of murder. At such times, when her heart hammered with panic in the dark, she felt the urge to chuck it all and run, to burn rubber for the distance, for somewhere; it didn't matter. Just somewhere away from Crystal River—away from the calm cage she'd put herself in.

So she went to Spring Hill, got drunk, had a fight, and dumped her boyfriend again. It was something though; it broke the static—kept her mind away from the memories and gave her something in the present to still what lay behind the big dark door. That was the problem with “peace and quiet.” It brought a hush to life, but never diluted the ancient adrenaline—or cooled the hellfire that waited behind that door. She had dealt with her baggage stored and closeted there as much as anybody could, but time and boredom always rattled that door in its frame.

This year it came early. Only January and she didn't usually start climbing the walls until April.

After storming out of Flamingo's she headed to the highway and stretched the Beast's legs on the pocked and pitted asphalt. She soon sobered enough to realize the truth. She always ran, but never had a destination. She'd never known a home; places sure, people, but she had no sense of home to go to—the north, where she grew up, it left its indelible stamp on her, but family life had never been like home. She loved the country up there—and the people not the cold—but rarely returned. Hell, who was she kidding, here she was in Florida. The sun was nice. Lots of business for her salon. Schools were good and Crystal River was small enough to bore the criminal element—kept it safe. Her life in Canada, in the north was history. It was the past. Close the door.

Her character would not let her seek the anonymity of big city life. That was a sham, a game built of pretense. Hiding in the crowd was worse to her than running for the wilderness, especially if the crowd sipped lattes and jabbered on cell phones, all bought on credit. *Fuck!*

She took another corner at speed onto a dangerous section of gravel road that curled up and around a housing development. The police lights flickered between trunks in a stand of ash trees as the cops flew through the neighborhood. Suddenly, fear of capture, of humiliation and incarceration tightened the muscles in her stomach. Fear and anger churned. She knew she'd go kicking and screaming if they caught her, something she'd be both ashamed and proud of—but bad for business in Crystal River. All people did there was talk about other people's problems.

The Beast's engine roared and the tires drummed when they ripped into the black line of asphalt where the gravel road stopped and the street to her neighborhood began. Again the flicker of red caught her eye in the mirror, they were coming fast, but were still too distant for their cameras to catch her license plate through the thick dust. *Good.* The Beast's engine howled as she followed a curving stretch, her mind counted the driveways over one, two, three, before she slammed on the brakes and cranked the steering wheel. She reversed up the thirty-foot drive and into the carport, shut the Beast down and launched herself onto the damp grass beside the house, her miniskirt rolling up her backside, the skin prickling against the chill dew. She crawled behind the blackberry bushes that bordered the west side of her driveway.

The cruiser roared past, some rookie caught up in the chase like a cop show drama. He'd be back sooner or later. She giggled where she hid in the bushes. *Hide and seek!*

The police car would return at a crawl, a spotlight playing over the front porches and windows in the neighborhood. Eventually the light would find the Beast's heavy body crouched under the carport—might even catch a cloud of steam rising from the hood. But no license plate reported, no license lost.

She chuckled and climbed to her knees. The cop would know it was too late to catch her, that there was no way of proving she'd been driving the car, drunk or not. Any more than they could connect the Beast to a game of chicken two months ago that left a transport jackknifed across the highway. *Oh, Fuck! That's out of control.* She opened the driver's side door, pulled out her purse and retrieved her cigarettes. She lit one.

The warm claustrophobic air of Crystal River hung around her. Even with her daughters in bed asleep *hopefully, the lights were out*, going into the house now would only increase the sense of suffocation—like pressing a pillow over her face.

*Fucking Audrey.* She growled. *Damn it, Terry.* She walked to the deck out back. *It's not what you think—it's always what you think.*

The stars in the black overhead caught her eye. *Friggin' stars!* She climbed the stairs, dropped into the lounge and took a long drag on her cigarette. The stars. What did that old boyfriend of hers say, George the artist? He said that in his life he'd looked at the stars and wondered if his true love was out there in the world looking at them too—hoping to find *him*. She smiled at the memory because she had been fond of George, and because in optimistic moments she'd thought of the stars that way too. But there was another way of looking at it that spoiled the romantic notion for her. Anybody could look at stars. And if that was the case—was he *looking* for you or hunting you down? Was it love in his eyes, or hate?

"Fucking George!" she murmured, flicking the cigarette into the grass. She closed her eyes for a minute and drifted into a sleep that smothered like tar.

A hand on her shoulder and her eyes snapped open. A cop—a young guy, Mike Linton, a customer. She cut his hair—he was in deep denial over the balding crown. Linton had the hots for her and she couldn't care less. Daylight crowded into her eyes. The sun was up but it was early. A touch of hangover pulsed at her temples. Golden bands of light cut through the neighborhood—gilded the tree trunks and low branches. She slapped his hand away, looked toward her shoes and saw her miniskirt had ridden up well over the lower curve of her thong.

"What?" she snarled, pushing the hem of her skirt down "What are you doing? Get off my..."

"Lee." Linton had a self-satisfied look to him, something she distrusted in a cop. Something that made her wonder how long he'd waited, if he'd watched her before he woke her up.

"What?" She looked around, found her cigarettes on the porch beside the lounge. A chill ran through her and she realized a fine mist of dew covered her tanned limbs. She was freezing. The lighter shook in her hands as she lit a cigarette.

"Well, the North Bay Police up in Canada sent a bulletin down here last night about something that happened up there. Looking for Lee Stewart...maybe this doesn't even have anything to do with you—but I know you're from Canada. They said you might be living in Crystal River." He took his hat off, turned it in his hands. "Is your mother's name Margaret Morelli?"

"So what?" Lee took a long drag, made the cop stumble for words.

“She’s...” he started, clearing his throat, “dead.”

Lee studied his dark eyes for sign of manipulation or collusion. She searched him for truth. Her heart fluttered a second, but steadied. Her eyebrows knitted together.

“Good,” she spat through a cloud of smoke. A smile crossed her face as the cop’s shock registered. She laughed. “It’s about time.”

## Chapter 6

Sloan was fuming as his truck hurtled onto the hard-packed snow and roared away from the Morelli farm toward Redbridge. He was on vacation. The investigation was fifty hours old and he had been booted off the case. To make matters worse, it was noon Sunday and too late to save any of his weekend with Sam. There wasn’t enough time to call his ex and arrange even a short visit with the boy. *Her fucking rules*. She demanded 24 hours notice. *Well it doesn’t always work that way*. But he relented, had to or suffer the wrath. It wasn’t his fault that the case had forced him to cancel his time with Sam in the first place. It was the job. She knew how it worked!

A lot had happened since he’d found Mrs. Morelli Friday morning. He cursed under his breath as he ran over the mess in his mind.

On Friday afternoon his superiors turned control of the investigation over to the Ontario Provincial Police. That was in the rulebook on multi-jurisdictional crimes in the province. North Bay Police Detective Jordan Corbeil finally answered his page. He almost broke a record contacting the OPP detective that was already on his way. The ass-kisser was all ego, more interested in building his career than a case. Sloan hated the guy from his trimmed eyebrows and blonde highlights to the cut of his overpriced suit.

“There won’t be any more trouble,” Corbeil said on his cell, close enough for Sloan to hear. He got to the Morelli place just after Don Beatty called to say he’d get the coroner and come back out. “Constable Sloan was playing detective and released the body before he secured the scene.”

The OPP detective told Corbeil to secure the scene while the provincial police assembled the manpower and arranged to have forensic equipment brought up from Toronto.

Small municipal police services tended to overreact when dealing with the big boys at the provincial or federal levels. Sloan knew they’d bend over backwards for a chance to raise their profiles. Corbeil knew it too so he complained bitterly to Sloan’s Captain Markson about the early release of Mrs. Morelli’s body. *It’s risky to have Sloan around*.

“You overstepped, Sloan,” Markson had said, when ass-kisser handed him the phone. “We have an opportunity to work on an historic murder case. Don’t fuck up again.”

Sloan also endured a dressing down from Corbeil, and it was everything he could do to keep his lip buttoned, but he managed. He’d received enough *looks* from guys he respected to know he’d screwed things up.

Barnes tried to help Sloan by calling it *scene shock*. “It happens. A mad dog attacked you, Harry, that’s going to narrow your focus.”

As a punishment, Corbeil ordered Sloan and Rookie up to the barn to dive for evidence. “Give me something I can work with.”

Rookie was still shaky as hell, but Sloan did what he could to bolster his spirits when they encountered the wall of stench on the way into the barn. *It's a cop's life, Rookie. You'll tell your grandkids about this one.*

Rookie held a flashlight while Sloan hooked a body with the shovel. They realized it was wearing denims that had not yet decayed and there was an interesting bulge in the back pocket.

"It's a wallet." Sloan dragged the body away from the others.

Rookie looked at him mournfully.

"It's a cop's life, buddy." Sloan smiled weakly, shrugged and nudged the rotten body with the shovel.

"What?" Then Rookie got the drift. "No..."

"You're already covered in shit," Sloan said and almost gagged. "You can't get dirtier."

The wallet contained a driver's license that Corbeil read over the phone to Markson. "Get this Captain. The victim's name is Cody Vinn. He's from Vancouver. We're going *national!*"

Corbeil called a friend at the local RCMP detachment and it wasn't long before the feds were on the horn with the OPP and Captain Markson setting up to coordinate the different provincial and municipal agencies that would become involved in the expanding case.

Sloan had a feeling there would be trouble when the Mounties drove up at sunset and a bearded East Indian climbed out of the late model sedan. A big blue turban looked out of place with his suit, tie and overcoat. *What the fuck!* He walked into the Morelli house without much more than a glance at Sloan. *Goddamn ragtop!* His partner, a heavysset white guy with gray hair called Detective Saunders, stopped long enough to shake Sloan's hand, ask his name and introduce himself and his partner, Sergeant Singh.

Corbeil shouted and hurried over, almost elbowing Sloan out of the way to introduce himself.

"I'm Detective Jordan Corbeil. If there's anything you need, just ask. We're here to help." Corbeil almost shit himself with excitement when Saunders told him to expect RCMP officers trained in media relations. "They'll handle the television crews."

Corbeil ordered Sloan and his constables to watch the road.

"That's bullshit!" Sloan snarled. "My constables froze waiting for you to show up. Let the next shift watch the fucking road."

"Watch it, Sloan," Corbeil had said.

Saunders viewed the exchange impassively, just nodded, half-smiled and walked toward the house. Corbeil gave a final glare and then followed.

Sloan turned to his men. "Stay in your cars. It's too cold."

Nobody wanted to ride shotgun with Rookie.

At about six o'clock Corbeil, Saunders and Singh came out of the house and asked for Sloan. He was at the end of the driveway welcoming the shift change.

"Nobody goes home." Corbeil pointed at the RCMP detectives who were climbing into their car. "They want details."

"This is shit!" Sloan growled. "My troops are freezing."

"Keep it up, Sloan," Corbeil reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. "You want to ask Markson what to do?"

Sloan got into the back seat of the sedan.

So: *Start with the complaint of the barking dog.* Sloan ran through the story, using his notes where he needed. Then came the questions: Why did you discharge your firearm? Why did you process the crime scene? Why did you release Mrs. Morelli's body? Did you search the barn before releasing her? Do you know the Morellis?

Then the RCMP brought Sloan's fellow officers in for questioning. Sheila Barnes looked pissed off when they took her into the car, and murderous when she came out. Carl Henrich was in for only twenty minutes or so. Sloan noticed that they questioned Rookie outside the car, frigid wind or not. The constable still sported a light covering of manure and vomit.

Sloan met up with his crew by their cars before they left. They were as pissed off as he was about the RCMP *coordinating* things. Even Rookie had hissed a few choice words. "Bathing in shit and bodies for nothing."

Around seven-thirty, headlights blinded Sloan as two black OPP vans dragging portable generators arrived on the scene. They started setting up a big canvas shelter by the barn. The weather was getting worse.

Sloan was cold and tired but he lingered in his car, glaring at the farmhouse. It was his case, and people who couldn't tell a trout from a pickerel had hijacked it. *Let some foreigner run the operation? Not on your watch, Sloansky!* He had a good crew. Like them, he was territorial. They were a team. He could content himself with that while he was *coordinated* over a stump by the Mounties.

Eight more OPP officers arrived in a van just after nine. They said the news was getting out, just sketchy stuff on the television and radio. But public interest was building. The story was going to break big!

Sloan got home around eleven that night. He made a quick call to the station about contacting the Morelli girl—suggested they start looking in Crystal River, Florida. If she wasn't there, Sloan told them to Google her. Sam's sad voice was on the answering machine: "I love you dad," but it was too late to call back. He barely had time to crack a beer before he was asleep in front of the TV.

When he came on duty Saturday morning, he could see that the cat was completely out of the bag. Helicopters from various news organizations buzzed the site as the sun's first rays cut the frigid air into shards of frost. The media was arriving in force and turning the concession roads around the Morelli farm into a cross between a circus and a poker run. The road in front of the farm was slow going, and Sloan had to stop and start his way through a gauntlet of reporters, videographers and their vehicles. Columns of exhaust and steam rose from the gathering. The Morelli Murders were fast writing themselves into the history books. Other than that pig farmer out west, mass murder of this size had never happened in Canada—hell, even CNN had sent a van.

He handed off a cardboard tray of coffee to the shift he was there to relieve, and then walked up the laneway to the Morelli place. A refrigerated tractor-trailer was parked up by the barn. He found out later it was a temporary morgue. Investigators carried things in and out of the large canvas shelter beside it. Nondescript RCMP and OPP vans were blocking the barn's interior.

Sloan got on the horn early and told Rookie to drive out on Trout Lake to find Clark Campbell. The investigation was growing big enough that he wanted to load the crowd

with as many familiar faces as possible. Clark knew the area and local infrastructure, and might find a way to weasel his way into the investigation.

Sloan, his constables and a couple of the OPP officers had a bitch session about the Mounties. The OPP from Sudbury and North Bay agreed that Singh was a control-freak who kept his head wrapped too tight. Saturday went on like that. Sloan was pissed. He controlled traffic *and his temper* and directed the media's questions to *Turban-Fucking-Singh*.

The media and spectators grew in number as the day wore on—trucks and cars appeared on the side roads, windows rolled down, faces, binoculars and cameras materialized. People were coming from as far as Huntsville. Locals climbed out of their vehicles and were standing by the snowbanks in groups discussing the case—sometimes with the media. If it wasn't so damned cold, Sloan knew they'd already have people hiking across the fields for a look. The whole scene gave him the vague foretaste of disaster—with the cold coming on, and the forecast issuing storm warnings. The sky was growing heavy with clouds. The chances were climbing that one of these rubbernecks would get into trouble and freeze to death.

They had dug out nineteen bodies as Saturday wound down. The investigative team had a couple of medical examiners evaluating victims before storing them in the tractor-trailer. They'd be sent into North Bay to thaw as they were tagged and bagged. Others that required detailed analysis, DNA workup, would be sent to Toronto from there. The examiners were certain from the state of decomposition that some were recent burials, two months to a year, while others showed evidence of having been dead for decades.

Corbeil spent most of the day scowling at Sloan and the local constables. He left them alone later to follow Singh around like a puppy when the foreigner arrived at noon.

Later while walking the property, a pair of OPP constables discovered a skeletal hand protruding from the frozen earth where the snow had been blown away from the tree line. The ground was frozen. They were waiting for a backhoe that was on its way from North Bay.

More reinforcements arrived from the OPP around suppertime. Sloan went home and had a fight with his ex about Sam. *You break his heart every time you cancel!*

Sloan got back to the Morelli place on Sunday morning with Clark Campbell following behind him in his van. *Drives like an old lady*. Rookie brought the pathologist to North Bay the night before—the weather was getting bad for highway driving. They were lucky to make it. Campbell was uncertain about his jurisdiction in this case, but after Sloan filled him in on more of the details, he was anxious to get out there and have a look.

Singh and Corbeil stopped Sloan and Campbell halfway to the barn. Singh very sternly thanked Campbell for his interest—his Indian accent was there definitely, with a snooty British stitch. He explained that medical examiners had been brought in from Ottawa to coordinate the primary exhumation and identification. Dr. Campbell was welcome to observe or assist.

Sloan told Singh that since Campbell was a pathologist at the North Bay Health Center, he should have a say in how the bodies were processed. Singh just smiled and said that the preliminary forensic investigation would be carried out by the examiners *on site* but that Dr. Campbell was welcome to assist in the cataloguing of victims as they were sent to the Health Center's morgue.

“It’s out of his hands Sloan,” Corbeil threw in. “We’ll have to get you a rulebook some day.”

Sloan lost it.

“We got enough trouble with our own fucking Indians!” He saw red. “Campbell’s got more rights in this *jurisdiction* than some motherfucking Muslim immigrant from god-knows-fucking-where.” His head hammered with rage. “What the hell does this asshole know about Northern Ontario?”

Corbeil actually smiled. It almost got him punched out, but Sloan wrestled his temper under control.

Corbeil took out his cell phone, called Captain Markson and explained the situation. He batted his eyes at Singh. “I’m sure that Sergeant Singh is more interested in pursuing this investigation than filing a formal complaint.”

Sloan took the phone.

“There’s no excuse for your behavior Sloan, and with the eyes of the world watching, you run the risk of embarrassing the North Bay Police Service that you claim to so proudly serve,” Markson said. “You’re suspended with pay pending an investigation. Leave the Morelli property, now.”

“*Fuckers!*” Sloan growled miles from the scene, his truck fishtailing between snowbanks, the tires thundered on ice.

## Chapter 7

Lee had to pee, and the weather wasn’t helping the situation. The wipers spread slippery clods of slush all over the windshield—slashed it into smaller slithering wet specks that dribbled along the weather stripping where it was sheared off by the freezing wind. *Drip. Thump. Squeal. Drip. Thump. Squeak. Drip. Thump. Squeal.* Occasionally a shivering clot would come loose at the juncture of windshield and hood and spray across her vision, dragging a sputtering curse from her lips. *Splatter.* She had to pee! *Splash.*

The weather was awful by the time she reached the border, a shock to her system after the temperate Florida winter she left behind. The aching wind even hurried the customs officials who were clearly sick and tired of working in the freezing rain that accompanied it. Served them right. Customs officers were just cop wannabes anyway, and in her mind that was a rung lower on the ladder of disrespect. She didn’t want to test her patience if they got pushy and her dual citizenship had taught her to keep it simple at the border. The only things she brought across were cigarettes, sixty ounces of duty-free vodka and a bottle of Kahlua for Black and White Russians. She planned to use the booze instead of a lullaby when she stopped to sleep. It went undeclared in her trunk.

The customs officers gave her passport a glance and let her in. Her passport wasn’t required to get into Canada *yet* but she would need it to get back to Florida. *Thank you terrorists.*

Lee shivered and then giggled, getting a visual of driving with her legs crossed. She knew she could easily make it from the border to Redbridge in one long day of driving—if the weather cooperated even a little—but she didn’t want to arrive there after nightfall and exhausted. She had been on the road for almost twenty hours and was running on caffeine and chocolate. She had planned to stop along the highway during the night, but

was making such good time she pushed on. She'd stop at a motel just outside of North Bay—a northern Ontario city of some sixty thousand—where she could rest with her Black or White Russians, soak in a hot tub and recuperate. In the morning she'd sneak the final thirty miles into Redbridge on the back roads. She wanted to get in and get out—it wasn't old home week—it wasn't like she left on good terms, and she didn't owe that strip of backwater anything.

Lee got a surge of anger whenever she thought of all the nice people up there on their farms, in their fucking trailers and railroad houses watching Saturday Night Hockey all those years while crimes were being committed and re-committed just a mile or two away. *Out of sight out of mind.* She tramped on the gas and passed a young gang-banger loser in his little Honda skateboard—*Get a real car, Punk!* Lee felt the Beast's rear end slide a little to the left but she steered through it with a curse on her lips. Easy. *The wicked witch is dead! Us munchkins are supposed to sing or something.*

When she got to Redbridge she'd talk to the cops and make arrangements to bury her mother—*what do they do with nuclear waste?* A cynical part of her was pretty sure she'd get stuck buying the bitch's cardboard box. Forget inheritance—other than the property. God knows the Devil never spent a dime on anybody else's clothes or education, but she spent a lot on herself.

An RCMP officer had called Sunday morning while Lee was packing for the drive north. Pants, socks, a couple black leather minis, shirts, a fistful of thongs, something to sleep in, a sweater and jacket—she didn't worry too much about the clothes and she never scrimped on herself. If she got bored with them, she'd just shop for something new. Lee included a small leather bag full of accessories—some of her friends thought it gaudy, lots of chrome and silver—heavy rings for fingers, earlobes and bellybutton, amulets and chains. It fit her overall style, and every piece of it had special meaning for her: a karma ring and chain combination for luck, a phoenix ring that meant eternal rebirth, rings and anklets with gemstones. Every piece had some meaning.

Janey took the call. The cop said it was important and he wanted Lee to call right back. *Who's he think he is?* In her mind the only thing worse than a cop was a Mountie. *Always get their man? Yeah right!* She had shrugged at the message and hit the road at three Sunday afternoon after lingering too long with the girls. She'd told Janey she'd call or text them from the highway. Jeannie was over at a girlfriend's house and Carrie barely looked away from the television when Lee said her goodbyes: “Do what Shelley tells you!” She'd had to cancel her appointments for the next two weeks and her poor partner Shelley was going to cover for her at the shop—and the girls were going to stay with her.

Lee's mind kept coming back to that call. She had never liked cops, but the inconvenience mixed with the convoluted feelings for the days ahead was bringing her close to open warfare.

“Snap your fingers at me... Go call *yourself!*” She chuckled at her own bitchiness, and then checked her eye makeup in the rearview—snorted at her silliness. “The Egyptian death goddess!” Lee started to laugh, then checked herself, clenched her thighs together. “*Oh my god! I gotta pee!*”

A howling row of truck tires brought her attention back to the road, as a transport appeared out of the gray on her right—too close for comfort. Lee gunned the Beast's engine—softly. The Grand Am could easily start a slide that would kill her in this weather. She'd been too long in the south, hadn't thought about winter tires. All she had

were all-season radials, and with an engine like the Beast's that could be a tricky combination. And here she was driving into blizzard country.

She was just north of Toronto, had about five hours to go with the weather—and things were just getting worse. Lee thought about running the radio dial until she could get a weather report, but she had always treated such things with disdain. *How do you know what the weather's going to do in two days? How can you be sure?* She'd use her own judgment and if the highway were closed somewhere up ahead, she'd know it a lot faster than any radio station. In fact, she rarely listened to the radio, or television news either. Newspapers, sure. That was class; you could get the real story there. Every day at the shop she read the *Chronicle* from first to last.

Before heading out, she had collected a box full of CDs for the drive. They were all the company she needed. Hard rock, classic and some of that new metal stuff—perfect for her and the Beast to rock the highway.

"*I gotta take a pee!*" she sang operatically this time, smiling. She squinted her eyes into the wet snow. Lee was making excellent time on the drive, but she was starting to think she'd waited too long for the food and bathroom break. There were stretches of the Highway 400 North where you could only find rest stations and gas stops fifty minutes apart. And some of the bastards closed in the winter. She checked her watch. It was eleven o'clock. First gas station she spotted, she'd stop.

Lee had turned off her music as the weather got uglier. It was easier to concentrate on the driving without Robert Plant screaming and she had been amazed at the number of cars headed north. Traffic was getting bad everywhere, but she really hadn't expected to find so many other cars on the road, especially in this weather.

"Stay out of my way!" She laughed. "I gotta pee!"

The heater was on high; she was cooking—her eyes were stinging from the dry air and the pall of cigarette smoke. She was sure that the Beast was leaking too—in the trunk maybe—drip-drip-drip, *splink!* Perfect, with the cool air that gathered around her feet, her bladder felt like a chunk of ice—if she didn't go soon, something bad was going to happen.

The Beast roared along the dark pink-granite highway as Lee changed lanes—passing a bi-focaled old man in a rusty blue truck. She felt only the slightest suggestion of spin in the ass end. A thrill of adrenaline throbbed through her like lust. She used to joke with her girls that certain cars gave her a hard on. Her logical mind knew there was something twisted about that phenomena since it wasn't all jest; but the juxtaposition of freedom, powerful engines and burning rubber made her feel tingly and warm below her bellybutton ring.

She had her reasons for the many facets of her personality—all the facets, even the strange ones. *Bad* reasons likely. *Good* reasons too. Despite the wave of excitement Lee warned herself again to watch for black ice. The Beast was an awesome machine but all that power needed traction, and the last decade in Florida had dulled her winter driving skills.

She knew she had to stop before she got to the long stretches of nothing in the north, where the highway wound through the granite rock cuts. The distant ragged skyline would drop away, and it would be hill after hill of snowy wilderness, punctuated by flatlands where dried bulrushes stuck up out of lonely frozen lakes to either side; and the

tall pines and spruce worn into tortured shapes by the wind and cold would lean in—and start to obscure the leaden skies.

*I hate this cold! I've got to pee!*

She had no idea how the North Bay cops had found her. She wasn't exactly hiding, but other than the salon's website, she kept a pretty low profile. Her name was listed there with Shel's. That lapse in security added to a growing uneasiness in her gut. She hadn't eaten since she crossed the border but she knew food wouldn't help, full or empty, her stomach churned whenever she thought of the farm—the *Morelli place*—as the locals called it. She was glad that she'd left this particular past far behind—proud, in fact, considering what had happened—and she hoped the death of her mother would put a lot of these things permanently to rest. But as she drew nearer, an anxious ache had returned to her stomach. Even the shapes of the snow-covered rock cuts were conjuring up old memories.

She had left home for very bad reasons—*who would leave home for good ones?* And she had done everything in her power to forget it, to lock it up behind the big dark door: even tried a failed marriage, kids and career. She had not returned to the north in twenty years, only a couple of trips into Canada to visit with an aunt, but never farther than Toronto. Now that her mother was dead she felt a quick trip back to tidy up the possibility of inheritance would be worth the bad feelings that ate at her guts. The house and barn sat on twenty acres and though little more than a frozen shit farm it would be some payoff for everything she had endured. She could always use money—her girls were close to college age. Lee knew that if her mother was dead, then her stepfather—*her step 'something'*—would be long gone—probably. Lee had no idea if he had stayed at the farm after she ran away.

*He must have left.* The cops wouldn't have come looking for her in Florida if he was still there—not right away. She was sure that the property would be in her mother's name, her stepfather had insisted. She knew that the farm and *extras* had been bartered long ago and paid for by Lee. Now that her mother was dead, and there was no one in the world who cared, Lee included: there would be no will, which put the property in direct line to Lee—after the government ripped off their piece of the action.

A blinking sign appeared overhead in the wet snow: Danny's Pasta and Gas. Lee turned the Beast hard to the right, bounced the car rumbling and snorting over the slushy parking lot out front. The pumps were under a tall wide roof—the restaurant looked like a converted mobile home. *Fuck!* Lee cranked the wheel and turned the Grand Am shuddering back toward the road.

A police cruiser was parked there behind a van.

“Motherfuckers!” she shouted, rumbling back onto the highway. *Who do they think they are?* The Beast's tires hissed on the slick asphalt; the engine opened up with a roar.

The car had enough gas to keep her shrieking northward for an hour or more, and there would be a gas station ahead—somewhere up there in the snow. Lee would find one where a cop wasn't squatting, eating his doughnuts and showing his gun to the local girls. She lit a cigarette. As her rage passed her bladder resumed aching. Food wouldn't help, maybe a White Russian and a strip of smoked salmon. If her need to pee got bad enough, there was a pile of extra large coffee cups on the floor that was starting to look pretty inviting. She giggled.

## Chapter 8

Dr. Gilles Dorval was daydreaming about reanimating dead flesh when the phone rang. The sudden sound had him up out of his chair, heart pounding. His fingernails bit at the book's cloth cover where he clutched it to his chest. He glared at the phone. It rang again. *Reanimate me, you bastard!* He glowered at the device where it sat on a small table by a chair in the front room, just a short way up the hall. It rang again. Dorval grumbled: it was barely eleven o'clock. He had only been up for two hours, and he hated doing anything before noon—especially on Monday. The phone rang again—and again as he let his gaze slide across his empty coffee cup and back to the book. *If it's truly important, they'll call back.* He dropped into his seat and scanned the page for the place he'd left off. He had no answering machine and he liked it that way.

Since his retirement, Dorval had taken to reading less staunchly literary or academic works though he had to admit his new choices would never be regarded as *fluff*. In his hands was a specially annotated copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a Christmas present from his grandniece, Maureen, who was studying medicine in Toronto. Dorval loved the story, it was timeless, but most of his enjoyment of the book hung on the plentiful footnotes that vied for prominence with the actual narrative. The large print book in his lap was one of a series of horror classics produced in special editions. Each in the series was heavily annotated by prominent surgeons, pathologists, neurologists and scientists. These empirical experts had been gathered by the book's editors not so much to dispel the magic of the horror classic, but to compare each author's imaginative leaps to modern scientific advances.

It was only in the last couple of years that Dorval had become comfortable with the notion of horror stories. True, since his retirement, he had shifted to mainstream fiction and fantasy—he'd devoted most of his life to the *real world* after all—but the events that colored the last half of his career had given him understandable reluctance to absorb more horror and death—even the fictional variety.

The phone stopped ringing, left a tingling echo in the air. It was the only time he questioned his decision to forgo an answering machine or service. *Those damned machines ruled your life! You're retired now.* People can always call back. Dorval looked over at the phone and smiled. *You are no longer my master.* He breathed a chuckling sigh of relief before returning to his book. *Where was I? Something about dead tissues...*

The phone rang again and Dorval snapped his book shut.

"Merde!" he hissed.

He snarled at the device, momentarily considered letting it ring out again and then leaving it off the hook. But his decades as a doctor in a small village wouldn't let him—he knew every living soul there, had delivered many of them. *And he owed them all so much.* He climbed out of his chair, grunting and groaning with displeasure. *Have to get back to my daily walks! How many lazy dead men did I prescribe the same simple thing to? A chill ran through him. This afternoon I must. It's snowing; but a short walk will not kill me. Might be pretty out there.*

Still glaring at the phone, he knotted the belt on his housecoat, while stabbing his toes blindly at his worn old slippers until he snared one and then the other. Dorval shuffled to

the phone, paused long enough to summon his professional demeanor before picking up. *You mean, push all that anger down!*

“Hello?” he said, suddenly noticing where the tip of his right thumb had split near the nail from the dry, cold air. *Moisturizer needed. You’re falling apart.*

“Dr. Dorval, it’s Jean Carmichael,” a woman’s voice said, without a trace of guilt for such an early Monday call. Events in Jean’s life had removed the need for any social observances.

“Hello Jean,” Dorval answered. “How nice to hear from you.” *What do you want?* He wanted to say. *No one just phones to ask the old doctor how he’s getting along.*

“It’s Fergus,” Jean whispered. She often whispered when talking to people about her son, as though her connection to him and his illness deserved some acknowledgement of responsibility. There was a quiet hiss in the background and Dorval remembered she needed oxygen assistance—*Emphysema*.

“How *is* Fergus?” Dorval genuinely liked the young man but since his retirement had not seen much of him. Poor fellow wasn’t given much of a chance at life. He’d certainly made the most of it though. “Is he enjoying the snow?”

“Yes, Doctor.” Jean paused. She sounded hesitant. “Lord knows he always does. He’s out there now tormenting the hill with his *Superglider* though with the snow, it’s not as much to his liking.”

“Unfortunate side effect of living in the north,” he grumbled, looking over at his comfortable chair and his book. He had a sudden yearning for another cup of coffee and quiet—maybe a nap too! “How can I help you, Jean?”

“Well, Doctor, I know you don’t work anymore. That is rather...” Dorval could hear her blushing. “I understand you’re retired and so...”

“Yes, Jean.” *Get to the point.* He cleared his throat. “How is Fergus?”

“I wonder if I could bring him to see you?” she said sheepishly.

“If it’s an issue of Fergus’ health, I suggest you take him to Dr. Langlois,” Dorval said, pacing beside the table. *I’m retired, for god’s sake! And I delayed that by a decade!* “You know it’s in Fergus’ best interest to develop a good relationship with her.” Helen Langlois was an excellent physician and was more than up to the job of handling Dorval’s practice and a special patient like Fergus.

“We been to her,” Jean said, a tiny bit of guilt was creeping into her tone. “But she don’t know Fergus well enough to get to his point.”

“Give her time,” Dorval assured her, “and give Fergus time. He’ll find a way to get his point across. And *she’s* his doctor now.”

“Well, I know that too, Dr. Dorval, only...” Jean said, voice trailing off. “Only it’s not just Fergus’ health now I’m talking about. It’s those dreams of his. God help us, but they’ve come back.”

Dorval’s heart turned to lead, his breathing slowed, labored a moment. He collapsed into the chair by the phone. His voice was suddenly brittle. “The dreams?”

“Yes, those he had before he first was sick—and what came on after,” Jean said quickly, like haste would make it easier. “And he’s making signs for them other things too.”

Time opened up beneath Dorval—left him dangling. He leaned forward in the chair, looked at his tattered tartan slippers—pressed his weight down to make sure the floor still

had substance. *So long ago.* His lungs labored over another breath. There was a dull hammering in his chest. *The dreams.*

“The ‘signs’ you mean, of the wolf, I take it?” he whispered, thought: *Oh god no.* Dorval clutched the flannel housecoat over his sternum. “Poor Fergus.”

“Yes, the ‘wolf’ I take it by his signs.” Jean’s voice cycled upward toward panic and then leveled off. She was too tough to let fear control her. “And other things I’m trying to puzzle out.”

“You are certain?” Dorval leaned back in the chair, rested his head against the wall. “You know sometimes, he can be difficult to...”

“To *understand?* Yes, Dr. Dorval, I’m well acquainted with my son’s ticks and foibles!” She cleared her throat—*was that a sob or the oxygen machine?* Then she continued: “I’m sorry Dr. Dorval, that isn’t kind of me I know. And here you are poised to do a favor for my boy.”

“Of course,” he said closing his eyes. *Poised?* A ridge of wallpaper pressed against the back of his head, kept him in the present. “You are best to understand his way. I apologize, of course.”

“You are too though, Doctor,” she added hurriedly. “You’re the one knows him best, since the trouble and so I’ve called.”

“Yes,” he breathed the word, his voice suddenly fragile. “*Since the trouble.*”

“Could I...” Jean’s tone suddenly went desperate. “Can I bring him by to see you?” She kept going before he could refuse. “Maybe they’re just dreams, *real* dreams though. Not to do with sickness. It’s been so long.”

“Of course, yes.” Dorval opened his eyes. “I would love to see Fergus, and yes, it may very well be dreams alone. Just dreams more than likely. No need to worry,” he said, unable to believe his own assurance. He climbed slowly to his feet. “But tomorrow afternoon, I think, yes. I’m really not prepared to see anybody today. I feel I must pay my retirement that much respect.” *Respect? I don’t want to know about those dreams. I’m sorry Fergus but I don’t.* His head swam momentarily. “Why not come by the house at two o’clock tomorrow.”

Jean thanked him and hung up. Dorval stood a moment, then slowly set the phone back in its cradle. *It’s been so long. So long.* He shuffled to his easy chair. A look at the cover of his book sent a shiver through him. There was a full moon, pitch black around it. A dead tree trailed its thin clawing branches across its cratered face. It looked the way the moon would in the depth of winter, in the middle of a long cold night.

## Chapter 9

Judy Bloomquist hated her kids. Despite the comfortable tickling warmth that flooded over her skin like sex and caressed her to silence, Judy continued to feed raw emotion to the dying fire of her life. It was all she had left now. She had good reason to hate her kids before: two ungrateful sons and a self-centered daughter selling the family home “for mom’s own good,” then marooning her at a seniors’ home between the highway and a blackfly-infested swamp, far from the city, her neighborhood and friends.

Rowanwood Retirement Center could have as easily been called Rowanwood Detention Center. The one-story red brick complex was the definition of bleak and dismal

when Judy was first delivered there four years before, surrounded as it was by miles and miles of northern bush and lakes—an impassable wilderness that an Indian warrior could not have survived or escaped. The last sign of habitation she had seen all those years ago was a sad-looking gas station glimpsed through a haze of sedation and the van's smoky windows.

For the last four years she'd seen each of her kids three times on her successive birthdays—forget the other holidays. Instead insipid “greeting” and “best wishes” cards were sent and stuck to the cream-colored paint on the wall beside her bed, tacked up by good-natured but overworked nurses in an attempt to rally her failing spirits—all done with loud voices and saccharine tones.

*Here you go pretty girl, a Hanukah card from your kids!*

Her hatred for her children had grown unchecked since. It pounded in her temples, a steady, potent flow of emotion more dependable than her failing heart. The last ten months had shown a steady decline in her health.

Her nurses whispered—*they thought she was asleep*—“poor Mrs. Bloomquist's heart is breaking”—*it is, it is*—“she's giving up.”

And they were right—her heart *was* breaking, but Judy had decided to break it herself—*ungrateful kids*—hold my hand while I die and bury me then you bastards! It was all she could do to reach them—to *punish them. Am I a bother for you? Me? Your mother! I fed and clothed you, scrimped and saved for you! Your father died young for you! He left me alone for you!*

But soon after she'd decided to die, Judy regretted that too. She'd barely started to punish her children this way when she was alarmed to find that she could no longer keep her food down. Her doctor started looking worried after the first exam, so he ordered tests, tests and more tests—*no dignity now: nothing*. They had to feed her through a slow IV drip.

No broken heart, *they found cancer*—and as her body failed—*so fast, so fast*—she'd been forced to wear incontinency briefs. *They're diapers just say it!* It was more than age and loneliness. Cancer was killing her and it was in a hurry. It was too late to rally or start the good fight.

*Cancer*. The nurses whispered.

She blamed her kids for this too.

Things took another turn for the worse when Judy's nurses stopped taking her seriously. As the pain medication was increased; their respect for her word diminished. At least they'd listen to her before—listen to the stories of her life and her loss. *Where are my kids? Where are they? They'll believe me!* But respect left with her hope. And now when she needed them to believe her the most...

Judy saw something at the window earlier that night and had paged the nurses four times.

*What is it Mrs. Bloomquist?* They'd asked.

“A shadow was there at the window—a big dog, a big wolf.” She barely got the words out before recognizing the doubt in their faces—the unconscious little roll of the eyes. *Someone believe me!* She looked around for her teeth. That was it; they couldn't understand her. She was slurring her words.

“Where are my teeth?” she had shouted, but that was met with condescension too.

*There are no big dogs out there, Mrs. Bloomquist,* they'd said, after lifting the curtain and looking. *And there haven't been wolves in the area since the Indians and hunters got them years ago.*

After answering her last page, Judy begged the nurses to believe her, to look. To listen. She insisted they go to the window, to look out into the snow and the cold and see the tracks that must be there. They looked, but shook their heads sadly and crossed their arms—heads tilted, shaking, disbelieving.

*Something was trying to get in!* Judy stabbed one of her hands toward the window trailing a plastic IV line.

She'd seen this thing—a shape only minutes before. Something had raised a paw and ran it scratching over the screen. She said it made a zipping sound but it was there, distinct against the cold silence of winter.

They wouldn't believe her. She wept as they watched. She told them a crazy mood had hit her last time it was there at the window. She decided if she were hallucinating it wouldn't hurt to call out to the shape. *Good doggy! Good doggy. Come here, there's a good boy.* Then she wept as she told her story, her old toothless voice mushy with fear and urgency. After she called to it there was a thump against the glass, and another thump and a scratch again. She wailed when the nurses clicked their tongues. Their rolling eyes made her angrier and she shrieked at them.

"I am not crazy!" If it wasn't a wolf—if the Indians and hunters got them all—then, "it's a big dog, but like a wolf with tall pointed ears and eyes that burn."

Her nurses' sighs of disbelief filled her with rage. One was winking sleep from her eyes; it was two a.m.

*There's a winter storm out there, Mrs. Bloomquist. That's what you heard.* The wind. They smiled sympathetically. One left the room and returned with a needle on a plastic tray.

*Demerol,* Judy had thought: Some Demerol to make the crazy old lady sleep. *But the dog...the dog!*

That needle had come an hour or more ago, and it had worked at least a little, helping Judy into a dark shadow that was neither waking nor restful. She stared dully at her fear with a stupid grin on her face. There were so many drugs for pain now that none could make her sleep, but she must have drifted off because she'd come out of a haze all the sudden. There was a curious mixture of emotion. She floated in a creamy suspension of happiness, rage and terror. Cool sparkles of snow were tickling her forearms where they rested on the covers—*that feels pretty, they twinkle on my skin*—but then she thought of her kids—*ungrateful kids*—and then she realized that the snow sparkled in the air as it blew in through an open window. She giggled.

And her mind came more awake. She looked around the darkness—a half-smile on her face. The lights were off. There was a dim green glow from a screen on the oxygen machine. Judy patted around on her sheets with her right hand but the pager was gone. How could she call her nurses? She had to tell them the window was open. That was wrong. She was an old woman. A window open in the winter! She chuckled, thinking that she could call the nurses the way that farmers called their pigs: *Sooey! Sooey!* It's all they deserved.

The curtains shifted over the window. Illuminated by the parking lot lights, a sparkling spray of snowflakes and frost entered on the breeze. The urge to scream turned

into a need to giggle—then scream, but the urges were overcome by weariness. She sighed and wriggled beneath her covers. Judy dragged a deep breath into her lungs, listened to a slow, methodical rhythm she recognized as her heartbeat. It seemed to be whispering: *Sleep. Dream. Sleep. Dream. Sleep. Dream.* And for a few more seconds she'd struggled against this soothing beat.

Her anger flared, brought her back around: *Those UNGRATEFUL KIDS!* The fury pulled her back from the brink. Kept her awake. Kept her alive.

Something was in the room. It came in through the window. Whatever it was, the wolf, the dog nuzzled at the back of her left hand. Its broad wet nose was cold and soft, the tongue was warm and soft. It was licking her skin—nibbling it—chewing the place where the nurses stuck the IV needle in. Judy wanted to scream—knew that this was so terribly wrong—but she smiled. Something in the way the thing licked and sucked her skin kept her quiet, reminded her body of other times long ago, when she and Mr. Bloomquist, Michael, were young. When her body had tingled with pleasure across her stomach and down her legs—*between her legs*—before she'd put it to use birthing ungrateful children. She felt a tickling there now, long absent but familiar—*so soft*.

The dog was gentle—*good doggy*—and something, its paws perhaps, explored her body—nails scored her skin. The sensation kept her from falling into terror, kept her from calling out with her failing breath. The dog's hands were rough. She remembered Michael.

“Nice doggy,” she murmured in a cozy blanket of warmth. “Good boy.”

As Judy Bloomquist slipped into a final sleep, a shadow appeared before her face. The muzzle was whiskered and damp. A broad pink tongue slipped up over its nose; its teeth chomped together. A pair of red spots glowed where eyes should be. *Good dog.* She thought. *Good dog.* The dog panted, shook its head and made a hollow popping sound as it chomped its teeth.

## Chapter 10

The big dark door was open. Its inner surface was cold gray wood splintered and ripped as if by claws and stained with bloody fingerprints. Past the frame was darkness, a shadow holding waxy yellow bone-shapes: skulls, a ribcage, femurs and teeth gathered and piled in the inky depths, set aside for a time, for reasons unknown by an icy presence that lurked in the dark behind the sill. Its red eyes peered out over the bone heaps, watching, gathering strength to pounce, to kill; over and over it growled the words: *I want you! I want you! I want you!*

Lee was paralyzed, frozen in place on the cold earth, in the dark smell of death and sodomy that flooded out past the door. Nightmare screams came with it, filled the air, locked her in the murderous gaze. Images of rape and torture assailed her. Screaming violation upon violation tore at her mind; sent it twisting and turning in the raucous air. She tried to heave herself away, but the screams bound her—restrained her limbs, fought her efforts to move or turn. Heart hammering, impotent she only imagined escape, but the noise battered the fantasy into flickering remnants of light.

*Let me go! LET ME GO!*

And then the dark terror followed her into the light.

The screams harrowed Lee as she finally managed movement and clawed at her eyes for vision. The sound was deafening, disorienting as it echoed in from all around, and then with the light came reason. The noise, the scream, it came from her. She was in the Beast and screaming. Silence came when she closed her mouth. *The red eyes were gone but she still felt their gaze.*

The Grand Am's internal contours had amplified her voice with an immediate and terrifying urgency that had heated Lee's waking like fever. *Oh fuck! Oh shit!* She pushed her leather jacket aside. *So hot.* Her jeans, shirt, and bra were soaked. Her hair was pasted to the back of her neck, and her eyes felt crusty. Tilting the rearview mirror, she saw that her mascara had made long-fingered tracks down her cheeks. *Oh fuck!* She laughed nervously with relief and then flashed her teeth at the reflection: half-smile, half-snarl. *Like Alice Cooper's mother!* New tears filled her eyes and ran down her face. A strained laugh burst from her.

Then all humor was washed away by a wave of nausea. *The dream—the eyes...oh god!* She dug into her purse for cigarettes and lit one. A feverish chill shook her, and she started the Beast. The engine grumbled in the cold but soon fired heat into her face and lap. A big logging truck trundled past, negotiated its way among the other vehicles and out of the lot.

Lee had parked the Beast the night before at the Fifth Wheel Truck Stop just outside of North Bay, exhausted—*just for a pee—just for a snack, maybe a catnap too, something quick.* She had parked the Beast in a space beside a sleeping semi carrying mammoth machine parts.

She had entered the Stop and walked past all the tables. A couple of old truck drivers watched her tight jeans—*she saw them in a mirror behind the coffee counter; they always watched. She didn't always like it.* She entered the combo shower and bathroom—four stalls and hooks for trucker's clothes. *Never would have seen this for women in the old days.* She'd picked up a ham sandwich with lots of mustard on her way back out to the Beast. The sandwich was drying out on the seat beside her. Lee's plan was to find a motel. She'd pushed herself too hard coming north—thirty hours? So after a few bites of sandwich she had closed her eyes for a minute. The big dark door opened and the nightmare began. It wasn't the first time she'd experienced the dream.

It always started with her in bed back at the farmhouse—asleep. Her bed on the farm was on a little half-floor built up over the kitchen—*like an afterthought, like everything she was.* It could only be reached by a solid oak ladder beside the door. The position gave the young Lee a bird's eye view of her home—*her mother's bed, too, yuck*—and it afforded her the illusion of safety. *At least she could see what was coming*—unless it was him and he was playing his games. In the dream, she woke up to the sound of classical music and voices.

She had learned at an early age that hearing sounds down there did not mean she should look; in fact it usually meant the opposite. So she would tune them out, imagining stories, remembering fun things at school and the like. When she got older, she used her headphones and Walkman.

But in the dream, she heard music: something old and classical, something boring! Then the music was joined by giggling—*a silly girl giggle and a boy giggle, or young man giggle.* It made her mad anyway; it was stupid. That was strange for Lee because she usually liked laughing, loved it. She thought about things that made her laugh. Often at

night she would lie in bed snickering to herself about this or that idiot kid at school, or on the bus coming home.

The girl-giggle came from her mom. Sometimes she laughed like that, like a child, almost innocent—*it sounded at first*—until you listened and heard it was really just childish and irresponsible. A threatening sound to come from a full-grown woman, Lee had never liked her mom's laugh. It was never fun, ever. It negated something. The truth? Honesty? Responsibility? Right and wrong perhaps. But Lee learned early on that it meant something bad was going on or was going to happen. And in the dream the boy giggle came from someone else, someone Lee didn't know—*another guest, another friend*. It was not her stepfather's laughter. That man never laughed, he just looked and looked and stared at things until you thought they would explode. He never laughed, and there was only one thing that would make him smile.

But in the dream the giggling continued. That meant something bad always happened—*was going to happen*—bad things always came following in on the heels of any laughter or pleasure at the farmhouse. Lee knew her mother too well to think the giggling was anything good for anybody else but her.

In the past when she heard the laughter, the innocent giggling, Lee would wrap herself tight in her blankets—wish herself away or turn up the volume on her music. But in the dream, in the nightmare she could never resist looking over the lip of her little balcony bedroom. Events always happened the same way in the dream. She knew that looking would just start the worst of it, but she always looked, could never resist. So sliding toward the top of her mattress she peered over with her little dark eyes.

Her mother was naked. She lay sideways across the queen-sized bed. Her head was thrown back over the edge of the mattress. That position arched her back and pushed her breasts toward the ceiling. Her legs were spread as wide as they could go. A young man knelt on the floor in front of her and his face was pressed between her legs—*right there!* Her mother had her fingers twined in the young man's thick hair as she ground his face against her crotch like she was scrubbing clothes on a washboard.

Lee always felt sick watching, but it was more than the grossness of it. She wanted to warn the young man—*young woman too, sometimes the nightmare had a young woman in it who would do it to her mother*—but she wanted to call out, to scream a warning for what was going to happen.

Sometimes she wondered if she could just call out—*do something*—if interfering in the nightmare would end it forever. *Perhaps it might have*. But her life at the farmhouse had taught her the perils of interfering or drawing attention to herself. Time was different in the dream space, it seemed to crowd around her body, running up her spine and over her skin until it drew tight around her lips like drowning water, and always it seemed the very second she was going to scream a warning her stepfather burst onto the scene.

Lee watched the tall man throw the door aside and stalk into the house with a carpet of leaves or snow swirling around his feet. Lee saw the young man turn. With his lips raw and red, pulled back in a grimace of fear, he tried to utter words too late—*I'm sorry! It's not what you think!* But the nightmare had its own shambling gait now, and lurched violently forward to her stepfather's rhythm. He grabbed the young man by the hair and pressed his face against his wife's—*Lee's mother's*—crotch until his nose broke with a sickening crunch. Then her stepfather lifted him over his head—the poor stranger screaming, streaming blood, until his terrified face was almost level with Lee's. She

always remembered that, the wet and blood on the young man's face, the saliva spraying in fear and prayer, and his insanely startled expression as his eyes locked on hers—when he realized a little girl was watching him die.

But the nightmare roared forward, and the young man was thrown to the ground, and her stepfather leapt on him with all his weight and strength—*there were cracking, popping sounds*—until Lee had to look away, bury herself in her blankets to drown out the noise.

Then she'd hear the licking, and she'd hear the ripping sounds like eating, and when Lee looked over again she'd see her stepfather on her mother's naked body, and she'd see their lips stuck together with blood.

Lee would turn away from the horrible tangled scene, and find herself staring into her stepfather's eyes—they were red like his scarlet lips that stained her pillow and left a trail across her little breasts.

If she were lucky she'd find the strength to slam the big dark door and if she wasn't she'd find herself sitting exposed in front of it while that dark presence watched her over bones.

Lee kicked the Beast into action, followed the lumber truck onto the highway in the bleak morning light. She'd drive to Redbridge, see the farm, make arrangements to bury her mother and get the hell out. She didn't even think about her stepfather. She knew his tastes. He would have left a long time ago.

## Chapter 11

Walt Carter studied the young woman he was going to fuck. He sat on a stool with both elbows hooked over an old-fashioned Formica lunch counter that ran along one end of the truck stop restaurant. He'd only been distracted once from his little pussy prey when a big black muscle car suddenly materialized from behind a big rig and roared out of the parking lot. He watched through the window as it disappeared behind a curtain of falling snow before returning to his frank appraisal of the fresh young waitress. She was spraying Ready Whip on a slice of pumpkin pie. A full tray of the wedges sat on the counter.

Her cheap peach-colored uniform slid provocatively over her late teen-year-old body. A perfect ass stretched the material into an enticing half-moon and the breasts had that *god help me* conical shape that only came with the *firmest fucking flesh*. Each of her moves emphasized the outline of the body beneath. *Carter couldn't keep his eyes off her*—and *thank the Lord*, he had already caught her looking back at him in turn. She peeked at him over the Lottery terminal as she ran a customer's tickets through.

She was too young to remember him working at the local television station in the 80's, but that was okay. That allowed him to add a few bells and whistles to the otherwise lackluster story of his career in broadcasting. A few embellishments and ambitious young women batted their eyes at his six foot, muscular frame especially in backwater *nowheres* like his hometown of North Bay. They'd appraise his weathered forty-five year old looks, sprinkle of gray at the temples—and the talk would lead to where he worked now and was TV really exciting. That's when he'd mention the big city of Toronto, bars, nightlife

and then nine out of ten times: after a couple drinks the skirts would rise and the panties would fall.

Carter didn't mind blowing his own horn especially if it resulted in a young woman doing it for him. He rattled his coffee cup against the saucer, a little *clink*, just enough to get her attention. When she glanced up from the pie plates he did the little wrinkled eye, so-serious Sean Connery grin. Carter noticed the buttons up the front of her dress buckled and twisted the material creating a little peep show for him as she moved. One second a smooth expanse of stomach would appear—*is that the top of her panties?* Then a pale crescent along the inside surface of her breast. *Sweet!*

Carter lingered, eyes appraising, face giving off as much lascivious desire as he could—just short of a gawk. She knew he was looking at her, had caught him in the act but he'd learned long ago they liked that. They all wanted to be the center of attention—to be desired—so he let his eyes slide up from his breast to hers. He smiled unabashed, and she smiled back, pink clouds of blush appearing on her cheeks. *Excellent Carter boy...another home run*—he sensed movement to his left—a leg bumped his knee. A male voice coughed—a deep winter cough with a *will I survive to spring* pneumonia-sound to it.

The voice cleared a second. “Hey! You're that...” Another cough, long rattle this time—Carter turned to look at the old guy: gray hair, camouflage cap and vest—earnest filmy eyes. *Perfect timing, pops.* His old hand slapped Carter's cuff where it rested on the counter, then gripped his wrist. *Always the touching. Old guys were the worst for it.*

“The—uh,” the old guy mumbled, tapping the yellow pane of his fake uppers. “The reporter guy, the one that did the hockey news at the North Bay TV station—for the Centennials.”

“And the Agrinews for Mid-Canada morning,” Carter announced, slipping into his routine, pausing a second to be sure his waitress was in earshot. He grabbed the old guy's hand, flashed a custom smile and raked his gaze along the coffee bar—*she's watching, smiling. Excellent.* “Walt Carter,” he continued in his professional baritone, laughed and pumped the soft hand while the old guy clawed his hunting cap off with the other. “Pleased to meet you!”

“Yeah, me too” coughed the old guy, patting Carter's shoulder now—*always touching: hormones of andropause maybe, and loneliness. Shoot me if it ever gets that bad.* “I thought it was you, Walt Carter, the hockey news, the Centennials—yeah, yeah, years ago. Me and the boys always watched at Casey's...”

“I'm working down in Toronto now, anchoring GTATV's Metro-live, a daytime current affairs show.” Carter burst in to steer the conversation back to him. *Good the waitress was listening—can of Ready Whip cupped on her left palm, leaning back against the hollow between her breasts. OH GOD!*

“You don't say...*current affairs?*” The old guy slipped his hat back onto his head. “Toronto... What's the show called?”

“Metro-live. Hey!” Carter whacked the old guy's shoulder to avoid clarifying anything. GTATV was an independent production company in the Greater Toronto Area. He'd been voicing commercials for them since being dumped by CityTV almost a year ago. GTATV also sold shows to the networks. He'd only recently pitched Metro-live to them after it was turned down by all the local stations. In the meantime he still had contacts and worked as a stringer reporter and videographer. Money was tight.

His waitress had wandered over, stood right across the counter from him refreshing his coffee with the stainless steel decanter in her free hand. The color in her cheeks had never left. It was joined by a strange dreamy stare and smirk. *I'm in. She's got Carter!*

"I can't go into it too much. We're working on some sensitive stories." He smiled, touching the back of the waitress's hand; his cup was overflowing. She blushed more deeply, lifted the Ready Whip and left a smear across her chin. "You ever been to Toronto, Miss?"

The waitress stroked her chin, discovered the Ready Whip there and licked it off the second knuckle of her index finger.

"Couple of times," she said. "On trips back in high school, and I saw concerts there too."

"Well, I'm doing some research for a story we're working on. North Bay was my hometown. Look, I've been away a long time and I'm feeling a bit rusty. I could probably use a guide." He smiled, popped his eyebrows like he'd just got a great idea. "Maybe we could hook up, you could show me around, and I could tell you about Toronto."

"That's it!" said the old timer. *Okay thanks Pops I can handle it from here.* But he squeezed Carter's hand and continued, "I wondered right away if you were up here because of the Morelli massacre."

"Morelli massacre?" Carter swung around; his mind followed the name back in time.

"In Redbridge." The old guy took a sip of his coffee. "Whole district's buzzing—a big area's sealed off now. RCMP's here, OPP too and they say there's so many bodies thawing at the hospital that the morgue is full." He coughed and then to Carter's amazement, he ran his fingers over his chest and forehead in the sign of the cross. "Oh, CNN's here too, that's why I thought you were up here."

The truth was, Carter had just spent the last two days in a highway motel drinking hard, weeping and watching pornography. His ex-wife had just won a judgment against him that awarded her a much larger portion of his dwindling paycheck. *Stupid! Why did I fight with her about money? Everything was fine.* He was two months behind on rent at his shitbox Scarborough apartment, his bank account was already down to fumes, and she wanted the rest. Now he was contemplating running out of the big city, finding a steady job through old contacts in the north where he used to be somebody.

*Why did I have to fuck her best friend?* He had spent the last two years one credit card payment away from the poor house. *Why did I have to fuck the station manager's secretary? I should have known he was nailing her too.*

Worst part was, he had never wanted to get into television in the first place. But fate had stepped in and rearranged his life with a bottle of tequila and a broken condom. His then girlfriend future wife and current bitch from hell had got pregnant and refused to abort it. The self-righteous—*I make my own choices*—bitch—what about my choices? She totally derailed his plans of being a novelist. *DAMN!* He fooled himself that he could still write and hold down a day job, but the second baby kicked the shit out of that idea. *GOD DAMN!* Then he went for her girlfriend. *Perfect.*

"I do work for a current affairs show." Carter laughed to cover his journalistic ignorance. "I'll be honest, I'm here because of the Morellis. I play dumb to tease information out of people." He reached into his jacket, pulled out his cell phone and notepad. The waitress smiled—*just icing on the cake sweetpants.* "Best way to the truth."

He jotted the name "Morelli" on the pad.

“There was a daughter,” he turned to the old guy, jotted another name beside the first. “Lee?” he said and the old guy nodded.

Carter remembered Lee—she worked at a hamburger joint by the Ferris roller rink twenty years or more ago, wore an ugly orange and white polyester uniform. Black hair, and wouldn’t take her stepfather’s last name. She went by something, a Scottish name—Stewart? Really Italian looking, pretty enough for risks and was crazy about his car. He took her out a couple of times. She was jailbait but one night after a pit party they fucked on the hood of his Mustang. He remembered she just stared into his eyes—hers were little dark brown blurs in the starlight—glistening like she was going to cry. She wouldn’t stop staring. It had freaked him out.

“You have a phonebook, Sweetie?” He smiled at the waitress. She smiled back.

## Chapter 12

Harry Sloan was singing to himself as his tires tore up the hard pack. The afternoon sky was dark and sending down a pretty constant fog of fat snowflakes. Driving was possible as long as the wind didn’t come up. Sloan didn’t care. He was singing the *Happy Birthday* song, but in place of the usual words he was adding every curse he could think of: “Mother...fucker, up you, you fucker *fuck you*...you shit head motherfucker...you fucker fuck you!” He did it in rounds while pounding a beat on the steering wheel. It was something he’d done since he was a kid. Anytime he got angry enough to start swinging at someone, he tried to get it out of his system by singing it in curses. Any tune would do, usually the first thing to enter his mind. He’d already hummed several verses on the way out to the Morelli place, and was starting up another chorus for the drive home.

Times like this he tried to remember what old Paul Wray would do, and then try not to do it. Wray was a veteran North Bay Policeman who had taken Sloan under his wing when he was just a rookie. Wray was old school, more paratrooper than peace officer like cops had to be in those days. He was a broad shouldered man from Elliot Lake who joined the force in the fifties right out of high school. Wray looked like a wrestler and was proud of the map of scars he’d picked up in the line of duty.

“A broken bottle,” he’d say, pointing to a jagged silver line that ran up from his eyebrows into his hairline. “The Dokis brothers at the Portage Hotel in ’67. I told them to go home, and they didn’t want to. I broke Andrew’s arm when he asked me what I was going to do about it.”

Northern cities were wilder in those days and the rules simpler. As Wray said, “Sloansky, watch your back. Wrestling a gang of drunks in the middle of the night is a thankless business. In daylight the hoity toity fuckers who pay your wages will look down their noses at you, but they know we’re the guys who make them feel safe enough to do that. They don’t care how hard we have to push against the bad guys. So *push!*”

Sloan had pushed in the early days. Everyone on the force did until the legal eagles started telling the criminals that they had more rights than the police who were paid to keep them in line. He ended up receiving his first official reprimand and Wray was forced to choose between early retirement or charges after the pair of them were *pushing* a few Indians and shit-disturbers out of the Blackjack Saloon. The Indians from Jocko Point put

up a fuss, and asked for Wray's name because he'd used some racist language on them. "Here's my name." Wray stepped in close and coldcocked him with a solid right.

Everybody started swinging, and Sloan stepped into it too. He got a month disciplinary leave and Wray was forced into retirement when it turned out that one of the boys he'd been kicking lost the vision in his left eye. None of it was new to Wray's colorful record either.

"Don't sweat it, Sloansky," Wray had said on one occasion after, when they got out for beer and darts at the Legion Hall. "I feel bad for *you*," he'd snarled into his mug. "The bad guys won." Wray died of a heart attack eighteen months after his forced retirement.

Going out to the Morelli place after being suspended was just the sort of thing Wray would have done. *Stupid, probably*—Sloan had been bored and kind of angry with himself. *Now I'm not angry at all. Shit!* But he couldn't help it after spending all day Monday moping around his house watching the news for updates. The reports were vague because the RCMP media relations officers were on scene using the escape clause: "*unable to comment during a ongoing investigation.*"

Sloan wanted to know more. Especially if Morelli was the chief suspect and he was still at large.

When Sloan drove up to Rookie and Henrich on the road in front of the farmhouse they filled him in. Twenty-three bodies in the barn—that looked like the total. It was slow going with the backhoe—the earth was frozen, but they had tagged at least five burial sites at the tree line. Rookie said the RCMP was sending for a Ground Penetrating Radar system to get pictures below the surface. The machinery was still in trials for forensic use, but with the frozen ground they had to find some way to speed up the operation.

Henrich said that overnight Sunday, investigators started taking the basement apart. Once the floorboards were pulled up, they found a partially filled hole, maybe seven feet long by five deep—like something had been buried and dug up. The investigators did some test excavations around the hole and found more graves. The early estimate was ten in total. More investigators, OPP and RCMP, were being brought in from Ottawa and Toronto—the farm was starting to look like an archaeological dig.

Rookie looked sick when he said: "Harry, some of the victims are kids!"

*Kids* didn't make any sense to Sloan. A flag goes up for a missing kid every time. Teens and adults were one thing—they go missing. *But kids? Unless they went missing prior to Amber Alerts.*

Before Sloan could press for more, he looked up and saw Turban-fucking-Singh pointing at him from up at the farmhouse. Henrich leaned over and whispered that Sloan better go.

"It used to be a free country," he responded—steady enough to have a discussion with the foreigner—but he decided to leave when Henrich gave him a mournful look: *don't drag us into it.*

So Sloan had smiled at Singh, nodded and then couldn't help himself. He produced the middle finger of his left hand and touched it to his forehead in mock salute. Then he caught the rolling eyes of his peers and he snarled. *Fucking stupid move!* Sloan wrenched the steering wheel. He tromped on the gas and his tires spun on the ice. He had to struggle or crash into all the media vans parked on both sides of the road. That would have been perfect. *Easy Sloansky!* He told himself as he wrestled the truck under control and drove away.

“Easy Sloansky!” he said now as he took a corner, slid in the snow—got his fishtail straightened out. He was driving one concession up from the Morelli farm following the road toward *Wisemen’s Hill*. Everyone knew about *Wisemen’s* locally. The road followed a hill past a trio of old dead maples at the top. There was a section of road where you could park and watch the whole area: Morelli’s to the east, the first regular shapes of the Redbridge trailer park to the west, and to the south the Morellis’ closest neighbor, Mrs. Leland. Wisemen’s Hill only showed bush, rocks and swamp to the north—right now it was just more of the contorted landscape under snowfields. It would give him a good view of the Morelli place.

“Unless Turban-fucking-Singh has stationed the Iranian National Guard up here!” He wondered why he put up with this shit anyway.

Sloan growled, “Retire and go fishing! Buy a boat.” He’d talked with his son about getting off the force. Sam worried about him. *All those cop shows. All that shooting.* The pair of them had dreamed of Sloan taking early retirement and running tours into the northern lakes. *Rich Americans. Rich fucking Japanese with their cameras!* He knew most of the best fishing lakes and knew people who could tell him the rest. Then it was all just gravy.

“Fuck!” Sloan muttered, “Need money for that.” A pressure like sadness caught in his throat.

The snowbanks atop the hill were low and cut razor sharp by the wind that blew year round. Old timers blamed the wind for killing the three maples. Sloan had never believed it: stupid to think of wind killing a tree without knocking it over. The landscape all around was alien: banks and drifts piled up in weird shapes where chunks of granite and old fence lines protruded from the ground.

Ahead he saw the trees, but they weren’t alone. Tucked in close to the bank he saw the wide heavy ass end of a black car—a Grand Am? Four plumes of blue-gray drifted from its dual twin tailpipes. Some instinct gripped him then, made him pull tight to the bank and stop maybe twenty yards back. *Who the hell?* There was movement inside the car. Long copper-blond hair—lots of curls, and he caught the distinctive gleam of the light reflecting off sunglasses.

Sloan reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a small pair of Bushnells. He got the binoculars as a birthday gift from Sam after they’d talked about hunting. Sloan hadn’t hunted in years, but the gift came in handy. He lifted the binoculars and steadied them atop the steering wheel.

*A Grand Am with Florida plates:* the driver was alone, a woman in sunglasses with blonde-brown-chocolate colored hair and deep tan. He watched her place a cigarette in her mouth with long-fingers. It took Sloan a second longer to recognize her.

It was the Morelli girl! Stewart—not Morelli—she went by her mother’s maiden name, even back in high school. *Lee Stewart is here?*

What was she up to? *Watching her parents’ place, Einstein.* Christ, she hadn’t wasted any time—must have headed out the minute she got word about her mother’s death. Of course, one look at her car told him she’d be able to get anywhere she wanted to go and fast.

And here she was watching the circus. He’d told the shift Friday night where they could start looking for her. She went west twenty years ago, and then ended up in Florida.

He knew about Florida from something he'd found in the Morelli house: something that bothered him then, and had preyed on his mind ever since.

Right after they'd found the bodies in the barn, Sloan knew that if Morelli wasn't dead, he had to be responsible. He told Rookie, Barnes and Henrich to search every inch of the barn—haymow, all of it. Sloan returned to the house to check the basement again. He'd already been down there while the coroner and forensics dealt with Mrs. Morelli. There was a two-by-two trapdoor under the love seat.

Sloan climbed down the ladder to the sparse open square of fieldstone...about six feet to the bottom of the main floor joists: maybe thirty feet on a side. It was cold down there. The floor was covered with rough loose planks cut in lengths. When he was first down, he noticed the floor knocked hollowly underfoot so he had lifted a couple of the boards, found a big hole like something had been buried there.

Directly across from the ladder was a rough set of stairs leading at an angle to the locked cellar doors. There was snow on the stairs mixed with clods of black earth.

But there was something else he remembered. Something he'd only glanced at on his first trip. Sloan hurried over to the wet cardboard boxes jammed in the corner to the left of the stairs. Beside them was an old wicker-back rocking chair. An empty packing crate was set in front of it like a table. A hurricane lamp sat on the crate. The boxes contained newspapers—the *North Bay Nickel*. He'd quickly looked through them on the first trip. *They were all the same issue. Two years ago. September.*

Sloan set one of the newspapers on the crate, turned his flashlight on it and read.

On page three a headline: *Local Woman Makes Splash in Florida*. The story explained that the *Nickel* reporter had stumbled upon the woman, formerly of Redbridge, while on a trip to Disneyland. She and the woman had been school chums in the early eighties. Sloan had recognized Lee Stewart from the picture, as pretty as he remembered.

And she was back.

He lifted his binoculars, watched her through the blowing snow. Her lips were moving. She was talking to herself and it looked like she was really pissed.

The article said Lee was a businesswoman and single mother of three girls. A *beautician*, she ran her own salon in Crystal River, a small retirement community in Florida. The article said Lee loved being Canadian but hated the cold.

*It was more than the cold.*

He set the binoculars in his lap. Too many people had died in his jurisdiction. *He couldn't let it go. No fucking way.* Fate led him to the mother, and now the daughter. He wasn't superstitious, but it had to mean something.

He continued to watch Lee Stewart through his binoculars. He had to tell her that her father was missing. If he was alive, there was little doubt that he was involved in the murders which meant he was dangerous. That was bad all the way around. But the newspapers in the basement had twisted Sloan's guts into a knot. Seems Morelli missed his daughter.

## Chapter 13

“BITCH!” Lee pounded the steering wheel and threw the Beast into drive. She turned her head to the farmhouse in the distance, *her* house—she had paid for it! “Bitch!”

When she first drove up Wisemen's Hill, she had felt an unexpected sense of excitement and nostalgia. It *had* been a favorite location for her before she left, ran away, *escaped*—especially in the last years—her *teenage years*. She made her dates stop up there. *Easy as taking off your pants*. They'd always think she had a hard on for them. Sometimes she did, more often though she just liked to sit up there on the hood of the car, listen to the crickets and the wind pouring over the grassy hill, making the Wisemen groan—or kicking back after a good fuck—*was there such a thing for a woman under twenty?* She'd watch the stars overhead and fantasize about somewhere else.

It was a good way to delay her return home after a shift at the Dairy Queen or after a date. She got better at avoiding her stepfather as she got older. Even her mother started leaving her alone—especially when Lee balled up her fists and told her to *bring it on*. That was why Lee left in the end. The abuse was one thing, but they always seemed *sane* enough to know they were doing something wrong. But near the end they acted like she had always been a part of the freak show—a *willing* part, anyway. Lee feared they were losing the ability to recognize the lines they shouldn't cross.

Back then Wisemen's Hill was a comfort zone. It calmed her down, allowed her to think about the horizon, the world, and suggested the shadows might hold promise and everything in the world wasn't really shit—anything was better than the farmhouse.

But the hill wasn't working today. The nostalgic aura was dispelled the moment she looked across the snowy expanse toward the farmhouse. She had grown suspicious on the way out, passing a lot of cars on the highway, and running into traffic on the back roads to the farm. Lee had tried to pass it off as progress, but Redbridge wasn't any bigger.

It was still just the General Store and gas station beside the highway. It looked like the same strange motor home with a peaked roof sitting as it always had at the far corner of a dirty square of slush and gravel from which a pair of fuel pumps protruded. The sign over the door was the same, faded and chipped—somehow looking slightly older than the massive willow tree that grew up behind the store. She knew old Maurice Dennier would be there working—or one of his perverted sons. Nothing much had changed.

The trailer park was still there—built just down the road, maybe a couple new trailers. There certainly weren't any new businesses or houses on the way in. Still, she'd been away a long time. It was when she passed a news van from Sault Ste. Marie that a chill ran over her. An instinctive surge in her stomach brought up her old defenses, so she decided to drive up Wisemen's Hill first, to get the lay of the land and at the top of the hill she'd felt the ugly jaws of fate on her again—*her curse*.

*“YOU FUCKING BITCH!”* A long multicolored line of vans made a wall across the front of the property. Other cars, trucks and vans were parked in sporadic groups on the road that ran beside the farm—people were out there gawking—she could almost smell the coffee. Flashing lights flickered on a couple of OPP cruisers across the driveway, other cars and vans with lights and insignia were parked in front of the house. There were a couple of black vans by the barn and a big canvas shelter beside a tractor-trailer. She could just make out light blue tarps piled around it. There was another large tent behind the house. Lots of people were standing around—*COPS people!* Lots: the police, the media and sightseers. *Nothing ever simple with that BITCH! WHAT DID YOU DO?* She slapped around on the seat beside her—seconds away from frenzy, then grabbed her cigarettes and lit one. All around the Beast the snow blew—it was getting worse.

She couldn't take her eyes off the farm—fixated on the unexpected circus that had grown up around it. Lee fidgeted. *Could be either of them.* Her stepfather had certain tastes that would draw that kind of attention sooner or later—and her mother. In Lee's eyes she was just a step away from being the Devil herself. She was capable of anything.

Another wave of rage swept over Lee and she pounded the steering wheel again. Somewhere deep inside a debate had been won by her pessimism: the voice that all these years had whispered against her hope that at least she'd be able to cash in when her mother died. *When the devil bitch died.* Then all her years of sacrifice, of pain and humiliation, would be compensated—at least a little. Even just a bit.

“AND YOU STOLE THAT TOO!” She just knew that her mother had found a way—left some final insult. “FUCK!” Lee howled to the interior of the car. She smelled something burning, realized she'd dropped her cigarette on the mat. Lee picked it up, stabbed it out in the ashtray.

A sudden defensive impulse passed through her—something feral and guilty that turned her ears red, pressed on her chest and made her breathless. It was irrelevant who was to blame for what she saw around the farmhouse. Whether it was her stepfather or her mother—it didn't matter. The fact that something had happened there, at the farm—it would involve Lee somehow. At least, it would bring everything up again and expose her girls to what was hidden behind the big dark door. *Shit.* True, she'd been away for twenty years, could hardly be held accountable for anything—there had been problems at the place and she had seen enough, experienced enough to make her an accomplice in her own eyes—if something terrible happened. *Oh god...* But she was a victim back then. She'd have to assume that role to stay out of trouble—but she hated to see herself that way. Couldn't think of parading that violation in front of her daughters.

She turned on the radio, started scanning the dial for news. The stations buzzed and popped as she moved quickly past. Lee swore abruptly and cursed herself for driving in a news blackout.

“How was I to know?” She hissed at her self. *You should have known. This is your mother. She heard herself thinking. Everything about her is bad. Of course her end would be bad too. Ugly. Probably the ugliest thing ever.* And there was her stepfather. *That monster.*

The Beast growled angrily, started forward in the snow. Lee needed a TV. She had to watch the news, find out what the fuck was going on before she walked into it. There was already a growing sense of guilt in her—she'd been a victim for the first part of her life, and she still felt responsible for it. Check that. Only felt responsible about it *now.* Now that her parents had done something, whatever it was to cause that circus.

She didn't bother to check her blind spots. The rear window was covered in snow. Lee headed for North Bay. She'd find a motel, get a room and scan the news. *You did it too me again.* A wave of rage electrified her. She stamped on the gas. It was everything she could do to keep the Beast's speed inside a safe zone on the snowy road. Rob me of that too. *YOU FUCKING BITCH!* She slapped and punched at the dashboard. Tears wanted to come, but they burned up in her rage. That house is mine! *I paid for it with my childhood, you bitch!*

She didn't see the truck pull out and follow her along the road.

## Chapter 14

The little man struggled onto the examination table without uttering a word or giving an inch to his deformities. His concentration was perfect, the complete opposite of the lopsided body he was performing the operation with. The right leg was longer than the other and it had a distinctive turn to it. The shorter also bent inward. Many of the muscles on that thigh had atrophied while others were overdeveloped from pedaling his tricycle, turning the leg into an awkward wooden pendulum at times. The arms themselves were untouched by deformity, but were irregularly placed on shoulders set out of true by a twisted spine, a side effect of his misshapen gait. His facial expressions were spastic and gave his eyes a mismatched appearance. Drool poured liberally down his chin and shirt dependent upon the inclination of his head. The lips moved without symmetry over large buckteeth mouthing ideas he could never speak.

Dr. Dorval wasn't sure why he still kept the examination table in his den, and he decided as he watched Fergus climb onto it that it was his own damn fault no one left him alone in his retirement. Once a fair-sized town, Bent Steeple had dwindled to a village with a population numbering in the hundreds. In the first years following his *official* retirement, he had indulged a few former patients who were having difficulty with his replacement: Dr. Helen Langlois. She was in her late thirties, and some of the locals struggled with the sociological advances she represented.

Helen was an excellent doctor who had completed her internship in some of the busiest Emergency Wards in Toronto. She claimed that was why she accepted the position in the isolation of northern Ontario close to the Quebec border.

"Burn out," she'd said. "I wouldn't be a good doctor for long down there. Too many faces to connect with."

Dorval had been impressed by her scholastic and work experience, so he was pleased to hand his practice over to her. She was black—from Trinidadian parents, though she had immigrated to Canada as a child. Bent Steeple's population was a mixture of English, French or Native ancestry, and the tensions usually ran along those lines. Dr. Langlois' husband was white, which also had many in the village choking blue in the face. Dorval didn't think anybody was really prejudiced about her skin color so much, they just weren't used to it. She would have had a tougher time if she were a native. The locals knew how to dislike *them* and were out of their element with Trinidadians. Most of his former patients complained because she was a woman.

But Langlois had an excellent bedside manner and quickly won over the majority of his old patients. His assurances when married to the difficulties of getting a doctor to move so far north soon settled most of their discomforts. As it was Langlois worked six days a week but claimed the northern environment and simple nature of life kept her sane. Former patients still visited Dorval from time to time—but he never treated them. He acted as a psychiatric buffer zone for Langlois—a consultant, really. He would dispel worries where he could, and encourage people's faith in his replacement. Down deep though, he had a hard time taking his hand completely out of it. *You enjoyed it then, and you enjoy it now!* The long days of retirement, as wonderful as it was to read and relax at his leisure, could result in tedium. He'd had too many years answering the phone in the middle of the night.

*And you still owe them,* his mind echoed.

Fergus was having a difficult time with the slippery sanitary bib that covered the surface of the examination table, but Dorval had learned long ago that his former patient was incapable of accepting help. If he were to offer a hand, or worse physically assist, Fergus would just look at him with a mixture of shock and embarrassment.

His mother waited in the living room on the other side of a pair of sliding doors—*it's a waiting room, admit it*. Dorval was going to give Fergus a preliminary examination. This historically would amount to a discussion, since despite his challenges; the little man was usually as healthy as a horse. And Dorval preferred talking to Fergus alone first.

Though handicapped since the age of five by a profound form of aphasia, Fergus communicated volumes with body language, expression, sound and tone. But it required calm and focus to understand the signals. Fergus' mother was unable to let her son talk without speaking for him, and though she was the best at translating Fergus' strange language on the whole, she made her interpretations based on the limited range of topics that *they* discussed. Dorval's belief had always been that his first 'read' be one-on-one so that he could have his own range of experience to refer to before the mother 'shaped' Fergus' meaning. Nine times out of ten, Jean Carmichael was right but Dorval hated to think of Fergus' frustration when his mother spoke for him, let alone if she was wrong. Dorval felt he owed it to the 37-year-old to treat him like an adult.

Finally, Fergus pulled himself onto the examination table. He struggled to flatten out a great wad of sanitary paper that had balled up under him. Smiling meekly, he swung his legs until he jerked himself over onto his back and then cautiously rolled into a sitting position. Fergus smiled at Dorval and shrugged when he saw the crinkled mess he'd made of the paper covering. Finally, Fergus drew the back of his hand across his forehead and blew out a great wet sigh.

"Fergus!" he said his one word, then positioned his hands and arms and hunched forward in an attempt to obscure his deformities.

Dorval nodded smiling. Fergus always took a moment or two to relax. "Yes. Yes. A difficult climb. Indeed, my friend." He laughed and stepped forward with his hands out.

Fergus' eyes glinted with tears at the word 'friend' and he quickly wrapped his hands around Dorval's, petting them and nodding.

"Fergus," he rasped, voice full of emotion. "Fergus."

"Yes," Dorval replied, blushing at the younger man's sincerity. He clasped Fergus' hands warmly. "It has been a such a long time. I am so pleased to see you, Fergus." Then a wave of guilt rolled over him. *How long has it been?* "I've been meaning to come see you." He cleared his throat. "But, I've been busy."

Fergus dropped Dorval's hands and then put his own together palm to palm, before tucking them under his chin and feigning sleep. He snored loudly, letting out a long shrill whistle between intakes of breath.

"*You!* I was not sleeping." Dorval gripped the younger man's sinewy shoulder and squeezed it. "I'm retired!"

They shared an unusual laugh. Fergus nodded, cackling gutturally, until a long string of spittle descended from his chin. Dorval pulled off his glasses to wipe his eyes.

"Oh Fergus." He coughed. "I was a fool not to visit."

Fergus nodded vigorously and Dorval laughed again.

"Now, enough of that!" he said, replacing his glasses and looking the man over. "What's all this about?" Fergus was wearing a heavy felt coat over a flannel shirt. God!

*She's still making his clothes for him!* His pants were made of felt also, and short, stopping mid-calf. *Good god, knickerbockers?* The design gave him plenty of clearance for tying his laces. His mother still insisted on buying him big black boots with the sole on the left a good two-inches thicker than the other. Lots of laces too, looked like they'd come out of a museum. Dorval told her about advances, Velcro, for instance but she would have none of it.

"Fergus needs to tie his own shoes." The discussion frustrated Dorval. Orthopedic advances were more up-to-date than Fergus' footwear admitted, and the poor fellow already stood out like a sore thumb.

Dorval looked Fergus' body over. His muscles had suffered atrophy during a critical period of growth. The right leg was twisted and poorly muscled, and the left over an inch shorter. There were a host of skeletal disfigurements as a result: his shoulders were hunched; there was a curvature to his spine—scoliosis that never developed enough to require a brace. It caused him difficulty when getting around, and his balance was terrible. It had never been determined whether that was because of the physical impairment or the mental abnormalities he suffered as a result of the—of that time of the blizzard and the strange sickness.

The past started to well up around Dorval's ears, until his heartbeat lurched into a faster, unsteady rhythm. His throat tightened.

"Oh god," he groaned, setting a palm on the examination table. *It never gets any easier.*

"Fergus?" his patient asked softly, sliding a hand along Dorval's arm. "Fergus." He tried to reassure the doctor. "*Fergus.*"

"I'm sorry." Dorval felt his breathing return to normal. "I'm getting old. And I was..." But one look at the younger man's earnest eyes suggested his patient understood. "It was so long ago." *You're here to talk about that. You're here for the past.*

Fergus just nodded in agreement, then squeezed Dorval's arm.

Dorval knew that much of his own problem with the Blizzard of '77 was the lie he had told himself to live past it—before therapy straightened him out. He shook his head and smiled at Fergus' face. Fergus couldn't lie. He certainly wasn't living one.

A mystery illness slightly preceded the Blizzard of 1977. The storm had paralyzed northern states and much of Ontario. As it left the south, it set a stranglehold on northern communities—dumped tons of snow, and blew drifts fifteen feet high. Bent Steeple was one of the villages buried by the storm. By the time the weather turned its worst they were already in trouble. The first case of the mystery flu was reported on January 24, 1977. The snow was just starting up then—it had been a winter like that: snow, cold, nothing new, all old-fashioned.

But Florence McGregor brought her daughter, Nancy, into the new Medical Clinic—the village was too small for a hospital—complaining of fatigue, a cough, nausea, shortness of breath and headaches. Dorval diagnosed it as the flu, prescribed bedrest and fluids. It had been a winter like that too: colds, flu and fevers. He'd spent most of his time at the clinic or making house calls.

But over the next five days he was inundated with young patients experiencing similar symptoms that he diagnosed as flu. It was not uncommon for such small outbreaks to occur at that time of year. When Nancy McGregor died at 2 p.m. January 29, Dorval knew he had a dangerous illness on his hands. He had by that time diagnosed 15

cases among the local children. Some of the mothers that came in also showed symptoms but these dissipated rapidly. By and large, the kids got sicker. He made attempts to contact the provincial health authorities, but relief was hampered by the blizzard that had paralyzed southern Ontario for the preceding days. Assurances were made that help would be sent. The blizzard creeping northeast soon captured Bent Steeple and area.

They were completely cut off when high winds knocked the phone and power lines down. Dorval had isolated the worst patients, turning the community center into a makeshift hospital. A local HAM operator, Hugh Desjardin, contacted authorities with his radio and he was told that help was on the way. *Dorval didn't have time to think then, there were so many sick children.*

Two and a half weeks later he had catalogued thirty-one cases in total. But Dorval and Bent Steeple had been changed forever. Twenty died. *Twenty!* Seven kids that had mild cases survived. Four very sick kids found themselves in desperate struggles for survival. Fergus was one of those and the sickest. He was five years old when his mother brought him in complaining of bad dreams, nightmares, and of flu symptoms. He was considered normal then, the mystery illness had not yet caused the Hypoxic Ischemic Brain Injury, nor the long-term mental deficits and physical deformities. *The illness manifested with fever blisters and flu-like symptoms that led to an aggressive form of anemia.* The anemia reduced blood pressure that reduced blood flow to the brain. Fergus ended up in a coma for two months. When he came out of it, Dorval was appalled by the damage that was done.

When he regained consciousness, Fergus could only say one word, his name. As his physical health stabilized, it was determined that he was afflicted with a form of non-specific aphasia. Dorval believed the profound long-term impairment was due to his age when the brain damage occurred. Since Fergus was five at the time, his language skills were incomplete. His therapists later suggested that because of this, he did not make up nonsensical or compressed sentences typical of aphasics. He made unintelligible noises, and said his name. He seemed to understand most of what was spoken to him, though he was forced by the aphasia to communicate his ideas and responses with pantomime and body language. His injuries impaired his concept of time and he lost the ability to understand the nuances of human behavior. They discovered that Fergus was unable to retrieve the limited reading and language skills he acquired prior to the injury and proved incapable of learning to read or write. It was soon apparent that Fergus used his name in more than simple reference to himself—he used it for everything. *And he drew—he drew things.* He liked to color.

Despite the many impairments brought about by the aphasia, he showed none of the more severe behavioral problems often associated with that type of injury: psychosis, depression, restlessness, combativeness and hostility. Because the damage was in the left frontal lobe, and because Fergus' occurred at such an early age, he was also afflicted with some right-side paralysis and palsy-like symptoms that distorted the normal development of his limbs. Long-term muscle movement disorders resulted that preceded affective modern physical therapies. Fergus was lucky to survive the illness but he had his scars.

“So Fergus,” Dorval said, pulled up a stool and watched his patient. “Your mother tells me you're not feeling yourself.”

Fergus' face screwed up in puzzlement, then his big teeth burst out in a lively wet grin. He shook his head, then after pointing to himself, he repeated his pantomime of

sleeping. Fergus' mock snore echoed around the room. Then, his eyes opened wide with terror and he clutched his hands to his chest. His body shook as he looked around Dorval's den.

"Dreams," Dorval said, nodding. He picked up a small notepad and scribbled in it to test his pen. "You're having bad dreams, my friend."

Fergus wrinkled up his face, scrutinizing the doctor. Then he nodded somewhat suspiciously before doing the pantomime again, this time with spittle spraying from his mouth as he silently screamed.

"I stand corrected. *Nightmares!*" Dorval repeated. "It is normal to have nightmares."

Fergus shook his head aggressively. His features twisted up with frustration. He repeated the pantomime. This time, when he pretended to wake up, he froze with his hands clasped at his neck. His dark eyes stared right into Dorval's.

Just as Dorval was about to speak, Fergus unclasped his hands from his neck and slid them up behind his cheekbones, behind his ears until they stood up over his head—fingers clasped tight together and pointed upward like large animal ears. Fergus' face crunched up in a snarl—a growl burst from him.

"Oh!" Dorval shifted away with a start. He shook his head, composing himself. *No, no—I'm too old...* "So you saw, *something* in your nightmare." He played dumb.

Fergus frowned knowingly and then nodded rapidly, his whole body shaking—his hands still pantomimed the large pointed ears. Dorval saw the shadow on the wall behind his patient, it looked just like a...

"Fergus!" Fergus barked. When he saw that Dorval understood his meaning, his air of performance left him. Fear started to close in around the little man, his hands slid down his face and wrapped around his chest in a hug. He shivered.

Dorval kept nodding. *Poor devil! His whole life's been about that winter.* "I can't..." the doctor started—voice failing. "You're having..." he said and paused. "You're dreaming about the wolf again."

Fergus' arms wrapped more tightly around his chest and his head bounced idiotically in agreement. He curled his legs up, would have assumed the fetal position if his handicaps would allow it.

Dorval dragged in a worried breath. He whispered, "the wolf." His heart charged breathlessly into the past.

"Fergus!" his patient stammered in agreement.

## Chapter 15

The motel room had filled with smoke. A heavy gray pall hung over everything and glowed magically in the light from the TV. The volume was way up—the newscasters were shouting. Lee's dark brown eyes were glazed by knowledge—her spirit overwhelmed with information. She was on the bed, wrapped in a towel, paralyzed by what she was seeing.

She had used her cell phone in a coffee shop parking lot. The damned thing lost connection three times while she was making calls. Apparently the storm was kicking ass down south. She found after a bit of trolling for accommodation that North Bay was hosting a provincial hockey tournament. On top of that, any rooms not taken by hockey

moms had been snatched up by news media. Everything was booked solid. In the end, Lee had to drive a half-hour north of the city to get a room at the Bo-mark Motel. There was a three-dimensional model of an old missile over the sign. A memory of Canada's participation in the Cold War, the contraption looked like something out of a B-movie. North Bay also had an underground airbase cut into the granite of Sage Mountain—that was something out of the same kind of movie: spooky as shit, every school kid toured it.

The motel room cost Lee ninety dollars a night, which judging from the low water pressure, dirty green carpet and yellowed bedding was about fifty dollars too much.

She'd bought herself a coffee and a tuna sandwich at a Tim Horton's drive-through. The coffee was good, extra large: touch of sugar, lots of milk. The sandwich was dry but did the trick. After checking in, Lee stood under a hot shower for almost an hour—the cold had sunk into her bones, and the sight of the old farmhouse left her feeling dirty. Something about what was happening—whatever it was—what she suspected, deposited the filth on her again. Along with it came the guilty self-disgust that she used to wear before she ran away. Her body felt fresh but raw when she finally climbed out. There were welts where her nails had scratched at her small breasts, her shoulders and her hips. Lee dug her housecoat out of a bag—cursing herself for her mood. *Forward is the only direction!* She'd used that as a mantra over the years. It had helped her long healing process. *You don't have time to waste. Nobody does!*

But Lee knew she would have a hard time avoiding the darkness this close to home. Halfway through the shower she made a vow to leave. *Find out what's going on. Bury the Devil. Get back home to the girls and the salon.* Her customers always cheered her up—they kept her happy, kept her moving forward. Their lives always put a smile on her face—good or bad, it was either funny or one of those stories: *thank god that isn't my life.* She chuckled then, remembering one fellow, a groom, whose friends had shaved half of his head at his bachelor party. He'd come in hoping she could do something before the wedding. Lee had laughed and suggested *the mother of all comb-overs!*

She set her cigarette down, grabbed what remained of her sandwich and coffee, and fought the urge to scream.

"If I didn't have bad luck, I wouldn't have any!" A wave of phantom tears passed. *Careful—self-pity kills.* She shifted her attention back to the TV. It was the top of the hour and the local station was running over the top stories again

"The RCMP issued a warrant for the arrest of long time Redbridge resident Viggo Morelli. Morelli is wanted in connection with human remains found at his Redbridge farm. Detective Jordan Corbeil of the North Bay Police Services working in conjunction with RCMP media officers would not confirm the number of victims but said the circumstances surrounding the discovery would be made public when the investigation permitted."

*OH SHIT. OH SHIT. OH SHIT.* Lee crushed out her cigarette, lit another and sipped the cold coffee. The television now flicked to an aerial shot of the farm: the old house, the windmill and the barn. Then the images shifted. Camera shots from the ground with different angles and zooms. A tight shot—poorly focused—of people in white coveralls wearing filter-masks carrying dark blue bags—*body bags*—out of the barn. There was a shot of bags being carried out of the cellar—*the house*—and put into a van. *Oh shit!*

The announcer continued as a pencil drawing of a face appeared on the screen beside him: “RCMP were unable to obtain a photograph of Morelli but are circulating this artist’s rendering.”

Lee looked at the image and a sick feeling rose in her. It was only a shadow of his dark presence, but enough: black close-set eyes, lanky brown hair, high heavy cheekbones, and narrow chin. Didn’t look older though. He should have gray hair by now. *Looks like Tom Cruise on heroin.* She chuckled.

“Viggo Morelli is just over six feet tall, 190 pounds with narrow build. He has an accent: French or Russian. Morelli drives a distinctive black 1966 Ford F100 Styleside Long Box.” They flashed a picture of a similar truck. A chill ran through Lee when she saw it. Bad things had happened in that truck—really bad things that made her want to climb back into the shower. The announcer continued, “Anyone with information related to the case should telephone the RCMP at this number.” A phone number and web address appeared across the bottom of the screen.

The camera suddenly cut to a man in a black suit. He was in his early thirties, had a medium build, pencil-thin eyebrows and over-conditioned hair with highlights. His head and shoulders sprouted up from a forest of microphones. A name was superimposed under him as he spoke.

Detective Jordan Corbeil said: “It is too early in the investigation to go into details. Yes, bodies have been found. Yes, Mrs. Morelli is among the dead. No, we are not prepared to give further details. Concerned individuals should telephone the North Bay Police Services or local OPP detachment in North Bay.”

*OH SHIT. OH SHIT. OH SHIT!*

Lee’s mouth dropped open. *Bodies? What the hell? When?* She remembered the dreams about her stepfather—bad dreams. Dreams with blood in them, and pain—violence. They were the only things that were worse than what he actually did. What her mother let him do. But they were nightmares. She remembered times, that her parents did strange things together, and on the odd occasion with company; but she learned to tune it out when she was young, block it out with headphones and music as she got older. But murder! She gave her head a shake. *Too early to know.* I don’t want to know. SHIT! What have they done?

*What am I waiting for?* Lee jumped off the bed, ran over to her suitcase and pulled on her underwear. If she moved fast, she could get to the border by the end of the day. *Fuck this shit!* Her mother had exacted final revenge. Lee would never see a nickel from the sale of the farm or property. *Bury yourself or rot, you bitch!* And if her stepfather was on the loose; if he was the one who did it!

She slipped into her bra, pulled on her pants—cigarette clamped between her teeth. She had to go. Get into the Beast and burn for the south. Don’t ever look back! They hadn’t mentioned her in the newscast, so it was unlikely that anyone was looking for her yet. Well, some would. The cops in Florida would figure it out. Still, that was a whole other country. It was here in the north where she felt most vulnerable—where people knew her. She could just bet what they were saying too. *The girl was no good either. A real loose one—loved her cars and her cocks! She ran off for some reason, didn’t she—probably pregnant.*

“Easy girl!” Lee scolded herself, setting her smoke down to pull on her sweatshirt, then socks before picking it back up. “With friends like me, who needs enemies?”

There was a knock at the door! She froze. It was set in the wall beside a big window. The curtains were drawn—there was a narrow band of the afternoon’s fading light. Another knock. It wasn’t a nice knock either. It had an official ring to it. She didn’t move.

“Lee Stewart?” a muffled voice said suddenly. *Did she hear a chuckle?* “I know you’re there; I can see you through the curtains. I’m Constable Harry Sloan with the North Bay Police Service. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

She remained frozen! The smoke curled up from her cigarette.

“Miss Stewart, this is silly. I can see you,” the voice continued. She took a long, slow drag on her cigarette. “You’re smoking.”

*Fuck!* Lee jammed her feet into her shoes and grabbed her jacket. She knew that she could leave the room by the rear door, but that would just lead to a hallway, the office and a pool. The Beast was parked right outside her door—the other side of the window, maybe six feet behind the cop. *Damn!*

“I know things must be overwhelming for you. I understand.” Sloan’s voice softened. “I saw you up at Wisemen’s Hill. You were easy to recognize after all these years.” He cleared his throat. “That’s sort of a compliment.”

Lee glanced into the mirror behind the door. Her hair was still wet, hung in long wet curls. No makeup either. *Nice.*

“No one else knows you’re here,” Sloan said, “I have no authority to hold you, and I don’t owe anybody any favors.” His tone dipped glumly. “So if you decide to leave, at least you’ll know something, and if you stay, you’ll get a heads up.”

Lee swung the door wide. The cop stood there. He was a tall, solid-looking guy with a frustrated clench around his eyes—slightly under-dressed for a blizzard, wearing leather jacket, denims and hiking boots. Maybe forty, he was unshaven—lots of white whiskers at the chin. He had a thick chest and shoulders and full head of dark hair. There was a self-assured slant to the way he carried himself—left thumb hooked in his belt, right shoulder cocked higher. He snapped to attention when she ran her eyes over him. His expression opened up, revealed laugh or worry lines at his temples. He looked vaguely familiar.

“Why?” Lee snapped at him. Her eyes narrowed with anger. “Why are you doing *me* any favors?”

“I thought you should know what happened in your own home,” he said, and his eyes dropped low. “And because you’re pretty.”

“Hell of a reason,” she snarled and flicked her cigarette past him. A pickup truck was parked across the Beast’s rear bumper. *SHIT!*

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I get talking...”

“Well, what do you want?” Lee glared.

“Look, someone already chewed me a new one but I survived,” the cop said, his eyes flashing impatiently. He lifted his chin and tapped his throat leaning in. “So. Just right there. Go ahead! I won’t fight.”

Lee smirked at that one, and the cop’s body language relaxed.

“I’m suspended from duty,” he continued smiling, looking down at his hands. Large snowflakes blew in past him. “Because I don’t know when to shut my mouth. It happens sometimes. I say things before I really think about them. I have to work on it. Probably nerves and emotion...” His eyes flared as he rolled them. “See, right there I’m doing it. I

should shut up now.” He smiled sheepishly. “On the bright side, cancer runs in my family.” He kicked snow from his boots. “Look this is my town and my jurisdiction. I grew up here like you did.”

Lee just stood there shaking her head, trying to keep her anger boiling; but the man’s raw vulnerability was making it difficult. He was under pressure and tired of it.

“But something bad happened up at the farm,” he said, looking past her and back at his hands again. “It happened to *your* parents in *your* house, but it happened in *my* backyard. The RCMP and the media from all over are involved, and I don’t think they’ll see you the same way I do.”

Lee noticed his eyes misted up there.

“Listen to you!” She smirked despite herself. *Good thing you’re not wearing your uniform today, copper!* “You sound like we’re breaking up.”

“Yeah.” He flashed broad white teeth in a smile; long dimples slashed his stubbled cheeks. “I don’t think they’ll care if they ruin your life. The media will drag you into things that you probably don’t know about and like it or not, the cops watch the news like everybody else. You’ll get roasted if you’re not ready for them.” His eyes leveled on hers. “But I was first on the scene. I found your mother. I’m sorry for your loss.” Again his eyes misted. “I shot your dog, too. I’m sorry about that, but he attacked me.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been all through the house.”

Lee blushed. *He’d seen inside—my dirty little bedroom!*

“I found a little reading room in the basement. Someone was very interested in a newspaper article about you. There were two boxes containing copies of the same paper with the same story.” He held her gaze. “A local reporter on vacation in Florida wrote about meeting you. She took a picture too.”

Lee remembered the meeting—wanted to kick herself for talking at all. Seemed like fun at the time. *Jesus! Can’t I even heal without being punished?* But it was so far away, and she’d never suspected there would be an article. She felt dirty again, as she imagined her stepfather in the basement with her photo.

“Did it mention my daughters?” Lee’s voice broke.

Sloan nodded. “Yeah, and where you live in Florida.” He leaned against the doorframe. “It’s an old edition, so he could have got to you long ago if he wanted. But I’m thinking that your mother’s death is a bad sign. If he’s responsible for that, and for the others then he’s not hiding anymore.” He shook his head. “And I think that means you and your daughters might be in danger.” His breath came out in a puff of steam. “I want to catch him and I think you can help me do it.”

Lee held the door aside for him.

“I’m hungry.” He gestured to the little diner attached to the motel. “We can talk in there. Then you can go on your way if you want.”

## Chapter 16

Kevin Lonsdale regretted the fight he’d had with his parents. He knew it was impossible to avoid. It was *destiny*. But he regretted it all the same—too late now—too late. He wanted to do what he wanted to do. That’s the way it was—*he was—always was*—they wanted him to report in every time he was going to do anything—*anything*—

like he was still playing with his G.I. Joes and dribbling at the nose and wetting his Spider-man undies. *Fuck that!* They didn't understand his life, and they didn't even try.

Too busy with their own fucking stuff—their money fights, their who-fucked-who fights, their *I can't believe I married you fights!* But did he give them shit for the pain in his stomach—the sleepless nights listening to them crash, bang and scream? Did he blame them for the headaches he got from huffing glue and gas behind the Legion with his friends because he couldn't stand it anymore? Fuck no! But then they pushed, and they got in his face. So, the blow up, the fight. Kevin felt bad about shaking his fist in his mom's face—that was over the line—too late now, too late—he knew it, but: *I'm 15 damn it!* Then his dad grabbed his arm—*Don't raise a fist at your MOTHER*—like he wouldn't, like he didn't—and threw Kevin against the fridge. He fell to the floor—a shower of those fucking multi-colored fridge magnet letters pelting him—spelling out some crazy end to it all—too late now—too late.

He had jumped to his feet and his dad punched him in the face and started running his mouth about his worthless son—some sad bullshit about working all day cutting trees and coming home to have piles of shit dumped on him—his son making his mother sick—sick and tired of it all. And his dad punched him again and got real round-eyed when Kevin didn't move—just took it, all the hate, and snarled back at him like a dog. So he shoved his dad—all he had, both hands in the chest—and the old fucker flipped up and over the table and the whole thing collapsed with spaghetti and salad spilling all over him and plates breaking. Would have been funny except his mother was screaming and screaming. Kevin's face throbbed where his dad punched him, but her screaming hurt worse—the way she screamed and said stop it, and yelled: *get out! Get OUT!*

So Kevin told them all to fucking die and go to hell and fuck the priest and anything else he could spit out while he raged—and raged—and smashed stuff—cleared the kitchen counter—*goodbye Mr. Coffee, goodbye crock pot*—and he howled and swung his fists and showed them that he wasn't some little shit they could push around and tell to come and go. He ran up to his stinking little room spitting and snarling—*same smelly sheets for months, piles of hardened socks, tangled yellowed T-shirts*—and he grabbed his jeans and his hoodies and his jacket, a few bucks from working the chip stand by the rink and his bank card, and a handful of chrome studs he rotated around the pierced flaps in his body. He stuffed them all in his pack and charged down the stairs.

His father was at the bottom, face streaked with spaghetti sauce like blood, glaring; Kevin showed teeth at him—*old fucker jumped out of his way, that's it, that's more like it old fucker*; he glared at his mother holding the baby now and it was crying—little sister *boohoo, good luck*—he hissed fuck off, *fuck off!* She screamed—*they screamed*—and Mom slid down the wall like he shot her with a gun. His older sister would have gotten into it to—used the fingernails—*had a mouth like a sewer*—but she was working her shift at the Primrose Diner and fucking her boyfriends in the bathroom out back.

Kevin remembered screaming at them: fuck yourselves—*I don't need you, I don't need YOU*—as he shoved the door aside and stormed out into the cold January night. His breath had hovered close about his lips like a frozen veil—so cold, biting into him—almost made him turn around with apologies—he could have easy, like fights were all they did—too late now, too late.

*Fuck them, that's what they want!* He had screamed. Fuck them treating me like I don't know nothing—just some slave, some loser—*I hate it! I hate it!* He decided to go to Toronto—had always wanted to live where the action was—*I got friends down there!*

He'd set out, and it was cold. There was no chance his dad would come after him with the pushing and the fall. This was worse than the swastika tattoo on his left shoulder. He tried to explain it wasn't a Nazi-mark—it was an East Indian peace symbol. But Kevin had ended that fight walking along the highway—until his father came and picked him up and took him home. Not this time. Maybe the old fucker had broken his arm—*good, good that would teach him.*

Kevin had made the half-mile walk to the highway under the clearing sky—there was a break in the storm, all around in the moonlight the clouds had climbed like mountains. His breath clung to his face, crackling in his nostrils. He hadn't been at the highway twenty minutes before an old black truck drove past heading east. *Too bad.* Kevin was heading west and then south to the big city. The truck had braked a second or two—slowed down like the driver was giving him a look—*like why not just take a picture—* before it picked up speed and crunched over the hard packed snow into the distance.

Kevin had still been boiling mad from the fight so just muttered under his breath and kept hiking—a good hike would help anyway—*just get into the trip and all, leave that shit behind me.* He had shouldered his pack and walked west, hugging the edge of the road as close to the tall snowbank as possible.

Kevin remembered the walk, and how cold it was. Yes, he remembered the fight. *Too late now, too late.* And he regretted setting out for Toronto. *No plan—no idea.* He did have friends down there, but they just partied, and he didn't have much money and they sure as hell didn't. He regretted the fight. He wasn't ready.

But at least he was warm now. Warmer than when the big black truck returned some miles down the highway, heading west now, slowing beside him. He felt warmer now like the air he remembered coming out the passenger side window when the driver rolled it down. He remembered getting into the truck—*something wicked in the air here, blue cheese and gourmet pizza—*wondering why the driver would go east and then west, but then thinking maybe he was on an errand—*what did it matter, it's warmer.* The truck's long box was full of stuff, some old wooden crates; the big one ran from the cab to the tailgate. Kevin had just smiled at the guy. At least he wasn't walking in the snow and freezing his nuts off—*and he wasn't fighting with his dad.*

Kevin could still see the driver's eyes, could still feel their pressure in his mind—the caring, *the Oprah stuff—all weepy things are going to be all right stuff.* Why else would you be walking on such a night? Of course there is trouble. The truck was old but in good shape, and the dashboard lights gave the edges of things a spooky green glow. The driver was about forty or fifty, Kevin wasn't sure because he thought everyone over twenty-five was *too fucking old*—foreign-looking and sounding too, he guessed, big cheekbones and long chin. But the eyes had carried a little extra something that made him feel comfortable, once they locked on—made Kevin stop wondering what made them so interesting—*sort of made him forget about the face too.* And the driver had asked him what was wrong, and Kevin found himself telling the whole story, everything. Even about the nights before it all happened, when he was just out screwing around with the guys and not coming home when he was supposed to—and breaking into empty cottages in the winter to steal booze.

The driver had been sympathetic. He told Kevin in a deep calm voice—*was there an accent, not French, not French*—that young men needed their space; that they were different from their mothers, and fathers resented the freedoms their sons enjoyed. The driver had agreed with his decision to go to Toronto, had asked if that was where his parents would look for him. Kevin had told him that he always talked to them about his friends in Toronto, and that he always wanted to go live in the big city—*just needed more cash, and the nerve*. That topic of conversation had started many a fight.

The driver had said that this was some relief to him, since he knew Kevin's parents would look for him, and he felt somewhat guilty helping the young man run away from home. But, if they would look for him in Toronto, *they* would not worry so much about him so *he* would not. The driver had said he was going south to buy a new truck, and would be glad to take Kevin—he said he felt it was his responsibility to see that he got there safely.

Now Kevin struggled to get comfortable; his head kept slipping down. When he slipped, the water lapped his chin and that brought back memories of cold. The cold ate into his ability to remember—*like the eyes*. Yeah, the eyes were something. They had a lopsided feel, not physical—the feel of them shifted, like they drooped back and forth between caring and cold—Marilyn Manson eyes, yeah. Each different, and different again—like four eyes in one face.

They drove for hours, passing few cars as they slipped around rock cuts and frozen swamp. Traveling, the driver spoke little after their initial exchange. Once while trying to find music on the radio, a sharp sliver of anger had entered his voice as he berated a song by a new Rap artist, the name escaped Kevin even now—*Snoop Doggy Do?*

“Music...*Pah!*” He had switched the radio off, turned to Kevin with his comforting gaze. “The choir is silent.”

Kevin could remember falling asleep. While he slept, he dreamt about Jaqueline Fraser in grade ten. How they'd made out behind the community center—all that kissing, and tongues licking. *Yeah*. He remembered the way she held his dick in her soft hands and how she jerked him off. Kevin remembered the feeling of her fingers and the way her chin dug in against his neck while she did this, like she didn't want to look. He remembered her warm snuffling breath against his neck while his orgasm built—when he squirted all over her skirt.

Kevin had awakened in the water, coughing—a coppery taste in his mouth. His head and shoulders poked up through a rough-cut hole in the ice. An axe lay nearby. He wanted to scream, but he was puzzled. Looking at the gray water and the thick ice, he knew it should be cold; but it was comfortable, dreamy almost as it hugged his body below the ice. He wanted to sleep, snuggle in really. It was dreamy ever since, as he thought back over the trip. Wishing, and wondering. *Too late now, too late*. The driver was doing something up in the red glow of the taillights. It was hard to tell. It was so dark.

Kevin watched the driver climb down the embankment through the snow. He was carrying Kevin's packsack, his gear and clothes. The sky was growing lighter; the snow lit the driver's features enough so Kevin could see him smile when he knelt by the hole in the ice.

The driver's gaze held his for a time, something curious flickered from beneath the dark and heavy brow; but the smile returned as he tugged on Kevin's jacket, pulled it with a popping sound from where it had frozen to the ice.

"Where are we going?" Kevin asked so tired, he wanted to say something more but he was so tired. It was warm in the water, all he could do was smile and say: "Oh the air's cold."

"Good bye, Kevin," the driver said, then raised the pack and pushed it against Kevin's face until he was under the ice. The darkness wrapped around his body and the water dragged him down.

## Chapter 17

Carter resisted the urge to suck the pink toes that peeked out of the tangled sheets. Instead his eyes slid to the pale blue-veined inlay tracing the white skin on her left ankle and followed it upward into shadow. His imagination continued along the lines promising sweetness, hinting at orgasm. He contemplated crawling under there and waking her up the fun way, but abandoned the notion remembering the night before. She'd think it was *creepy*. What's her name: *Cindy, Mandy?*

She was sleeping. *It's a pity she didn't take as much interest in fucking.* He shook his head, allowing his eyes to swoop over her firm form until his gaze came back to her youthful face and smooth brow. Not young enough to be that inexperienced. She just wasn't trying. He remembered the excitement he felt picking her up after her shift. The thrill when she agreed to go right to the motel for a drink. But the exchange had been a boring affair, once the bra and panties were off. He probably should have pushed the booze a little more—that usually made up for inexperience.

She was a beautiful girl without any excuse for being so bad at sex. Unless controlling men with sex was more fun than losing control of herself. Unless... It was hard to believe that even this young their complications could take the fun out of it. Her lackluster performance made him nervous and took the shine off banging a novice.

Carter settled back on the floor at the foot of the bed. He was pretty sure he got her off in the end. He had so many tricks up his sleeve he could coax a chair to orgasm, given time. She'd dropped into a deep sleep right after. Carter passed out too. He wanted to get an early start on the files he'd copied at the *Nickel* that afternoon.

He looked at his watch on the nightstand. It was ten o'clock. He had been up since six going through a box of old news stories and copies of reporters' notes. So far, he'd found nothing about Morelli, but something else had caught his eye.

It started during a conversation with Peter Segal who gave him the files the day before. He'd known the reporter back in college. They were having coffee in the *Nickel* lunchroom and getting geared up about the most exciting news story to hit the area in decades. Pete claimed that the Morelli thing was going to be bigger than Sergeant Renquist and the Blizzard of '77. Especially if the rumors were true and some of Morelli's victims had been bled dry.

Carter barely remembered the story of the snowbound Mountie who raped and killed a kid in some nowhere town. He had spent most of 1977 in seclusion with only *Playboy*

magazine for company so his memory was vague on it. His acne kept him from anything but autoerotic fun.

But he did remember people talking about the case. Renquist was an RCMP officer and the betrayal felt by the community gave momentum to the story. A copy of the pathologist's report was in the box of files Segal loaned Carter.

*Carrine Patterson's body showed signs of sexual molestation. The cause of death was exsanguination. The suspect had opened the child's carotid artery with a sharp instrument. Some evidence of tooth marks and saliva around the edges of the wound...*

Witnesses described Renquist licking the wound and drinking the blood before he was apprehended. Carter laughed out loud at that one. *Perfect!*

It all happened in 1977 when a mysterious illness afflicted the children in a village on the Ontario-Quebec border. Its French name was *Carrefour*. Carter opened another can of Coke. *But the locals called it something else.* What did Pete say? *Bent Steeple.* Carter barely remembered the nickname from his youth. Weird little place people used to say you'd find yourself in if you got lost looking for Mattawa.

Bent Steeple had been isolated by a monster blizzard that shut the whole province down. Renquist was sent out there on a Skidoo with medicine and communications gear. Twenty kids died of the illness over a two-week period and Renquist turned into a murdering pedophile.

Carter dug through the pile of folders he'd separated from the others. He asked Pete how they got copies of everything, police and doctor's notes, eyewitness accounts. Pete said the RCMP struck a deal with Larry Belanger owner of the *Nickel* back then. If the *Nickel* went easy on Renquist, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police would give complete cooperation and copies of all the files surrounding the mystery illness. Pete laughed and said that pedophilia was too extreme to hang a story on in 1977. The Catholic Church hadn't brought it out in the open yet. So Belanger took the deal. Diseases and death sold newspapers.

Of course that was decades ago, and the files were later sold to a giant media organization along with the newspaper. But the deal was kept, and the RCMP continued to update the paper's files. Carter cracked a folder, read the typewritten title:

*Dr. Gilles Dorval, M.D. Carrefour (Bent Steeple), Ontario, 1977*

SUMMARY - "I saw the first case of the mystery illness on January 24, 1977. Sheila McGregor brought her daughter Nancy in complaining of fatigue, a cough, nausea, shortness of breath and headaches. I diagnosed it as the flu, prescribed bedrest and fluids. Over the next five days I was inundated with young patients bearing similar symptoms. Closer inspection exposed minute lesions in the groin and extremities that were consistent with fever blisters and heat rash. It is not uncommon for such flu outbreaks to occur at that time of year—especially among school aged children. When Nancy McGregor died at 2 p.m. January 29 I knew we faced a serious illness. I had by that time diagnosed 15 cases among the local children. Some of the mothers showed symptoms but these subsided—though it lent credibility to my diagnosis of flu. The fathers were generally unaffected, though some reported phantom symptoms. I made attempts to contact the provincial health authorities (see attached copies of notes) but these efforts were hampered by the blizzard that had stricken southern Ontario for the preceding days. Assurances were made that help would be sent. The blizzard creeping northeast soon captured Bent Steeple and area in its grip, and the phone service was lost. Resident ham

radio operator Hugh Desjardin, contacted authorities and was told that help was on the way.”

Carter skipped down the summary:

“Constable Renquist was a blessing when he first arrived, since it allowed me to focus my efforts directly on containing the outbreak. It became apparent that the mysterious illness focused upon the young—curiously striking only those between the ages of five and twelve. Children younger than this were unaffected. A passing malady for adults, the illness proved fatal to the majority of the children who contracted it. Of the thirty-one cases I diagnosed there were twenty fatalities. In those cases, the children suffered flu-like symptoms that rapidly developed into a lethal form of anemia.”

Carter jumped over the next paragraphs where Dorval outlined the mystery illness’ symptoms in medical terms. Then he found Renquist’s name:

“Sergeant Renquist set up a temporary headquarters in the community center. It was his plan to radio his superiors and report on our efforts to combat the illness and weather the storm. I had asked him to request medical supplies (see attached list). Renquist claimed to be having difficulty contacting his superiors, and when he did discovered they were overwhelmed meeting the needs of the many other communities stricken by the blizzard. Eleven days passed before any help arrived. A small force of officers from the Ontario Provincial Police and a local snowmobile club forced their way through the snow to deliver the supplies. At that time they found the survivors, and the badly injured Constable Renquist already subdued and in the custody of a volunteer security force he had organized.”

Carter looked up after re-reading that last line: “the badly injured Constable Renquist already subdued...” *That’s a hell of a fastball you’re pitching there Doc!* The sentence hid the story Carter wanted to hear.

He had read the news item where Renquist pleaded not guilty of the assault and murder of Carrine Patterson. After his lawyers entered an insanity plea, the Judge handed him over to the Penetanguishene Mental Health Center for psychiatric evaluation and treatment where he was found unfit to stand trial.

Carter leaned back against the end of the mattress. The girl in the bed sighed and rolled over. He dug through his pile and found the RCMP files on Renquist. The whole thing was a black eye for Canada’s finest. They were overwhelmed by the potential damage from Renquist’s actions and they were willing to do anything to keep the story out of the headlines: *even tell the truth.*

Carter found a handwritten update and summary at the top of the pile with a *Nickel* reporter’s signature scribbled across the top. He read it, pausing occasionally to jot the main points in his notebook:

“RCMP Constable Sergeant Brian Renquist: nicknamed Sarge, spent fifteen years at the Penetanguishene Mental Health Center before being transferred to the North Bay Psychiatric Hospital for sexually assaulting and murdering Carrine Patterson in the town of Carrefour (Bent Steeple) in February of 1977. Since his release three years ago, he has lived in a North Bay group home and halfway house. He is considered at low risk to re-offend due to his age, 74 (he was 42 when he committed the crime) and health (he has a heart condition) and due to the psychiatric therapy he underwent during his 25 years of incarceration. He was prescribed the anti-psychotic medication clozapine until the late 1980s when it was removed from the market, but suffered none of the serious side effects

associated with the drug. Because he responded well to individual and group therapies offered through inpatient services, it was determined that he no longer required such medication. Renquist has difficulty remembering his crimes and was an exemplary and responsive patient.”

He read over a report by Renquist’s deceased psychiatrist.

*Dr. Adain Buchvaldt*, 1981. Patient Report: # 114 Subject: Brian Renquist.

Penetanguishene Mental Health Center: “My first impression was of how cooperative the subject was...”

Carter skipped ahead.

“Renquist is experiencing another bout of salmonella poisoning. The first case was mild by comparison. I have prescribed ampicillin and fluids. After his first infection extra care was given to the preparation of foodstuffs. Now, I must agree with my colleagues who theorize that some other unobserved behavior is the cause. His crime—in which he ingested human blood—suggested his psychiatric disturbances might run to *fetishism*. On one occasion, he was witnessed using a plastic doll as a subject for his sexual fantasies. Similarly, he was caught stealing the undergarments of other patients...”

Carter jotted notes and scanned through the pages.

“It is theorized that Renquist’s fetish might extend to Fecophilia and he is being watched in this regard...”

*Weird bastard*, Carter laughed when he jumped ahead a year.

“After Renquist’s third case of Salmonella stool samples yielded the undigested bones of a rodent. My colleagues are excited by this opportunity to study a case of zoophagia. Further observation showed Renquist taking part in garden activities on hospital grounds. A search yielded a dead mole hidden in his clothing that we believe was intended for consumption. Renquist denied taking part in any such activity despite the fact that the animal had already been bitten and its blood removed. His behavior clearly encourages the recurrence of salmonella infections...”

Then Carter riffled through the reports and read:

“A fourth and very severe recurrence of Salmonella afflicted Renquist in the summer of 1994. From this he began to exhibit signs of Reiter’s syndrome...”

Carter set the reports aside and let things percolate. Renquist had an excellent record during the twenty years he served with the RCMP and was admired and well liked by his peers. He had no previous criminal record and none of his personal or professional acquaintances saw any indication of exotic or criminal behavior. A search of his home after his arrest yielded no damning evidence.

Provincial law enforcement agencies were overwhelmed by the blizzard of 1977. Renquist was sent to Bent Steeple during the crisis because of his familiarity with the area, having grown up in Huntsville. He spent three years as a traffic enforcement officer with the Ontario Provincial Police before joining the RCMP.

Aircraft were grounded by the blizzard so he traveled to Bent Steeple by snowmobile. Renquist was to provide support and assist in the administration of law and order in the snowbound village. It had a population of approximately six hundred at the time. Renquist assessed the inhabitants’ needs and the severity of conditions regarding the illness.

Then all went quiet and eleven days later, Renquist was a murdering child molester.

Carter couldn't stop a smile from breaking across his face. *It was perfect.* A fantastic angle but an easy connect. He started composing his lead:

"The Morelli Massacre has forced these isolated northern towns on a terrible trip down a memory lane of murder, death and betrayal when during the Blizzard of 1977 an RCMP officer stopped protecting the innocent, and started preying on them..." He snapped his fingers, "not 'preying,'" he smiled, and wrote the words across the top of his notebook. "*Feeding* on them..." Carter chuckled. "And now, the full story that the RCMP tried to cover up!"

Pete Segal told him the phone had been ringing off the hook since the first body was found at the Morelli place. Media people from all over the world were asking questions and converging on the farm. The rumored number of corpses had just passed twenty-five—nothing official yet. The RCMP promised a statement soon. They were looking for Morelli. His wife was dead and Carter's friends at the *Nickel* told him their daughter lived in Florida and hadn't returned since she ran away in the late eighties.

When in a pile of shit, make fertilizer. Carter got in touch with GTATV. He told them where he was and that he knew the Morellis. He offered to upload pictures, video and audio news files that they could sell to Metro news services. They couldn't believe their luck and told him to ride the story, even hinting that this piece might be just the street cred he needed to launch a current affairs show. He'd already uploaded several sound bytes using the motel's wireless connection—slow but it worked.

It would be a feeding frenzy at the farm and Carter was getting tired of mouthing bones. He wondered how many reporters had the local contacts to make the leap for Sergeant Renquist's story. That brought the horrors of the Morelli case to mythic proportions. When he thought of the weather report's predicted blizzard—he had one of those epiphanies that people talked about.

He could go to the Morelli place and pick up as much footage as he could with his MiniDV recorder—interviews too: cops, locals, etc. He could edit on his laptop and upload. While those news bytes competed with the other media sources, he could build a bigger story, do the background for Renquist—Interview him! He was living, unsupervised, in a halfway house a short bus trip from the Morelli place! *Perfect!* Then right after the RCMP released a statement about Morelli, Carter would let everybody know about Renquist: A Wolf in the Fold! *Perfect!* Carter jotted the headline.

Play it right and go international. And then book! And *then* talk current affair shows!

The girl in the bed mumbled when Carter cackled giddily. Then a terrifying thought: If any of the victims at the Morelli place turned out to be minors—the cops would run the list of known sex offenders as a matter of course. Morelli might even be one of the corpses. Carter had to move fast.

The girl moaned again and Carter felt his cock twitch reflexively. *Talk to Sarge. It's not a sidebar either—it's a perfect fucking story. A perfect book!*

Triumphantly he rose, looked down on the bed, at the girl's calves. She made a whimpering noise when he set his lips to her inner thigh—licked the soft skin beside her kneecap. *The hell with it!* He thought. *I feel like celebrating first.* He started kissing his way up her thigh, licking and sucking the soft flesh there. *If you can't get champagne.* Carter didn't care if she appreciated his talents or not.

## Chapter 18

“You lost the body?” Lee stood in front of the funeral director—every atom of her being was sharpened with anger and pointed at the small man—her angular form reminded Sloan of a cocked crossbow. Her target looked terrified enough to climb into one of his showroom coffins. “That’s got to be unlucky for a funeral home!”

Behind them “John 14.1-6” was written on a stained-glass lancet window. Sloan was too many generations away from regular church attendance to know what it meant. Plaster saints were hung on the wall to either side of the window. Their robes were painted bold carnival colors; their faces were doll-like.

Sloan had accompanied Lee to the McGuinty Funeral Home after meeting her at the Bo-mark Diner that morning. He was exhausted from sleeping alternately in his truck—thank god for thermal blankets and long johns—and cruising to the bypass coffee shop to warm up. Good thing he staked her out too, because at around two a.m. Lee came out of her room with her bags. She giggled and said: “Busted!” when he climbed out of his truck. She went back in to bed without another word. It must have been an impulse. They had a deal after all.

They had talked the day before at the Bo-mark Diner. She couldn’t remember Sloan from high school. “*I was never there, for god’s sake!*” She’d laughed, but told him *he* did look familiar.

Lee avoided talk about her days on the farm. She just wanted to go back to Florida.

“Don’t want to open that door,” she grumbled dismissively. It was clear from the way she talked that she had only contempt for her stepfather and mother. *Something bad had happened.* “They fucked things up for me again. I’ll be heading south empty-handed. Oh, with a trunk load of humiliation. Thanks.”

Sloan tried to be vague about the situation on the farm but there was no way to sugar coat it. He told her that investigators had found some bodies in the basement and that the barn had given up about twenty. The property itself was starting to yield shallow graves and they might find more in the spring.

Lee looked like she was choking as he told her this. It was awful to watch—her demeanor was all carefree strength—but the news chiseled cracks in her. The dark mischievous eyes developed a wounded air, an inward focus. The obvious distress kept him from telling her all the facts about her mother’s death. He’d said “exposure” which she accepted as some part of her mother’s insanity. He didn’t tell her about the wound on the woman’s neck. It was too grim and he didn’t want to hurt her more than the whole situation already had. He’d tell her the rest later.

Sloan tried to tough it out with her—there was something about Lee that looked the part, with the big blonde hair, bangles, jewelry, denims and leather jacket—and the car. It gave her a strong look—something *piratey* and free: a survivor. But Sloan wasn’t sure how much of it was disguise, was put on as a defense for someone who was hurt early in life. He hoped she wasn’t a pretender. He hated pretenders. They weren’t real survivors.

He quickly picked up that she scorned emotional talk. That fit. Survivors laughed at the touchy feely thing. So that would be a bad direction unless he wanted sarcasm. He was already sure she didn’t like cops. It wasn’t anything personal, but just mention of police drew a downward curl on her lips and coaxed a dark glint into her eyes. Sloan had

seen it before in people who'd been victimized. They started to hate those who *could* have helped but didn't.

Her cigarettes were part of the architecture.

He had told her she'd better be ready. The police would want to talk to her, whether she did it now or later; and so would the media—and there was a hell of a lot of both. He agreed that it might make more sense to run for Florida and deal with it all long distance—hire a lawyer and then control her entry into the fray. He pointed out that leaving now that she was here would put a guilty spin on things that would make for a more hostile police *and* media when she did start talking. That had two edges too. Generally, the angrier the police got, the more sympathetic she'd look to the public. There were a lot of things to consider before she hit the highway. Sloan warned her that since a couple of the bodies were kids—*she actually shivered when he said it*—that would put an ugly color in the public's mind. Again, that might make it worse if she ran for Florida.

He told her that some of the bodies had been buried a long time—likely buried before she ran away. Police would definitely want to talk about that. Lee said she didn't know anything about it. She spent most of her time keeping away from her stepfather. She never liked him. She rarely saw him in the daytime, but she did remember overnight guests—and parties—but everyone was gone by morning. Sloan knew how small the house was, and where the girl slept. She would have noticed something criminal going on. She was young when it happened though—a victim in her own right. Young minds tended to run from unpleasantness, especially if the guilty parties were parents. Kids didn't want to admit things like that.

"I usually only saw my stepfather after dark. He went out during the day when something had to be done, but he stayed in the house mostly, pattering in the basement or out in the barn." Lee had studied her cigarette. "I stayed away from him." Blood darkened her tanned face. "As much as I could." She paused again. "He'd do his chores in the evening and he'd go driving. I remember he did bring guests back occasionally—but like I said, I stayed out of his way. Slept if I couldn't get out of the house." Lee's face set in hard lines. *There was more but she wouldn't say.*

Lee had asked him about her mother, finally. He described the scene—downplayed the dog attack—but went over the unusual way she was found—frozen. Lee listened intently, her eyes almost black under her sculpted brows.

"Fucking cold bitch froze to death." She laughed. "There's irony." Lee had noticed Sloan's minor dismay at her attitude, but she shook her head. "Don't worry about me. We didn't get along, my mother and I. In fact, I rarely refer to her as my *mother*. She was my *Devil*. But freezing to death? Suicide doesn't sound like her."

Sloan had tried to push her on that point, but she deflected it by asking if he knew where her mother's body would be. She had to say something to it.

"I still can't believe she's dead." She laughed. "I want to put a stake in her fucking heart to make sure." Then her giggle ran through the coffee shop.

Sloan had put in a call—first on his cell, then on the payphone after the signal cut out a couple times—cellular service was still twitchy this far north. He talked to Clark Campbell, asked him about Mrs. Morelli. Clark was helping to catalogue bodies for the RCMP medical examiners. There were just so many of them.

“Whole thing’s amazing, Harry,” Clark had said—his voice full of excitement. “Under your hat, now...you’ve heard the rumor, but here’s the truth: It looks like all the bodies have been bled out...” Sloan wasn’t expecting that one. “Man, woman and child—*exsanguinated*.” It might fit. Many serial killers collected trophies. Why not blood? Sloan asked how it was done, and Clark said it was too early to be sure. “But it looks like the blood was removed through various small wounds on the bodies. Groin. Neck. Extremities. Punctures—but ragged around the edges, varied in size.”

Sloan had wanted to hear more, but knew that Lee Stewart was sitting in the Bo-mark Diner with a big fast car outside. He asked Clark where he could find Mrs. Morelli’s body.

Clark had laughed and said there was a major screw up. “The bodies in the North Bay Health Center morgue *before* the Morelli investigation began were sent to the McGuinty Funeral Home pending autopsy or funeral arrangements to make space for the RCMP forensics team and the evidence they’re collecting out at the farm. In fact, anybody dying in the next week or two is going to end up at one of the local funeral homes for holding. No one had a chance to open Mrs. Morelli up yet—she’s still thawing—so when the RCMP order came to make space she was sent along with the others.” Clark chuckled. “That was well coordinated!” He laughed. Clark cautioned Sloan to stay out of trouble, and then hung up.

Sloan told Lee and she leapt at the idea of seeing her mother at the Funeral Home.

“I don’t like hospitals anyway.”

He recognized a grim purpose in the set of her features, and he was glad he would not be the recipient of whatever was formulating behind those eyes. The *deal* was she would tell Sloan what she could about Morelli if he let her leave town. He kept watch for her overnight anyway: lucky thing too.

That morning they drove to McGuinty’s in her car—she called it the “Beast.” Sloan approved of the Grand Am’s sporty lines, if Lee’s driving leaned toward the reckless.

“No!” she had trilled, when forcing a van to slow as she changed lanes. “Keep your eyes open gramps!”

She had ignored Sloan’s warning that visiting McGuinty’s might expose her to the public before she was ready; but he could tell this was too important. Whatever she had to say would be worth what was coming for her.

And now the poor funeral director was withering in her gaze.

The man clutched his small pale hands together as if in prayer. “I’m so sorry she has been *misplaced*.” He shook his head—a long black lock fell loose of the sculpted greasy form on his head. “It’s this trouble in-in-in Redbridge. I wish I had not agreed to help now. It was stupid of me. I really didn’t have a choice. I hope you understand. It—*she*—will turn up. Some of the overflow has already been diverted to my competitors. I’ve put in a call to Martyn’s and the Hillside Funeral Home. Please, we will find her. I am so sorry.”

“*Sorry?*” Lee stepped in close. “Call me on my cell phone the second you find her and I won’t sue you.” She pulled a pen and a pad of heart-shaped sticky notes out of her purse, jotted the phone number down and stuck the note to the director’s chest. “Fucking amateur.”

Lee turned on her heel, stormed out of the building and onto Algonquin Avenue. She hurried through the gathering snow toward the parking lot beside the building.

Sloan followed, his mind beginning to juggle doubt and guilt. He could accept withholding information about an important witness—for a while—even her location. Especially if no one knew he was doing it. He was suspended, and though he was bound to report he had found her, he was not bound to do it in a hurry. Fuck you, *Sergeant Singh*. But as the word got around, the hourglass started turning. He'd have to report soon. With all the child support he had to pay and his own bills, he couldn't afford to lose his job. He'd talk her into getting it over with and if he were lucky, he'd get back to work. They couldn't blame him for taking his time confirming a lead after his screw up with Mrs. Morelli's body.

He turned the corner and saw the Beast's dual twin tailpipes pumping exhaust into the dirty snow. The engine rumbled. Music pounded inside. Sloan walked around the car and opened the door. He saw that she already had a cigarette going, and was laughing and singing along with the song. It was something old mixed with something new.

He climbed in and asked the name of the song. She snickered and shook her head. He repeated his question, raising his voice. She shook her head again, so he shouted it, and she flicked a dial. The music was gone. His voice echoed in the car. Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

"You don't have to shout!" She laughed, then sobered. "My daughter's music."

"Oh," he said. "Where are we going?"

"I just want you to understand that I am not pissed because they've lost her body." Lee took a long drag of her cigarette. "She'd hate it." She chuckled. Her eyes grew serious a second. "I just have a thing or two to say."

Sloan nodded, and Lee laughed, slipped the Beast into reverse and tore backward, pointed its wide nose into the street.

"I've been thinking." She grinned, looking at him. "Maybe I should tell you some of the story before I run. Or a chapter before you turn me in." She chuckled, nodding her head at his innocent expression. "Just so someone knows. *If my stepfather's involved—who am I kidding? He's involved; I know it.*" Anguish flickered over her features before her humor returned. "I might know where he went, if he's hiding." Her small pink lips quivered near a frown before she smiled. "Will it buy me a head start, Copper?" She giggled at Sloan's puzzled look. "But I need a drink before I peek behind *that door!*"

She gunned the Beast's engine and the car tore out into the traffic. The acceleration pushed Sloan back into this seat. She turned her music on again.

Lee watched him frown as she lit another cigarette. She mouthed the words through the din: *Lighten up!*

Sloan watched her long strong fingers and colored nails dance on the wheel. Occasionally, her voice trilled along with the music.

Sloan decided to lighten up.

## Chapter 19

Fergus loved snow days so much that he was lost for words. He wasn't sure what a snow day was, since so many winter days had snow, but for some reason on *snow days* the neighborhood kids stayed home from school too. When his mom got him up on those days, she told him right away, because she knew how much he liked them. Then she'd

turn on the radio and they'd listen to the music and the people who talked so fast that it made Fergus' mouth hurt.

On those days he would always eat his breakfast extra fast, sometimes so quickly his mother would warn him he'd choke and she'd even wag her finger at him. But he was always excited so he ate too fast anyway. Without school the kids would be looking for something to do and when they looked hard enough they would find Fergus on the hill, pumping his *Superglider* up and down. He knew that snow days made pedaling much harder, but that and the kids being home were the only difference he could see from other winter days.

"Fergus," he said to his mother as she wrapped his scarf around his ears, and picked at a bit of dried maple syrup on his chin. He always tried to explain that he would be too hot in the scarf with all the pedaling. "Fergus..."

His mother just clicked her tongue and told him: "Don't take a tone with me, Mr. Carmichael. I know better than you what fellows need out on their tricycles in the winter—when it makes no sense to be. So don't!" He'd never seen her out on the hill so he didn't know how she knew better, but he did agree that something was needed.

"Fergus," he said seriously.

"I'm not about to have a son without any ears, young man," she scolded.

"Fergus," Fergus said in agreement, and she hugged him.

She was better at hugging him now than she was all those days and nights ago when he wasn't quite as tall or hairy, because she rarely cried when she hugged him now. He never did understand it back then; she had worried him with all that crying and hugging. For the longest time he was afraid to move when she did hug him, just in case that might hurt her too. But she'd noticed it finally—the fact that he froze like a statue when she put her arms around him—and she had laughed and then kissed him and started crying again.

"Oh Fergus, don't worry for me," she'd said, rubbing her broad palms on his whiskered cheeks. "Your mother loves you boy, that's all. You won't break me if you hug me back—you haven't the strength of Goliath you know." When she saw that he was still afraid to move, she'd laughed that much louder. "Oh lord, my boy I've given you a fright."

She had started hugging him differently after that—and stopped crying when she did. He was glad because he liked her hugs and he liked hugging her and he told her so: "Fergus."

So that was some other time, and thoughts of it drifted out of his head like most thoughts did when Fergus made his way down the hill. The snow day snow was kind of too thick around his tires, and he had to pedal a bit going down the first couple of times. Of course some of the other kids had come too and that would help because they didn't bring bikes or *Supergliders*; instead they had other things special just for snow—things that would flatten the drifts down, make it so Fergus could go faster. He thought they were silly bringing toboggans, sleds and plastic carpets, but he was glad their sliding made it easier for him to glide. They weren't necessarily happy about it though.

A tall boy, William Bourke, was quick to point out—a flush of red in his cheeks. "Fergus. You're ruining the hill. Just get a toboggan like us!"

"Fergus!" Fergus said, and then crowed like a rooster to show how excited he was.

"Fergus! You're ruining the slide." William's younger brother, Marky, joined in—he was shorter and darker haired. He had stamped his feet and scolded Fergus the last time

he passed down the hill. The *Superglider* had obliterated a snow jump the kids were making for their sleds. “Look what you did!”

Fergus had stopped, looked down at the jumble of snow, and said, “Fergus?” He drummed his handlebars impatiently.

“Yes, Fergus!” Marky stepped forward, anger coloring his face. “You ruined it, who else?”

That was when little Serena Bourke, their sister and Fergus’ fast friend—not many years old or tall, spoke up.

“Leave him alone Marky!” She trudged through the snow toward Fergus. She wore a pink Skidoo suit and red boots. A wool hat was pulled low over her blue eyes, and strings of blonde hair fell out over her cheeks. One of her mittens gripped her Wendy doll while the other patted Fergus’ knee. She always had Wendy with her

“Mom says that you shouldn’t be mean to Fergus.” She looked up at Fergus and smiled. “Should they my little Fergie-wergie?” Her voice dropped lower. “The boys are so mean to you—yes they are!” She crinkled her tiny face into a miniature version of her mother’s. “My precious baby boy!”

Fergus grinned and laughed—patted his chest. A long string of snot slid over his lip then snapped back into his nose when he breathed in again.

“Fergus!” He nodded at little Serena. She continued to smile sweetly.

William corrected, “He isn’t your baby boy, Serena. He’s a grown up man with a kid’s brain!” William saw that the others were watching. “And he’s got fleas.”

“That’s why I got fleabag insurance,” Marky said, pulling off his mitten and saying the big blue letters written on the back of his hand: “FBI.” A couple of the other boys saw it and laughed. “Serena’s got fleas too!”

“Fergus?” Fergus looked at the letters before turning the *Superglider* away. He frowned a moment and then smiled.

“He does not have a kid’s brain and he doesn’t have fleas! And *me* either.” Serena groomed her Wendy doll’s matted hair. Her mittens were covered in ice pellets. “He’s Fergus the Archduke of Fergus! And I’m the princess.”

Fergus watched the little girl—saw her angry stance and he crowed again. She looked at him and grinned.

“What’s that *mean*?” Marky pulled his mitten on and kicked at the snow. “All that crowing? Does he think he’s a bird?”

“It’s his way,” Serena said distractedly walking toward the edge of the road, “of saying that he’s quite excited.”

“I wish he’d pick another way. Crowing or not it isn’t right when he runs things over. He should know better! It’s not just *his* hill!” Marky grumbled and began reshaping and polishing his slide. “Just stop driving over the slippery parts, Fergus. We’re working on that slide!”

“Fergus,” Fergus had said solemnly before repeating and nodding. “Fergus.” He wanted to crow but decided to do it later since the boys had stopped being so upset and serious.

Fergus had shifted all his weight onto the pedals, his arms shaking as he pulled on the handlebars. He plowed his way back up the hill, grunting against the strain. The little boy with the red cheeks and bad cough, Nathan Green, went swooping past on an old

aluminum saucer almost colliding with the *Superglider*. His hat fell off revealing his long curls.

Fergus blew a great wet raspberry after the frantic little boy, and crowed. He loved the kids. It reminded him of other times and other kids. And these kids liked playing with him too, even if they did get too excited and sometimes were angry at the snow and stuff. He liked it most of all because since they were kids, they had long times ahead of them—real long times, and he rarely glimpsed their graves in the shadows, or the crowds of people who would be standing in black beside them. That usually just happened by the bad place where the church was. Then he saw things, always saw things.

One time he did see a shadow following little Nathan Green everywhere he went. The shadow was there for a long, long time, back when the boy could barely breathe climbing up the hill and his mom always came and fussed with him when he played. But something changed in Nathan and the shadow went away. Fergus would never tell the kids about the things he saw. They wouldn't understand and he knew how scary it was.

But those same shadows made it hard for him to talk to some people. Especially people like the doctor, and others with white hair and wrinkly skin. They had been around too long for Fergus to look at much—he could see the shadows plain as day behind them, and the gravestones and the people. Funny, in the doctor's shadow he only ever saw a plain gray stone overgrown with grass and no one near.

When Fergus was not so big and hairy he didn't understand what the shadows meant, and he still really didn't, but he learned not to look. Well, most times, since all he had to do was ride past the old church, and it all became so plain and clear that tears would slide over his cheeks.

"Fergus," he said as he reached the top of the hill. A dim shadow appeared behind everybody so he pedaled hard away from the kids playing there, shaking his head and looking at the trees. There were shadows by the trees, but real shadows, not the dark ones that scared him and promised things.

He shook his head to scatter the thoughts; watched the snowflakes fall around him. Fergus saw the things he didn't want to see if he thought about them too much. He stood up on his pedals and turned back toward the hill. He started roaring toward it crowing like a rooster.

Down the hill he went, his *Superglider* vibrating, the wheels slipping and shaking until he crashed into Marky's slide. The boys jumped up again, angrily screaming Fergus' name.

He turned to look quizzically at them from where his tricycle was stuck in some deeper snow. "Fergus?"

Now Luke Devine and Karl Turner came running. They started digging bits of snow off the road and making snowballs. Fergus crowed again and laughed, then started pedaling back up the hill. A storm of snowballs struck him as he rode. The balls pelted him, burst against his body. They crackled like fireworks in his spokes. He crowed and laughed until all the kids were throwing snowballs and smashing snow on Fergus. He cackled, and pedaled, and kept his eyes shut against the ice flakes. Suddenly his front wheel twisted. He pitched over and tumbled into the snowbank.

The kids came running, calling his name and pitching their snowballs aside. The smiles slipped off their faces and were replaced with worry. Little Serena was there beside him in a flash. Her face was all concern as she grabbed his arm.

“Fergus!” she burst out. “Oh my god, are you all right?”

And the other kids gathered around, the smaller ones kneeling and lifting. They helped him onto his feet while the bigger boys set his tricycle upright. Fergus snorted and shook his head and a heavy shower of snow scattered about him—some of the kids cried out and covered their eyes as it struck their faces. He crowed again, and bellowed: “FERGUS!”

Fergus climbed back onto his *Superglider*. The kids were soon laughing and playing again. He pedaled up the hill, a silly string of spit dangling where his chin stuck over his scarf. The kids were good and he loved to play with them. It made him laugh. And it kept him from thinking of the shadows and his dreams and the other thing he saw in the darkness. The wolf was getting closer still and coming fast.

He crowed and shook the idea out of his head then almost fell over trying to catch a snowflake on his tongue.

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## OLD HAUNTS

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### Chapter 20

“Hey Sarge! You better not be jerking off down there!” The voice that echoed down the stairs came from Karl Miner. He was a supervisor at Able Bodies; the company that hired mentally disabled men and women and trained them to do everything from groundskeeping to house painting. Able Bodies had recently been awarded the contract to clean old equipment, garbage and building materials out of the North Bay Psychiatric Hospital. The government was shutting it down bit by bit after a fifty-year run and was preparing four former wards for demolition. Sergeant Renquist had called the hospital “home” for almost a decade.

“Sarge,” as everyone called him, was happy to be back. The place gave him such a nostalgic feeling that he didn’t even mind the retards he had to work with. They were stupid and most of them smelled but they were friendly enough—even if they spit when they talked or were a bit too touchy feely. And most couldn’t keep their hands off their peckers. That was why Miner made that crack about Sarge jerking off. The rest of the crew did a lot of masturbating.

Sarge didn’t care as long as they kept it them to themselves. He’d had too many bad experiences at Penetang to put up with any of that stuff. As long as the retards kept their distance, they’d all get along. He even told them jokes at coffee break and lunch. They weren’t bad guys.

The crew was hired to haul away heaps of lath and plaster, broken office furniture, metal rails from drop ceilings, ABS tubing and old copper pipes. Miner had made a deal with the crew about the copper tubing and fixtures—he’d do a split on the profits from the sale of it. Miner told the others about it too, but Sarge was pretty sure he was the only one who could remember. Maybe it would mean more money for him. That was one of the good things about the retards. They never carried a story to Miner or anybody because they rarely remembered things.

Sarge had crawled in behind a pile of old chairs and desks just before Miner called to him. The concrete was wet; his knees splashed in puddles. The cold made his legs ache. *I'm getting old! Seventy-four. So old.* He would have been retired with a good pension by now if not for that trouble, and the doctors said he caused what pain he had: Reiter's Syndrome. It hurt when he walked or pissed. He ignored his discomfort, crawling through a shadowy tunnel formed by dozens of tables leaning in against the wall.

"Hyoooh, heeyar him?" This came from Arnie Stiles, a nice enough Mongoloid boy with the Downs Syndrome that Miner usually paired with Sarge: stupid but strong as an ox. Arnie would have been fine if not for his overly familiar habit of touching the hands and arms of anyone he talked to—and the spitting got Sarge's dander up. Still, Arnie was the closest thing he had to a friend on the crew, maybe closest anywhere. "Arge! Hyoooh heeyar Iner? Iner, he allin hyoooh."

He could only imagine the shower of spit that would be accompanying the retard's ballyhoo.

Sarge glanced over his shoulder. Arnie's silhouette was plugging up the opening of the tunnel. He was squatting there with his thick limbs folded up; looking like an ape hunched over picking bugs or something. Arnie's head bobbed back and forth as he tried to see Sarge in the gloom.

"I'm coming, Arnie!" Sarge growled, moving quickly into the deepest shadows. Something ticked up ahead, a tiny splashing sound—followed by a trickling patter like droplets. He smiled. *No problem, no problem. Come to Sarge!*

"Sarge!" Miner's voice boomed now, he'd come into the building and would soon climb down the stairs. *Still don't trust old Sarge. That's good. That's good. Not so old yet.*

"Arge! Arge!" Arnie's voice came hard on it. Shouting frightened him, and he was getting anxious. "Hyoooh heeyar? Ow him angry—Iner angry!"

Sarge blocked out the voices, focused on the sound of movement up ahead: the drip of water, a little splash, the light touch a small foot would make, and a flicker of droplets. He sniffed the air, could smell the mold, old urine and distant sewage. But something was up ahead. He caught the scent of its musk and shit—of its dirty pink feet.

He moved cautiously, his old knees screaming as they scraped the concrete. *Patience. Patience.* His wrists and neck ached. Then the tunnel stopped up ahead. He knew it, could feel it—the sound bounced quickly in front of him, echoed just feet from his face. The air was a small damp pocket just before him.

Sarge struck! He lashed his hands into the darkness like claws, raked the silence with his fingers until they hooked something furry—something fat—something that squealed and spun in the air, its teeth clicking on shadow.

Sarge's hands clamped on it. He could feel small muscles tighten under his grip—a wiry spine arched—the tiny vertebrae dug into his palm. Sarge recognized a dull growling now, something deep in his own chest. He pulled the creature to his mouth, set his canines into its neck and closed them. The bones crunched, the rat's body stiffened and a gush of coppery fluid filled his mouth.

"Arge!" Arnie screamed into the shadow. It was too dark for him. He'd never come in. But there were other sounds now—another voice.

"Sarge! What in the hell are you doing in there?" It was Miner. "You get out here right now!"

“Yes sir, Mr. Miner.” Sarge took a couple long desperate sucks on the rodent’s neck. The blood was hot. The creature’s balls quivered against his thumb. Then he jammed the dead rat into his underwear so its bulbous belly was warm and claws tickly against his scrotum. “Coming!”

He licked at his lips and wiped his mouth with his sleeve before backing out of the darkness. They never searched him at the halfway house. No need to worry about what Sarge found.

He crawled slowly out of the recess knowing Miner would give him shit for scaring Arnie. Sarge would just say he saw something. He was amazed how far he could get with that answer. Most people figured he was a crazy old man so they let him talk. Anyone who knew about the trouble couldn’t stand talking to him for long anyway. Sarge didn’t like to take too many chances though, since doing something out of the ordinary had got him into trouble in the first place. *Not following the rules—even for him. Careful! No insubordination, Sarge. Be good. Be good for the Inspector.*

Sarge put his best and warmest smile on his old face, lit it up with thoughts about the dinner that would be waiting at the *halfway*—maybe mac and cheese and bloody red ketchup. Cheesy casserole to chew and stir like guts—and some pie...*no*, he reminded himself. *Not pie for dessert. Something better.*

## Chapter 21

Lee slurped down another White Russian. She tipped the glass with the sweet mix until the ice cubes bumped against her nose. Chuckling, she wiped the drip away with the back of her hand and set the glass down. Sloan the *cop*, *don’t forget who you’re dealing with*, was watching her, an unusual expression on his face—nose slightly crinkled up, eyes almost closed. *Don’t try to figure me out, Buddy!* Then she saw that his skin was developing a gray tinge—or was that the air? *The air was hazy blue!* She’d been chain-smoking for half an hour—and Sloan—the *cop*—was suffocating.

“Oh shit!” She laughed in a singsong way, leaping out of her chair. “I’m killing you to death!”

Sloan sat across from her on the edge of the bed. He shook his head, started to shrug like it was no problem.

“No. No. No—you’ve been good to me. I can’t kill someone who’s been good to me.” She chuckled, pulled the door open, and yanked up the sash on the screen door. “Oh shit...look at you,” she chuckled—almost breaking into a fit. “You should see your face.”

“It’s not that bad,” the cop said gulping in chunks of fresh air as he talked. “I’m tempted to join you. I just quit smoking last week. Please, it’s okay.” He finished his own White Russian. Lee walked over to him, grabbed his glass and took it to the dresser to refill alongside hers. This was number three.

“Look!” She grinned over the glasses, pointing long fingers at the door. The wind was picking up, pushing snow through the screen. “I’ll have a hard time getting away in that.”

A subtle change passed behind the cop’s—Sloan’s—features as she handed him a new drink.

“The radio said the weather would get worse,” he explained, wincing at the White Russian’s sweetness. “Something to do with the jet stream—it’s wonky this year. A

storm system is building strength over the Great Lakes and moving north. Toronto is already getting creamed.”

Lee climbed back into her chair, crossed her legs and studied the cop—*it’s Sloan—you can’t call him COP, damn it!*

“So Sloan, how come you’re not on the case if you’re the one that found my Devil?” She smiled wickedly, the drinks starting to have an effect. They’d danced around the topic since they met. *What topic haven’t we danced around?* “What did you say to earn a suspension?”

“It’s Harry,” he said, watching her light a cigarette. “I mouthed off to an RCMP officer who was taking over the investigation. It’s politics and I’m not a politician. The Mountie came from another jurisdiction and was treating my guys like parking lot attendants.” He smiled fiercely.

Lee liked the look.

“What does *he* know about Redbridge?” Lee said through her glass.

“Exactly! And this son of a bitch grew up in Calcutta or something—not even from Canada. Wore a turban in Redbridge! In *Redbridge!*” Sloan took a big drink and pointed at her. “People who know the neighborhood should handle the local investigation. Fine, the RCMP can do the national stuff, that’s their job coordinating the different provincial and municipal agencies. Us local cops should investigate it locally.”

“You got in his face?” Lee asked.

“This Turban-Singh guy didn’t come right out and say it, but—we got into it because I moved your mother’s body prematurely...” Sloan frowned apologetically. “The detective on shift’s supposed to take charge of the crime scene, but that ass-kisser wasn’t answering his pager. It was freezing cold, so I started the ball rolling.” He slouched guiltily. “I didn’t know we had a multiple homicide at the time. Probably stupid of me.”

“Probably.” Lee watched his face fall and then she giggled.

“Yeah, well... We found the other bodies *after*,” he muttered, squeezing the back of his neck. The skin was raw above his collar. “I probably overreacted, but the whole thing was happening so close to home. This Muslim prick takes an attitude with me in *my* neighborhood. *My son’s* neighborhood.”

“You have a son?” Lee asked.

Sloan flinched. “Yeah, *and* an ex-wife.” He continued to rub his neck. “And I’m willing to sacrifice a lot to do the job. I missed a weekend with my son over this.” He shook his head. “That makes me look smarter.”

“How dumb can you be? You’re sitting here in a room with the dead woman’s daughter.” She tapped her smoke in the ashtray. “Do you think they’re looking for me?”

“Probably soon.” He looked at his drink. “Have you talked to your daughters yet?”

Lee paused—a shiver went through her. *Damn fashion.* She had changed into a pair of black Lycra bellbottoms when they got back to the motel room—more comfortable but chilly.

“I tried sending a text message but I can never tell if the damn thing works.” She grabbed her cell off the coffee table and shook it. “I’ll call them when I’ve made up my mind.” Lee smiled. “They’re staying with a friend.”

“So, it’s been almost five days since the police contacted you. And three since you left Florida.” Sloan studied his hands. “They’ll think of your safety first.”

“What’s second?” Lee almost leapt out of her chair when it hit her.

“That you’re involved somehow,” he said, spreading his hands wide, palms down. “All their focus is on your stepfather, Morelli, right now. The media is probably calling your place in Florida and beating the bushes for you. It depends how sharp they are. The police will want to talk to you before *they* do.” He cleared his throat. “Canadian crime is not interesting to American news sources unless it’s big.” He straightened. “You have dual citizenship?” Lee nodded and Sloan shrugged. “Dual means you’re kind of a gray area. American heroes and villains sell more American papers and commercials. They’ll be after you.” He rubbed his hands together. “But with that many bodies, it will be big news everywhere and the Internet will get it sooner or later.” Sloan shuddered with a sharp intake of breath. “The truth is: everybody will be looking for you by now.”

“My daughters are staying at Shel’s. We run a salon together. Hair, manicures and stuff.” Lee’s drink was running low.

“When they look for you and you’re not at home you’ll become bigger news. So, your girls might be contacted—I’d touch base before they get worried.” Sloan’s dark eyes centered on hers. “If the police can’t find Morelli, they’ll figure he’s a danger to you.” He shrugged. “I do.”

“Well, that’s a real little way too late.” Lee chuckled, stubbed her cigarette out and then grabbed his drink to mix another round. She crossed to the dresser, dropped some ice cubes into the glasses, started mixing. Something was starting to tighten up in her. As much as the drinks were loosening her tongue, they were bringing something heavy and dark to the forefront. When she turned around, the cop’s—*Sloan’s*—expression was calm. He sat on the edge of the bed like they hadn’t just met that day. Something about that rankled her. Something about it started to turn her on.

“So your father...” he started as she handed him his drink.

“*Stepfather!*” she hissed and crossed to her chair, lit a cigarette. “My mother married him when I was five.”

“Morelli,” he said, shifting his weight on the bed. “He was a danger to you?”

“I’ve asked around,” Lee chuckled. “It seems to be on the stepfather resume.” She shook her head. “No. That’s too easy. That isn’t true. There are bad men, and there are a lot of good men.”

“Not your stepfather though...” Sloan took a drink—slurped it accidentally—smiled. The expression bled off his face.

“You want a chapter.” Lee crossed her legs, tried to get comfortable on the motel chair—a whiff of mold wafted up, penetrated the shield of cigarette smoke. Her guts knotted—her skin was hot. “Not sure that’s one I want to go into right away, Sloan.”

“Okay.” He leaned forward. His face was starting to look a little flushed too. “Do you know where I can find him?”

“All right!” Laughter burst past her hand—she pulled a serious face and then giggled. A look of disbelief or frustration passed over Sloan’s features. *He’s gonna think you’re crazy!* She swept her hands apart dramatically. “I’ll give you a chapter. I’m not ashamed of this stuff. Not my fault! But it’s a hell of an icebreaker.”

She took a long drag from her cigarette, and then straightened in the chair letting her mind drift inward to the big dark door. Lee opened it a crack and immediately felt the jostling bouncing ride of the truck’s old suspension, heard the jingle of his keys hanging from the steering post, and smelled cowshit drifting up from their boots.

“My stepfather used to pack me into that ugly old truck of his at night, and take me for what he called ‘joy rides.’” Lee stabbed out her cigarette half-smoked, lit another. “Unfortunately, I was the joy that got ridden.” A sneer or snarl appeared on her face—rolled away to a sad chuckle. “My mother knew it too. I don’t know what kind of deal he made but she let him take me out at night, and we’d drive all over the back roads—mostly in the summer. I think he was afraid of us getting stuck in the snow—he had a real thing about being able to get home. *A homebody. FUCK!*” Lee laughed, and took a drink.

“It started when I was six. He drove me out to one of his favorite—*secret*—places he called them like it was a kid’s game.” Lee looked over at Sloan; he watched her quietly. “He knew secluded places all over. He’d take us and park and he *played*.” She chuckled viciously and blew a thin stream of smoke.

“One time after I fell asleep, I mean—the days when I cried about it passed quickly—so I fell asleep. Sometimes, I’d wake up and he’d do it again, some kind of game, anyway—or I’d wake up and we’d be back at home. I’d just go into the house and sleep—and move on from it—hope somewhere dimly that it was the last time. But this one time I woke up in the truck and we were parked just off the road on top of a hill with trees all around. I think I was nine. He had already *played* once and must have driven to the new location while I slept. I didn’t recognize the place, but here we go—honestly, I was so conditioned to the whole thing, I almost started taking my clothes off as soon as the truck stopped—the sooner we started the sooner it ended.”

Sloan winced.

“Anyway, I waited for him to start things, or make me start it and I could just see his face and eyes reflecting the dashboard lights. But he had a real sad look on his face.” Lee remembered how weird his eyes were at night. She’d always passed it off as her imagination but they had a reddish glow to them. “So, I asked ‘daddy’—that’s what he made me call him, ‘what’s the matter’ and he said something like, he was going down memory lane.

He climbed out and told me to wait in the truck; he’d just be a minute. Then he walked to the gravel road and continued on down the hill. Well, you can imagine at this point in my life there was not a punishment that he could threaten me with—and believe me, he didn’t mind punishing. I knew I’d never get back to sleep—spooky too.”

Lee shivered remembering the grass whispering in the wind all around the truck.

“So I waited a few minutes and then followed him down the hill. I didn’t have to go far. There was a building—really old—where the road curved. And I was about a hundred feet from it when I saw his silhouette against the gray shingles on the side. He was running his hands over the wall—almost petting it. Then he went around back, and from the echoes and sounds I think he got inside. I didn’t move any closer. Fireflies in the trees were really colorful that night and there were sounds like frogs or crickets or something very noisy. It scared me but I still gave the building a good looking over. Against the night sky—kind of framed by stars and trees—I saw a steeple, a thin black cross on top, and it was bent over toward the road. So I almost screamed and then ran back to the truck.

“He came back and used me pretty roughly. Almost like he knew I was out and watching; but he was also very, well—*horny*, for lack of a better word. Something had him all worked up. I fell asleep at the end of that. Barely had time to pull my pants up.”

Lee shut the big dark door and took a deep breath.

Across from her, Sloan struggled with revulsion. She knew men had difficulty with the story, could tell they wanted to express their disgust but were afraid that might feel like blame to her. He was a cop though, and his response was typically controlled. Sloan nodded. Looked thoughtful a minute, and then strangled an invisible man with his strong hands.

“And you think he might have gone back there?” he asked evenly.

“I don’t even know where *there* is.” She got up, walked over—stood in front of him. *A little rush there...a bit dizzy.* “It was just an old building, a church, by a hill. He used to drive us all over the back roads, and sometimes over the border into Quebec. I was asleep when we got there and asleep when we left. But I have a *feeling* that place meant a lot to him.”

“Well, it’s a landmark. It’s something.” Sloan scratched his chin. “I can ask around, check it out.”

Lee’s face warmed when she closed her eyes. She reached out and stroked his chin—curled her fingers and ran her nails through the stiff bristles. “I want to come with you.”

“No. Morelli might be dangerous,” Sloan said, tone dismayed, halting. He couldn’t hide his excitement.

“Okay,” she said, opening her eyes, giggling. “I wasn’t talking about *that*.” She straddled his lap. Her fingers continued to stroke his jaw line. “But since you brought it up—if I help you find the church—that might help you find *him*.” Her eyes were inches from Sloan’s now. She slid her arms around his muscular shoulders. Her heart beat wildly; his beat against her breasts. “And there’s lots I’d like to make him pay for.”

“Like what?” Sloan had slipped his hands around her waist, was sliding them up and down.

“Maybe it’s the White Russians talking,” she said and giggled. “But enough about him for a minute...” Lee put on a Russian accent, “Make love to me, Comrade...” She giggled. “That sounded Spanish!” Her whole body vibrated as she laughed. When her eyes fixed on his they were a little sad and teary, but very excited. Lee reached down and felt the bulge in his jeans.

“Sorry,” she said, there was no doubt he was interested. “*That* was definitely the White Russians talking!”

“But—your story—the chapter—maybe you, maybe we...” Sloan said. “Are you sure?”

“That story had nothing to do with making love,” she said. “Just don’t hurt me.” Lee giggled. “Unless I tell you to.”

## Chapter 22

John Sutton was starting to think he had a horseshoe up his ass. The expression always made him laugh since the act of putting it up there had to outweigh any of the benefits. *I mean, do you start on it from one end, or do the whole shoe at once?*

“That’s gotta hurt,” he chuckled and then decided that you had to be lucky to survive the process in the first place.

Sutton was feeling lucky, anyway. Some idiot was coming over in the middle of a minor blizzard to buy his van. The radio said a major storm was brewing that would rival

the Blizzard of '77. Sutton didn't care about the weather as long as the roads were clear enough for this guy to drive his new van home. Christmas had tapped them out, and as the new year started he was already getting those *I'm your wife, and wondering why* looks from Angie. The credit card bills had arrived—couldn't forget the utilities either. It was a stroke of desperation that made him put the van up for sale.

He loved the van, but knew he shouldn't have bought it in the first place. They already had the Topaz and his work truck. He didn't *have* to sell it. More work would be coming soon. Once the worst of the winter passed the crew could get back into the lots to cut trees. His December twentieth layoff was unexpected because the boss had assured him in November that the crew would be kept on to clean the shop and tools if there was any downtime. But business was business, and Sutton breezed by Christmas with the help of lots of beer and credit cards. By the middle of January he started praying for a break in the weather—but the snow kept coming—*Goddamn snow anyway!* In an attempt to calm his wife he tried to buy a bit of time by parking the van out front and slapping a *For Sale* sign on it. He never thought it would sell.

Sutton was just watching *Jeopardy* after supper when Angie called him to the phone. A guy was driving north, his truck died on him and he was desperate because he had time-sensitive deliveries to make. *Who cares, just buy my van. Shame to see it go but my wife's been yanking my chain so long I feel like her bitch!* Selling a van in Huntsville in a January snowstorm was quite a feat. *Incredible.* His luck had to be changing; maybe this was going to be a good year after all.

There was a knock at the door. Sutton gave Angie a look and ran an index finger over his lips while pointedly staring at the twins. She nodded. He hurried to the door and pulled it open.

A tall dark figure stood outside the screen door—a cloud of whirling flakes obscured his features. The porch light overhead buried his eyes in shadow. He was tall and lean, just over six feet and big boned. He wore a cap with some kind of a logo on it and a dark green canvas work coat, open, showing a faded plaid shirt and a hunting vest.

"Please, come in! Come in," Sutton said with far too much excitement. *Lower the levels man, or he'll know you need the money.* "Please."

The man pulled the screen door wide and a cold breath of wind blew in, sent a chill up Sutton's spine. The stranger kicked the doorframe to clean his boots and then stepped onto the carpet just inside the door. Sutton saw that his cap said: "Jack Deere." *Jack Deere?*

The man's hands were bare. He wore work pants and boots. His face was unremarkable; the skin was pale and stretched over big high cheekbones. The eyes sat deep in the skull and were dark. When he smiled, warm red lips pulled away from what Sutton judged to be thousands of dollars of dental work.

"Forgive me calling so late," the stranger said, extending a long-fingered hand.

Sutton took the hand and shook it. The fingers were fleshless and the skin clammy. He resisted the urge to wipe his palm on his pants after.

"No trouble," Sutton replied, gesturing for the stranger to come into the hall as he closed the door. "I'm surprised you'd come out on a night like this..."

Suddenly the twins hurtled down the carpeted steps and exploded into the entryway. They were laughing; one was blowing a whistle. Their bare feet stamped in the snowy puddles by the door and they shrieked

“Kids!” Sutton started, smiling apologetically. The stranger missed the expression. He was smiling broadly, hands outspread, as the children ran around his legs. His fingers lightly brushed the twins’ hair as they skipped just beyond his reach.

“Sorry,” Sutton growled, called up the stairs. “Angie! The kids!” The twins screamed with laughter now, as the stranger’s long fingers swept outward.

“Please,” the stranger said, eyes still fixed on the twins. “*Children!*” he snapped with feigned annoyance and they froze, hands hanging at their sides, smiles still set on their cheeks. The stranger knelt down, quickly reached out and then appeared to pull a dollar coin from behind an ear on each. He held them in front of their dazzled eyes. The kids rubbed their ears in unison and looked at the coins.

“A trick,” the stranger said, chuckling. He handed a coin to each child. They watched him, frozen in place. When he rose to his full height, he caressed their tousled heads. “I have more but they will have to wait until another time.” He laughed again.

Sutton was about to say something. He didn’t like the way his kids were so comfortable with the stranger. He’d have to talk to them about that. *Still, some people have a way with kids.*

Then Angie came padding down the stairs, fluffing her hair up and straightening the hem of her pink—and *well-worn*—jogging suit top. “Laney! David! Your movie’s almost over.” She grabbed the kids by their shoulders, pointed them toward the stairs as she looked up at the stranger. “I’m sorry—Mister?”

“Veneur,” the stranger purred, took her hand and half-bowed, before he said, “And please don’t apologize.” The kids looked back at him halfway up the stairs. “I love children.”

“Try twins,” Angie said, a peculiar smile on her face as she explored the stranger’s dark gaze. “Where are you from Mr. *Va-noor?*”

“The south. I sell antiques and rarities at my shop in York—Toronto.” He tilted his head and then cast another glance at the twins. There was an accent there, French maybe, but Sutton didn’t have that refined an ear. “I do most of my business with companies in Montreal. They have connections with collectors in Europe.”

“You’re a collector?” Angie asked. “What brings you to Huntsville in such bad weather?”

Sutton blanched. *Don’t make him feel stupid!* He tried to catch her eye. *Let’s just sell the van!* Then he stared, puzzled—the logo on the man’s cap said: “Skiloil.” *What the...?* The stranger turned to him and smiled. Sutton chuckled and shook his head. There was a sound suddenly in his ears, a chime? *What was I?*

“Sorry...” Sutton’s eyes were still caught in the stranger’s gaze. He reached out to pat Angie’s shoulder—gripped it hard instead. *The van!* Suddenly all he wanted to do was finish the business at hand. *Hurry!* “We don’t get many visitors in the winter since they built the bypass. My wife forgets what’s none of our business.”

“Please. It’s a cold and lonely highway and I’ve been invited into your lovely home. I’ve met you, your charming wife and delightful children.” He did his little half bow again. “It is a welcome intrusion if indeed that is the case.” Veneur turned back to Angie. “I am on my way to South River where I made arrangements to pick up some articles I acquired through an estate sale. My truck broke down—I’m afraid permanently. My affection for antiques comes at a price.”

Sutton could see that his wife was watching Veneur with a strange, partial stare—*was she swaying?* He decided he'd talk to her later about that. *What the hell?* He nudged her shoulder and she snapped out of it.

"Angie, we shouldn't keep Mr. Veneur from his business. He's still got quite a ways to go, and the weather's shit—sorry—bad." Sutton nodded to Veneur, and grinned; then he pulled his boots on and grabbed his coat from the closet.

Angie shook the man's hand again, and then backed toward the stairs. "Sorry, Mr. Veneur, of course."

"Don't apologize." Veneur did another half-bow. "It's been my great pleasure to have so nice a visit. I have driven this highway often and only seen this town as a sign and a highway exit. I will have to visit again—*soon.*"

Angie drew back toward the twins—nodding idiotically. "Please do." She rubbed the kids' shoulders, brought them out of their trances. They'd spent the last few minutes, their eyes flicking between their dollar coins and Mr. Veneur. The three of them moved slowly up the stairs toward the living room.

"Come on," Sutton said, gesturing toward the door. "Time for some male bonding."

Veneur followed Sutton into the blowing wind. He gestured toward the end of the driveway and the van and the stranger nodded. A tall drift had blown up against its passenger side. Sutton grabbed his shovel from the snowbank.

"Hell of a night to buy a van!" he yelled into the wind, but couldn't tell if the stranger heard him. He gave Veneur the keys, gestured for him to start it up while Sutton dug into the snow beside the vehicle, released the driver's side door. He fought his way around the back of the van. *Please buy it! It's perfect for you!* He saw right away that the drifting was not as bad as he'd first thought and shoveled a path halfway to the passenger door.

He beat the snow off his shoulders and chest and climbed into dry heat. Veneur had started the engine. "What do you think?"

Veneur's face was set. The expression was unreadable. He was looking at the dashboard lights.

"It's a Ford Econoline...big... 1998..." Sutton started but Veneur cut him off.

"Please, this is fine. The specifics are irrelevant to my needs." A low chuckle. "I will take your assurance that this is a good vehicle." He nodded slowly, then his eyes brightened as he continued, "I am old-fashioned and have rather more knowledge of antiques than modern conveyances—*vans.*" Veneur's eyes brightened and he laughed. "You must forgive me, but I have an antiquarian's bias against such things. A carriage and string of horses capture my interest. Microchips and gas mileage hold no fascination for me at all."

"I get you," Sutton replied, amazed at the sudden shift in the stranger's talk, then he started doing the math. *Antiques plus rarities plus shop in Toronto equals: Gay.* No problem, just buy the van sweetheart.

"Your family, Mr. Sutton," Veneur said, a strange smile divided his features. "Do you attend church?"

Sutton felt his cheeks flush. "Well, mostly for weddings." He turned toward the window. If Veneur was religious then the whole deal could go south. Christians stuck together. "Some, I guess. And the special holidays for sure," he added weakly.

"That's a shame." Veneur's nose and lips twisted. Something like disappointment pulled his full lips away from his teeth. His eyes stared at the windshield. "Your van."

“It’s big and hard as hell on gas, but dependable.” He couldn’t look at Veneur and lie—especially if the man was a Christian. He looked along the driveway and to the road. “Hey, how’d you get here?”

“A taxicab,” Veneur whispered, “from a gas station.” His long fingers caressed the steering wheel. “How much?”

“\$4,500.” Sutton gritted his teeth, rubbed a hand along the door.

Veneur nodded. “I will pay you \$4,000 cash if we can complete this transaction tonight.”

Sutton’s mind did a flip. *Cash! You bet we can!* He grimaced suppressing his excitement, slapped at the moisture on his pants.

“Hmm,” he said finally. “I suppose we can do it.” Veneur didn’t need to know about the right rear wheel, a bit clunky, and the brakes would need to be re-done soon-ish. Sutton reached into the glove compartment, a half-smile on his lips. He pulled out the ownership and other papers.

“Come back inside,” he said, pushing his door open. “We can do this over a beer.”

“Your company will be refreshment enough, I assure you.” Veneur turned the van off. “Tell me, how old are your children?”

“They’re twins.” Stuffing papers into his coat Sutton replied, “Six in the spring.”

“A robust age,” Veneur said, snowflakes swirled around his head.

The next morning, John Sutton struggled out of a deep and claustrophobic sleep. He was hearing the chimes again, and there was an echo of heat. Face buried in the pillow, he recollected a dim sense of panic too—an anxious memory that tightened his neck muscles. He snapped out of it quickly enough pushing the covers aside. The cool air hit him—then his eyes focused on the wad of cash on the bedside table. *Beautiful!*

He jumped up—head swimming for a second and he had to clutch the headboard as it passed. *Shit!* Then his eyes found the money again.

“Fantastic!” He dressed, and stuffed the cash into his jeans. Angie was sound asleep in a pile of blankets, snoring like a chainsaw. As he hurried down to start breakfast, Sutton paused to look out the window. There was a mound of snow where the van had spent most of the winter. He smiled, and then swore when he saw how deep the snow had piled overnight—drifts completely covered the end of the driveway. *Shit!*

A short time later, Sutton was drinking his coffee and trying to think of a way to talk his wife into buying a new microwave oven. The cash would cover most of the bills; but it was three months since the old microwave had gone tits up and he was sick of waiting for the conventional stove to do the job.

Angie walked into the kitchen. She was pale and had dark rings around her eyes. Her housecoat hung lopsidedly, exposing one bare shoulder.

“Honey, holy shit.” Sutton handed her a coffee and rubbed the exposed skin on her upper back. “Are you okay? You look a little—*awful.*”

“Thanks,” she said, before trudging over to the table and dropping into a chair. “Thirsty. I must be catching something.”

“Well, I hope you can bounce back,” Sutton started. “Because...” And he outlined a trip to the mall and the purchase of a microwave.

“Not going to happen,” she said, and before Sutton could re-state his case she continued: “The twins have something. They were up in the middle of the night.

Surprised you didn't hear it. Crazy buggers were stripped naked under their covers and crying. Probably hot with fever. I thought it was just nightmares, but this morning they're pale and don't want to get up. Got some kind of marks on them too—upper thighs, right in the crotch—like a broken boil maybe," she chuckled. "I think fever. Laney keeps asking about the *lonesome prince*..."

"Lonesome what?" Sutton cupped his wife's cheek. Her skin was cool. He looked closer, saw a small red swelling, an open sore behind her left ear at the hairline. "Hey, looks like you've got one too."

"That's *nothing* compared to where I found others," she smiled cryptically, pulling her housecoat tight. "I was going call you a pervert until I saw the twins. I already had Chicken Pox, and these are too big for that. I don't know." She ran a hand through her hair. "You should take a look at the kids."

"Oh joy." Sutton shook his head. "I can't wait for the vomiting to start."

"Must have caught something from your sister's kids," she said. "And I got it too, which means."

"No microwave today." Sutton said quietly.

"Yeah, and I'd get some orange juice into me right away if I were you."

## Chapter 23

Retired Conservation Officer Arthur Stokes was checking his trapline for corpses. He did it every time he patrolled his property's perimeter. All told it was about a four-mile hike around a big bush lot of pine, cedar, spruce and maple—tattered old birches too. The walk was good for him, very good for his old heart. *Eighty-five-year-old valves—Henry Ford couldn't design them so good. The Koreans couldn't—maybe the Japanese.*

He rolled things over in his mind as he walked the line. It was his way of relaxing. *A bit of physical fitness and philosophy to keep the fight and fuck in me.* It beat what others his age were doing, sitting staring out windows, worried about crapping their pants on the next sneeze. *Not me. Not old Stokesie.* The walk was good; it kept his digestion and just about everything else regular as clockwork. *In an eighty-five year old clock!* It was good for him inside and out. The reason for it, that was different. While the walk would calm a doctor, the reasons behind it might concern a psychologist—if Stokes believed in such things. *He* was more concerned that the average trapper might think he'd gone senile when considering his trapline ran the entire edge of his property about five feet *inside* an electric fence. The fence followed the same winding course through the bush. Nothing could get to the traps for Stokes to trap.

The chain link fence was six feet tall with three strands of barbed wire up top. They had enough juice in them to scare off anything that tried climbing over—and it was hooked up to a couple of computers back in the *Fortress*. Cameras sent pictures to warn him if something was on the property. Stokes knew that some of the local lads talked like he had gone crazy with cabin fever and scotch—and they gave him a wide berth because of it. *Not sure what to think, eh boys?*

He didn't care. Security on his property was an easier task without neighbors dropping in and waking him during the day. Stokes' slept until mid-afternoon so he could patrol—once at midnight, and once just before dawn. *Dawn was the prettiest.* It all might

look like he'd lost it, but as far as he was concerned his mind was as sharp at eighty-five as it had been at twenty. And it could be said that some of the humor that curled up the edges of his old face was wisdom, and the accompanying slippery duck's back for insult that resulted. But the smile was also there because he knew one thing that completely ruined his critic's arguments. They didn't have enough facts to make a judgment on his wits since they based their observations on the kinds of things *they* knew: foxes, rabbits, coons and lynx. Stokes was walking the trapline checking for something else entirely.

He had to admit that tonight's patrol was a challenge. The snow had been coming down heavily for a week and it was tough to move through—put a strain on his knees. *Good shape or not, fiddle fit or so they say—those are 85-year-old hinges just the same.* Stokes contented himself with the jest. It was just pain. He knew a good nap by the fireplace would tend to it. What concerned him was the way the snow had piled up to conceal his traps. To avoid them he kept the fence in the beam of his big lantern, and knew he had a safe path if he kept two and a half feet of space to his left. But the heavy snow tended to shove him this way or that with uneven footing, and he had to move methodically and be prepared to stop to check his bearings—or regain his balance.

The whole project required stepping gingerly, making sure he didn't lean into the fence, or slip too close to the other traps. And they were *some* traps. The main reason he put the electric fence up was to keep people off his property and away from *them*. That was why he ran an electric current through it in the daytime too.

Stokes had tried to space the traps out, and keep them random enough to be traps. From his years with the Ministry of the Environment he had come to respect the chaotic nature of, well, nature, and he knew that the best hunters and trappers tended to think in circles and figure eights, not straight lines. So, he had set large leg hold traps every thirty feet or so. Nothing a bear would worry about, but of a size that would hold a big wolf in his tracks. Those were really just to bamboozle, to hedge his bets—to hopefully warn him that he had caught something or scared it off. That's why he'd affixed an assortment of metal and brass bells to the chains that staked the traps to the ground. It would buy him a little time to prepare. *A good soldier likes to be prepared.* The leg hold traps were metal, and regular animals could smell it. He didn't bait them so...

In the best-case scenario, he hoped his prey would detect the leg holds and change its course toward the *real* traps—the ones that meant business. These were pits about eight feet on a side and ten feet deep, spaced between the leg hold traps. Stokes designed them after tiger traps he'd seen in books and movies—things they used over in India. Took him the better part of a summer to dig them with a rented backhoe in 1980. Cost him a bundle in the end. *Might as well have bought the damned backhoe.* At the bottom of each pit Stokes had planted a little garden of sharpened hardwood stakes: oak and ash, mainly. These, he knew were the most dangerous of his planned defenses. The real show stoppers, as he liked to call them. *Got to know what you're hunting.* Though he wasn't hunting tigers, he was pretty sure they'd be effective for what he had in mind.

*Nobody and nothing's getting past those.* He smiled. *Not even me.* Stokes tightened up his stride a little as he struggled along inside the fence line, forced by the snow to use his shotgun as a crutch. On real quiet nights—when there was nothing in his forest but chickadees and whisky jacks, he was sure he could hear the electric fence hum, but tonight his head was so tightly wrapped against the cold he doubted he could hear a gunshot. *Who'd be shooting a gun back here but you?* He chuckled. A few more yards

and he'd take a break. Stokes found he needed breaks more and more these days—especially in the winter. But age, though it might slow him, would not make him drop his guard. *Not on my watch. Not again.*

Ahead, the beam from his lantern fell over a familiar pairing of bent cedar trees. Under the drift there he'd find a tree trunk sawed off two feet tall that he usually took his rests on. It was about halfway around the property, and a good spot to do it. *Used to be able to hike the whole perimeter without a rest.* Then Stokes smiled thinking: *Used to wake up with a hard on too.*

“Cry me a river,” he groaned out loud, then tried to content himself with the surrounding nature. *Nice place to stop, and vigilant or not, a man's got to smell the pinecones once in awhile.* He often mused that the stump was where they'd find him in the end, when his time was up. Sitting at the fence line, eyes open, guarding the perimeter.

He trudged toward the stump, kicked the snow off the top and then wrangled his way around until he could drop his ass onto it. He winced when he caught his steel bayonet scabbard under his left hip, grunted as he twisted it around on his belt. The action pushed his holstered .9 mm into his lap. Stokes stuck his shotgun in the snow to adjust things. He finally breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back against the rough cedar bark. He felt around and then pulled a canteen out of the huge pocket on his right thigh. Military issue pants could be bulky for getting around in the snow but they offered him lots of room to carry things—way more convenient than a packsack.

“Four-thirty a.m. is a little early,” Stokes smiled opening the canteen and took a good long pull on the whisky. He wiped a thick canvas mitten over his lips and coughed. “But it's past noon somewhere...” Then he laughed.

A loud cracking sound like a gunshot echoed through the forest. Stokes dropped the canteen, snagged his shotgun where it lay in the snow at his feet and hooked his lantern over the barrel. He stood up slowly, eyes peeled for the distance. Hunks of snow dropped through the branches, broke apart and drifted like ghosts. *It was the pines.* The cold was getting to them, too. Sap got too cold and something popped. Stokes had spent too many years in the woods to mistake the sound for anything else. *Damn cold. Even the trees are complaining.* As the lantern light played over the hulking tree trunks, the shadows lurched against the snow, made the low twisted cedars ghoulish.

He took his lantern off the shotgun, shone it down on his canteen and his shoulders sagged mournfully. The snow was stained the color of whisky. *Damn it soldier, that's a waste.* He knelt to retrieve the bottle—grumbling. Stokes shook the canteen, peered into the opening before reupending it to lap at the final drops.

“A carrot at home,” he coughed, slipping the empty canteen back into his pocket. Stokes looked in the direction of ‘home.’ Locals tenderly referred to the structure as “the Fortress,” or “Stokes’ Fortress” and less tenderly as “Stokes’ Folly.” His retirement ‘cottage’ had evolved during its design into something that was a cross between a fortified army bunker and an A-framed summer home. It stood on the highest point on his property, where the lower land rose westward to meet the square mile of bush lot that flattened out behind it. Reinforced concrete walls formed the twelve-foot tall outer edge of the pentagon-shaped lower-structure. These were punctuated with narrow, lancet windows—it could get stuffy in there, but it was cool as hell all summer.

On top of that was a broad viewing deck, and tall A-framed building covered with barred windows of tempered glass. Its heavy beams grew out of a thick concrete rear wall and loomed thirty feet above the rise facing the east. Razor wire coiled around the juncture of concrete and wood—and there was an overhang that the most nimble raccoon would find impossible to navigate. From the parking area at the base of the concrete wall, a timber-reinforced path that resembled a World War One army trench ran up and around to the back of the Fortress where a heavy door and locks allowed entry.

“On duty, anyways.” Stokes’ scalp still itched with adrenaline—the noise from the frozen pine had set his nerves on edge. *Might as well go while my dander’s up.* He’d have to tighten up his reflexes too. If he could still read old Dorval’s tone like he used to then something was up. His friend had called and said he wanted to get together on Thursday to talk about *something serious*.

Dorval was cagey, had said: “There’s trouble with Fergus.”

Stokes spat a long string of saliva into the snow, didn’t notice that half of it hung from his chin. He knew that trouble with Fergus could only mean one thing.

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