

**MOTHER'S BOY**  
**G. Wells Taylor**

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## PROLOGUE

ALL the old houses on the street had the same problems.

But it was the people who lived in them that were haunted.

The homes had leaky roofs and basements, cracked brick and loose mortar. Beneath the peeling paint could be found mildew, fungus and dry rot. And populating the cobwebbed shadows were hungry termites, trundling sow bugs, and skittering roaches.

Time weighed heavily on the creaky uprights, and scratched the wrinkled shingles from overhead, but the great piles of red brick and yellow stone staved off decay by sheer mass alone. The cracked walls were thick, the rotting timbers and supports were stout.

And so the work of long-dead craftsmen held, shored up the load of years and barring fire, war or calamity would stand much longer.

And always the people within the houses were kept safe and sound and relatively dry. The families came and went, and the old homes were given minor touch-ups and repairs, and in some cases major renovation. But the buildings themselves, the heavy masonry and staunch pillars could not be replaced or given respite.

Time pressed down on them relentlessly

Yet, the first century passed with relative ease.

Life unfolded behind the doors that opened onto the street to other homes and neighbors and lives. Lovers were married; babies were born and grew to be lovers in turn.

The buildings protected those within from the elements and harm—the very forces that ground against their stony walls; but they couldn't protect their dwellers from themselves, from the old dangers that they brought with them inside.

And so the houses stood beneath their first century of time, a constant setting to various lives unfolding for good or ill—caretakers of the blessed and the cursed.

But the second century was not so easy.

By its start the weight of years was holding sway. Any flaw overlooked had developed into a condition, and some superficial mending delayed, a cracked wall painted over say, or a wooden sill swollen with rot, had deteriorated to dangerous depths beneath its disguise.

Yet still these buildings endured. Their crumbling corners unshaken by the yawning years held aloft the walls and floors and kept the life within from harm.

As much as they were able.

For the buildings could only protect. They could not influence what went on within their walls—what their dwellers did.

So the houses stood their ground, night upon night, protecting those who slept beneath their sagging roofs, inhabitants whose nightmares were shaped by the creaking floors or groaning timbers, the damp spaces and drafty halls.

The houses were only silent, aging witnesses and sentinels.

And one day they would fall and fail.

For all the old houses on the street had the same problems.

But it was the people who lived in them that were haunted.

Like the woman in the attic of the big red brick house at the end of the street atop the hill.

That building's eccentric turret had overlooked the town since its founding. The house, now well into its second century, was built on the escarpment's edge by a ship's

captain back when the harbor had hosted sailors from afar. He'd demanded of his architect that the turret perch high, so his young wife could watch the horizon for his sails, should the lake and fate have kept him overlong.

*Overlong...*

The lake kept him forever in the end, and fate took his wife away in childbirth. The house stood through his memorial and her funeral and quietly welcomed the next family into its embrace.

But the woman in the attic knew little and cared less for the building's ancient history. Her connections to the house were more recent and personal. Like so many modern people she was a prisoner of *now*, running from her past and afraid of the future, too busy drowning in time to understand its power. And now her problems had sent her running to the attic's unfinished spaces for safety and for silence—and for a place to disconnect and catch her breath.

For her current task had overwhelmed her.

Between the stored boxes and unused furniture she ran. Her eyes were glazed with terror and her teeth showed pale in a bone-white face.

Where the path through the crowded storage ended, she cowered in the angled space between ceiling rafters and floor, where the old dust had piled up and clotted in tattered wads of gray debris.

"It's my fault," she whispered as she ducked down behind a musty box of old clothing. "It's true!" And she made claws of her fingers, and raked the flannel shirt that covered her belly.

"I'm sorry," she said, and gasped as her eyes fell on a long, coiled length of clothesline, and for a second she pictured white sheets upon it pinned against a blue sky, drying and snapping in the wind like sails. The sun gleamed through...

"I can't," she muttered hopelessly, reaching out for the coil of rope.

The woman was 37 and no more, and pretty in her worn and weary way.

She looked up to where the rafters met over her and the peak of the roof was in easy reach, but high enough for the task at hand. The task that brought new tears welling from her burning eyes.

"Because of me," she said, looping one end of the clothesline around a beam and putting a slipknot in the other end close by her forehead.

*Because of me...*

Something stopped her then, bent her forward around a knife of pain, and she dropped to her knees.

"Why?" she pleaded through tears, her eyes yearning for escape. "It wasn't *all* my fault."

And then a wind entered the attic, tore up along the angled stairs to raise the dust and set the single light bulb swinging from its chain.

"No!" the woman screamed rising, throwing a hand across her face against the blinding storm of dust. "Leave me alone!"

And she stretched up for the clothesline noose that swung low by her head, and on tiptoe slipped her chin through the loop.

*Leave me alone.*

Her bare feet brushed the floorboards while she died.

The errant wind set her body swaying until it played out.

And somewhere in the house a phone started ringing.

**Monday, May 6**

## Chapter 1

4:00 p.m.

AMANDA West watched old Georgie rolling toward the wicker side table that was positioned by his bed. He muttered to himself more than to her, saying, “Get the phone. Got some *visitors...*”

His extended footrests knocked against the table legs as he came to a halt, reaching forward with a gnarled old hand to lift the receiver from its cradle.

“Hello?” he rasped, pressing the phone to his ear.

Amanda stifled a laugh.

Georgie had an old black rotary phone that a staffer had picked up years ago at a yard sale, so it wouldn’t likely work even if it *had* been plugged in.

“Hello?” the old man repeated.

And Amanda snickered into her sleeve.

He had been insistent during the early days of his stay, carping on and on to the nursing and support staff about needing a phone and having business to do. And he spent long days returning to the nurses’ station constantly, asking to borrow their phone, or money so he could use the payphones in the first floor lobby. It drove them crazy

He had the money, he claimed. *I’ll pay you back later.*

*And he had business calls coming in and business calls to make.* He’d also manipulated the staff with stories of family and friends and visitors. He never knew when they might try to call.

*Come on!* He needed a phone.

He had family obligations.

*He needed a phone for business!*

Despite the fact that Georgie was not allowed to have a phone, the staff had to do something to break the impasse, and in the end they’d been lucky. It didn’t matter to Georgie that there was no one who would call, and no one that wanted to hear from him.

His file listed a *lawyer* as his *primary contact* in case of emergency.

He had no one.

And he deserved it—he’d put himself right where he was. Most people in Grey County who were old enough knew something of his story and those too young had at least heard rumors about it. Rumors of what he’d done...

*If* Georgie even came to mind. His story had happened a long time ago now and the general public had an endless barrage of shocking *new* headlines to contend with.

Georgie was history, to most; he was old news.

“Hello?” he said again into the dead receiver. His voice had become a mere whisper of its former self over the years. It had fairly boomed when he’d first arrived.

Amanda had only been a year out of college on her first job placement at Lee Manor when they met. She had worked at a few different jobs after high school, trying to find herself—so she didn’t graduate from nursing school until the age of 25.

She remembered how Georgie had gone on and on about the phone.

*He needed it for business, or for someone wanting to visit.*



A phone had become a necessity in the end. Everybody who was there remembered the immediate calming effect it had when he finally got his mitts on one, and first turned the rotary dial with his big, scarred fingertips.

*Georgie's telephone treatment* worked better than some of the strongest sedatives at the home.

He didn't seem to mind that it was not hooked up.

Or that it would only break the rules if it were.

They were lucky.

Amanda wondered if he could actually hear it ring.

It was weird the way it happened, but like some pre-wound clock, he'd break from whatever conversation he might be attempting, or snap out of a sleepy reverie, and move his chair back to the phone. It happened everywhere: in his room, while he was out rolling the halls or in the middle of dinner, just *snap* and he had to go answer the phone.

And the staff quickly learned it was best to let him go get it. Those times they'd tried to prevent him; he had shown a flash of temper that stirred echoes of the man who'd put himself on the road to ruin, and the path to Hell.

But Georgie had a way. You had to feel for him. He was so addled by senile dementia that he struggled to keep his place in a conversation, let alone accurately recall the events that had colored his life so darkly.

So, what was the point in reminding him?

And there were times he seemed to be suffering without any urging.

When Amanda pulled the late shift, she had heard him lying in bed and whispering on the phone in the middle of the night—he'd sounded so pitiful that it had tugged at her heart to hear him cry.

*Not that he doesn't deserve it:* as all the staff said like a period or exclamation mark at the end of any bittersweet story they shared about him, as though they owed it to his victims.

But time and poor health had made him a sympathetic character.

And he was lost without his phone—unable to function.

He needed it for work, even though he hadn't been employed after the events almost 30 years past, after his 15 years in a forensic psychiatric ward, lengthy stay at a group home and his final move to the Lee Manor Long Term Care Facility in 2002. A cruel and unusual punishment multiplied by his paralysis and life in a wheelchair.

*He had it coming.*

Georgie pulled the receiver away from his ear and looked at it puzzled.

"Just wind scraping ice," he said, before hanging up and staring at the device while Amanda hesitated by the door.

She'd only stopped at his room to give him his meds: a sedative, blood pressure pills and an anti-clotting agent. His heart was stuffed full of blockages, but he was too sick for his doctor to bother cutting them out.

Georgie looked at his palms and then rubbed at the dark stains left by the chair's rubber wheels.

Amanda sighed ruefully, contemplating the hard edges of life.

Even if he deserved the isolation, Georgie could be a sad thing to watch.

Aside from staff, he only ever received one visitor, and that one was a shocker for anybody who knew the story.

Retired Sydenham police detective Michael “Red” Penney made it in to the nursing home at least twice a month to play cribbage with Georgie, or to try, depending on Georgie’s level of lucidity that day.

He had his good days and bad.

But it had surprised everyone at the home when Penney first showed up with a cribbage board under his arm, and a couple coffees in a takeout tray asking for the “lady killer.”

He’d been the detective on Georgie’s case, and had caught him without much of a fuss or to-do. Of course people in town would’ve called it a no-brainer anyhow, since Georgie’s fingerprints were everywhere, and considering his relationship to his victims.

Especially since Georgie was still at the scene when the police arrived—down at the bottom of the stairs in a pool of blood with his back broken.

A crime of passion.

When Georgie turned his wheelchair to the door, his old brow twisted into furrows, and his mouth dropped open in surprise when he saw her.

“Who are you?” he asked Amanda in a half-whisper. He glanced over the left and then right arms of his chair, a worried look on his face before his gaze slid across the floor, checked the corners and then...

“I’m your nurse,” she said feigning disappointment. He had his days. “*Amanda!* I’d think a handsome young gentleman like you might remember me.”

“I remember,” he sighed, looking up at her as she moved over to him and pushed long strands of white hair from his eyes. “You give me pills.”

Amanda chuckled, smoothing his hair over the dome of his head. He still had lots of it, parted on the left. “You need a haircut.”

He squinted up at her.

“We’ll be calling you for supper soon,” she reminded him, and the old man showed his crooked dentures in a smile.

Then a phone rang down the hallway outside Georgie’s room.

Its shrill warble cut through the quiet and made the old man wince as he swung around to face his old rotary phone on the side table.

He rolled toward it.

## Chapter 2

11:00 p.m.

GINA Genoa's cell phone rang and her hands came up to muffle the sound as her anxious fingers switched the power off. The night rushed in again, and her heart hammered as she listened to the shadows for the sound of pursuit.

A single ringtone had escaped. A stupid riff had *twanged* over the beach—something from a favorite song she shared with her eldest daughter.

Not loud on the street, but it was more than enough on the empty stretch of shoreline. *It was too much.*

Her breath caught as the heavy sound of feet thumped toward her over the sand.

Gina crouched down in the thicket of manicured trees that marked the southern edge of the resort. It was the only shelter she could find on the run.

She couldn't be farther from home.

*Fun. Sun. Tan on a white sand beach,* she remembered the brochure proclaiming.

The footsteps stopped—an airy wheeze suggested rapid breathing.

Or it could have been the wind that was still playing havoc, plucking at the curls of Gina's sun-bleached hair and causing the broad-leafed trees around her to sway.

In the distance, the Caribbean Sea lapped quietly at the shore like it was listening too. Wondering where he was.

Close by, in the dark, waiting with ears cocked. He'd be trying to pick up her trail.

*They had taken a nice long walk after a late supper.*

It was the second night of their trip.

It was her idea to take a little vacation to get away from it all. Just what the doctor ordered after three years of struggle with her ex since the breakup.

Her marriage was finally history.

In the time between, she'd taken risks, sometimes stupid ones, all on the way to finding herself—the *real* Gina. While the road to self-discovery was not well marked, she found it overpopulated. She'd met some nice men—good men with stable characters, decent men that she eventually found to be boring men. Maybe “predictable” was a better word.

They were moving toward the place in life she'd just escaped.

That was the recurring theme. Men her age all wanted love, security and peace on earth; but she didn't believe in that now, and any sign of the sentiment in a man flared up to her like drama.

*She had just come free of all those heart-wrenching chains—so words like love and house and home and family sounded like a prison sentence.*

And she remembered that her ex-husband had been like that in the beginning. Just out of college with a good job, he'd been a stable choice, a smart choice, and a family man before pregnancy arrived nine tedious months before parenthood, separate bedrooms and the inevitable infidelity.

In the end, their marriage didn't have enough passion to push past the dirty diapers and the pabulum. She was still amazed by how quickly it had died. Her ex took the easy way out—avoidance: *baby's crying, honey, you get her; I've got to work late, don't wait up; I'll be along after the hockey game.*

And she was too busy with the baby to notice how lonely she was.

They got drunk and romantic on their third anniversary. They no longer had a regular sex life—and nine months later a second daughter had arrived. Gina saw even less of her ex after that, but neither of them seemed to care.

Of course, he wanted to be around when she started to talk about divorce.

*Then* he wanted to participate, but it was too late.

So after seven years of talking about the end of the world: their world ended. They were still married when he found someone like she used to be, and she had started her search for what had been missing all those years.

So many of the men she met after her separation had frightened her with their open arms and their understanding—and even their love. They were so free with it. Love poured out of them in a desperate stream.

And while she did not run from love, she recognized the trap inside the word. These men wanted comfort for themselves, and security. Most were ex-husbands hoping to replace what they'd lost.

Gina knew it would be like finding her husband again.

*The good old days.*

So she took some risks, and avoided the emotional guarantees of men her age, opting for the vigorous, if unpredictable, affections of youth. Young men didn't care about tomorrow as much. They weren't worried about a home and family. Sex, freedom and fun seemed to be all they needed.

And that was fine with Gina. She had her daughters and that was all the family she wanted.

From there, it was an easy leap to becoming a *cougar*. In fact, she quickly realized that young men were so horny her own grandmother could have scored.

Gina had kept herself in shape, and her 39-year-old body drew all the attention she desired. The young men were attractive and enthusiastic, and their physical yearning unquenchable. They showed their inexperience in bed, but so did she. After all, except for her infidelities, what experience did she have?

Unfaithful sex was thrilling because it was *unfaithful*. There was no need for foreplay or technique when fucking a married coworker in the parking lot at lunch.

*It was so easy then.*

So as Gina had experimented, she had been drawn to that part of herself that had always yearned for more from life. The younger men were like a fountain of youth to her.

They came, she came and they went home.

And then she'd met Brandon Clark. Weird really, how that happened.

One day as she was coming out of a Metroland grocery, a gust of wind and dust blew up out of nowhere and blinded her. She took two awkward steps and walked right into him. Fate was looking after her—chance had her back, or so she had thought at the time.

*Everything's gone to hell now!*

He was 24 and a sculptor, very handsome, and his eyes had that half-crazy look, an untamable intensity like so many artists had; but there was also a darkness in Brandon's gaze that he wouldn't or couldn't explain.

Brandon used that mystery to sweep her off her feet and he fucked her against the outside back wall of the pub where they met for their first date. There was something about him.

Every warning light went off in her, but that was the old Gina. *She* cared about warning lights. The old Gina had *warned* herself into boredom.

The new Gina found him intriguing, and very sexy.

*Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!*

Now four short weeks later, they were on a nine-day, all-inclusive vacation in the Dominican Republic. Brandon had been short of funds, but she didn't mind paying his way. Between her salary and the spousal support, she could treat them both to some time away.

And the girls needed time with their father.

So Gina and Brandon had jetted off to the sun and surf.

She had been surprised earlier that night when Brandon insisted on bringing his digital camera on their beach walk, but she didn't waste a lot of time wondering. He always had the thing with him, and this trip had been no different. In fact, carrying the camera had made more sense on the beach than the way he lugged it around with him everywhere back home.

It didn't matter where he was, he only put the camera down when it was time to fuck or sleep.

Gina had suspected he was going to ask her to take some dirty pictures again. It was a part of his dark character that she desired and feared, but had so far found manageable. He'd already asked her a few times if he could take some naked photos of her.

The idea had thrilled her at first.

And it was her belief that naked pictures were on his mind when he'd badgered her into shaving her pubes. She'd gone along with that, and she had to admit that though his request had creeped her out a bit, it had also turned her on.

But she wasn't going to let him take any pictures. She knew how dangerous it could be to have digital photos on the loose. There was something on the Internet about it every day—someone screwing up her life by permanently recording a moment of extremely poor judgment.

No. She wouldn't go along with the photos, but the shaving...why not? And it was a way of keeping him interested, too. She didn't know how long they would last, but she sure enjoyed the sex they'd had the night she showed him her "manicured hedge."

So far things had been good. He had shown no interest in the meaningful things that the older men were obsessed with. Devotion. Love. Compassion.

Brandon had none of that. He was freedom, fucking and self-expression.

So...

*I was so blind...*

After they had fucked on the sand with the starlight overhead, he'd left her on the towel by their clothes to wade far out through the shallows to the deeper water where he could swim.

And after Gina had watched the sky for a while, and twisted her toes in the sand, she noticed that he'd set his camera beside her on his shorts and shirt.

While Brandon swam, she had nonchalantly picked the camera up, turned it on, and flipped through his pictures on the electronic viewfinder.

*Oh my God, what had he done?*

Hiding in the dark amidst the trees, Gina's guts cramped around the memory.

The first photos were of her legs sticking out of the bed sheets. She couldn't see her face, but she knew her own feet—and she knew the setting. It was their hotel room at the resort, the first night. They'd gotten really drunk and she passed out early.

*The bastard!*

And the photos progressed from there as she flipped forward through the files to show the blankets and sheets come off, and then came a series of photos showing her naked crotch from two feet away. He'd taken the pictures...

Gina had almost screamed at him out in the water, right then and there called him a scumbag; but she browsed into another folder of picture files.

And found a photo of a window in a brick wall. She didn't recognize the house. There were lights inside; it was night. The lawn suggested any neighborhood. The next two pictures were shot between curtains and showed a redheaded girl of no more than nine in a nightie on her bed.

The next photo was similar of the same girl but now she had a teddy bear.

And then there was a picture of the girl sleeping. It was taken inside the room by someone standing beside her bed.

The next one showed the girl's bed without blankets. Like Gina's own had been.

*The fucker! And the next...*

"What are you doing?" Brandon's voice had broken through the darkness. He'd swum closer to shore and must have seen the camera's display illuminating her face.

"You sick fuck!" Gina had thrown the camera aside and clambered to her feet before snatching up her bikini and her top.

"What did you do?" he snapped, thrashing toward shore, but Gina was running. Slipping and falling in her sandals, she kicked them off and ran naked.

Behind her, Brandon had shouted something angry—full of fury. His voice had changed then. All the darkness was coming out.

No more mystery.

When Gina had reached the line of trees she slid into her bikini and pulled her top over it, pausing only to feel her phone in the pocket.

She had no idea how to call the police in a different country.

Or how to tell them where she was.

So she had been trying to catch her breath and get a sense of where *Brandon* lurked when the damn phone had rung...

Her mind reeled out of reverie.

There was still no sign of him.

As she listened in the darkness, the pale sand appeared through the branches and leaves as a two-dimensional pattern of black and gray. The ocean beyond was no better, black but with points of light. The stars reflected.

*You have to run!*

A sudden gust of wind shook the trees near her, set the branches clicking and cracking against each other. She reached out to steady them.

And she heard a sudden breath. Quite close.

Something rustled near.

*Oh God!*

And then her phone rang again.

*Impossible!* She had turned it off.

As she clawed it out of her pocket, the light from its view screen showed the tangled branches like bars close around her.

And reflected off of Brandon's eyes where he stood naked, staring into her hiding place.

"Time for a swim," he said, reaching through the darkness.

## Chapter 3

11:00 p.m.

THE phone rang but the man who sat beside it was too intent on his web search to be startled by the sudden sound.

He glanced away from the computer to grunt at the noise before diving back into his surfing, casually netting page after page of free sample photos from selected porn sites. He'd already chosen a couple of fine videos, and was just looking for some complementary still shots.

It had been a long day.

And he'd used the idea of a naughty schoolgirl as a carrot to get him through it.

Nothing more twisted than a high school senior falling out of her uniform.

*That's twisted enough, considering...* But he was particular about his self-gratification.

The phone rang again.

*Controlling. Methodical.* He chuckled, wondering if subconsciously *he* was the naughty schoolgirl, and his choice of profession was the big bad principal against whose rule he rebelled.

*You've been working too long.*

The blind was pulled down over the room's only window obscuring a bleak Main Street view of an out-of-business clothing store and realtor. He'd turned out the lights in his second floor office. The only illumination came from the computer monitor.

He enlarged a few of the more promising photos before clicking them off in disgust.

*Always tattoos... How many schoolgirls have tramp-stamps, let alone one the size of a cowboy hat?*

The phone continued to ring.

Another grouping of digital images appeared on the screen. They hit the mark with the school uniforms—short plaid skirt, dark jacket with crest, white dress shirt and knee socks, and black patent leather shoes—but the models were Asian.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. He'd been known to dabble in those waters too, but he preferred blondes—especially after a hard day at the office. Of course, the Asians always looked young enough; they were ahead of the game there, too. He'd seen photos of non-Asian “cheerleaders” where the models had to be pushing 40.

The phone rang on and he cursed. The porn was losing its grip on him.

He grumbled, reached out and answered the phone.

“Hello?” he whispered, clicking on an image of some “schoolgirls” about to engage in a semi-naked pillow fight.

“This is Detective Joe Penney of the Sydenham Police Services,” a hard voice rapped in his ear. “I'd like to talk to Dr. Simon Minor.”

“*Detective?*” Minor shot forward in his chair, and started clicking closed the many windows that were clustered on his large flat screen. “Um, just...a second—a second!” He kept clicking. “Sorry, just...working and uh...”

“Could I speak to Dr. Minor?” the detective repeated.

“This *is* actually—but I'm not a doctor,” he said. “You've *guh*-got him. Simon Minor—*me*.” He saw that he had accidentally closed his email program during his panic,



so double-clicked to open it again, hoping he'd saved the letter he had been drafting before he'd become distracted by the digital porn.

"You aren't a doctor?" the detective continued.

"Uh, no, I'm a social worker with a degree in psychology," he explained, shrugging into the phone. "I'm a *counselor*—uh, for—there is a shortage of psychologists in the smaller cities like Sydenham. I work for the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and can make recommendations regarding more extensive psychiatric—uh—care."

"All right. But you *do* counsel then...okay," the detective said. "I apologize for calling so late Mr. Minor. I didn't want to try you at home since it's really not an emergency at this point, but thought I might catch you at the office."

*Lucky catch.* Minor glanced at his watch. It was just after 11 o'clock.

"Uh look, I have a confession to make," Penney continued suddenly. "I drove by your building a half hour ago and saw a light was on behind the blind."

*Not a lucky catch—a creepy one...*

"That's okay. I'm—I'm just finishing up a few things, uh—I had a busy day." Minor struggled to master his stammer. It only came on when he was nervous—or surprised. "So I can—uh—make a fresh start of it in the morning." He frowned as he opened the mail *drafts* folder, and saw he'd failed to save the letter he'd been composing. "How can I help you, Detective Penney?"

"I got your name and number from Health Services—the *fourth floor*," Penney said, referring to the Sydenham Hospital's Mental Health Services wing. "They said you were Brenda Hamilton's counselor."

"Well, Detective, I'd like to help—uh, but as you know, anything that my clients share with me is—uh—privileged information," he answered.

"Even without you being a doctor?" the detective asked.

"I have some latitude," Minor admitted, "but the files are private."

"Okay. We'll be talking to her next of kin again so they'll probably give consent if we need anything," Penney said. "They were pretty broken up today."

"Uh—wait—*next of kin!*" Minor reached out to the desk lamp and turned it on. "What happened?"

"Earlier today—your client was found hanging by her neck from a length of clothesline in the attic over her apartment," Penney said starkly. "She rented the top floor of the *Brighton House*." He cleared his throat. "Sorry to be the one to break it to you."

"Oh my God. Dead," Minor gasped. *Poor Brenda.* She had moved there about a week before—the first of May—said she needed to prove something to herself, but wouldn't elaborate. "That's—that's awful."

"The new owners had just finished renovations, too. So much for the fresh start." Penney's voice sounded old and tired of dark humor.

Sometimes called "the Captain's House," the Brighton House had a history. Of course, most of Sydenham's century-old houses did.

"A shame," Minor breathed the words.

"Yeah. A pretty cut-and-dried suicide," Detective Penney said matter-of-factly. "A neighbor heard a lot of noise during the day leading up to it. Music and what sounded like an argument."

"Well, she—she didn't have a boyfriend, and—complained that she had no friends. She lived alone," Minor said, heart sinking.

Brenda Hamilton was a sad case: 37, single, depressed and unable to form close personal relationships. A local who suffered intense guilt over something she refused to talk about. Minor had read her file and knew what fueled her depression, but the discussion had to come from her.

Brenda wasn't crazy enough to warrant psychiatric intervention, but in their last session together, she'd worried him.

*"Payback is coming," she'd told Minor, mascara and tears streaking her face.*

*"Payback for what?" he'd asked, watching her eyes as they jittered around the room like she could see something he couldn't.*

*"For what I did," she said calmly, and then gave him an even smile. "But I'm ready to make it right."*

As he had many times before, he'd asked her what she had done that was so terrible, hoping to nudge her toward constructive dialogue, but she had circled around to talk about payback coming. Eventually, her agitation passed, and she'd ended the session with a laugh and a warm hug.

*Like she was comforting me.*

"Last time I saw her," Minor started, "she—uh—didn't look well. I was considering getting her into the hospital for observation."

"You were *considering* it?" the detective challenged.

"There are steps we have to take," Minor explained, hoping he didn't sound too defensive. "If someone is presenting an immediate danger to himself or others, we can take decisive action and get him in right away. Otherwise, we have to start a process. I'd arrange a meeting for Brenda, myself and a psychiatrist and we'd make recommendations about treatment. There's a chronic shortage of psychiatric beds...so I'd have to see if one was available. It's complicated."

Minor felt a sudden rush of realization as the news began to sink in.

*Had he done enough?* He'd put a call in to Brenda's doctor. There'd be a record of that. Minor would have to close her file. *There'd be an investigation.*

"Okay," the detective said. His voice was frustratingly business-like. "But she didn't look well when you saw her last?"

"No, but she was getting ready to move," Minor said. "So she was agitated." *But not bad enough to warrant intervention.*

"When was that?" the detective asked.

"Uh—one, one sec," Minor said, and then shoved his notebook, box of tissues and coffee cups off the desk blotter. He quickly ran a finger over the big calendar. "Two weeks ago..." He did the math. "April 23rd."

"We think it happened Sunday." The detective went quiet, probably writing notes. "Her parents found the body today around noon. They were taking her to lunch."

"Those poor people," Minor breathed.

"A downstairs neighbor heard noises Sunday afternoon," the detective said. "There's no proof that anyone else was there—except the neighbor thought she was talking to someone. Maybe having an argument. We can pull her phone records. Other than that, we just have *sounds*."

"She vocalized—Brenda talked to herself," Minor said, his voice dropping. *She must have been agitated—panicked.* "Look, uh, I've got her parents' phone number somewhere..."

“A uniform already talked to them, but we’ll follow up when they’ve had a bit of time,” Penney said. “If her parents don’t give consent to let us look at her file—well, we’ll work it out.” Then his tone softened. “Listen Mr. Minor thanks for your time. Your office hours are?”

“Eight to five, generally,” Minor explained absently, thinking the parental consent might be unnecessary. He made a habit of getting his clients to sign a couple *blank* “Release of Information” forms in the event something came up and their permission was needed in their absence. *Never with this in mind.*

“But I make myself available Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday night from—from seven to 9:30 for people who work and can’t—uh—make it during the day.”

“Okay, thanks, this is all probably academic. Not much to investigate in a suicide,” Detective Penney said. “I’ll drop in if I have more questions.”

“Sure, uh—great,” Minor said as the detective hung up with a *click*. “*Super.*”

The heavy feeling grew in his chest as Minor thought of Brenda Hamilton. *Hanging. Alone.* He smiled grimly. *Would hanging with company be better?*

“Brenda,” he muttered, shifting his attention back to the computer. She’d suffered nightmares, too. More payback. *Part of what she deserved.*

Minor quickly deleted his web browser history, and the schoolgirl video samples he’d downloaded. With a detective set to *drop in*, he couldn’t be too careful.

*What about your own little shit storm?* He would have to talk to his supervisor, but first he’d put Brenda’s file together—sort that out and update his notes. Minor would soon be on the hot seat justifying why he had been concerned about Brenda, but hadn’t taken any action. *OH FUCK!*

Minor paused halfway through cleaning up his computer to ponder the phone. He had a feeling it was about to ring again.

**Wednesday, May 8**

## Chapter 4

5:00 a.m.

SHARON took her cell phone out of its waterproof pocket when she heard the ring and flipped it open. Light from its screen colored her hands and arms pale blue.

*Nothing.* She checked the call display and found only a number from the night before. Margie from the Little Theatre—hopeless Margie, in love with another liar.

She turned the phone off, switched it back on and shrugged.

*A glitch.* She should have gone for the more expensive smartphone.

Then she cursed her ex-husband under her breath. Phil had been fair on the child support, but had managed to whine and whittle away at the *spousal*.

Nothing extra. *That's why you've got to work so hard.*

Sharon slipped the phone back into the pocket just inside the waistband of her pants and zipped her hoodie closed.

She knew it was a little risky taking her morning run before sunrise, but for some weird reason it felt safer than going after sunset.

She didn't know why it worked that way, but it worked that way. Maybe it was the one time when good guys and bad guys were in complete agreement.

Five o'clock was too damn early to be doing anything. Even running seemed ridiculous when she had first turned off her alarm and poked her nose out of the blankets to test her bedroom's chill air.

But Sharon's day lived and died by her run. Once she got dressed and laced up her shoes, the world started to make sense. If something kept her from it, then God help anyone who got in her way—the day became a struggle and everyone became an adversary.

*She had to run.*

And now that spring was well on its way, the whole enterprise became an exercise in health and happiness. She found it impossible to contain herself once she got going; the fresh air leant an extra kick to her feet, and her lean body thrummed with youthful vigor.

And she hadn't been able to get enough youthful vigor since she'd turned 39.

Winter running on the treadmill at the YMCA or plowing through snowdrifts with the other hardy souls from the Runner's Den jogging club paled *and sucked* compared to tying on her shoes and hitting the fitness trail that wound through Harrison Park as the sun rose over the forested escarpment. The May morning sky usually lit up with colors that gave her a boost that lasted till nightfall.

It was the definition of well-being.

She had been a little put off when she first came out of her house. The forested east rocks were black at the horizon; the limestone bluff was still a wall of shadow butted up against a dark sky, and the air smelled like rain.

*Sunrise would be late.*

Across the street, rainwater left by a recent shower had gathered in small pools where the winter frost had cracked and deformed the asphalt.

And moisture hung in the air, settled on her skin in droplets and obscured the details of her neighborhood with foggy gray.

Still, she wasn't going to be stopped by the threat of weather—it wouldn't be snow—and the lingering darkness would pass quickly.

The several blocks she had to cover to reach the park were lit by streetlights anyway, and the fitness trail was an easy 10 or 15-minute run over a crushed gravel path.

A gusty wind soon appeared and promised trouble from the cloud that lurked somewhere overhead, but she was wearing her waterproof gear and her course rarely kept her out for more than 40 minutes.

Sharon actually didn't mind running in the rain. Never in a downpour, and only if it was warm enough, but a run through the raindrops had a cleansing effect on her soul.

So she started south along 3rd Avenue, jogging down the left side of the road, keeping an eye out for puddles and traffic. She didn't trust Sydenham drivers. There were too many senior citizens in too many old folks' homes. One early-rising old man behind the wheel of a big car could be doomsday for her.

And in minutes she crossed the usually busy 10th Street, now traveled by a single cab that crept west to Main Street and the harbor beyond.

She hurried through a mist that shrouded the old post office and the new, her shoes kicking up a light splatter from the wet sidewalk, freckling her calves with mud.

Sharon would reach the fitness trail that traversed the park inside of 10 minutes. It followed the winding course of the Sydenham River, crawling through forest and wetland toward the distant Inglis Falls many miles to the south where the limestone escarpment's eastern and western arms crossed at the ruins of the old mill there.

While she'd done the run out to Inglis before, her weekday morning did not allow her the time for that ambitious circuit. Instead, she would cross a bridge heading west over to where the path slipped under the old trees that filled the wide river valley, where the Harrison Park Inn stood by a big parking lot.

There was a kid's playground and wading pool near there, an old band shell, and farther in, a grass and gravel campground on the west side of the river.

But Sharon's course would take her across another bridge by the inn where she would run back north toward town out to where the fitness trail met Main Street as it entered the park and completed the loop.

She was on the clock. Her kids should be up by the time she got back. The oldest, Bobby, at 11 years of age, was able to look after his sister for the brief time between waking and Mom's return from the run. He could get her started with morning cartoons and a bowl of dry cereal—if he bothered to get her started at all. She often slept until Sharon was finished showering.

And it was not uncommon for her to return home and find them both still in bed.

Sharon slowed her pace where 3rd Avenue crossed 6th Street hill. The brick homes were set well back from the sidewalks and big old trees grew out of the deep wide lawns to hang their heavy branches over the asphalt.

To her left, 6th Street cut sharply upward, blazing a trail east through the darkness; its streetlights obscured by huge maples and oak that grew out of the gnarled clay slopes that swept away to either side.

She was past the hill in a heartbeat and starting through the winding streets by the old homes bordering the park. This neighborhood had enjoyed a resurgence of sorts, and the properties had a classic look that reminded her of pictures from the good old days before

World War II or *the great old days* of the 1950s that her father claimed came after. They were old homes, in the good company of other well-kept properties.

The Sydenham River boasted many such neighborhoods along its foggy banks.

But running between raindrops, still waiting for the slow sunrise, Sharon was overpowered by the more gothic qualities of these old buildings; ancient and imposing compared to the pop-up structures that were thrown into the new neighborhoods behind the mall.

The architecture of these older places—with high gables, brick buttresses and Roman arches—made them more than a little creepy there in the dripping shadows. Having grown up in Sydenham, Sharon had heard the stories of some of these houses—the dark tales from their pasts.

The town had a mean streak back at the time of its founding, and the older buildings lurking in the shadows seemed to remember that legacy and now echoed it.

Years past, Sydenham had been a notorious Great Lakes port where many a wicked sailor had come to a bad end, and at its worst the city had earned a reputation that prompted the town's early clergy to ban the sale and consumption of alcohol within its limits.

Everything had a past though—Sharon did, too—and not all history could be referred to as “the good old days.”

*Maybe towns have learning curves, too.*

She couldn't fault the buildings for their staying power or the old memories they housed, and she remembered that the gabled roofs were cheerful and homey to look at in the light of day. She was just getting caught up in the morning's rain-washed gloom.

*If only the damn sun would rise.*

A fine mist continued to fall against her face, and the taste of spring on each breath soon lifted her spirits. So she picked up her pace, and turned the corner that put her a short quarter mile from the fitness trail.

*We all have a past.* She thought to herself, still struggling against the fog that shrouded her heart. *Shit happens.*

She remembered the months after her divorce.

She'd done some things she wasn't proud of, and interestingly, those things weren't the *bad things* she'd done with *bad* men.

*Buyer beware...*

She tried to be philosophical. Transition men had to be more careful about the choices *they* made when dating divorced women.

*What did they expect?*

And she had still been angry at the time, pissed off with her ex, and distrustful of men. Then, gasping down a breath of moist air Sharon realized that she'd enjoyed making men squirm as far back as she could remember. *In high school especially.* Any time she had felt down about herself, she had lashed out at the boys—especially the good ones.

*You can't hurt a bad one, right?* Half-familiar faces flashed across her mind. She had always been a challenge to the boys—the sensitive ones anyway. And where else could she learn how not to hurt people?

But even as she thought it, she recognized the excuse. The reason she had indulged herself then, and had returned to the activity after her divorce was it made her feel good to hold the reins of power again. She liked control.

That was something she had learned about herself. *She liked to be in charge.*

As she pelted around a patchwork of puddles, she wondered how much her past would affect her karma. There were times that it seemed like the world was out to get her. Of course, that increased the size and weight of the chip on her shoulder, which usually had her throwing her weight around again.

*Watch out boys!*

Ahead of her, the wet asphalt gleamed silver under the streetlight at the corner. The road turned left there and headed back north over a rise toward her home, but the fitness trail went south where the gravel was just past the streetlight.

To either side, tall bushes laden with buds and new leaves grew under the light, and were a heavy presence behind a gleaming guardrail. Just past that on the right was a swampy area full of old cattails that led some 30 feet to the dark, slow waters of the Sydenham River. The plant life shook and rattled in a gust of wind, and swayed against the quiet darkness that loomed beyond it.

Mist fell across Sharon's face and veiled the landscape around her. But something caught her eye.

She slowed her pace. There was something by the pole, there in the bushes beneath the streetlight. A shape, some darker form within the shadows. It stood out, lumpy looking against the slender stalks and branches.

*What was it?* She slowed and then stopped, screwing her eyes up against the dark and the mist—peering the last 30 feet into the shadows.

Then, something in the strange shape shifted—a head bent down or a hand came up. It didn't matter, it was a...

*What was it?*

And Sharon started along the street to her left where it climbed away from the fitness trail. She poured on the speed and glancing back, a relieved smile appeared on her cheeks, until...

*Crack!* A sharp report came from the bushes under the streetlight. The sound echoed after Sharon like a tree trunk had broken.

*Had snapped—but what?*

She slowed to watch when the entire thicket behind the guardrail suddenly started shaking and quivering like a wild wind was tearing at it—like a small tornado had touched down and was ripping at each branch and root.

Then came another flurry of crackling noise as Sharon lingered to watch the bushes shake and shred. Branches and plants leapt upward in pieces before raining down and collecting in the damp pool of silver under the streetlight.

And as the pieces flew, something began to happen.

*Something wrong!*

The dark debris whirled and turned as it fell and collected, coalescing into the unmistakable outline of misshapen human feet, and up from those grew spectral ankles and calves with mud for marrow and twisted sticks for bones—torn leaves and grass for muscle and skin.

*Something impossible!*

Above it, the distorted knees and legs were forming as gray outlines only. A shifting shadow of flaring hips, and a narrow torso grew in depth and texture as the debris littered down upon it.



Unformed, unfinished the shape took a step toward her.

Sharon turned and ran along the street, her jaws locked over a scream.

The houses were dark to either side of her. No one else had heard—*had heard what?*

Her eyes were playing tricks—that's all.

As she ran, her mind reeled over the sounds and action.

*Someone had been waiting there—hidden in the trees. And the wind...but...*

She had just started her morning runs through the park a week before, and she realized that someone would only have to see her once to know where to find her, *and when...*

The rest was fear.

A repetitive slapping sound came from behind.

*Don't listen to it!*

And she glanced back to see a silhouette cresting the small rise, its upper body a cloud of swirling, unformed rubbish. As it came in pursuit, the streetlight beyond burned between its tangled ribs of wood.

*Impossible!*

Its wet feet slapped the asphalt, and a hissing noise rose from within its unfinished chest before it exploded into a whirling cloud of leaves and refuse.

Caught up in the mad wind it hurtled toward her.

*You're crazy!*

Sharon sprinted.

But the trees to either side of the street were shaking—all of them—the air was choked with twigs, buds and tatters of new growth.

The hissing sound still filled the air, and now the taint of decay assailed her nostrils.

*A tornado?* And a cedar hedge near the sidewalk convulsed violently. Its heavy limbs whipped out and the clotted green branches clubbed the street near her feet.

She whimpered and ran on.

The hissing followed with freakish gusts that dragged and blew the ugly cloud of leaf and litter, and the putrid whisper rose in volume as the wind grew in strength and shook the branches overhead.

Sharon sprinted full out along 4th Avenue, and was across 6th Street hill in a blink where she glanced back along the sidewalk to watch the whirling cloud of debris charge the hill. It surged along beneath an arch of black-limbed trees.

But the flurry of vegetation exploded when it hit the curb and blew a fan of debris into the space beneath the streetlight.

Bits of gravel and sticks and leaves pelted Sharon's upraised arms, and prickled her cheeks and scalp.

She gripped the sides of her head and wondered if she'd gone mad, for the wind and hissing had stopped. Only the faint smell of rot remained.

And in her fugue of disbelief she stepped toward the wreck and rubbish, to stand finally on the street centerline watching the curb where pools of water had formed and the debris twirled on the surface in the streetlight.

It took her a second to realize what she saw there on the water.

*A reflection.*

Head and shoulders cast upon the light. Long wet hair hung over the reflected face, and its chest heaved with exertion.

A woman.

*There* just beyond her range of vision.

Sharon steeled herself, and slowly lifted her eyes to see the thing that cast the dark reflection, but no one stood upon the sidewalk beneath the arch of trees.

*No one?*

The streetlight went out and the morning gloom closed in.

Sharon lunged backwards and stumbled as the streetlight flickered back to life, and she screamed.

Then her phone rang, and she screamed again.

## Chapter 5

12:00 p.m.

SCOTT Keyes grumbled. A phone was ringing, dragging him from restless dreams of faceless women, Scrabble tiles and tea parties.

He had already awakened a couple of times to take his own phone out, reflexively answering it—only to find that he'd turned it off.

*So he could sleep.*

Glancing over the heads of the other passengers on the Greyhound bus, he realized that whoever was ignoring his phone was either a deep sleeper, or deaf—or listening to music on ear-buds.

Indeed, an annoying buzz of overlapping musical styles came from at least three locations on the bus, but the noise echoed and mixed with the rumbling engine and ratcheting gears making it impossible to know if the ringing phone and discordant music were connected.

The front of the bus was full and there were only a few people sitting behind him where there had been none when he boarded at Yorkdale.

He couldn't remember them coming on, which suggested he had managed a bit of uninterrupted sleep along the way. Of course, they could have moved to the back from the front, too—and then he realized he didn't care enough about it to care anymore.

Keyes yawned and tried to stretch. His cramped seat was about two-thirds of the way to the back of the bus. He'd sprawled across its well-worn upholstery, and used his jacket as a pillow against the steel window frame. The sharp bottom ledge acted as a lever to open the emergency exit, or so it claimed in large black lettering.

Keyes thought they were tempting fate, and imagined some sleepwalking passenger doing a chin up on the bar and pushing the window out onto the highway.

*That would be fun.*

But he was pulled out of his humorous reverie as the phone continued to ring for its negligent owner.

Keyes dispelled his building tension by looking for the bright side. Perhaps the offending passenger would go deaf at an early age, or the ignored call could be important—a kidney transplant was ready to proceed. A donor had been found, and the doctors were prepping for surgery.

*If only the idiot would answer his damn phone.*

The ringing stopped abruptly, and Keyes rose up in his seat to peer back and then forward over the headrests, ears straining for the sound of conversation. It would be nice to know whom he had just condemned to dialysis and death.

But he could hear no one talking.

The offending passenger had not answered. The caller must have finally given up and left a message.

Keyes settled back into his seat counting his blessings. His brief investigation had shown him that half his fellow travelers were clicking away on some kind of handheld device.

Everyone was texting or *sexting* or messaging, when they might have been talking—a social nightmare that was happening more and more frequently. People taking personal

telephone calls in earshot. Businessmen noisily closing deals at a restaurant table beside a honeymooning couple, or the same couple angrily fighting at a distance: he in line at the bank, and she on an exercise bike at the gym.

*Shouting.* Unable to switch it off, even for a second.

And Keyes pondered again whether the constant connection might be responsible for the many failed relationships and marriages out there. How could people stand it? A disagreement in the morning continued by texts became a full-blown argument by lunch so that talk of a breakup was waiting for you at home after work.

They couldn't catch a breath or cool off or let it go. The constant connection became more important than actual communication.

He fantasized again about mobile-free zones. *That* was a million-dollar idea: unplugged cafes with electronic fields that blocked phone and wireless signals. People would have to switch off and think about what was being communicated: what was said, what they were saying to others and perhaps they'd even have to speak to someone face-to-face.

And actually see the impact of their words.

*You're one to talk.*

But he was different. He'd only purchased a cell phone a year before, and then only because of an amazing deal from the service provider.

However, his slow adoption of the technology did not mean he preferred personal communication. He didn't feel obliged to talk just because people were near, but that was just his character. He was a loner and he liked his privacy. Keyes remembered great friendships he had made in high school, but that was many years ago.

After he was moved to a different city, he'd lost touch. So he had adapted to his solitary lifestyle, or he felt safer in it.

*Don't start...*

Except when it came to relationships. He loved women too much to go long without. But that was a problem too, or so he had been told.

He couldn't turn his feelings off... And chance had worked against him any time he had tried to take a break from those same feelings.

*Here we go.*

He was about six feet in height, with a deep chest and well-muscled body. Keyes' hair was dark brown and managed to grow in all of the right places.

*In a world where men shaved excess body hair no landscaping was required.*

But the law of averages often put his regular body type and familiar-seeming, but expressive face into another relationship before he'd had time to deal with the last.

Or so it had been until his late 30s. Things had slowed down a bit since then he had to admit.

*Or have you slowed things down?*

He was a good communicator when someone caught his interest. He put that down to his eyes. At least, the women he'd known had pointed that out. That they could see his sincerity in his *hazel gaze*—it was plain to read.

*Oh, boy...*

So he could never lie to them, or hide his feelings...good or bad, and sometimes women seemed as fearful of love as they were of hate, like they were more comfortable around negative emotions.

“You’re going to be fun today,” he whispered, and caught a sliver of eye looking back at him between the seats ahead. Someone had overheard.

He dug into his backpack and drew out a bottle of water as he studied his notebooks and pens on the seat beside him. He had hoped to take advantage of his time on the bus to jot some notes, to get a few things down.

But he was too tired to think.

Keyes had been unable to sleep the night before. The hotel was restless with sound: guests, phones, music and televisions, even the air conditioning’s quiet hum had kept him turning.

But, he’d been excited—and terrified—about the morning.

And the bus to Sydenham left at 7 a.m. which left him in an obsessive-compulsive toss and turn “sleep of the damned” when slumber did come, followed by that “sandbag for a head” feeling when the wakeup call arrived at 5:30—seconds after he’d finally managed to fall asleep.

He dug an apple and a bag of potato chips out of his pack, weighed both carefully, and decided to start with the potato chips.

Keyes had special rules about junk food—weekends only, unless something *special* was going on. He was amazed at how variable the term “special” could be when applied to his appetites. Some people had a sweet tooth, his was *all salt*.

He needed rules, or his waistline did. His belly had become a dumping ground for extra calories since his 30th birthday, and had grown no less troublesome on his 37th.

But this was a special day, and trip, definitely—*special*. This time, he felt, he deserved to have junk food on a Wednesday.

He was going to his hometown of Sydenham—pronounced *Sid-num* by the locals—and he hadn’t been back there since he’d been spirited away by his adoptive parents just after turning 17.

Thoughts of his adoptive parents momentarily darkened his mood despite the bright sunlight that lit the farm and woodland that lay to either side of the highway. The May weather was warming the fields and coaxing the first shoots of green from the gray-brown scrub. Colors were rich from recent rain.

He could never forget his adoptive parents. They were footing the bill for this journey of self-discovery.

And they had raised the money for it with their lives.

Their house had exploded. Ronald and Eileen Johnson’s deaths were ruled accidental after investigators found the cracked gas fittings on their stove. The insurance company stalled, whined and accused Ronald Johnson of damaging the fittings himself when he was making room for the delivery of a new refrigerator but that still fell well within the definition of “accidental” and they had finally paid out.

Scott Keyes was the sole beneficiary: \$400,000 on the house, and combined life insurance payouts of \$250,000. These were hardly a call for celebration, but Keyes saw the legacy as an opportunity.

*He had to make it more than money.* He wanted their contribution to count for something, like everything they’d done for him.

And he didn’t want their last gift to be steeped in sadness. There’d already been too much of that in his life. He’d come from a dark time that eventually led him to the Johnsons. They’d taken him from there into the light.

Nothing glorious—*not yet*. They moved him to a three-bedroom home in Toronto, where Ronald worked for Ontario Hydro, and Eileen pursued a career as a realtor. They put Scott in a good high school and helped him pay for college after that.

His career of web design and blogging with the dream of perhaps, *maybe* writing a book about his life—the *dark time*—had only delivered a mediocre living that had taken up so much of his time that he doubted any of his life *after* Sydenham was worth writing about.

*Not even love.*

Instead of cultivating friendships, he had searched for a lasting, meaningful relationship with a woman—and failed miserably. It wasn't that he hadn't tried. He'd done nothing but... *What do the women say: You try too hard?*

But he generally ended up either heart-broken from losing someone he was certain was perfect for him, or thankful that he was able to stop trying to make something work with someone he had grown to dislike.

*Whatever.* He had known for some time that something was wrong with him; that there was a reason he always ended up alone. And it couldn't always be the women, could it?

So he saw this insurance windfall as an opportunity to step away from his work and reconnect with the important things in his life.

Wind the clock back to the dark time and figure things out.

And it was dark. He couldn't remember much about the really early stuff, and his teenage years were insulated by hormones, self-involvement and the Johnsons' steady efforts to redirect his thoughts and stop his past from damaging him any more than it already had.

Whatever it had done. He could not remember much.

But it had all happened in Sydenham—a smallish city on a river of the same name that emptied into Owen Sound Bay. The bay was named after an English explorer who had captained a ship into its uncharted waters.

Keyes remembered the city as feeling more like a town, perhaps because of its geography. Being a forested river valley crossed by bridges in four places, what development existed was hidden by topography.

Part of the enormous Niagara Escarpment, cliffs formed a jagged limestone bowl that descended in steps to where the dark river wound toward the bay.

He could remember climbing the Centennial Tower atop the escarpment's east side, and looking down into the valley. In high summer, with the trees and plants in bloom, there was barely any sign of habitation.

But he hadn't been back in two decades. With the way development and population had boomed in the rest of the province, he expected the city to be overflowing its limestone walls.

Keyes had watched the miles and miles of farmland pass and wondered if that would be the case. While arranging his trip, he'd skimmed Sydenham's web pages, and while the Downtown Improvement Association had done their best to get shots of the city's main street at busy times, the photographs couldn't hide the fact that it was still only four blocks long, populated with old brick buildings that he remembered.

Looking at all the open space that passed to either side of the bus, he knew that growth should have filled those many miles with homes and businesses. In fact, moving west of Sydenham's neighbor city, Collingwood, had been like going back in time.

Sure, vacation condominiums hugged the edge of Georgian Bay's cold blue waters, but the rest... Instead of a sprawling condo-land, he saw forests and rolling hills. Instead of malls and urban expansion, there were farmers' fields, even horses.

The truth was Sydenham had seen its day. The once-bustling Great Lakes port had gone into decline with the Great Lakes shipping industry. Now that travel on the lakes had been replaced by travel *everywhere else* by road, the little city was far away from all the action.

Keyes leaned forward in his seat as the last miles passed, as the two-lane highway rose up and over the wrinkled terrain of rich earth and ridges of yellow-white limestone molded by glaciation and time.

Each height was marked by red brick farmhouses and tall stands of hardwood or conifers. Each depression held dark spring wetlands full of dry cattails, cold ponds and ducks.

Atop one plateau, he saw the Sydenham Airport pass, and soon they slipped down a long slow hill that took them through six lanes of blacktop that fed shoppers to Wal-Mart, malls, roadhouses, and gas stations—the first real sign of development.

That they exited in a short five minutes.

And Keyes was moving along a street he recognized. As the bus swerved through traffic and onto old asphalt, it swept around a corner and passed St. Mary's Church—the building unchanged—before dropping quickly down the hill past old homes to a nerve-shattering stop where the street struck 3rd Avenue at right angles. The bus paused, shaking, face to face with another line of red and yellow brick homes.

The engine groaned, heaving the bus to the left, and they rumbled past the line of houses, before shooting by the old jail and the firehouse.

Hurling toward a busy intersection, the bus roared sharply to the right, and Keyes lost his balance, catching himself on the arm of his seat as they turned onto an expanse of blacktop surrounding a low red brick building. Its green steel roof linked it to every other bus or train terminal in the province.

Anticipation and centrifugal force had him hanging into the aisle.

The bus circled the building and came to a halt facing the street where people gathered on the pavement under a sign bearing the names of destinations.

The passengers seated ahead of Keyes started gathering up their belongings and pulling bags out of the overhead compartments. They knew the drill.

*But what's the hurry?*

The rules of the big city need not apply.

*Slow down and discover...*

Sydenham was such a small city. He'd try to get in tune with its rhythms, dust off his good manners and...

The midday sun burned down at a slight spring slant, just cutting under the upper lip of the bus windows and lighting the interior with flashbulb brilliance. Outside, the raw, white rays heated the pavement like high summer, and sprang up to blind the waiting group that stood squinting from under hats and the shadows of outstretched hands.

The concrete platform under them looked bleached and baked.

There was a sudden loud squawk of airbrakes and a great cloud of dust blew up from under the bus.

The group of spectators took a step back as a random gust of wind caught the rising dusty mix of road sand and salt, and twisted it into a dirty funnel. This vortex swelled, pushing out against the station and the bus, clutching at clothing and blinding those who waited on the platform. It rose in intensity and sent them staggering back to creep blindly along the station bricks seeking shelter.

The bus' door swung open as this disturbance drove against it. The driver looked apologetically at his passengers and shrugged as the first climbed down the stairs into the minor maelstrom. Keyes watched the passengers hesitate at the last stair before stepping out into the explosion of wind, and then reappear as dark shapes in the rushing gloom as they sought out the station.

Keyes grabbed his pack and pulled his travel bag from the overhead—amazed at the wind's sudden intensity. It rocked the bus on its axles, and kept up a steady rattle as it pelted the walls and windows with debris.

He paused atop the stairs as the wind rose in strength, as the driver stepped out into the abrasive rush and was engulfed.

Keyes descended to the last stair and waited half a second before he closed his eyes and stepped out onto the concrete curb.

Where he opened them to find the vortex had stopped; was reduced to drifting haze in the sunlight.

People peeked out through the bus station doors, eyes wary, watching for another burst of wind.

Dust settled at Keyes' feet as he walked onto the empty platform.



## Chapter 6

2:00 p.m.

FATHER Martyn Warga lay in bed adjusting the flexible cast that bound his aching left wrist. That injury was relatively new, albeit mysterious. A few years back, he had awakened one morning having somehow sprained it in his sleep. Its painful throbbing had been a chronic recurrence ever since.

*What next?*

Head center to his feather pillow, he contemplated the tongue and groove cedar that covered the ceiling and walls of his little rectory bedroom and study. The afternoon sun, still chilled from winter, sent bright bands through the curtains to shine along the jointed wood, and show up the otherwise invisible seams. The highlight somehow cheapened the dark and rosy woodwork.

The room was so warm at night, so comforting. Orange, red and scarlet then, with dark purple shadows—womb-like by candlelight.

*Comforting. Protective.*

Warga had gone back to his room to “rest” his legs, which was true enough. True, that they needed resting, damaged as they were, weakened by his unending, some thought “misguided” penance. But it was untrue in other ways. Parishioners at St. Mary’s Church knew what it really meant when he rested his legs, but charitably accepted his word. They’d all smelled the whisky on his breath before.

*They know where you draw your comfort.*

His replacement, the much-younger Father Jonathan Tracy who now led the Sydenham parish, might not have accepted his word but respected his spiritual devotion and the myth of sanctum sanctorum required to maintain it. He kept silent regarding Warga’s real motivation for privacy in the way the brotherhood and church demanded.

It was common for Warga to rest after lunch, common for him to return to his small rooms to lie for a time in contemplative repose, and to supplement his daily regimen of painkillers and anti-inflammatory medicine with a short draft of whisky—perhaps two.

*Or three? Sometimes it had to be three, and after that...*

Father Tracy understood, and no doubt had his own vices. The Catholic Church had kept many worse secrets than Warga’s small dependence on this combination of pills and drink and rest—many worse, and so much worse, that the very knowledge of those secrets made one complicit.

And the Church would keep many more, even as it struggled desperately to maintain those secrets it already had.

Warga rarely slept when he rested, though he usually settled back on his simple single bed to stretch out his spine and aching lower limbs.

His stomach complained at such times as it usually did. After lunch there was a struggle that resulted in spasms of pain as his guts tried to process his food. The large amount of ibuprofen that he ingested for his damaged hips, knees and ankles left his intestines squirming.

He’d found that the whisky only helped while he was drinking it, a treatment he felt reluctant to employ overmuch during the daylight hours—if there were people about, and he might be called upon.

*Which wasn't happening much anymore.*

While he had few scheduled duties at the parish now, there were still some locals who trusted only Warga's shepherding for their souls. So, that potential interruption kept him nipping at his calmative in the daytime, instead of applying it in the generous quantities that his condition required for relief.

He could only seriously administer his treatment after supper, when he had retired for the evening and Father Tracy was busy with any of the Church's activities: evening prayers—*be with us, Lord, tonight...*; refereeing youth volleyball in the new multi-purpose room, or supervising church-sponsored French language classes.

*Any number of things.*

Warga's whisky also allowed him to sleep, when he could. His slumber was uneasy, but the blank silence of drunkenness was preferable to his querulous subconscious, and his actual dreams that were usually nightmares.

He understood those to be psychological manifestations of the actual physical suffering he endured throughout his waking hours, and sometimes they were echoes of the events that had damaged him so long ago.

His knees had never been good. Even as a boy, they had clicked and popped and pained him. His mother blamed that on the poor diet she'd had to endure as a teenager when the Nazis invaded the Ukraine and after.

His parents immigrated to Canada in 1951, the year following Warga's birth, and she maintained that those early days were responsible for many troubles also, since she and his father had had to take on physical labor despite their education, working low-paying jobs to raise a family on filling but unhealthy food heavy on peanut butter sandwiches and tuna casserole.

Warga blamed his immigrant status, and sometimes sickly appearance for the isolation he had felt as a child. *Never sporty, always bookish.* He suspected the accompanying social stigma had pushed him toward the priesthood. Of course, there were family traditions, too.

Warga's knees got worse after his hip was broken, and now it felt as though his legs were decaying out from under him, right down to his swollen ankles and feet and to his arthritic toes.

"Compensatory damage" from the hip, he was told, caused by the resulting sedentary lifestyle. His taste for rich, high-fat traditional Ukrainian meals was later blamed for the crippling gout that became a recurring source of suffering from his 50s on.

His hip was the worst though, truly like a jagged blade twisting in his groin as he walked, nagging him day and night. Warga could set the true blame there, and on his refusal of all physiotherapy, and rehabilitative treatment after it was broken.

Other than the metal pins, and brace in his femur and hip—which he had no recourse but to accept—Warga had not followed their installation with the recommended restorative stretches and exercises. Of course, at the time of the injury such rehabilitative science had been relatively new, and often subordinate to simple pain relief, bed rest and mild exercise.

But he had neglected to do the simplest of these things to aid his healing.

At the time, it seemed to him that further suffering was required to pay for the failure that had caused the injury, and so severely damaged a young girl he had been asked to protect.

He had been called to action and he had been found wanting.

*The Church failed me first!*

But it was worse than that. Through the fog of pain and anxiety Warga had mistaken his deeper injury, for it was not a shattering of his faith that had occurred, as he had first thought.

No. He had instead learned that his faith had been altogether misguided.

*The faith they'd taught him was a blindfold and when he'd removed it; he'd seen God there in the room with the criminals, a witness at best, at worst...*

Like most in the Church, he had heard whispers about the abuses going on behind sacred doors. There were rumors about its criminal core, and Warga himself had heard confession, admission of the sins—betrayal, outrage.

He knew. They knew. *We all knew and had done nothing!*

Only to later hear that the crimes were covered up and the victims persecuted by the Church hierarchy, and so, sanctioned by injustice, the crimes had continued.

*You never had faith...*

So when the time had come to help the girl, the Father Warga who was called upon had a faith already dead—called to face his greatest challenge when his heart was weakest.

When he dared not believe in God or the supernatural, *he was mocked by proof.*

But he must have been seeing things. Anxiety had warped his memory of that night.

*You hide behind confusion because you failed her.*

After that night, he'd first embraced denial, glancing away from the Church's secrets and offering blind devotion to its tarnished cross. *He could not have seen what he had seen, in the room there, no! His doubt had blinded him to the truth...*

But he found no solace, haunted as he was because he needed faith to believe what had happened; yet faith of that sort would validate the Church's impossible crimes.

His dilemma: If God is here...then He was *there*. If He was there, *then He...then we...*

Then Warga embraced realism. Religion and his God were powerless mysteries, more likely empty mythology—ancient excuses shaped to veil humanity's animal heart.

But nothing real could explain what he had seen with the girl...

So, he had shifted his study to all things supernatural. Perhaps, if *those* existed, they could explain Warga's impotent God by way of an opposing power. Something had stayed the Creator's mighty hand.

By Warga's desk, a pair of filing cabinets contained the results of that desperate research, proven meaningless also. He'd gathered a list of charlatans, hucksters and fools, no more. Case studies of the absurd, no better than the dusty titles on "Super Nature," "Extra-Sensory Perception" and "Witchcraft" arranged on the bottom shelf of his book case.

In the end, his studies in the paranormal had had the opposite effect to proving an opposing force to God's. Instead, they'd outlined very clearly the delusion at the core of any such belief and by association, the Church also. There was no difference, why would there be?

*He'd brought delusion in the girl's time of need.*

Afterward, he'd mocked her suffering by making himself a laughing stock, when he'd told others what he'd seen and heard in the room. Those who saw no comedy there averted their eyes from the tragedy—for such self-destruction in a priest was unseemly.

*I did not try to kill myself...something tried to kill me!*

In the end, Warga found nothing. There was more meaning in the hurtling unknown, in the dark matter between the stars than in all the dusty relics in the Vatican, and that darkness was *nothing*, a swollen nullity dripping with power.

*You are alone. We are alone.*

*That was his Creator—master of the world. Mindless. Invincible. Immortal. Humans were children of an idiot God, savant perhaps, but idiocy was necessary to His innocence.*

*Faith. Delusion. Madness.*

At first, Warga had maintained his penance, carrying his shattered body as proof of his lack of faith, and to illustrate the Church's essential emptiness—and why not continue to caper? Drunk and deluded, people had thought him mad, anyway.

*That is how they explain what you saw! What you did! Insanity...*

Eventually his penance had become a personal payment made to his memory of that day and to the girl in his care who had suffered so.

Robbed of faith, Warga knew he could not serve the Church honestly, and without his Church what was a priest? But what was honesty to the deluded, or truth to the hypocrite? So he took part in the charade, and was allowed an “annual” leave of absence from those of his small duties that remained.

Those absences came after each short return to service in the Church. Warga would try to lead sermons and even took confession, but it was always a precursor to more echoes of failure. Those homecomings ended with him anxiety ridden again, pained and drunk.

Which initiated *that* year's leave of absence.

He still had a room at St. Mary's rectory and few challenged Warga's annual cycle of despair and resurrection, especially after he had given up his large rectory apartment to Father Tracy's use, and since he'd kept up his side of the bargain and kept his *madness* to himself.

*St. Mary's tended her injured lamb.*

So he did what he could for the parish, mimicking the forms of hope and faith—camouflaging his barren soul with words. Over the years, Father Tracy and others had approached him about his mental state and his injuries and penance, and time and again decided that he needed only love, and reflection.

His previous incarceration for telling the truth had been enough, because it was bad when he had finally unwound, and the Church believed in psychiatric science when religious devotion failed so utterly.

Upon his release from the mental hospital, Warga had replaced the Church's doctrinal blindness with a bleary vision of resignation.

So if he were ever drunk enough to dare look and sober enough to see, he'd peer past the rectory walls into the surrounding Sydenham neighborhood, certain that something evil still dwelt among his parishioners.

Something that could not exist, but could still cripple priests and torment young girls with madness. Something that required insanity or faith to believe.

There were times, on clear days and moonlit nights when Warga had glimpsed it from his window, but he kept such occasions to himself.

Out past the parking lot, at the grassy edge of the church property, a shadow moved along the line of trees.

## Chapter 7

3:00 p.m.

AMANDA West enjoyed the afternoons at Lee Manor most. She loved her job, but there were high points and low, and the morning could be discouraging: a challenge when the disorientation felt by many of the seniors in her care turned to frustration, anger or fear. That could get to anybody.

It was tough enough starting the day for some of her more lucid patients, but it could quickly become a struggle when troubled residents wrestled senile dementia, fatigue and hostility.

It was all about patience and understanding. *And patience...oh God, the patience.*

But by about 3 o'clock, most of the seniors were over their post-luncheon gastronomical issues, and hygiene had been taken care of for the most part. That accounted for the background aroma of diaper and cleanser.

This left the residents content, in their way, enjoying full bellies, socializing as they waited for their afternoon snacks and casually riding their medication toward supper.

Those who could still get around congregated in the halls forming strangely purposive parades shuffling, limping and wheeling from one dining room to the next in any of the three wards on their respective floors. There were three in total—*four* if you counted the main floor, but that consisted of public rooms, auditorium, offices and the kitchen.

The Lee Manor residents made a train of memories, mimicking aspects of their active youth, searching for words or topics of conversation as they wandered the halls, while others crowded the TV room; the most aware picking channels while spectators tried to sink an anchor into some recollected moment in their lives or the day.

That gave the staff a few minutes to start spelling each other off for coffee breaks.

Break time was precious at that point so the nurses and caregivers wasted no time getting away from their duties and out of doors if possible. Winter sucked in Sydenham, and in that bitter season, the inner world of Lee Manor became the poster child for “cabin fever.”

April showers had been torturous to watch this year, but they rewarded the eager caregivers with a jump start for May, which had been warmer than last spring.

The sun was shining this bright spring afternoon.

Amanda had escaped with a small clutch of coworkers gathering over at the designated rest area put in place for staff to sip coffee or tea, have soft drinks and talk. It was for smokers, mainly, and Amanda had always been amazed by the number of nicotine addicts working in health care.

Relatively new government regulations had forced the move, pushing workers and residents off the Lee Manor grounds proper if they took their fix that way.

The curious open gazebo structure of wrought iron was built on a concrete slab over by a dark brown garage where recyclables and garbage was stored.

*Few smokers missed the point.*

The gazebo provided little shade, and no protection from the wind or rain. It was a stark cross hatch of open iron bars that met a foot overhead. Large planters at each of the four corners promised a vine covering one day, but as one smart ass had pointed out, the unobstructed sun would have given them all skin cancer before that day arrived.

Another wavering cloud of cigarette smoke blew across Amanda's face, momentarily ruining the day—before passing. She was an ex-smoker and very sensitive to it.

*You'd think nurses wouldn't...* but she abandoned the inner monologue. If nothing else, here was a crowd of smokers you could waste your breath on with health warnings.

They knew what they were doing. Many of their patients dealt with the long-term health effects every day.

Amanda and the smokers had gathered around Sharon Ross as she went over the finer points of her story. There had been a mysterious chase that morning.

"I couldn't see who it was, really," Sharon repeated. "It was very dark. I could just make out the shape."

"And it was a *woman*," Amanda said to confirm that point. "Weird, Sharon, considering, but maybe a bigger cause of concern. At least, a man doing that, you have an idea what he's up to. But this...you really should call the police."

"What? You don't think I could inspire a female stalker?" Sharon said, and then pressed a "peace sign" over her lips and flicked her tongue between the index and second fingers in the universal sign for cunnilingus.

"Sharon!" Amanda blurted, exasperated. Her friend had hinted at bisexual leanings in the past, but her actions had been heterosexual all the way. She always had a man around—at her beck and call, on a string: the way some people kept dogs. But she liked to rankle Amanda's more conservative nature.

"The police will think I'm nuts!" Sharon said, laughing, brushing her brown locks away from her broad cheekbones.

"Who cares? You should report it," Kim Cranston said. "Someone else might have seen something, too." The heavysset blonde worked at the little tuck shop in the lobby.

"And they're cops," the nurse Harold Fulton said, eyes lingering on Sharon's lips. Her joke and gesture was stuck in his mind. "They're hard to surprise, and they might be able to make some sense out of it."

"Or they'll just take you up to the *fourth* floor," Amanda goaded with a laugh, referring to the psychiatric floors at the hospital.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Sharon said, joining in the laughter. She reached out for Kim's smoke and had a couple drags before giving it back. "And if they get me to talk, they'll come after the rest of you!"

"You haven't pissed anyone off lately have you?" Amanda asked, catching and holding Sharon's gaze. The personal support worker had joined the staff at Lee Manor about two years before, but the pair of them had hit it off and shared some war stories. Sharon's were much more interesting than Amanda's.

The stories relating to her love life, anyway.

"I've been good!" Sharon said, and winked. A survivor of a failed marriage, she was making up for lost time on the romantic front, and had recounted many sexual conquests—and not all of them were with single men.

Amanda knew how possessive married women could be, and they all felt threatened by divorcees. If Sharon was sampling husbands from the married flock, then maybe...

"Oh, I gotta go," Kim said, after a glance at her watch, flicking her cigarette away.

"Me, too," Harold agreed, starting toward the building with her. "I've got Mr. Gamble to deal with."

“You have fun with that,” Amanda said, watching them go. She did not envy Harold his duties.

Mr. Bill Gamble had been a big man all his life, and had only just arrived at Lee Manor. In time, the dieticians would whittle away at his extra weight, but he was currently some 300 pounds: all bones, muscle and fat. His Alzheimer’s kept him from understanding who all these people were, and why they were invading his privacy.

His doctor was still trying to figure out a balance for his meds, too. It was tricky, but there was good incentive. When they found the correct dose, he’d probably stop punching nurses.

Harold could arrange for help from other caregivers, but he always made the attempt on his own first.

*Disciplined, martyr or fool?*

It had been a long time since Amanda thought a client’s self-esteem was worth a broken nose.

“You’re sure?” Amanda asked Sharon as they watched Kim and Harold enter the building. “No old grudges?”

Sharon shook her head, the playful smile dropping from her face as she shrugged. There had been incidents.

Amanda remembered Sharon telling the story about a confrontation that happened in line at the Cineplex. She had been on her way into a Disney movie with her son and daughter when a young woman had approached with a group of friends and called her a whore.

Apparently she had followed Sharon and her husband to a motel.

“After the woman walked away, I told the kids she was a crazy lady.” The confrontation had shaken Sharon up, but she confided later that it had also sweetened the conquest.

“Knowing the wife was so pretty, and so young—and *pathetic*.” Sharon had smiled. “It’s sick but *you* do the math.”

Amanda understood the mindset, and knew how it could invigorate the ego of a woman approaching 40; but the empty victory had never appealed to her, probably because she had never married or divorced.

Amanda had different chips on *her* shoulders, so she’d never been tempted.

“You’ve been such a pirate,” Amanda reminded. “Maybe go over the list.”

Sharon laughed, and kicked at the concrete, before opening her mini yogurt and spooning a mouthful in.

“You should tell the police at least,” Amanda said, nudging the toe of Sharon’s spattered white gum-soled shoe. “Just so it’s on record. Maybe they’re already looking for someone.”

“A *tree* person?” Sharon asked, smiling uncertainly. She’d told Amanda the stranger parts of her experience over coffee before their shifts started that morning. She hadn’t shared *that* tidbit with the others. “A woman who appears in puddles...”

“Come on...” Amanda bumped her friend’s elbow with a fist. “It was dark. You were scared. The mind plays tricks.”

“Some trick,” Sharon said, but relented with a sigh. “You’re right. I’d feel better if the cops took a look around down there. It was just so weird. The *trees*...they should still be messed up along that street by whatever—I mean, *whoever* came after me.”

“Yeah, and don’t forget how much you love running in the park,” Amanda continued. “You want to be comfortable down there.”

“Unless I can get someone to run with me,” Sharon sang, dismissing her concerns. “The sun’s coming up earlier every day.”

“Um, yeah... *No*,” Amanda answered, eyes rolling evasively. Sharon was always after her to run in the morning, and while Amanda kept trim with her own fitness routine, she did her jogging later in the day. Mornings were meant for coffee.

“No thanks,” she said, laughing. “Remember that time when I tried to get to the gym before work? They found me asleep on the stretching mats.”

“And your shorts were inside out,” Sharon threw in with a lascivious wink.

“I better get back,” Amanda said, glancing at her watch and starting for the building. “Duty calls...”

“So does nature,” Sharon added from behind with a chuckle.



## Chapter 8

3:15 p.m.

OLD Denzel Green sat on a log watching the spring sunlight reflect across the river's calm surface. The line from his fishing pole ran into the water and went slack. The red and white bobber floated some 15 feet from the curling filament, just where the river bottom dropped from the clear shallows into a dark brown hole.

Denzel had lots of time on his hands, and this was his favorite way of spending it.

*Like he had a choice.*

He had worked at Farmer's Folding Cartons for three decades before the government forced him into retirement some eight years ago. It was just a stupid law about age and had nothing to do with what Denzel could do. He knew he could still outwork anyone at the plant, if it hadn't finally been closed up.

A couple years back they'd moved it over to China or Mexico or some goddamn place where people worked for nothing, and got by without any dental coverage or who even knew what.

Hell, Denzel had even worked through his bout with cancer.

A tumor had taken his voice box more than 22 years before. The surgeons had removed it, and left him unable to do more than make ridiculous sounds. His voice was at best a hissing gasp, like a cross between a sputtering tea kettle and Donald Duck.

But he could still make himself understood. *Try that you damn jokers!*

At least his coworkers had kept the mockery behind his back. That was because it had happened from cancer and people were superstitious about making fun of a guy's stupid voice if he got it from a tumor. But *they* knew his story.

All the years since retiring had hardened the parts of Denzel that were left. Once he was out of the plant, he had to spend his days among the public, and they had never dealt with an old man who sounded the way he did.

So kids teased, and people rolled their eyes and winked and chuckled, or looked downright afraid if he tried to talk to them.

People had left him alone at the plant. He could keep to his work moving piles of die cut cartons from the big printer to the room where they were wrapped and tied for shipping.

He could go the whole day without uttering a word, making himself understood with a nod, or gesture of his hands.

But in the years since, he'd been exposed to Sydenham as something of an oddity; which just left him saying less and less, and before long he only talked to himself.

He even put off the simple communications that he'd have at the grocers, or heaven help him, at the barber. He hated sitting up in the big chair croaking at Bernie Michaels who was giving him a trim while in the mirror the seated men behind him laughed into their newspapers while waiting their turns. So Denzel tended to let his hair grow into a tall white bush before he broke down and got it cut.

He was usually seen wandering the town with a great blowing tuft of hair growing up over his old face. His features were set and grim, ready for rejection, or mockery. He was not a sympathetic character though. He had grown into the unpleasant expression.

Denzel was ornery at the best of times, and like a wasps' nest at the worst.

He had a temper, and one of the few things that calmed it was his near-daily fishing trip to the banks of the Sydenham River or down where it emptied into the harbor.

He liked catching salmon in the fall, and splake and speckled trout at any time he could get them—and when he couldn't, Denzel liked catching and killing suckerfish.

Everybody did it. They were no better than fleas on a dog, and it gave old Denzel an outlet for his anger—a target for his vengeance.

*Suckers!*

Just then his line went taut and the tip of his fishing pole jumped.

Denzel knew he had something big. *No question there.* He snatched up his pole and started reeling as he got to his feet.

The river was only 25 or 30 feet wide where he had been hunkered down with his pole propped against a dead branch beside him. The sandy mud bank in front of him was some five feet across. Behind him a gravel walking path trailed the river's edge and led south to the Mill Dam or north to the harbor.

Denzel had chosen that spot because the water dipped to 15 or 20 feet at the deepest, and stayed cool and dark enough for big fish to rest and nibble on whatever they could find. Even in the afternoon.

He gave the pole one harsh snap to set his hook, and then his old fingers started working the reel again. Denzel kept the pole up and out from his body, to keep the fish from snarling the line on any of the hidden stumps, branches or garbage that had collected at the river bottom.

But the fish wasn't going to give up easily, and might very well have gotten away if it had more room to run. That was another reason Denzel chose that place on the river. A fight with a fish didn't last long when there wasn't much water for it to play in.

Soon, he saw the twisting body, and his expression curled up with disgust. The creature was long and streamlined: dark brown with a white belly.

A suckerfish.

Denzel spat, reeling hard, drawing the fish closer to the bank.

*Eat my bait, you bastard!*

With a final heave, and sweep of his pole Denzel slid the fish from the water where it started flipping and jumping on the muddy bank.

*Now you'll get it!*

The suckerfish was just under two feet in length, and no more than five inches at the thickest part of its body—a big one.

Denzel stepped closer, keeping the tension on his line, as the creature contorted, and twisted on the sand.

He stamped a rubber boot heel down hard on it, and trapped the fish against the bank.

"You wanna go home?" he snarled at the fish in his cartoon voice. "You miss your mommy?" He laughed.

The suckerfish lay on its back. The big lips for which it was named sucked at the sky, drowning on air.

"Hah!" Denzel rasped. "You ate my bait you fucking fish!" He pressed his boot down on the slippery body; put his whole weight on it.

The pressure pushed its gills out like flower petals. The suckerfish twisted under his foot as Denzel reached down and ripped the hook out of the large mouth. There was a tearing sound, and the upper lip shredded as the barbs pulled free.

*He knew some people he'd like to do that to. Make fun of me!*

Denzel set his fishing pole aside, and stayed bent over the fish. He shifted his weight and gave the suckerfish another squeeze.

Blood trailed out of its ruined mouth.

“You don't like that?” Denzel said, frowning, pressing his weight on it again. “Ah!”

Suddenly, a flood of bright yellow-gold eggs spurted out of the suckerfish's belly near the tail.

Denzel watched this fertile goo coat the sand around his boot.

“Eggs and suckerfish babies, eh?” Denzel chortled. “No fuckin' way.”

He stamped on the suckerfish's head. There was a wet *crunch* as the tail flapped against the sand. He put his full weight on it, twisting his foot and the fish's head came apart. The tail twitched a final time and was still.

Then, Denzel started stamping on the eggs with both feet, grinding them to mush.

“Fuckin' sucker!” he hissed as he crushed the fish's body into a gory mess.

Then something caught his eye and he froze. Two dead fish each a bit bigger than his hand were floating five feet from shore. *What's that now?*

They looked completely out of place, flat and brown with bright yellow stripes. It was easy to see they were tropical—angelfish? Nothing like that ever lived in the river. They were dead, not even a flip of the tail.

*Someone emptied his aquarium...* Denzel lingered on the concept; sure he'd heard other fishermen claim they'd seen equally foreign fish wash up along the Sydenham River's banks from time to time.

He turned back to the sucker, his boot raised to give the pile of gore a final stamp when he heard a sound behind him.

*Who's laughing?*

Denzel looked up. Just where the riverbank rose past the gravel walking path there was a thicket of tall poplar trees growing on the slope. The undergrowth around their trunks was dense with green budded branches and leafy plants. Those trees formed a narrow forest that followed the river, and guarded it from neighborhoods that crowded its banks.

*What the hell?* He peered into the trees absently snatching up his fishing pole and slipping his hook through the largest line guide before increasing the tension on the reel.

A breeze had sprung up, and was tracing lines across the surface of the river. Then, the light caught his eye as ripples built up and lapped at the shore.

A gust of wind blew his bushy hair into his eyes, and shook the trees along the bank.

*More laughter?* He started walking up the incline.

*Or was someone crying?*

Fishing pole gripped tight in his right hand, Denzel walked into the narrow woods, the wind tugging at the branches and brushing the undergrowth against his legs.

In places that strip of forest was no more than a yard wide, while in others like this, by Denzel's deep spot in the river, the trees formed a long patch of wilderness some 30 feet wide and 60 long, a forested crescent where it bordered the sidewalk on 1st Avenue.

He knew that in some places on the riverbank where the trees grew thickest the high school kids, even some of the fishermen, built little fires and drank beer or whisky, and sometimes did God only knows what.

Denzel had found wrinkled condoms among the ivy and ground cover back there, on the times he'd been bored enough to investigate, or when he had to piss.

*What the?* He rubbed his eyes. For a second, he was sure he'd seen a small round head pop up out of the undergrowth. Then, he caught a glimpse of light skin in the shadowed places between the new leaves.

*More laughter! Little voices. Goddamn kids!*

He lifted his fishing pole higher to keep it from tangling in the wiry saplings and growth that rattled against his legs. The plants whipped back and forth, seemingly pushed aside by something moving. Here, there, movement everywhere around him.

*Some shavers back here making fun of old Denzel?*

Then a sound came. This time, ready as he was, he could make it out to be a voice—a woman's, and higher pitched with a low base, seesawing up and down with sadness.

Denzel's first thought was to turn the other way and leave the river, or at least leave his fishing spot since he didn't have much to do with women anymore. Perhaps he'd make his way to the Mill Dam. The river was shallow there, but late in the afternoon, might let him snag a few more suckers if there weren't any fish worth catching.

But the sound came again.

He was sure of it now; it was a woman. And she was crying.

*Maybe the kids were bugging her.* His skin rippled with gooseflesh as he realized the bushes had gone quiet of childish laughter.

But it felt like eyes were still on him.

Denzel looked down at his boots. They were covered with gore: suckerfish blood and eggs. He quickly cleaned them against some ivy.

The woman kept crying, voice louder

“Wait!” Denzel called out, momentarily forgetting his voice. If there was trouble, he could help. He was angry but he was from Sydenham, and the small town still lived in his manners.

*If there was trouble.*

Denzel struggled on into the undergrowth, making his way between the tall trees. The sun dappled the new leaves that grew all around, and gave the gray trunks a yellow glow. The wind kept gusting against his back.

He walked toward the sound of weeping. It was a woman. A woman was sad.

It came from up ahead where the poplar trees and undergrowth started meshing with a thick wall of cedars.

*Can't see anybody.*

It was slow going with thorny undergrowth tugging at his clothes, and catching at his legs.

The woman kept sobbing and Denzel pondered calling out again before abandoning the notion, thinking his voice might scare her, whoever she was.

Then he saw something. Up ahead, someone was faced away and squatting down in the cedars. There was a head and shoulders in a dark gray dress, or nightdress—or was it wet? That was it; he could see the pink flesh beneath pressing against the cloth. Its contour defined at the shoulder blades and along the dimpled spine.

He could mostly see her shoulders, and the long wet tresses trailing down her back; the rest of her was hidden by the leaves.

He approached the huddled form, tipping the fishing pole skyward.

Denzel struggled, excited to see the pink flesh behind the cloth, and the shape beneath. She kept crouching forward.

“You wokay?” he asked in his voiceless rasp. “You hurt?”

The woman continued to weep without acknowledging him, but Denzel pushed closer anyway.

Now he could see that her cotton shift hugged the shape of her lower body too, showing her full hips and buttocks.

“Lady,” Denzel squeaked, feasting his eyes. “You wokay?” He could see right through the wet material.

Suddenly, the woman rose to her full height and the angled sunlight showed through the wet dress, silhouetting her long legs, hinting at upper thighs.

“Hey,” he said, taking another step. He was only three feet from her. She was no longer crying. Instead of that—he was sure of it—she was laughing!

*Is she playing tricks? Making fun...*

“Wokay?” he asked again, and she turned toward him.

The skin on her face was mottled gray and white. The sharp yellow teeth were bared in a grimace of hate or pain. Her eyes were hidden by a tattered strip of cloth.

The screeching rasp scared a pair of mallard ducks out of their hiding place by the mud bank, sent them noisily flapping across the river and into the air.

A moment later, an old man’s broken body crashed through the high branches of the poplar trees and hit the middle of the river with a splash. The momentum drove him down toward the bottom where the suckerfish gathered to feed.

## Chapter 9

3:30 p.m.

SCOTT Keyes was in his room at the Travelodge Motel doing what he could to avoid the “low” that usually followed the “highs” he’d experienced in his life. He had long ago learned to expect the strong emotional reaction that often followed any change.

*No worries. You’re just a little crazy.*

It had been a long time since he’d full-out stumbled into depression, but he was still careful to avoid that trap by catching his mood before it fell too far.

The first rule was accepting that what he was feeling was “normal.” A dip in the road was to be expected in a case like this. It was normal to feel an emotional drop after the building excitement that surrounded this trip.

*It’s normal to feel this way.* At least he hadn’t panicked—not yet.

Keyes had just returned to his hometown after 20 years away, and there was a big gray area of incomplete and missing memories waiting for him.

He smiled grimly.

*Yep!* Those were good reasons for a little sag in his mood. Once all the excitement had drained away and he’d had a chance to set his bags down—it had started to hit him.

*So. Well what now?*

He had showered and shaved, and stretched out on the bed in his underwear to take a nap and unwind his spine after the hours on the bus. He had almost drifted off, but instead slipped along the hazy borderland of sleep where time stuttered between long, dragged-out minutes and sudden bursts of speed.

The state also had him oscillating between anxious realization and calm acceptance.

It was amazing that it could still be restful.

One of those shifts from snooze to introspection had put his mind close to the darkness that surrounded his childhood. His trip up the hill to the Travelodge must have put him in the mood. He was wide awake now.

*Get out of your head. Take in your surroundings.*

He was lying on a double bed. Its right side was two feet from the wall allowing space for a side table and lamp. To his left, a dark wooden table and two chairs were set in an open space before a big window that overlooked the parking lot and busy intersection of 9th Avenue and 10th Street.

He had peeked out between the heavy floor-to-ceiling drapes just after he arrived, but had opted to leave them drawn.

There was a door beside the window. Directly across from that, another door opened on the hallway. That was how he got in. About 25 feet of dark blue carpet paced between the facing exits.

The room was 15 feet from the head of his bed to a tight grouping of furniture.

A television was bolted to a swivel-table beside the hallway entrance. Five feet from the foot of the bed there was, right to left: a chrome clothing rack and hangers, a narrow desk and mirror, and the door to the small but clean bathroom.

After hanging up what needed to hang, he’d put his alarm clock on the desk across from the bed. He couldn’t keep it close enough to hit the snooze alarm. He was bad with snooze alarms.

*You are here. Right here.*

Keyes had hoped for lodgings with a local touch, but had given up almost as soon as the idea occurred to him.

He had grabbed a taxi at the bus terminal and asked the rough-looking driver if there was a good hotel downtown. Keyes couldn't remember. It had been a long time since he'd been in Sydenham.

The driver had pointed at the bus and asked where he'd come from.

When Keyes said "Toronto" the driver had smiled showing yellow teeth through wiry whiskers.

"You don't want to be downtown then." The cabbie had turned the vehicle and taken him toward 10th Street hill. "The Travelodge is a couple blocks east from the top," the driver said, smelling of tobacco and aftershave. "An easy walk down, and close enough to the highway if you change your mind about staying."

He had laughed over that last part while Keyes struggled to see the humor.

They hadn't gone two blocks before stopping at the four-way lights that Keyes immediately recognized as Church Corners. There was no mistaking the intersection.

A massive church was built on each point of the compass. Beautiful and disconcerting, the buildings leaned over the cross streets. Each of them was distinct in architectural form, running the gamut from low stony castle like the First Baptist on his right, to the high soaring steeple of St. George's Cathedral kitty-corner to it.

He was unable to do more than gawk and catch a quick glimpse because the congested traffic on the street had started moving, and the driver surged ahead with the rest.

Keyes had made a mental note to go back to Church Corners and linger. Such a powerful collection of distinctive structures was impossible to look at without evoking memories.

Case in point, as the cab had approached the hill, he recognized the baseball diamond on the left, and remembered it from his teen years as St. George's Park abutting the grounds of the high-steepled church of the same name.

A flashbulb memory had gone off then, of his having sex with his high school sweetheart in one of the washrooms behind the bleachers, and also on the long steps that had climbed the hill behind it.

*That was the first night. You met at a dance and walked her home.*

St. George's Park had also been across 10th Street from the high school, but when he turned to look Keyes saw a crowded neighborhood of new homes where the school used to stand against the wooded hill.

"High school's gone?" he had muttered, remembering the complex, and its circular auditorium and gym.

"Yep," the cabbie had said, tromping on the gas as the car started up the incline. "New one's way up on top of 8th Street and looks like a prison." He chuckled.

*"Progress..."*

The cab had continued after cresting the top of 10th and Keyes had looked wistfully over at Victoria Park. That was a big grassy plateau where they used to have horse racing, the Fall Fair, and where certain gym teachers tortured kids running its long gravel track.

The bleachers were still there, tall and gray, and he grinned remembering that he and his high school sweetheart had done something up there too.

*Those were the days.*

His mind had just started to retrieve other memories about her when he was diverted by a huge black building that dominated the easternmost end of the field.

“What’s that?” Keyes had asked, and the driver cackled.

“More progress...” The man hunched over the wheel and stared at the building from under his hat. “That’s the new YMCA. Don’t know what was wrong with the old one.”

The cabbie had dropped Keyes in the parking lot in front of a dull, almost featureless red brick building: the Travelodge Motel.

After checking in at the front desk, Keyes had grabbed the local newspaper from the stand and read it in the bathroom before showering. A quick scan of the stories provoked some nostalgic thoughts, but it was the names more than the pictures that had an effect. The stories were basic, and fairly boring, the names however were familiar: Bothwell, Grey County, Wiarton...

*Basic and boring will do for a while...*

There was a feature about locals protesting the impact of new wind turbines on the health of cattle and people. *Never hear of Holland’s windmills?* And there was actually a front page picture of an old man and his cat. *“Puss-in-Roots found after search.”* At least the animal hadn’t been stuck *in* a tree but under one, and another bold headline said Sydenham police had chased kids out of a party area in the west rocks.

He had also read the classifieds. After one look at the motel, Keyes started kicking around the idea of renting an apartment closer to the downtown core for the duration of his stay. He remembered Sydenham’s houses, and beautiful neighborhoods. From first passing glance it looked like many of them had remained unchanged.

He knew that would be the best way to immerse himself in Sydenham and begin his trip down memory lane. *Cheaper, too, in the long run.*

And motels were depressing places, with mattresses marked by strangers’ bodies and stale smells ghosting in the corners. Here he was lying in bed trying to raise his spirits— isolated, alone...feeling anxious.

*Only bad if you let it get bad.*

A jumble of thoughts and feelings rolled through his mind, and gathered as an uncomfortable weight in his chest. His arms and legs were heavy—hell, they weighed a thousand pounds.

*You did fall asleep.*

He took a deep satisfying breath, and recognized that something was overpowering his anxiety. He felt rested, and that could only come from real sleep with a touch of rapid eye movement thrown in for good measure. He’d read that that kind of sleep was potent, and even a few minutes in the dream state could feel as restful as an hour.

*Did I hear kids?* Keyes had a sense then, more than a memory that he had heard something: children maybe, laughing—giggling. Or it was kids playing games?

*I heard kids.*

He listened intently for any sound in the next room. The playing noise must have come from over there.

*Another mark against an extended stay at the Travelodge.*

Yep. Definitely, he’d fallen asleep, dropped off thinking about—then a siren wailed in the distance.



*You heard that before.* Somewhere in town, an ambulance had made a rapid response, or it had already completed its mission and was headed to the hospital—or morgue.

*Morbid thought.*

His heartbeat surged as the emergency vehicle screamed.

Maybe that was what woke him up in the first place.

The siren continued to echo, and it took him a minute to orient himself with the noise.

*To the south.*

Definitely in town though.

Keyes remembered how Sydenham's geography included everyone in every minor or major accident: fender-bender, heart attack or house fire—even broken mufflers. Once a loud noise started it ran all around Sydenham's jagged inner rim—or depending on its source and inclination—might rocket straight across from the cliffs in the west rocks over to the east before bouncing back again.

Crazy at first, like a storm of sound it would rock Sydenham from top to bottom, until the source was satisfied or passed, and then it would wind down, sometimes all the way.

*Until the place was as quiet as a grave...* when even silence echoed about the place. Once it started moving around it damped out the other sounds.

It seemed that once something got in, it could take a while to get back out.

And it had a similar effect on people—if they could find their way in.

Sydenham's geography exaggerated an east and west division with the broad harbor and bay to the north, and the rugged Niagara Escarpment in the south where the river's highlands at Inglis Falls forced travelers to choose between an east and western approach to the city.

Once that decision was made, the landscape drew everything toward the center of the limestone canyon to where the river ran and split the town into east and west "sides."

The river ran right through the middle. Travelers from either direction followed the highways to streets that led down over massive limestone steps until they reached the river flowing south to north where it emptied into the bay.

First Avenues east and west occupied their respective river banks and paced in that direction successively second, third, fourth, etc. until they reached the highways that ran parallel.

The avenues were cut into blocks by intersecting streets that ran east and west, crossing the river on bridges in four locations. The streets were also numbered, and the population boasted the ease by which they used this simple method for getting around.

Of course, visitors to Sydenham struggled with the numbered grid, and often stopped to beg for directions that would lead them to any "named" street.

Keyes smiled up at the ceiling. It was such a little city that giving the streets names seemed like a waste of imagination.

Sydenham had a way with people. If it didn't spit you out quick, it could chew you up and swallow.

The siren replayed in his memory.

*Maybe poor Puss is caught under another tree.*

## Chapter 10

5:00 p.m.

DETECTIVE Joe Penney watched the ambulance drive away from the river. After a slow turn onto Main Street, it would meander back a block to 8th and head east up the hill toward the hospital. There was no hurry. Its passenger was dead.

The fire truck had left a good half hour before, off to “real” emergencies. The firemen had fished the body out of the river, and passed it off to the EMTs who were waiting on the bank to declare old Denzel Green dead.

There’d been a few minutes chat between the gathered services before the fire crew headed back to the station to dry out their gear. They’d promised to email a report to Detective Penney ASAP.

Penney and a couple uniforms, Binns and Matthews, used the next 45 minutes to search the east riverbank while constables Parker and Stanley checked the west trying to nail down where Denzel had gone into the water.

The first look around both sides had turned up the usual stuff: beer and soft drink bottles and cans, garbage, fish bones and broken lures. The Sydenham River was a busy spot this close, three blocks or three bridges to the harbor, and groups of locals often hunkered down along its length at this fishing spot or the next.

*Just Denzel today.*

This close to the harbor they hoped to get the big fish coming and going. At least, that’s what Penney had been told by fishermen on the force. He didn’t go in for it himself, but he knew the river hosted recreationalists seeking relaxation and fun, and others, unemployed people too poor to buy fresh meat for the dinner table and retired locals who had nowhere else to go, and nothing better to do.

*At least it’s something. That’s better than nothing.*

The mess on the bank closest to where Denzel’s body had been found indicated that the old angler had killed a suckerfish before he died.

*Killed? He slaughtered it.*

The boots that had ground the fish to gory paste had left prints that matched Denzel’s worn rubbers.

Constable Matthews had found Denzel’s fishing pole up in the forested area that served as a buffer between the river and the busy street corner that locals used as a short cut from the 8th Street Bridge looping up to main and on to 6th Street hill.

They knew it was Denzel’s pole because the codger had taken a black magic marker and written his name “DENZEL” in big capital letters along its old cork grip.

Matthews showed Penney what she thought was Denzel’s track going in through the undergrowth by the river bank. There were lots of new plants bent over at the stem or trampled down back as far as a thick line of cedar trees.

Nothing very interesting, except that Matthews pointed out the number of broken branches that were on the ground, and that seemed to have recently snapped off from high up on the tall poplars and few twisted maples that grew in profusion there.

*Another freak wind?* Sydenham had been plagued with them lately. The calls from locals about property damage caused by wind, and freak weather disturbances had grown so common that the crew at the station referred to them as *Sydenham Cyclones*.

To the force, Sydenham Cyclones were about as exciting as rescuing cats in trees. Once it was determined that nature had done it, well what was the police services supposed to do about it?

*Sydenham Cyclone trouble? Call a weatherman.*

Penney and Matthews had both shrugged off the broken branches, and then had an uncomfortable moment when they turned up a treasure trove of used condoms and cigarette butts.

They had headed back to the riverbank after that. Matthews set Denzel's fishing pole by Penney's car before she left with the other uniforms.

Detective Penney peered through the trees at the brick house on the corner where 7th Street turned into 1st Avenue. Nice couple there, the Sanderson's lot butted up against the trees that buffered the river. Matthews had ambushed them bringing their kids home from daycare, but neither knew anything. They both worked and had been away when Denzel went swimming.

Penney stood by the riverbank and looked up at the poplars. He could see several branches had been snapped off at least 40 feet up.

*Attack of the Sydenham Cyclone...*

"Be nice," Penney admonished himself in a whisper.

Denzel Green was a citizen too. Why he had been back in the trees was anyone's guess, and it didn't likely have anything to do with all those condoms.

Penney had known of Denzel for most of his adult life. The fellow hadn't made the transition from working patient to retired cancer survivor very well.

Left almost mute by the disease, he became a loner in retirement. Denzel never got into any trouble, kept to himself and spent most of his days fishing along the river. Penney did not think the old guy had any family in Sydenham.

*Probably just wandered into the trees to take a piss and then...*

The body had been reported by Debbie Rowan. The 20-year-old high school dropout had been walking her Rottweiler "Bachelor" up along the trail from the Mill Dam when she thought she saw a "white poodle" or "cat" drowned in the river.

She'd passed it off as such until the trail hit the gravel slope and log stairs leading up to the 1st Avenue parking area where the elevation had shown her a body hanging down in the water under the splayed tuft of wet white hair.

She'd called 911 on her cell phone, and had already given her statement to Matthews by the time Penney had arrived.

He made her hurry through her story again, what there was of it, because "Bachelor" kept glaring, growling and pacing around Rowan's legs. It didn't take a physics major to know that Debbie's small hands and thin white wrists could not stop Bachelor's 150 pounds if he wanted to take a bite out of the detective.

Denzel's death had the look of an unfortunate, but accidental drowning. It was not the kind of thing Penney wanted to sacrifice a suit over, let alone get stitches and a tetanus shot—or have to shoot a dog.

He was glad to see Debbie and Bachelor go.

Penney had studied the riverbank and noticed several places where rubber boot prints were clear in the shallows as much as eight or 10 feet in, close to where the water dropped into darkness.

*Old man falls in, boots fill with water; he can't get out.*

The only other explanation that made any sense was that Denzel had killed himself. He had to be pushing well into his 70s: alone, none too healthy, and probably depressed. Maybe it was the last day on the river he could stand, and being a fisherman, there was a certain symmetry to ending it all there.

Penney looked at the river. It was 30 feet across at that point, and he knew it was about 15 feet deep in the middle.

He knew the depth because he'd been to the bottom of it. Penney hadn't bothered to share that fact with his colleagues. It was just something that for obvious reasons stood out to him, and might have accounted for the uneasy feeling he'd had watching firemen fish a body out, right there of all places.

*Coincidence. Small town. Same river.*

Two decades back when he was 18, Joe Penney had fallen through the winter ice covering the river there.

In his teens, he'd been in a constant battle with his police detective father.

On that occasion, Penney had finally taken and passed his driver's license exam like his dad had challenged, but then old Red had reneged on his promise of buying him a car. Suddenly, that part of the bargain had depended on the younger Penney's grades, which had been slipping.

Red had double-crossed him.

And Joe had only put off getting the license in the first place because he had no car.

*What was the point?*

Penney had stormed out of the house before his mother could come to his defense. He didn't want her taking the brunt of his father's anger again, so he took a walk in the snow to cool off. He fumed along the edge of the Sydenham River, headed south from the harbor, making his way along the winding bank. Just thinking, wishing he had a different father.

Then he had seen something flickering out on the ice right where the river widened. It had looked silver, and imagining a money windfall, Penney hurried across the ice to a point almost 20 feet from the bank.

He had lost sight of the silver flash, and was looking for it when the ice suddenly cracked and broke under him. It had happened too fast for him to do anything but sink; his senses immediately overwhelmed by cold, and throttling pressure.

There in the icy depths, his heavy winter clothing had quickly soaked through and dragged him down. As he had struggled to peel the thick layers off, he looked up with throbbing eyes at the ice sheet overhead. Bright gray with streaks of light blue, and against it, he'd seen something he'd never told anyone about.

And he never would.

Shadows. Shapes. Movement.

*No oxygen. Your mind was playing tricks.*

He had finally managed to get his coat off, and push away from the river bottom and on the way up he'd passed the shadow shapes he'd seen.

Close up, they looked like children and animals, kind of—distorted. Strange, like pictures or sculptures of mist or ice just floating in the gray. His eyes had ached in the cold as he passed right through the twisted shapes.

Penney had been pushed along by the current, so was lucky to find a stretch of thin ice by a sewer outlet near the shore where he smashed through and dragged himself

sputtering to safety. He stayed at a coffee shop for a couple hours to dry a bit, and managed to sneak in later when his parents were watching *60 Minutes* in the rec room.

He later told them he'd lost his coat in the school cafeteria, but nothing else. His dad would have killed him. *And what he saw under the ice?* There were a million logical explanations for that, but until Penney had one he believed, he'd always be drawn back to the river.

He was looking for just such an explanation now.

Joan Preston, the EMT who had gone through the motions of resuscitating old Denzel, said there wasn't any water in his lungs. So she had suggested that he might have died of a heart attack, either from the shock of hitting the cold river, or from the struggle to get back out.

But the part that didn't make any sense was what Penney hadn't shared with Constable Matthews or one of the other uniforms. Preston had told him that before loading Denzel into the ambulance she had adjusted the straps that held him to the gurney. She and the other EMT Odell found that both of the old man's arms were broken and the right shoulder entirely dislocated.

It was possible considering the victim's age that some of the injuries could be attributed to panic, and an attempt to climb back out of the river—to save himself.

Some, but not *all* of his injuries. Penney smiled. Now *who's* fishing?

Only an autopsy would tell him more, and by the look, he'd still be left with an accidental death.

It was Sydenham after all—and Penney knew the old refrain. *Nothing ever happens in Sydenham.*

## Chapter 11

5:00 p.m.

THE old woman shambled along the street toward Keyes, her lurching, unsteady gait measured by the metallic *clink* that preceded her, a side effect of the slippery piece of chrome tube steel she was using as a walking stick.

*A table leg? Recycling works!*

The sound had first drawn Keyes' attention as he approached the bottom of 10th Street hill. He'd been on his way downtown when she limped out of hiding where 5th Avenue butted up against the sloping street. A concrete retaining wall and clump of tall cedar bushes had hidden her from view.

Church Corners loomed beyond her in the distance. The sun was lowering in the sky and backlit the old woman throwing her shadow at Keyes' shoes, briefly drawing his attention away from her.

She crossed the sidewalk and came to a wavering halt where the four lanes of traffic roared up and down the hill. She shuffled her feet, stabbed at the concrete curb with her walking stick, and craned her head at the vehicles.

It looked like she was going to cross the street where St. George's Park and its baseball diamond and bleachers swept west toward the church. To the east, the hill was covered with tall hardwood trees and pine, and followed a jagged line north for many blocks where Keyes knew it would come to St. Mary's Hill and the Catholic Church.

He scanned the area north of the baseball diamond looking for the old lawn bowling club buildings that used to nestle on a broad expanse of grass by public tennis courts. He remembered visiting the clubhouse after hours; leading his high school sweetheart with one hand and carrying a purloined bottle of vodka with the other.

They'd use the broad sheltered porch as their "love nest" and he again remembered several other places along that hillside.

*That's the problem with living at home—no privacy.* He remembered one time getting caught in the rain, and they'd done it standing up among some trees. *Not as hard as you think, once you get your balance...*

His mind was yanked from this reverie when he realized that the old woman at the curb was frozen in place, her dark eyes roving eagerly over him. An excited gleam flashed there for a second—before it was extinguished and replaced by a dull dissolution around the pupils.

Her features were large; her skin the color of strong tea, and her face was ravaged with many deep lines and wrinkles. She was heavy, and round, more thick or dense than fat. She handled her unusual walking stick with strong-fingered hands tanned the same yellow-brown.

Keyes realized that this woman's age would be hard to estimate since she had the sort of mummy-like skin that belied any guessing, and made him think of carbon dating.

*Is this my cougar?* He joked to himself.

She was old and worn, as weathered as barn board.

The woman had a gold and black kerchief tied tight over her wiry, white hair and knotted under her knobby chin. A thick, mustard-colored corduroy coat covered her heavy shoulders; its fake sheepskin collar was dirty, pulled up to her strong jaw. A big

vinyl purse was belted over her shoulder and kept up tight under her large breasts. The battle-scarred bag was stretching at the seams and looked like something out of the 70s. Stained pants and leather hiking boots completed the ensemble.

Her face and head reminded Keyes of a dried apple doll—a country craft from early pioneer days, where a face was carved on a peeled apple and left to dry. The dehydration distorted the features, twisting and discoloring them. He remembered seeing the dolls for sale at folksy roadside fruit and vegetable stands.

*Not my cougar.* He smirked as he drew nearer.

The old woman's small, black currant eyes came to life again and flitted quickly over him. The oversized features twitched. Her mouth fell open, and then snapped shut. The old lips stretched into a wide line under the long nose, before the woman showed off a single lower tooth as she mouthed a rasping stream of curses to herself.

As she turned back to the busy street, a patch of skin on the side of her neck was exposed between coarse hair and kerchief. It was dark and mottled, and textured. Not the durable leather that covered her face. This was scar tissue.

She hunched her shoulders, flicking her head left and right, bending forward to continue stabbing the curb with her metal cane.

Keyes saw that the woman had her work cut out for her if she hoped to cross, but any thought of helping her was erased the second he caught her aroma.

She smelled the way an old woman might smell, if she'd been dead for a week and hadn't showered in the year preceding her demise.

The odor hit him in the face like a fist, and sent him careening away from the crone. It was one of those stench that would require an equally powerful smell to dispel. So until he ran into a teen soaked in sports cologne he'd be smelling the old woman.

*Be nice. What's the hurry?*

The rules of the big city need not apply.

*Oh yeah...they apply.*

Still holding his breath, he glanced back toward the old woman, but saw that she was halfway across the street, moving quickly despite her bulk and reliance upon her homemade walking stick.

*Clink. Clink. Clink.*

From the centerline, she took one look back at him before pushing across the last two lanes with barely a glance to see if it was safe. A dump truck hurtling down the hill toward her hit the horn, and shuddered as its driver applied the breaks.

The heavy vehicle made a banging sound as it thundered to a halt, and the driver blared the horn again. The pavement vibrated under Keyes' feet.

Oddly, the old woman had shifted her free hand and held it flat across her broad backside, as though the gesture might expedite her crossing, or protect her from the truck's roaring bulk. She shuffled past the big front bumper, stepped over the curb and walked toward the trees.

*Crazy old witch!*

Keyes peered across the road and into the trees and glimpsed the woman's mustard-colored coat as she moved deeper into the shadows of the forested hill.

He pulled his jacket collar tighter around his neck and chin. The day had cooled off, and would only get colder as the sun continued to sink, and for a second he wondered if he'd brought a heavy enough jacket.

*Buy a new one...*

He had the money, which was something new for him. He'd never been exceptionally prosperous at his web design work, but he'd always been content. Over the years, he could remember many occasions when a girlfriend had looked at the condition of his jacket or boots and wondered aloud whether it wasn't time to update his wardrobe.

Keyes had never been much interested in fashion, and he felt that his early days had conditioned him to making do with what he had. The Johnsons were just getting by when they lived in Sydenham, and it took them a long time to get their financial footing after moving him to Toronto. Actually, they'd only been able to enjoy some real luxuries after Scott had moved out on his own.

Keyes would never wear rags. He had pride, but he wouldn't just replace something because it was old, it had to be worn out.

That certainly suited his low-profit entrepreneurial enterprise, and he knew it suited his personal beliefs about the environment, and the rapacious western consumer culture.

*The more you have, the more you need.*

But did that come from the Johnsons or was it something from before?

*We must have been poor. My parents...*

And his heart raced at the thought.

*Here we go.*

His stay at his grandmother's had been too short to account for the philosophy, though she was certainly poor enough, living in a tiny house on a dead-end street, nestled in a...and Keyes realized he'd turned along 5th Avenue which would take him south, away from Church Corners.

If he kept going for three blocks in that direction, he'd end up at the bottom of the goat path, and no more than a stone's throw from his grandmother's old house—if it was still there.

His grandmother, Norah Keyes, was dead; killed in a freak accident when Scott was 10. That had put him in the foster care of the Johnsons, and started the rest of his life.

*I owe them everything.*

A shiver ran up his back and he pulled his jacket tighter.

He wondered if he still had an uncle living in Sydenham—perhaps in the same house. As the Johnsons told it, Uncle Terry had been younger than Scott's birth mother and a son from a different father, but when Norah died he'd had too many troubles of his own to care for his nephew.

*No love lost either.* Keyes had been coming out of the fog then, so he remembered that: moving into Norah's house to find Terry there angry and possessive. He didn't want to share his bedroom.

He also remembered seeing Terry when he still lived in Sydenham. As a teenager, he would spot him at a distance downtown or when Keyes was walking to school. Keyes had not heard from his uncle after he moved in with the Johnsons or in the years since he'd moved to Toronto.

*Before Norah's place it was all a blank—darkness.*

He was amazed at how comfortable he had been with the shadows that hung over the early part of his life.

Keyes' heart continued to race, and he took in a gasp of cool air.



His adoptive mother Eileen did her best if he ever approached the topic, telling him that his “amnesia” was his mind’s way of protecting him. Some day, she assured, his memory of the early years would come back—and if not? Then she’d encouraged, that instead of feeling frustrated he should feel lucky.

Not every memory was an opportunity to grow or learn. Sometimes they were just bad memories and best put behind you.

*There’s no rush.*

Keyes continued along 5th Avenue, keenly aware of the place where his high school used to stand but that now played home to a neighborhood of cookie cutter houses.

Interestingly, on the side of the street facing the development the original brick homes were still alive with character by comparison. Each architectural design was different, and seemed to hold a greater sense of permanence than the new homes despite their hundred or more years.

Keyes took the first right at 9th Street and headed toward Main. He had decided to eat at one of the old restaurants he remembered. He’d loved the fried mushrooms at the Scopis, and the Trio had the best hot beef sandwich with gravy.

He salivated at the memory of the clubhouse platter they served at the Alps. Keyes smiled and then squinted as a sudden gust of wind blew dust into his eyes.

## Chapter 12

8:00 p.m.

GEORGIE stayed by the phone when he was frightened.

And he was frightened now.

Well, as frightened as he could be with the drugs they gave him after supper. But who wouldn't be scared? Belted into a wheelchair and all alone after sundown.

He was belted in because he often forgot that he couldn't walk. He was still strong in the upper body which was great for getting around with the wheelchair, but it also meant he had the strength to heave himself up and out of it.

Only for a second and then *BOOM* down he'd go.

One time he fractured his skull on the worst fall. That's what they told him and that had sealed his fate as just another old man at Lee Manor who had to be locked into his chair.

He didn't go down without a fight, and had managed to cut the belt once after borrowing a pair of scissors from a dizzy old dame who lived across the hall from him. He'd also taken 20 bucks from her purse.

But down he went, *BOOM*, that time too.

Then he'd figured out how to unlock the belt, just stick a pen in there and *click*...but now he couldn't remember what he had figured out. *Anyway, BOOM, down he went again.*

That had earned him cracked ribs, so maybe just as well he couldn't remember how to open the lock.

Georgie just couldn't walk anymore. Not since the trouble. So lucky for him he had the phone. It kept him from worrying about walking.

Once in a while he got good phone calls; reassuring messages and warnings came in from people who still cared. But most were crank calls—just noises and such meant to scare him—real hateful doozies. And others that were just plain mean; a brooding silence hung there on the other end of the line that delivered a dark message without saying a word.

But Georgie still preferred hearing that over the phone, because it meant he wouldn't have visitors bringing the message to his room personally.

And he didn't like the messengers that came. Not ever. No.

It was pretty dark in his room sometimes, like now. The only light was dim and came from the outer hall to cut a pale gray wedge on the floor. The nightlight in the bathroom sent a couple of orange beams sneaking out across the one side and along the lower edge of the door.

It was too early for bed when he had returned to his room after dinner, but he'd turned off his overhead light so he could think. Next thing he knew he was waking up still belted in his chair.

It was dark. Which could be enough to frighten anyone.

Georgie was exhausted from waiting all day for the phone to ring. It hadn't rung at all which had kept him on edge expecting the good news or the bad. It was tricky, because sometimes getting a phone call meant he shouldn't expect a visitor—if it was one of the visitors calling.

And at other times he'd get a call that warned him he'd be getting a visitor.

That was usually bad because...well, he had fine white lines from old cuts on his face and hard lumps of scar tissue on his hands for a reason.

Everybody thought Georgie was clumsy, but he wasn't clumsy.

Most of his visitors were mean.

There was the fucking cop, the one from the old days, "Red" Penney who came in to play cribbage. He'd come in and give Georgie a big Tim Horton's coffee with double cream double sugar, and he, that detective, would sit there and make wicked jokes and gloat because he caught Georgie so long ago or because he could get up and leave anytime he damn well pleased.

He'd ask questions too, and those questions got through the fog that sometimes hung over Georgie's eyes. Funny, too, that the fog came from the inside. It snuck up under his thoughts, whenever they got fuzzy or tired, and the fog would slip a haze over his eyeballs and stuff cotton batting in his ears.

Not that it really stuffed the cotton, but it sounded like it did. Georgie's ears would get a muffled echo that he couldn't shake. It would shut out the Lee Manor life: the shuffling old people, the hurrying nurses and squeaky wheelchairs.

Sometimes it even shut out the sound of the phone.

But when he got that way, all foggy, then he'd sit and think and get caught up on notions that wheeled by on the inside sort of, from ear to ear kind of thing.

They were usually about his past, like when he was in the hospital and in the home, and now more and more from long ago when he was a young man, and was married, and before that.

Before any of his trouble had started, when drinking beer and driving cars and playing pickup hockey were all the wonders and worries in the world.

He'd get caught there in that foggy place, and it sometimes took him a long time to find his way back out. Not just because of the fog, but also because the life from way back then had been easier and better within his grasp.

The nurse, the pretty one with green eyes and auburn hair, had told him about the fog. *Amanda. Pretty Amanda.* She had a way of conjuring him back out of it.

More than once he'd drift out of days gone by, of drinking whisky swish with the boys, fishing on the river, or netting smelt down at Leith to find her sitting across from him, both soft hands wrapped around his big knuckles.

Those times he'd like to fuck that nurse, or bend those pretty fingers around something else. There wasn't a man in Lee Manor who didn't think it. She was well built and pretty—like Ann-Margret the movie star but before middle age made her saggy.

Of course, he could want to fuck her until the cows came home. He'd never stand a chance now that he was forced to wear a diaper and he hadn't heard more than a peep out of his pecker in too many years to count.

He tried not to use the goddamn diaper, he really did. He watched and kept sharp about it, and asked for help to use the johnny whenever the need came upon him.

But he didn't always know what was going on down there anymore, and there were times he'd surprised himself and realized he'd up and dumped in his pants. It happened mostly in the foggy times, but not always. Sometimes, he just didn't know he was doing it.

Still, he'd like to fuck that nurse. He just didn't know how he'd work out the finer points.

He'd never say it out loud though. Georgie never knew who might be listening, and knew of some who could get very jealous.

But none of that was why he was frightened. He'd seen something from his window that made him start, that got him worried expecting a call, or worse a visit.

And it was the visits that hurt the most because he'd never know who was coming.

But earlier that day, he'd seen one of the little terrors.

The ugly nipper looked to be part baby, part frog and part pig. Filmy and hazy against the sunny slope, its body was oozing milky stuff where it played around the trees on the grassy hill outside Georgie's window.

That wasn't so bad. It could play on the hill all it wanted.

At least it was outside.

*But where there was one little terror...*

There had been other times, much worse times, when they got into the building. They'd come slithering or crawling in to peek at him through the door day or night, or pop up over the edge of his bed.

The longer they stayed, the worse it got—like whatever door they came in through attracted more things the longer it stayed open.

There was another one of them, like a skinny guy with a lizard body, that dragged his twisted legs around the floor by his malformed arms, and he glared up at Georgie with a single swollen eye. All while black blood slopped around in a rectangular hole cut in his back just between the shoulders where the spine should be.

It was impossible, but Georgie had seen that one slide out from under his bed and crawl around on the floor making baby noises.

Georgie knew of the little terrors and he didn't like them one bit, because seeing them usually meant that something else was going to happen.

*Something worse.*

There were times he wondered if he'd just gone crazy, if the fall down the stairs had ruined his brain as well as his legs.

He remembered having nightmares up north, in the psychiatric hospital that had been his first prison. He remembered the fear too, but it had never been as bad as when he got sent back to Sydenham, before they'd given him drugs.

Back then, it was mostly bad dreams, and sometimes face to face scares from other patients in the hospital, real crazy ones who were not just violent but psychotic too. Rapists and killers, and there was even an old Mountie that ate bugs and squirrels.

Georgie looked at the phone and silently prayed that it would ring.

*Creak...*

The door to his room slowly swung shut. *Clunk!*

*Damn it...*

Georgie shifted in his chair to look, to see something in the shadowed corner that had been hidden by the open door.

He could smell rosy perfume and swamp gas.

The nightlight's amber bars lit the floor at the thing's feet.

It was tall and black and shaped like a woman, and he knew she would be wearing a dress if he could see her. If the shadow wasn't so damn dark. The dress would stop just

below the knee, but he could only see the shape. And he knew that if he could peer into the darkness that he'd see a veil over her face, or her long hair would be pulled over her features.

He knew that dry dead petals would be falling from a black bouquet she held in her hand.

He'd seen her before, but never all at once, never clearly, just enough to put her together bit by bit. If it was her. If she was the one come calling.

She was bad, and he only wished he knew more about her. She'd come and stand and stare like that until Georgie's heart would almost burst from fear. If it wasn't for the drugs he would die...

*What the hell does she want with me?*

Sometimes she came in the middle of the night, and woke him up with a cold pale hand over his nose and mouth. At others, he'd be sitting at his window thinking, when he'd feel her crinkly veil brush his ear and cheek and her breath came over his shoulder. Then he'd smell blood and rotten meat.

Georgie had proof that she visited, too. Little scars and cuts on his face and hands and chest where she'd scratch him with her nails. Or there was a time he'd wheeled himself out into the hall with his nose broken and spurting blood. *Clumsy*. Accident prone—his nurses thought him, or worse, Georgie liked to hurt himself.

They didn't know about her. *She's a bad one*.

He knew she moved so quietly she could kill him any day, and that from her manner it was plain she wanted to. But for now, she seemed content to come and scare him and make him think about her all day. So he'd think about dying.

Like now. Georgie stared into the corner, his lips trembling.

A hand floated up out of the shadow, and a long twisted finger pointing at him. More flower petals showered the floor as she stepped forward, dust drifting down from the hem of her dress.

Georgie gasped for breath. His strong old hands dropped toward his belt, and he tugged at the lock as the woman took another step.

But the door to his room swung open and a nurse walked in, hand lashing out for the light switch.

When it came on, the shadow behind the door disappeared and left nothing in the corner.

"Why are you sitting in the dark, Georgie?" the nurse asked.

"Who are you?" Georgie grunted.

"I'm Amanda," she said, bending forward to wipe a soft hand over his old cheeks.

"Sitting in the dark just makes you foggy, Georgie!" She smiled. "It's too early for bed."

"Foggy," he said.

"Then you get clumsy, and I'm tired of bandaging you up," she said, but she wasn't angry. She smoothed his hair, and then held out a small paper cup. "You take your pills before your tea and snack gets here."

Georgie opened his mouth, tipped his head back mechanically and the nurse dumped the pills in.

He washed them down with water she gave him in another cup.

"Good boy," the nurse said, wiping Georgie's chin with a napkin. "Tea's coming."

She turned and left the room, her uniform showing off the flare of her hips and the firm shape of her buttocks.

The phone rang on the bedside table and Georgie peered over his shoulder, a guilty look on his face. He reached out, and lifted the heavy receiver to his ear. "Hello?"

His shoulders slumped as he listened to the voice at the other end of the line.

"Yes." Georgie peered around his room. "You just missed her."

He listened.

"You did," he said, brushing at beads of sweat that had collected over his brow. "I couldn't say which."

## Chapter 13

8:00 p.m.

THE Captain's House perched atop the hill as it had for well over a hundred years. Looking up at it from the sidewalk, Scott Keyes was impressed by its proportions. Everything looked larger than necessary—not overwrought or bloated, but monolithic, its components giving the impression of age *and* strength.

The weathered bricks were solid, set permanently on a heavy stone foundation, and mullioned windows guarded the lower floors. The building trim, soffit and fascia were sturdy and square on the upper reaches and appeared to have been freshly painted, while dark red shingles made the roof look impenetrable.

The sheer mass of the building was intimidating and the house loomed over him, despite the fact he was standing 30 feet away.

*It had to be the light.* The setting sun burnished the western sky and a dense wall of trees traced strange shadows over the structure.

Keyes had come to a halt at the top of the 9th Street stairs having been herded there by a persistent wind that had come up suddenly from the west.

*So much for the old restaurants.*

He had looked for them, but they were all gone: Scopis, Trio, Alps—in one case, only a parking lot remained. So after eating at a Main Street coffee shop, and lingering afterwards with a local arts and entertainment magazine, Keyes had sauntered north until he picked up 10th Street where he planned to pass Church Corners on his way back to the Travelodge.

He was determined to serve a nostalgic craving that had gone unfulfilled at the coffee shop, and remembered the churches had been dramatically lit back in his youth.

Catching them in the fading light might just do it. Keyes would take a more thorough trip down memory lane the following day.

But it was not to be. He'd barely arrived at 10th Street before a strong wind from the east hit him in the face and had him blinking dust and contemplating a long miserable trudge up the hill to his motel. The air had grown cool, too, so he opted for revisiting Church Corners the following day.

He had cut across the wind, backtracking to 9th Street where he knew a long set of stairs used to climb up the escarpment and would put him within five blocks of his motel.

Keyes remembered the hill to be very steep, rising 60 feet in elevation and was tree-covered there so thought it would block the worst of the wind.

However, when he had reached the foot of the stairs a trick of the Sydenham weather shifted the breeze around completely, and it had suddenly started from the west, almost pushing him up the hill.

The long stairway had looked bleak in the fading light. It was made of galvanized steel set on crumbling concrete posts, much different from the wooden planks and beams he remembered from high school. The stairs joined one end of 9th Street at the bottom of the hill to where its severed length continued eastward at the top.

Starting up, it had still been light enough to see that the steps were crowded on both sides by long dead weeds, dry brown grass and overgrown trees. Red sumac leaned in under the lower bows of pine and spruce.

A rattling sound had brought him around a couple landings up as the flat seed pods of last year's honesty plants had shivered in the breeze. Their bleached bone finish made the disks stand out against the new bracken and ivy that grew low over the slope. Groups of the plants covered old flowerbeds that had been broken up by frost and roots and scattered on the hill.

Halfway up Keyes had seen more of the crumbled stone from the old tiered gardens, lashed down now by vines, and detritus and the roots of cedar trees.

Keyes had remembered the house on the hill the moment he saw it.

*The Captain's House.*

On the sidewalk atop the stairs now, he craned his neck to peer past the branches of an old spruce tree that had grown to block much of the view. As the sun sank further, the windows were growing warm with orange light.

The house was strange to look at and strangely familiar. Decades past, he and his friends had sat on the 9th Street stairs during high school lunch breaks smoking cigarettes and talking about girls. The building had hung over them the whole time.

The old house sat on a distorted rectangle of grass that covered the top ledge of the limestone escarpment. Humps of old green concrete formed a wall that shored up the very edge, and protected the uneven lawn and paving stones in the yard from the erosion that was deforming the rest of the hill.

Old stone steps set in the wall led to the first of the limestone terraces that had once been built there, that had swept in stages down toward the valley floor. The terraces were gone now, cracked apart by winter frost and strangled with feral vines, rhubarb and budding plants that had once grown in the stepped gardens.

Gigantic old trees covered the hill and further disturbed the terraces, their roots obliterating the stony ledges and knocking long limestone chunks down the overgrown hillside.

You couldn't see the house from the west during the summer as the old maples, oaks and poplars filled with leaves, blocking any spaces left open by the tight growth of pine, spruce and cedar.

So the building's rich decoration of cornice, brick arches and columns went unseen from all approaches. Likewise, the encroaching trees would have robbed the house's inhabitants of any sight to the west, north or south.

Similarly blinded, a big turret flanked by large porches dominated the southwest corner of the building. It was 20 feet in diameter, with its first floor made of large gray blocks and the second of red brick. A broad conical roof sat atop this structure like a wizard's hat, exaggerating the tower's height where it joined to the main roof some 30 feet overhead.

Four tall windows on the turret's first and second floors would have given a complete view of Sydenham and the surrounding area before the trees had been allowed to run wild.

Twisted branches were etched in silhouette where they grew in to haunt the windows' dim light. In the growing dark, the effect added mystery to the building's mass.

Where the house faced the avenue atop the hill, the lawn spread out 30 or 40 feet until it crept under a tall hedge and butted up against the sidewalk. The wall on that side of the house bore only a few small windows for ventilation, clearly not illumination. They were plain in design and function, and were filled with yellowed, opaque or stained glass.



It was an unwelcoming face of brick and stone—the message its designers gave was clear. Those within *that* house wanted their privacy, and they would not be inviting neighbors to know more.

A sparse woody hedge paced the property's perimeter, and was measured by rusted iron rails that ran parallel to the ground. These were bolted to blocks of concrete every 10 feet, and suspended a foot from the earth. The hedge opened at a pair of rough stone pillars in front of Keyes. A steel gate hung crookedly from corroded hinges.

He turned as a door opened on the side of the house that looked over the hill. A black man came out, and crossed the broad porch under the light. He had a big, white bushy moustache, and his hair was long with filaments of gray trailing through it. His body was lanky, and he moved well. The stoop in his shoulders suggested he was older than he looked.

He wore a heavy leather jacket over his coveralls.

The old chap carried a bucket and mop to the edge of the porch and set them there. Cleaning products, paper towels and a whisk broom stuck up out of the container.

He returned to the house and was locking the door when he suddenly started. He either realized he'd seen Keyes standing on the sidewalk or he had one of those strange moments when you sense someone is watching.

The old man lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the porch light, before smiling and waving.

"You startled me," he called, crossing the porch, rubbing his palms together.

"Sorry," Keyes said. "I was admiring the house."

"You have an eye for architecture?" The old man hefted his bucket and mop and came down the steps to cross the paving stones.

Keyes stepped toward the gate.

"It is striking," he said.

"Striking!" the old man blurted, leaning the mop by the gate. "I've heard it called everything from ugly to *goddamn* ugly. But 'striking,' that's new."

"Is it yours?" Keyes asked.

"No," said the old man. "The owner lives down in Toronto." He reached over the gate to shake Keyes' hand. "I'm Mervyn Hall and do the renting out for him. Nothing as fancy as a 'building manager,' but that will do."

"I'm Scott Keyes," Keyes said, over clasped hands, before glancing up at the building. "It's the Captain's House,"

"*Captain's House?*" Hall's eyes went wide with shock. He pulled Keyes closer before releasing his grip and whispering, "*We* don't call it that!"

"Why?" Keyes asked, eyes roving over the structure. *The house. So familiar.* A strange feeling crept up his back, feeding the building tension in his neck. "It's a good story."

"An *unhappy* story and it hasn't been the *Captain's* house for a long, long time," the building manager explained. "Owner just sank 30 grand into it. I figure that kind of money's worth a new start for an old place. *The Brighton House* we call it after another *happier* family who lived here."

"A *happier* family..." Keyes echoed, studying the second story windows in the turret room. The curtains shifted against the inner light. "So the owner's moving in?"

“No,” the old man said, setting his bucket beside the mop and turning to look up. “Nobody wants a house this big with heat and hydro being what it is. Anyway, it’s been cut up into apartments for 40 years or more. The owner brought them up to code to get some decent tenants. The main floor’s cut in two, and the top floor is the third apartment. Big. Two bedrooms there.”

Keyes nodded.

“Nowadays families are too small to need that much space.” Hall looked at him quizzically. “You know about the *Captain*, so you’re not new to town.”

“My family used to live in Sydenham,” Keyes explained.

“So you’re visiting?” The old man lit a cigarette and coughed as he offered the pack to Keyes who declined.

“I guess.” Keyes’ eyes were drawn to the tall windows in the turret again. “I want to get a feel for the town. See what I remember.”

“Really?” the old man said. “Never thought someone would do that *here*.”

“Well, a hometown gets interesting when you’re away from it,” Keyes said, and chuckled.

“That’s a good point,” Hall agreed. “I’m from Kincardine originally. Moved my wife up here after I retired from the nuclear plant. Better hospital and such.”

“Douglas Point,” Keyes said, recalling the power plant.

“But I was never as interested in Kincardine as I have been since I moved away,” he said and gestured at the house with his cigarette. “This keeps me too busy to miss it much. I do the renting and cleaning up for a couple properties so the owner can tend his law firm in Toronto. Part time work for me. I got pensions but I also have time.”

“You rent other properties?” Keyes asked, catching the old man’s eye. “I’m staying at the Travelodge right now but I might be interested in renting something closer to downtown—if I stay longer.”

“Really?” the old man said, and glanced up at the turret. His lips moved as something turned over in his mind. “Is *this* close enough?” He pointed at the building. Again, a thought seemed to preoccupy him.

“*Here*?” Keyes frowned, and then brightened. “There’s an opening *here*?”

“Yeah,” the old man said. “Second floor apartment—all the utilities have been updated. Has two bedrooms, full bath, and access to the attic for storage and such. Just coming open last—oh, *next* week, I guess.”

Then he gestured to an old blue truck parked at the end of the driveway. There were cardboard boxes, green plastic garbage bags and pieces of cheap furniture filling the bed.

“Last tenant was barely moved in, before—*going off* somewhere else. I cleaned out the apartment and attic too. We’d inherited some old stuff up there.” He waved his cigarette at the truck. “Just junk that needed pitching.”

“I always liked this place,” Keyes said, eyes eagerly swinging up to the turret windows. “What luck.”

“Luck?” the old man said, regarding him seriously, and then he smiled. “You know, Mr. Keyes, you’re right again. One man’s luck is another man’s, well not so much luck...” His voice trailed off.

Keyes barely heard Hall, his attention locked on the building. A chill went through him. Excitement surged in his heart.

“Now, the owner, Mr. Korde insists on a year lease,” Hall said.

“Well, a year might be longer than I need, but...” Keyes pondered, stepping toward the gate. “What’s the rent?”

“Rent’s \$950 plus utilities.” Hall nodded, pointing at his truck again. “Be available Monday... I’ll finish getting it ready over the weekend. The last tenant vacated without giving much notice. Heck, there’s still table, chairs and couch up there if someone wants them.”

“Oh,” Keyes said, sliding his hands along the gate to find the latch. “They’re not coming back?”

“No sir,” the old man grumbled, leaning forward and pulling the gate aside. It opened with a loud *screech* and Hall winced. “She won’t be back.”

## Chapter 14

11:00 p.m.

WARGA was rarely ever completely sober anymore. The priest enjoyed alcohol's pain-killing and euphoric effects, but he was entirely dependent upon it for his courage. Without some measure of intoxication, he doubted he would ever go out of the church buildings.

As it was, even after bolstering his fortitude with whisky, he still cringed when taking the short walk from the rectory to the church proper, and preferred such adventure in the company of others. He would time his excursions to coincide with Father Tracy's activities or persuade one of the sisters who taught at St. Mary's School to act as his chaperone.

The women lived in housing attached to the school which shared the promontory with the church and overlooked all of Sydenham and its harbor. Their buildings were separated from the church grounds by a shallow cleft formed where 15th Street divided the hill.

But Warga dared not stray off the property otherwise. In fact, his proximity to the church and the company he kept were accurate tests for his sobriety. He'd have to be to blind drunk to wander off the grounds by himself—then and only then would he chance a walk past the edge of the church property day or night.

That notion of feeling safer in the company of the faithful seemed to contradict his religious doubts, but a lifetime serving the Church had left him superstitious.

The same notion could be extended to question why he felt safer moving about on church grounds if God did not exist? And if this mystery, this darkness, that he believed stalked him *did*, why wouldn't it just follow him inside the very cloister?

*The thoughts plagued him sometimes...a never-ending debate that also led to drink.*

But this thing, this shadow was something else—if it was real and he weren't simply insane... It couldn't be real, unless God existed, but if *He* existed, then He was complicit in heinous crimes of abuse.

*So He couldn't be real, could He?*

Drink made it easier to live with. Half mad with his painkillers and alcohol, he found himself both more open to the Church's delusional teaching and more prepared to rebel against it.

*What rebellion, you'd never rebel.* His memory was muddled.

*Deluded* then, he had done what he could. Like the girl, Warga was only human.

*Validation of inaction or you truly are insane.*

Only human... It was hard to beat that one. So much of his penance, and life was spent going over and refining that notion. Indeed, it was a very human Father Warga who limped the halls of the church and red brick rectory.

However, as a human, he grew frustrated within his confinement, even self-imposed, and on the rare occasion, always drunken, he was driven out of doors by a need to have the fresh air and free breeze against his face.

*A mad act to combat his madness.*

He never attributed it to spring fever. It was more like whisky-induced fever that drove him out into the night. But he preferred the evening to indulge these moments of

liberty. In part, it was the only time he could drink enough, and the night allowed him to avoid parishioners and their talk of faith, and their unending questions about his health.

On this particular night, call it a mix of spring and whisky as the source of the fever that drove him out in search of air, but there he sat on the “back” formerly the “front” steps of St. Mary’s Church where it overlooked the city from a forested mount on the east hill.

Warga was very drunk. It had been another long winter.

It was late, and the night was cool, but he was well-wrapped in long johns, wool suit, scarf, overcoat, boots and hat. The fingers on his right hand made a fist in the right glove, while the fingers on the left were wrapped around the neck of a one-quarter-full bottle of cheap blended scotch.

The other three quarters were in Warga. It was the required amount to raise his courage and dampen the pain in his lower extremities enough to allow him to sneak along the dark hall of the rectory and out the side door.

Then he had made his way on unsteady legs across the parking lot and onto the curving brick pathway that took him to the old “front” of the church.

Warga had positioned himself on the stone steps. Behind him twin lancet doors towered, sharing a single high stone arch ensconced in a wide brick wall. This was flanked by high buttresses that swept up to support the church’s steeple where it soared against a star-filled sky some 60 feet over him. The cross atop it was visible from almost every location in Sydenham.

The steps looked out to the west and onto a gravel tree-lined path that trailed down the gentle, grassy slope to the corner of 4th Avenue and 15th Street.

Progress and cars had turned the old front of the church into “the back,” and had made the lovely walking path irrelevant. Now the church used its ample-but-secondary side doors by the parking lot to allow the faithful in for worship.

The old entrance, its steps and charming walkway, was still used by couples at weddings as a backdrop for photography and for minor spiritual celebrations with gathered family and friends.

Gnarled old maples stood at 20-foot intervals to either side of the pathway’s 15-foot width, and formed an impressive canopy of branches twining overhead.

Depending upon the season, you’d have beautiful new growth in the spring, like now: the smallest branches were heavy with buds and new greenery. Or late in the high summer as large flat green and red leaves made a veritable tunnel of the path, and filled the overhead sky with life. Fall of course, drew observers and travelers, with its flaming colors as the trees prepared for winter and their leaves turned yellow, red and gold.

Warga enjoyed it in the winter also, when the snow hung heavy on the bows, and made the twisted black branches and heavy trunks stand out in stark relief.

He shifted for comfort, the tail of his thick coat under him for a cushion and warmth, his back pressed against the bricks of the arch. The whisky he’d drunk was doing an able job of quelling his fears and tamping down the constant pain in his hips, knees and ankles. He could endure the fresh night and the cool stone steps.

His pain and discomfort was always there, but now was little more than a dull aching.

*For now...* he thought and took another drink. He admired the bottle and his own cheekiness after.

*What is this, a bacchanal? You should use your flask in public—what public?*

The hand that held the bottle was feeling a little numb—numb than the other—and he thought perhaps he'd fastened his flexible cast too tight. *Too cold to fix it now.*

*Fuck it!* His right hand came up and made the sign of the cross. *Old habits die hard...*

He liked the old steps for their view, and the sense of freedom they offered him. Idling there gave him time to think, or not think, as his mood would have it. He had much on his mind, and more in his heart, but both of those receptacles had grown unused to sharing their contents, and he was often left in the no man's land between.

A space and land he casually flooded with whisky or other bottled relief.

Warga hung his head until his chin rested on the folded layers of scarf and overcoat. He drew in a breath of air, tasted dead damp leaves, and fresh earth. His eyes closed and a timeless second passed.

Until they opened.

*Fireflies.* Down on the ground, and up on the trees to both sides of the path. Or *no!* Some were flitting about the darkness or resting high on trunk and branch, or flickering in the spaces between.

But then he recognized more, there on the ground, twisty like worms or mushy like snails pulled out of shells. Glowing as their slimy bodies undulated, propelling them through the debris and over the knotted tree roots.

*It's too early for fire-worms...FLIES!* He pressed the back of a cold glove to his lips and cackled. *WORMS? Goodness—I'm drunk!*

"Rediscover the joy," Warga sermonized suddenly, and the closest bug flinched. "That's from Benedict." The last Pope had offered several such underlying themes for the year. The priest tried another: "The Faith We Celebrate is...er...something, something about sacraments..." His eyes were drawn to another curious creature as he giggled: "That's for May, and June...and..." He sniffed the air and smelled decay. "And April *showers* I think—don't spare the soap."

Warga squinted down at the dark earth to study the closest invertebrate. The glow from its body illuminated the instep of his left shoe. Eyes on stalks—that was it—hanging out there in front of its quivering body. *Like a snail's.*

He took a sip of scotch. As it burned his lips, the "eyes" on one of the creatures reacted to the movement and *blinked*; but instead of lashes, tiny fingers curled in and out of miniature fists.

Warga's breath caught. *Fingers? On little hands?* The glowing things, they were pale, almost white; and then he realized that they were like children in shape, but minute and melted, dwarfed or malformed.

*I've finally gone mad.* He tried to lean forward to look more closely but his chest came against an obstruction. Darkness pushed him back, pressed him against the church.

*He couldn't move.*

A breeze sprang up, warmer suddenly; growing rich and moist like it came from the sea. Scented with flowers, it caressed his cheeks.

Then a slender woman walked out of the inky shadows halfway along the path and started toward him through the gloom. She wore a long red-flannel shirt and nothing else. Its tail hung low enough to cover her naked legs to the knee. Her bare feet made no sound on the gravel, and his first thought was that she'd be cold.

Warga tried to get up, but the force was still there pressing, and a sudden spasm along each leg left him canted and gasping, sprawled across the stone steps. Then he saw that the shadows behind the trees grew darker around the woman, and moved forward with her, following. *Somehow keeping pace.*

Her face was wan; the flesh around her eyes was dark. Her gray lips were set in an ambiguous grin, and her overall expression was of bewilderment. Her shirt was buttoned up the front, but was open at the neck and shoulders to show a wicked purplish wound where her neck had been wrapped or bound too tightly. The skin was torn there, and dark red flesh showed through the gap.

A length of heavy twine or cord hung around her shoulders like a scarf.

The priest struggled again to rise but only managed to brace his back against the stone arch. The movement caught the young woman's eye because she angled toward him.

"Father Warga," she said standing by the lower step. She reached down and grabbed the dangling length of twine where the loose loop at the end was stained with blood.

"They won't let me in."

"What? *In?*?" Warga asked confused, lowering his head and rubbing his palms over his face until his eyes sparked. *It's a dream. You're insane!*

He opened his eyes to look at...

Brenda Hamilton was still standing there. Around her the weird fireflies flickered like a living aura, and light gray shapes oozed along the tree trunks and over the ground.

Overhead, a growing darkness accumulated in the trees; the lower branches shifted beneath its weight.

Warga smiled, and he then frowned at his futile gesture.

*Was that the best he could do?*

"It never did go away," Brenda whimpered, angling her chin, her eyes flashing back the way she'd come. She cringed beneath the swaying branches. "Never did."

Warga bobbed his head, his eyes filling with tears.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I'm crazy now, and drunk."

"It always came back for my sin," she said, leaning over to smooth Warga's thinning hair with her cold hand. "It was mine to bear."

She took a step; one of her feet came down on a glowing worm-thing and it shrieked before fading into the ground.

The young woman smiled.

"Brenda!" Warga blurted, as a shiver ran up his legs and drove a spike of pain into his spine. "What can I do?"

"You did all you could," Brenda said.

*All I could.*

He stared at the woman and shivered, the night suddenly cold. His full lower lip trembled.

Warga's hands strangled the neck of the whisky bottle.

"Brenda!" he repeated, as she looked up at the church, and then tried to step past him, but her forward motion was checked before the steps, before the doors, like an invisible wall was there.

Warga looked up at the steeple soaring high in the night sky, and when his eyes lowered, Brenda was gone.

There was a twittering sound by his knee and he looked down to see one of the colorless shapes crawling up his calf. Its twisted legs and arms squeezed the muscle as it climbed.

Warga cried out, jerking awake. He stared into the darkness and shivered, pushing his back against the church, head turning from the dark path that yawned before him.

*Let her in!*

He lifted his bottle, its shape flaring with slivers of distant street light. Upending it he drank off half of what remained.

*Drunk and dreaming...that's all. Mad as a church mouse...* Then the old argument and justification arose in him again. *It wasn't fair then, it isn't fair to blame me now!*

No escape.

*A dream. Others are responsible for Brenda, too... Look at what I have paid.*

He squeezed the bottle in his hands as cold tears ran over his cheeks.

*The doctors—can't they do anything?*

As he turned up the bottle to drink the last drops, he noticed that the path before him was still divided up in black bars of shadow against the glow from distant sources: lights in the harbor, perhaps, the stars...

*Just a dream, a drunken, mad dream...*

But then he sensed something in the trees again. Something shapeless filled the darkness, its shadowy weight cupped in thick branches overhead, brooding, watching him where he sprawled on the church steps.

For a moment it grew monstrous, almost tangible, and then the breeze shifted, and high branches rattled in succession to the west, like something moved through them.



**Thursday, May 9**

## Chapter 15

12:01 a.m.

SHARON had tossed and turned enough. She was sick of worrying about getting out for a run the following morning. Following? Hell, morning was only five hours away. It would be stupid to go to the fitness trail in the park; she'd have to let that cool off for a while.

Thanks to some asshole in a Halloween costume, or whatever the hell he had done to scare her that way.

*It was early. The mind plays tricks.*

She'd have to pass on the park and stick to the streets, just do a circuit up and down 2nd and 3rd Avenues. Do a big block run, and follow the walking path out by the Bayshore Community Center then loop back in across the top of the east hill.

It was pretty enough. Still see the sunrise. Still get her run.

But it made her so angry to think that some bastard could keep her out of the park. God only knew who he *or she* was or what they were getting at, but Sharon hated to be manipulated.

*To be controlled.*

That was the story of her life, and the prescription for insomnia.

*Just run the streets and roll with the punches.*

She held her breath and listened for a moment.

*Yep. Still there.* A tap was dripping in the house, had been dripping for some time.

*Get up and shut it off...*

Of course, if it wouldn't shut off, then she'd start worrying about calling a plumber in and she couldn't afford a plumber.

She didn't want to bug her dad with it, either. Sure he'd be glad to help, but she didn't want to depend on him for that.

*You need that run!*

But where? Missing the park wasn't the only problem. It was sidewalks, and paving stones, terrible for her feet and ankles. Terrible for her whole body, actually, but...

Which, with insomnia going back into high gear, got her questioning her devotion to running in the first place. What was she trying to prove with the G.I. Jane stuff, anyway?

Why not follow Amanda's more laid back approach?

Did Sharon want to live forever? *No. But she'd pass on osteoarthritis as long as possible.*

She wasn't getting any younger, and Hollywood made it obvious, especially with the new hi-definition flat-screens, that the first thing to go for women was the face and body. The *skin* went, and then...but that didn't matter. There was no point in breaking it down, the first thing to go led to the second, and those things were just the things that showed.

*It's all in the mind. "Sexy" starts between your ears.*

Fine, there were lots of examples where women held onto their minds well into old age—Mother Theresa, for one.

She chuckled, and rolled onto her side. *The Mother Theresa thing doesn't work for everyone.* Then she laughed outright, and closed her eyes hoping to ride that good feeling into sleep, but...

*Drip. Drip. Drip. That tap won't shut itself off!* She had told her boy Bobby many times to be careful about that sort of thing—he could be so careless. *Why blame Bobby?*

She chuckled, wondering who the other girls were blaming this year when they only had themselves to blame.

Sharon had seen enough of her girlfriends go to pot after the second kid because “I never get out now that I’ve got the little ones,” or “I don’t eat as well, now that the kids are having Kraft Dinner and who wants to cook two suppers?”

She had heard the same women complaining later that their husbands had lost interest in them *sexually* or had already cheated or left for another, *younger* woman.

Or someone like Sharon Ross—someone who took care of herself, and still had a little time on the clock.

She knew that she had about 10 years left to have some fun before she had to start being practical and start thinking about settling down again. While she still had something to barter in the deal.

*Drip. Drip. Drip. What the fuck is dripping anyway?* Sharon ground her teeth, registering the fact that she had to pee now. *That's only going to get worse.* She blew out an impatient puff of breath. *What, and get someone to take care of me in my old age?*

There were plenty of willing men now, there would be even more later. The clock was ticking for them too, and the game changed for everyone at a certain point.

Currently, Sharon still enjoyed playing off against younger women. She had to be in just that little bit better shape, but she was helped out by the folly of youth. Young women, generally, did not think about the competition the same way. It was all there for them to enjoy or not. They had power.

All of it a no-brainer to Sharon, now—if only she’d known then, what she knew... But she had to be honest with herself and admit that it was more than the sexual competition. Fitness seemed to feed on itself. The more you did, the more you wanted to do. The rest was a glorious, wonderful, orgasmic side effect.

But all of it depended on starting her day off with that self-affirming run. Pilates and yoga classes covered Tuesday and Thursday nights. She had weight training and more running on the weekend.

The winter sucked for running. She’d been so excited about getting back into the park, but that *thing*, that asshole who had chased her. *Damn!*

Her eyes had been playing tricks on her. That was all. She hadn’t had coffee—still foggy from sleep and dreams.

*Don't be stupid.*

The truth was someone had been waiting for her at the start of the fitness trail, someone who wasn’t playing with a full deck of cards.

He must have been dressed in camouflage. That would explain how he had seemed to appear only in pieces from the legs up. A camouflage balaclava, tunic and pants could have caused the effect.

It also fit into the twisted mind of whoever it was playing “hunter” to Sharon’s “prey.”

*Drip. Drip. Drip... Water torture... You have to pee now, anyway.*

She looked at the clock and growled. Another five minutes awarded to insomnia. It pissed Sharon off to know that not only had some whack job asserted control over her running, now he was fucking around with her sleep.

*Stop the insomnia. Make some choices.*

She'd still go out for her run, but would play it safe.

"Fucker!" Sharon growled, her heart racing, fists pounding the bed.

She made another decision. "Hot bath."

It was 12:30 when the tub was filled and Sharon was carrying her herbal tea into the bathroom, dressed in only a bathrobe.

While the kettle had heated and the hot water poured into the tub, she had lit a collection of candles on a foot-wide shelf to the side. They were leftovers from a money-raising enterprise at Bobby's school. Made in calming colors and costing only two dollars each, she could smell that at least one of them had some kind of calming aromatherapy properties. She hoped, anyway. Better than those cheap scented candles she could buy at any of the dollar stores.

She'd become reliant on the ritual since her breakup. Any nights that she had the kids, which was five out of seven in a week, the minute they hit their beds she'd sink into a tub with the candles, and enjoy a tea or a glass of merlot.

She deserved it. Between caring for the old folks at Lee Manor all day, and dealing with her son and daughter at night, there was precious little time left for her.

She'd already had a hot bath before going to bed that evening, but the kids had acted up, and she'd cut it short.

In fact, that was the culprit. *The dripper*. In her haste to settle the kids, she must have forgotten to give the taps a final twist after rinsing the tub. So, she had found water dripping into the dregs of her earlier bath when she started to refill it.

A whiff of sewer had puffed out of the drain as water spiraled down.

*Old pipes*. Her mind returned to expensive plumbers, and raised her hackles.

*Independence is a bitch*.

Sharon wondered again whether that was the main reason she shied away from serious relationships.

If she started something *serious* all the sudden she had to offer her dwindling emotional resources to someone else. Some man would need empathy: if he was divorced like most were, then his kids would need a part of her too; young and single, then *he'd* be the baby she had to care for.

*Been there. Didn't like that*.

Or he'd be going full guns overcompensating and then getting testy when she could take care of herself. And she had so little left at the end of the day.

Of course, she still went for one night stands, but while that gave her something, it was too empty, and eventually took more from her to maintain. Like a juggling act with too many balls.

*Too many balls*. She laughed. So, she had to find a way to get casual sex from good men, who then would not need to talk to her every damn day.

It was a tall order. But she knew that good sex required more than a hard cock and energy. That could be fun, but it could also be replaced by the big purple torpedo she kept hidden in her bedside drawer.

That never broke a promise or called her when she was trying to eat with the kids.

She had considered telling the truth to prospective partners, but saying it out loud sounded cheap.

*I just want to have fun. I want it casual because my life is too busy for more.*

It sounded honest, but cheap.

She set her tea on the shelf by the tub and ditched her bathrobe. Sharon raked her fingers through the water and then ran a bit more to cool it down.

She did like to have company, when *she* wanted it.

She stirred the cold water in.

What would people think if she just said she wanted sex without strings?

*Think of your future...*

It had always been that way. Since she first started dating, even high school, she had felt like she was working at cross purposes. She wanted to date the cool guy, and enjoy reckless youth roaring around in the hot cars, but she knew those guys were not going to make good husbands, and *that* story was always running in the back of her head.

Her parents wanted her to grow up and settle down, and they didn't want people to get the wrong idea about her. There were lots of decent guys—the type who'd try to treat her right, who wanted families too.

But they were...it was complicated.

She closed the tap and then dunked a foot into the water. The overflow drain under the faucet burred. *Another whiff of sewer.* The bath was hot and her muscles began to unwind the second she slid in up to her chin.

Her heart pounded, and her breath came in a long slow gasp.

*That's hot!* So, to equalize, she reached out for her tea and took a sip.

The tea and scented candles had their effect, and her heartbeat slowed. She set her cup down and reached up for a washcloth and soaked it before pulling it over her face.

*Life is good...*

But then, the light changed. She pulled the washcloth away and looked around the dim room, glancing at the candles. Her eyes had been closed under the hot compress, but it had seemed like the room had darkened momentarily.

Sharon thought of the kids. She listened, heard nothing...so it must have been the candles flickering.

*You're too jumpy.*

Sharon took a deep breath, pinched her nose and slid beneath the surface of the water, luxuriating in the soothing heat that enveloped all her senses. Eyes shut; her vision became a red blur with sparks.

*Easy. Listen.* And the regular beat of her own heart was all she could hear.

*Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

Reveling in relaxation she smiled. *Thump-thump—BANG!*

Something hit the side of the tub.

Sharon came up quickly, sputtering, wiping at her eyes. She glared around the room listening for more, but the house was silent.

*You're losing it.*

Sharon took a couple deep breaths and sank back down into the tub. The heat rose. *That's better.* She took several deep breaths as the hot water lapped at her chin.

*One, two, three, relax for fuck sakes.*

She held her breath and slid beneath the surface.

*Four, five, six...*

And the water went darker suddenly, and colder. Sharon reached out, but couldn't find the side of the tub—and she panicked! Thrashing, she quickly surfaced...

*Oh my God!*

She was outside. The sky was black and starry overhead. *What the fuck?* Was it a lake? A river, the dark water glimmered around her.

*What the hell?*

Treading water, Sharon looked left and right, recognized the hillside, and saw a streetlight shining in the distance.

*By the Mill Dam? No, it's the park! It's where I run...*

Something in the water brushed against her legs, and then she felt strong hands grab her calves and pull her down.

Underwater, scream muffled by pressure, she bent forward, punching and pinching at the rigid hands that gripped her, and pulled her deeper.

*Let go you fucker!* And suddenly her struggle paid off, the cold iron fingers released their grip, and she surged upward...

Her hands slammed against the edges of the tub as she heaved herself above the surface. Heat closed in as she thrashed, stole her breath as she struggled. The water sloshed against her violent action and waves swept over half her candles, poured onto the floor.

*Stop screaming!* She clamped her hand over her mouth, as the sound echoed.

*You're losing it. You're nuts!*

Her heart was racing and her breath was coming in rapid fire gasps. The muscles on her arms and legs still quivered.

*Calm down. Bring it down. You're freaking out!*

Sharon looked over at the smoking candles beside the tub and shook her head.

"A dream," she wheezed, and reached out for her tea, but the strong hands grabbed her ankles again and pulled her down.

She sank through the dark until the cold pressed in on her senses again.

Even as she struggled, the grip on her legs tightened; the force and cold sucking her strength out as she sank deeper.

Then the hands moved up her body, one over the other, past knees and hips, stomach and breasts until cold strong arms and legs wrapped around her torso.

Sharon's lungs were burning as a pair of frigid lips brushed against the back of her neck.

She wasted her last breath on a scream.

## Chapter 16

1:00 a.m.

SCOTT Keyes lunged out of sleep, and then curled in on himself before recoiling when he realized his chest was soaked with sweat. The sheets were wet, and clung to his stomach and back. Panting, he reached out with his left hand and his fingers curled around his bayonet's steel sheath.

His breathing steadied immediately. He didn't draw the blade, but he could, and that fact was enough to calm him

Raising it, Keyes saw the weapon's silhouette against the curtains where dim light seeped through from the parking lot. He rolled away from the illumination onto his right side, and saw the dull reflection from the bedside lamp.

Holding the bayonet to his chest, he wriggled closer, finally dragging his right arm free of the constricting covers. He snapped the light on.

Keyes twisted then, kicking the wet sheets away from his naked body. The cool air sent a chill over his wet skin as he huddled in the cone of yellow light.

*A dream...a nightmare.*

His fingers tightened on the bayonet as the nightmare screams echoed in his mind. The cold sweat on his body made him feel the river water again.

The woman kept screaming even as his hands had slipped over her smooth shoulders and stroked her breasts and stomach—even as he had kissed her neck.

*So real.* But it was just a dream.

A shiver ran over him, and he felt his skin turn to gooseflesh.

He consciously loosened his grip on the old army bayonet.

Keyes had had the weapon forever. His adoptive father Ron Johnson had given it to him when he was 13 after picking it up at a flea market. *For fishing*, Ron had said, and that had puzzled the younger Keyes who was never much of a fisherman.

He had eventually found other uses for the weapon, all of them peaceful, but he'd taken to sleeping with it or, keeping it close to him after hearing a story about a young couple being awakened by an escaped convict who had taken a bread knife from their kitchen to use as a weapon. That was all he needed to take control and ruin their lives.

The wife had ordered her unarmed husband not to risk his life, they'd do as he said, and she left as the convict's hostage. He'd let her go when he was free and clear. Instead, the man raped the woman for hours before abandoning her in a ditch to die. She survived, but the couple was never the same. All because one man had a knife and the other man didn't.

Keyes had decided that would never happen to him.

He set the bayonet aside and let his mind drift back to the dream.

The whole nightmare had started with him standing by the Captain's House, just down on the sidewalk outside the gate where he'd first met the building manager.

But he was alone in the dream.

The night was cool as he had watched a shape move against the amber light in the turret windows, slowly drifting from one pane to the next, darkening the curtains as it went.

When Keyes reached down to open the gate his hands had closed on empty air. The gate had disappeared along with the rough pillars to which it was mounted. The hedge too, there had been a hedge before—but now nothing.

Then came a throbbing sound, low at first, but growing in volume, and when he looked up he saw that all the windows in the house had gone black. The shape had left the turret room with the light and was replaced by gleaming filaments that spread over the dark surface of the glass, etching lines outward with a creaking noise, and weaving a spidery pattern *ticking*, and *clicking*, while from somewhere came the distant echo of something *thumping* in the night.

Something like a heart, something like a pulse.

And then the turret room windows exploded outward, the fractured glass broken into shards by foaming jets of water. The powerful geysers flooded westward, poured out over the edge of the escarpment, and roared across the lawn toward Keyes, the deluge catching his legs, carrying him toward the 9th Street stairs and hurling him over.

The rushing water was ice cold, and closed in on his senses as he tumbled. His eyes pulsed red as the pressure grew, and he knew that he was submerged.

He was deep underwater.

And then he had surfaced in a river—the river that wound through Sydenham, by the look. *Had to be*. Bleak black trees with twisted trunks and branches lined the shore; and dark houses loomed along the riverbank like ancient gravestones. Somewhere in the night, a woman's tortured scream had echoed, and there were splashing sounds.

Someone was drowning and he could not tell where the screams were coming from, so in desperation, he randomly picked a direction—and swam. Hoping—but not knowing where to go.

Then cold arms had wrapped around his torso and pulled him down.

He struggled in the embrace, the black water roaring dully in his ears. Disoriented, he had opened his mouth to shout and felt the cold rush in and set his metal fillings aflame with pain.

Until somehow he had shifted, and was behind his attacker. He felt a woman's body, long and shapely—muscles flexing, vibrating as they struggled. Aroused, he slid his hands over the smooth form and leaned in to kiss her while she screamed.

And then he woke up.

*In his room. At the Travelodge. In Sydenham.*

His knuckles ached, and he realized he had unconsciously reached out for the bayonet again, and was throttling it with both hands. His cramping fingers were white.

Keyes took a deep breath, and released his grip, setting the sheathed blade by his pillow. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, drying his chest and arms with the damp sheet.

*Sydenham. Home of the dark times.*

Anyone else would have taken the insurance money and splurged on a trip to Florida.

*But you wanted the truth...to remember.*

And now the Captain's House...of all places...

It kind of made sense. In fact, the dream had suggested something to him. Ever since he'd left Sydenham he'd had disturbing, recurring dreams—he wouldn't call them nightmares—in which he wandered through a big house. He had always thought of it as a



mansion because it seemed to go on forever, like a labyrinth, and each room or hallway held a mystery or a riddle.

In his dreams he'd found many things inside the mansion: a homeless person by a cook fire, a woman playing cards or circus freaks juggling pies, or he'd stumble upon a famous actor wandering the halls reciting lines, or an old girlfriend yelling or loving or tied naked in a bed. There were often sexual elements, and usually puzzling things, and occasionally there'd be a room with something scary in it.

But he'd never put a face on the building, on the house until just now, because he'd never made it outside in the dream.

*That's quite a leap.*

But the "mansion" might have been the Captain's House he was seeing in all those dreams. There had always been a turret room. He knew that, he remembered that. There was always something different in it, but a turret room was always there in the dream.

Similar to the Captain's House—at least on the inside.

*Or are you just desperate, looking for easy answers so you can splurge and go to Florida?*

He remembered the Captain's House from before, right there at the top of the hill behind his high school. He had hung out in its shadow with his teenaged friends, sipping beers stolen from their parents and talking about shit they didn't really understand.

*But that had been all he could remember. It had been a silent looming backdrop to his adolescence.*

Or so he thought. Had the house somehow gotten into his dreams? Were they dreams, or memories?

He remembered his friends and others talking about the house, telling stories about a captain who was lost at sea whose wife remained to haunt the place. Keyes had other partial memories, pieces of stories: a family had owned it once, but came to a bloody end over gambling debts; there had been whispers of murder; and a crazy lady with a hundred cats.

The house. Dreams—a nightmare, *his* nightmare. Now *his* apartment.

*Here we go...take a breath.*

Keyes reached for the glass of water he'd set on the bedside table, and took a drink. Light rippled over the silvery surface, making him think of his dream again. A sexual tingle passed through him, causing his pulse to race.

*It's normal to be unsettled. There are holes in your life that need to be filled.* He took another drink of water. *So fill them.*

The first step had been to set up a base of operations.

*Mission accomplished.* He had rented the second floor apartment in the Captain's House.

Mr. Hall had taken him in for a look at the place.

It had all seemed kind of familiar.

*Don't start... Breathe.*

Hall had shown him the three mailboxes bolted to the brick by the side door. He stood on the porch that overlooked the tangled slope, wrangled his keys and pointed at a sturdy-looking button fixed to a dull steel plate beneath each box.

"That's your 'hi-tech' security entrance," Hall had said, smiling. "Your company buzzes and you come down to let them in."

The double doors had big tempered glass windows. The first door was of heavy oak and swung outward; the inner door was made of a lighter wood, was more ornate, and swung inward.

Keyes had followed Hall into a broad, square foyer about nine feet on a side. In the corner, across and to the left as they entered, a carpeted stairway with a dark wood banister took a short flight of steps up, and turned to the right at a tall bay window before disappearing behind a wall.

As he led Keyes up the stairs, Hall had said that the electricity and plumbing for the whole building had been upgraded in the most recent round of renovations.

The narrow stairway passed between dark green walls, rising for about nine steps until it came to a very short landing at the top that led to a door. The door was of dark, unpainted wood and had a brass number “3” screw-nailed to it.

“I know the stairs are narrow, but we’ve always managed to get everybody moved in...” Hall had said, finding the apartment key on the ring. “Unless you have a piano...” He had scowled. “You have a piano?”

Keyes had shaken his head distractedly. His mind had been occupied, almost overwhelmed with sensation. The entrance, the stairs and window, even the musty, old building smell had been familiar to him—alarmingly, so.

But it didn’t go farther than that...

Until Keyes first entered the apartment, then he’d had another moment of *déjà vu*, but stronger—this time accompanied by a sinking feeling in his gut.

The layout was too familiar—no, *predictable!* He tried to reassure himself. He’d always preferred older houses and apartments. He still had a place in Toronto that was part of the second floor of a hundred-year-old brick home.

It went with the territory. *That’s why old houses are popular*—they feel familiar.

That’s just the way it was, and so “predictable” was easily mistaken for “familiar.” *Take a breath. Don’t get wound up.*

The apartment’s front door had opened on a large central living space. The walls were a lighter shade of green than the hallway—pastel—the high ceiling was light: ivory, not white. The floors and trim were hardwood, treated with a dark stain. Narrow windows edged with stained glass sat high in the east wall to either side of an old fireplace.

Four doorways opened out from this room.

There were two bedrooms, one on the northeast corner that would make a great office. It basically looked out on the avenue through semi-opaque, pebbled glass windows.

Another doorway on the southwest side led to the turret room. Its four large windows gave a wide view of the escarpment and property. That room was large and drew the eye where the building’s straight lines softened to accommodate its eccentric shape.

He had known right away that the turret would be his bedroom.

Just past the glass he had seen an enormous spruce tree, and beyond that, a stretch of lawn was bordered by the small retaining wall where the land dropped over the old abandoned terraces amid the tangled trees.

He had to have the dream to confirm it, but standing in the turret room was like looking at a picture of a place he had always known.

*Careful! Looking for memories would make everything seem familiar.*

The bathroom was accessed through a rounded archway. Mr. Hall had told him the big, deep claw-foot tub was original, but its plumbing had been extended to provide a shower. The ring-shaped curtain rod attested to that, but Keyes could see that he'd be able to stretch right out in the spacious tub.

The kitchen occupied the southeast corner beside the turret room and was accessed through an arch similar to the bathroom entrance, though it had not been framed in to accommodate a door.

In there were the usual suspects: fridge, stove and sink. There was room for the small table and chairs that still sat pushed against the wall to the right of old hinged windows. They opened inward over the sink, and looked down on the top of the 9th Street stairs.

Keyes had noticed a narrow door tucked up against the east wall opposite the kitchen counter and Hall had led him up a tightly turning stair to the attic where the rafters led back 40 feet or so to the north end of the house. The ceiling was slanted, but tall enough in the middle to allow Keyes and Hall to walk upright without stooping.

There was a big pair of square windows on each end.

After the tour Keyes had said that he'd take the place, even with a year's lease. He exchanged phone numbers with Hall, and agreed to leave a check in the mailbox for first and last months' rent the following day.

*Did I move too fast?*

He had passed on keeping the couch, but jumped at the chance to have the table and chairs that were both made of hardwood. They were not antiques, just old, but they suited Keyes' taste and went well with the apartment.

*It beats the Travelodge—and it's way cheaper in the long run.*

And then the dream of water had now connected the house to dreams he'd had his whole life.

*You're connecting them, idiot. You don't remember enough to be sure.*

He wondered if he'd ever been in the building back in his teen years. There had been lots of parties, and he'd been experimenting with drugs and alcohol at the time. His memory went to hell after a few drinks. Worse than the darkness that blocked him from his childhood.

*You see enough of these buildings; they all bleed into one big apartment.*

And the dream? Who was the woman?

*It's been too long, that's all. You need a woman—even a drowning one.*

Had *she* felt familiar, too?

*They all feel familiar at this point.*

He gave a rueful shake of his head. It *had* been too long.

There had been lots of women in his life but they'd all left him, eventually. That's why he'd taken a break from dating: to figure out the cause.

Well, not all women. Eileen Johnson, his adoptive mother, had stayed by him. She would have stayed forever, except...

A shiver dispelled his growing melancholy, and looking over, he noticed a line of light flickering along the edge of the door that opened on the parking lot.

Keyes quickly crossed the room, and grabbed the knob. The door was unlocked, and open.

*What the? I locked that.*

He pulled it aside and naked, looked out at the vehicles. Nothing moved in the parking lot. Across the street, the Tim Horton's coffee shop sign burned. A few cars lined up at the lights, and counted the seconds.

Another chill ran over Keyes' shoulders as he closed the door and locked it. He twisted the knob, and tugged. It was shut.

He tugged it again—*hard*—just as he'd done before bed.

## Chapter 17

9:00 a.m.

LITTLE glowing creatures were flickering through Warga's mind as he waited in Father Tracy's office. Memories of them had haunted him since awakening, conjured by his guilt to keep his hangover company, no doubt. His head throbbed dully behind a wall of pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medication.

To pass the time, the priest's thoughts wandered to his dream—or madness—and to the hypocritical religion that had undoubtedly spawned it.

That was usually the case when he was hung over. Sentimental fantasies abounded where he was not a failure. Where he had the courage to enter the church, approach the gathered parishioners and say: "Welcome. What an empty thing we have for you."

His mind tended to cower behind his own guilt in daily life, so the fantasy was necessary for balance. His face burned over cover-ups, crimes and abuse—he yearned to do something to atone for the greater sins of the Church but lacked the strength.

It was early the morning after, and Warga was chief among the sinners.

If *he* could not express the gravity of his own failures, then how could he ask the Church to admit its own mistakes?

He'd barely had time to finish his hurried breakfast before being asked in to talk about the morning's trouble.

Father Tracy had been awakened by a telephone call from a parishioner who had been taking a morning walk that included a lap of the church and rectory grounds. He'd taken that trek around St. Mary's every morning since his heart attack.

At sunrise, the parishioner had been surprised to find Father Warga asleep on the step by the rectory doors, snoring and smelling of liquor. The parishioner was well aware of Warga's history and so wished to keep his discovery discreet, while acknowledging it was far too cold to be napping outside.

He had used his cell phone and waited with Warga until Tracy dressed and opened the door.

Warga had tried at that moment, unsuccessfully, to explain his lapse in good judgment—that he'd stepped out for fresh air before sunup but had forgotten to bring his glasses.

So when he had dropped his keys in the dark, and couldn't find them, he was loath to wake Tracy by pounding on the doors. Warga had hoped to keep his mistake from turning into a disturbance by simply wrapping himself in his overcoat and awaiting the hour or so until the rectory inhabitants would begin their day.

The story had elements of the truth to it. Warga had passed out in the sheltered doorway of the old church entrance, and awoke shivering close to sun up. It was at that time that he lost his keys and resigned himself to wait at the rectory door.

Father Tracy had accepted that explanation with a curt nod and tired thanks to the parishioner. When the door was closed on the early morning, Tracy's demeanor sharpened noticeably and he suggested Warga visit him in his office later that morning.

Which turned out to be much sooner than Warga expected.

Clearly there were things that needed to be discussed in private.

He looked nervously past Tracy, and through the window behind him. Something of his dream the night before had pricked his imagination again, made him look out across the church grounds, his eyes drawn to a wind-blown bush.

The new, dark green leaves gave the impression of arms and shoulders in motion.

“Father Warga,” Tracy said, looking up from papers arranged on his desk. “Your drinking...”

“I am terribly sorry if I’ve...” Warga started and then he blurted. “It’s my legs, you see. They’re very sore. The winter chill still preys...”

“I am sure the doctor has prescribed other options than alcohol,” Father Tracy said. “I am concerned that our support here is not doing you as much good as we had hoped.”

“What do you mean?” Warga asked.

“I begin to wonder whether the arrangement you have with St. Mary’s Church parish is doing you any good at all,” Tracy clarified, holding his hands out, palms up. “Your physical health is deteriorating, I fear that is related to the *mental* challenges you have had in the past.”

“It’s the pain... I’m unable to exercise because of it,” Warga said, he raised his left hand and bent the fingers that protruded from the flexible cast. They were purple, and underlined his general poor health.

“Martyn, I do not wish to go into it again. While many at the parish, myself included, find your penance to be inspiring, others still wonder if it isn’t self-indulgent. I am curious to know if it relates to deeper troubles that you have experienced in the past. A doctor or psych...” he said, then changed his direction. “Certainly, your legs are getting worse. Your mobility is decreasing rapidly, and you rarely leave the rectory.”

“I should have a cane, I know,” Warga admitted. “I was sure that things were improving, and then, I think with the change of season...my joints—the pain returns.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been meaning to make an appointment with the doctor.”

“So you often say, and then instead, you self-medicate with Scotch whisky.” Tracy knitted his fingers together. “You must understand. We cannot have you inebriated and sleeping out of doors.” He went quiet, hands flat on the desk before him. “This is an important time for the Catholic Church. Benedict’s ‘Year of Faith’ continues, and Pope Francis now looks to the future...we must come together in celebration. We do not need more trouble.”

“I understand,” Warga said, nodding.

“The Church needs to heal,” Tracy said. “It has suffered many wounds, and I fear it will suffer more.”

Warga nodded, hiding his silent contempt. The former Pope’s “Year of Faith” looked like another tired promotion; unlikely to catch the attention let alone the trust, of the flock that was wandering from the Church in greater numbers than ever before.

Benedict had directed parishes to remind Catholics to “deepen their relationship with God and strengthen their commitment to sharing faith with others.” *Share faith with others...* In other words, get their worshippers, their “faith-filled witnesses” to drum up new members because people no longer trusted the clergy—or the Church to do it.

The new Pope Francis had his work cut out for him.

Rome had not done enough in Warga’s mind, to accept the responsibility for so many crimes. Throwing money at it had come too late and under protest, and was not enough—even now, financial compensation was being contested.

*Someone had to show real contrition. Francis must—someone must!*

“I would never intentionally add to our troubles,” Warga said. “This was poor judgment on my part.” He looked into his lap. “The result of a bad dream. I needed air.”

Father Tracy’s shoulders drooped and he regarded Warga sympathetically.

“Is this about the Hamilton woman?” Tracy asked, picking at the desk blotter.

“Yes—the Hamilton woman?” *My dream.* Warga wiped at an oily sheen of sweat that had appeared on his brow. *How could he know?* “Brenda?”

“Poor woman, I know you were close at one time, and she has figured prominently in your troubles,” Tracy said. “Suicide is...”

“*Suicide?*” Warga shifted forward and winced as pain shot up his spine. “Brenda...”

“Her parents found her on Monday.” Tracy’s eyes sharpened as he leaned into his desk. “*You didn’t know?*” The younger man’s dark brows arched up.

*Impossible to dream this...*

“*Suicide?*” Warga said, his voice trailing off. Expression bled out of his face. “I dreamed of her...”

“Martyn don’t you see? This is a prime example of what is wrong here. You are falling out of touch with your community. You keep too much to yourself!” Tracy said voice rising, and then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath before offering charitably, “Perhaps this should wait until another time.” He gazed steadily into Warga’s eyes. “I am sorry, my friend, I thought you knew. I had been hoping to discuss this sad turn, but I haven’t seen you.”

*He doesn’t see you because you avoid him.*

“I dreamed about Brenda,” Warga said, his voice hollow with desolation. Then, his face reddened as he twisted that to validate his excuse. “That was why I was out...and drank—recklessly.”

*Brenda had a wound on her neck in the dream—and carried a noose. Madness. There are no such things as visions. We are only humans...*

A ripple of pain rolled up Warga’s back between his kidneys and he winced. The night on the cold stone steps had done him in. His legs were aching, and his knuckles felt heavy and tight. He had to lie down.

“Her death—how did she *do it?*” Warga asked, drawing a handkerchief from a pocket and mopping his brow.

“Are you going to be all right?” Tracy asked, mechanically. Warga knew that people had grown tired of asking him that. In fact, it had been long since he’d heard Tracy offer the question.

Warga nodded.

The younger priest said, “She hung herself in the attic over her apartment.”

*The dream. A fluke. A coincidence.*

Warga shook his head, full lips trembling, and he gestured impotently at his legs and hips.

*It wasn’t the whisky. It had to be a dream.* Warga looked at Tracy, his eyes blinking spastically. *Dear Brenda...I did this.* He lowered his eyes and pressed the first knuckle on his right hand to his lips.

“There’s a gathering for her this Saturday at one o’clock at the Knox United. Her father’s decision,” Tracy said. “A non-denominational funeral service follows, will you go?”

Warga chewed his knuckle, eyes twitching as he studied his swollen knees. His mind raced over the memory. Brenda had said, "You did all you could."

*If the dream was real, then the darkness...*

"It never did go away," Brenda had whimpered.

He had seen it in the dream, there in the trees—like it was the night of his failure.

*Which meant God was there when the priests committed their crimes... Impossible!*

"Brenda had a—a psychiatrist—didn't she?" Warga asked, his years of avoiding his duties had not kept him from absorbing the talk—and people talked. Anytime the girl had trouble, when she faltered, the parishioners would gossip. "I've been curious about her progress, but her parents, they do not want me near her..."

Brenda's father had decreed that none of his family would enter St. Mary's Church again. His fury...

"When last we spoke, Brenda's mother told me she was making great progress with a counselor provided by Community Services," Tracy said, opening a drawer. "I've met the fellow through several of our parishioners who go to him." He pulled a small stack of business cards out of the desk and started flipping through them. "Not a doctor, Simon Minor. Here we go."

Father Tracy handed a plain card to Warga who winced as he leaned forward to receive it. A shooting pain caused both his legs to spasm. He drilled his fist into the rigid right thigh. The swollen knee on the left was especially painful, like it was on fire.

The lettering on the card was too small for Warga to read without his glasses, and he'd started leaving them in his room by the bed. It wasn't just a failure of memory; he found it a useful way of keeping to himself.

People were always showing him things: contracts, newspaper clippings, diplomas, poems and hymns. His poor vision and mislaid glasses decreased his chances of becoming involved in their discussions, and it shortened the exchanges when he couldn't avoid the entanglements.

"As I understand it, Mr. Minor spoke to Brenda a short time before it happened," Tracy said.

"Thank you for this," Warga said, slipping the card into his jacket. He moved back in his chair and a pained expression distorted his features.

"Martyn, I have a full plate this morning, so we'll finish discussing—your health later—we'll set the time aside." Father Tracy stood up and circled his desk. "You must see a doctor about your mobility issues..." He gripped Warga's elbow and helped him totter to his feet. "It's making you old before your time."

"Inaction has caused it. That is my fault, and the season changes—and my mind wanders," Warga said, looking up at Tracy—his eyes moist. "This news is terrible..."

He wasn't sad. He was frightened. He wasn't insane. He was a fool.

"You have punished yourself enough. There's a difference between penitence and self-indulgence." Tracy helped him toward the door. "It is time to heal."

"Surely," Warga said, as Tracy opened the door. "We all must heal."

"I am here to talk..." Tracy sighed as he said the words mechanically, "My door is always open."

"Thank you, I know that, my friend," Warga said, hesitating by the door. "And this news and my ill-conceived behavior of last night portend that I must avail myself of your kind offer, *sooner* rather than later." He lifted his head. "I appreciate your patience."



“The Lord counsels patience,” Tracy said, clasping his shoulder.

## Chapter 18

10:00 a.m.

AMANDA stood at the third floor nursing station checking a tray of medication cups against corresponding patient health records. She was hampered in the pill-count by the telephone receiver that was wedged between her ear and shoulder, and tethered her to the desk by its spiral cord.

The phone continued to ring as she worked.

Fellow nurse Harold Fulton sat a little farther down the desk beside her using one of the other lines. He was conferring loudly with a doctor, the pair going over a patient file. The right earpiece of Harold's glasses sported a wad of masking tape, a quick repair done after Mr. Bill Gamble had started throwing his weight around after breakfast.

Harold was learning to ask for help the hard way.

The repair propped up his glasses and just partially hid the long red welt that ran over his right temple.

*Amanda wondered if it had affected his hearing too.*

Harold Fulton's voice was deep, and he was roaring into the receiver with it, almost loud enough to suggest a hearing problem. It was that bad. In fact, it soon became so distracting that Amanda had to abandon her task with the meds to plug her ear with her free hand. She could barely hear the phone ringing at the other end.

*Sharon's answering machine should pick up soon.*

Amanda had missed her at their usual morning caffeine and catcall routine, and had only just heard from the shift supervisor that the personal support worker had not yet turned up.

The lack of capable hands had thrown Sharon's entire section into disarray. She worked with three of Lee Manor's long term residents and her assistance was essential in the morning as the facility was starting up for another working day.

If a support worker missed a shift, then everyone's already busy schedule became torturous until a replacement could be called in. There was a trickle-down process that made its way through the entire floor. Everyone felt the absence, as every worker had to adjust by picking up extra duties.

Putting the burden on another personal support worker or nurse meant *that* person would have to be covered, and on and on from there until everyone was snarling and cursing the name of whoever had broken the rhythm.

Whether it was fair or not, everybody found themselves venting at some point.

It wasn't like Sharon to miss a day, and she had never done so *for herself*. She was as healthy as a horse, and had only ever had to book time off when one of her kids was sick.

She'd been late in the past, when her early transitioning from married to single woman sometimes overlapped, but she was one of those people who could work through a hangover if she had to.

Which was no mean boast if part of your work involved changing adult diapers. As Sharon used to say in her Jerry Lee Lewis drawl: "There's a whole lot of gagging going on."

Amanda smiled at the memory and then frowned at Harold, who continued to shout into his phone.

“Harold!” Amanda finally snapped, catching his attention and pointing at *her* phone. He caught the action, nodded but just kept on blabbing.

“Harold!” she repeated.

“Hello?” a male voice came over the phone. “Hello?”

“Oh, hello!” Amanda shouted, and then turned her back to screen out Harold’s drone. A resident was standing on the other side of the nursing station counter.

“Hello to you also,” sang Viola Bumstead, an 80-year-old with senile dementia.

Amanda nodded and smiled at her, pointed at the phone, and then rolled her eyes toward Harold.

“Hello?” the voice came over the receiver again.

“Hi there,” Amanda said, moving as far from Harold as the phone cord would allow. Viola moved with her. “I’m sorry, it’s very distracting here.”

“Who? Is that Sharon?” the male voice asked.

“No, it’s Amanda West, a friend of hers,” Amanda said, smiling noncommittally to another patient who had appeared at the nursing station. Old Mr. Warburton was looking for his wife. She’d been dead for 20 years, and Amanda did not have the time to go into it yet again. “Who am I speaking to?”

She turned away as Mr. Warburton pointed at his chest and said his name. Harold’s voice started to dominate the ambient sound again.

“Oh hi Amanda, it’s Grant Ross,” the man’s voice warmed. “I’m looking for Sharon, too.”

“Really?” Amanda said. She’d met Sharon’s dad on several occasions, and liked the old bird. He had a great sense of humor and had one of those faces that you just had to talk to. “Well, she hasn’t turned up at work yet.”

“It’s funny, I was just about to call you,” Grant said. “Wanted to see if you girls were up to some of your monkey business last night.” By “monkey business” he meant the few times Amanda and Sharon had gone bar-hopping or shared some wine.

“She’s not there?” Amanda asked. Harold had just hung up the phone, and she fired an angry glare at him as he checked over notes he’d made during his call.

“I got a call from Phil, Sharon’s ex,” Grant said. “He said she was already out when he came by to pick the kids up for school, and the kids hadn’t seen her.” Grant grumbled. “I guess it took him a few hours to wonder if there was something to it.”

“The kids didn’t see her after her run?” The skin quivered between Amanda’s shoulder blades. *It would be just like her to go to the park. Did she find someone waiting?*

“No. Bobby told his dad she left a tub full of water,” Grant said, and then his voice changed, quavering nervously. “She left quite a mess in the bathroom. Spilled a lot of water, and had candles...” Grant’s tone lowered at an idea. “Did Sharon get herself new runners?”

“Runners?” Amanda shook her head. “Why?”

“The running shoes she’s so proud of are still at the door,” Grant said. “I still can’t believe she paid 250 bucks for them. I got by fine on \$10 sneakers.”

“Not that I know. What about...” Amanda’s mind spun back over the story. Someone—a woman—had chased her. *It was like a weird wind came up.* “Is her car there?”

“Yeah, her phone and house keys, too,” Grant said. “But you know her and fitness. Rather walk to a store than drive.”

“It doesn’t make sense that she’d leave her phone and keys though. And she liked to be there when Phil picked the kids up,” Amanda said.

“I figure she forgot her phone,” Grant said, reassuringly, the quaver in his voice now under control. “More than likely she’s gone on that long run she takes to Inglis Falls, and underestimated how much time she’d need to get back. Just like her. Of course, she might have twisted her ankle or something. I’ll wait a bit and then drive out there where the trail’s near the road.” He grunted. “I always told her to go with a buddy.”

“What about the police?” Amanda asked, remembering Sharon’s stories about running with “buddies.” *You’d be amazed what you can do with a man while standing up!*

“I’ve got friends on the force I can talk to, but there’s no sense worrying yet, Amanda. She’s only been out of sight for a couple hours,” Grant said. “And police don’t like to get called in until someone has done a bit of the groundwork. I’ll drive down through the park and on to Inglis.”

“Okay,” Amanda said. “Please call me when you know anything.”

“It’ll be a pleasure,” Grant said, far too calmly. “And you call me on this, on Sharon’s cell, if she turns up there. I’ll have it with me.”

Not too calmly, just *wisely*. Grant had been around too long to jump to conclusions. Especially, *the worst*, and he didn’t know Sharon’s story about being chased the morning before.

“I will.” Amanda’s thoughts lingered on what she had said. *A tree person chased her.*

“I’ll be in touch,” Grant said.

Amanda hung up and stared at Harold until he flinched and looked over at her.

“Do you have to talk so goddamn loud?” she snarled.

Harold had slid a stick of gum in since his call. He chewed that slowly, watching her silently.

“Can’t hear myself think!” she grumbled, and circled the nursing station to check the schedule again. *Yep, Sharon was definitely supposed to be in.*

“Shit!” she hissed, as her eye caught her own name. She was penciled into the Lee Manor Aqua-fit Program for Monday morning at the YMCA. It was supposed to be a day off, but a co-worker, Cheryl Ellis was seeing her doctor that day. *A home pregnancy test had given positive results.*

Amanda wouldn’t usually have covered except she’d always had a soft spot for young mothers. That likely came from her own failed attempts at marriage, and resulting lack of children.

No one had ever swept Amanda off her feet, and she’d just never been able to settle for anyone. She’d never bring kids into a loveless marriage.

Kids were no reason to get married.

*Or are they a great excuse?*

The quandary was just about academic now. At 35, she had begun to think the opportunity would never come. If she figured on meeting someone, and going through the responsible steps of a relationship, living together, engagement and marriage, she’d be pushing 40 before she had any kids.

People started families at that age, but it was not the best case scenario. There were health risks, and she didn’t know if she’d have the energy—and who has only one kid?

So, number two would be coming in her early 40s. It was not looking good.

*Unless someone sweeps you off your feet.*

“Yeah, right,” Amanda grumbled earning her a wary glance from Harold.

*It sure left a soft spot for kids though.* An especially soft spot, when she realized how much she didn't like Aqua-fit. She did not look forward to wearing a bathing suit around some of the horny old men who participated. Most of them had only signed up for sightseeing anyway.

She tucked her clipboard under her arm and picked up the tray of meds before starting down the hall.

Her thoughts soon turned to Sharon's kids.

## Chapter 19

11:30 a.m.

“SIMON Minor?” the strange-looking little man in priest’s collar, black overcoat and hat asked from the doorway.

Minor looked up from his computer screen, smiled and minimized the web browser. He was only fact-checking a letter for a client, but Internet security was fast becoming second nature to him.

He nodded in greeting, a little surprised. Minor had heard the door at the bottom of the stairs open almost 10 minutes before. *Had the priest been climbing up ever since?*

“I called you earlier. I am Father Martyn Warga from St. Mary’s.” His voice was deep and raspy, but he had no accent to go along with the name.

The priest pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his overcoat, then removed his hat, and dabbed at the sweat on his forehead. He tottered in place as he did this, swaying forward like he was about to enter, and then swaying back like he was about to fall over. He caught himself on the doorframe. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“My pleasure,” Minor said.

“I just heard of Brenda Hamilton’s death this morning,” Warga said. He lifted his right foot and took a painful half-step to the side.

“I would think you’d have been first to know,” Minor said standing, apprising the man’s clerical collar. The top edge was grayish with neglect where it cut up into his thin jowls. “Brenda was Catholic.”

“There has been a division between the Hamiltons and St. Mary’s. Brenda’s memorial and funeral service will be held at Knox United. Non-denominational, you understand,” Warga explained, shifting his feet and wincing. “The surviving Hamiltons do not belong to our parish.”

“Did they ever tell you why they quit?” Minor asked.

Warga scowled, his face a mass of wrinkles. “I was unable to help them with Brenda.”

“You’re not a doctor,” Minor said, circling his desk. “She mentioned you though, that you’d counseled her.”

Minor had always found the notion of priests counseling people to be dubious. Life within the Church could hardly prepare them to prepare others for things like marriage, sex or child-rearing.

*But it’s the placebo effect of spiritual counsel. Their patients believed priests had “powers” to heal, and guide and so they could heal and guide.*

“I was her spiritual guardian at one time,” Warga admitted, seemingly embarrassed by his title. “And family friend. I was asked to help Brenda at a crucial time, when she first began having difficulties.” He made a dismissive motion, passing his hands down the front of his black coat, lingering near his frail legs. “But, I failed to help her.”

*What the hell happened to this guy?* Minor wondered.

Brenda had mentioned Father Warga during some of her sessions with Minor. He’d been at St. Mary’s as long as she could remember. His name had appeared a couple of times in doctor’s notes on her file. Warga had counseled her during her first couple of stays in the hospital.

Her parents had requested it, so there hadn't always been bad blood.

Brenda always spoke well of him in session, but would not say much. She was very private about her relationship with the Church, and about Warga's counsel. Minor gathered that something had happened between them long ago, but he could only push so far. Considering it was the Catholic Church, Minor had hoped it was nothing more than church business.

But Brenda's problems did not stem from sexual abuse; or at least Minor had never made the connection. Love, definitely, and loss—of a personal nature, and the Divine. The Church doctrine made living with her decision difficult so it had had an impact.

Warga continued to hesitate at the door like he was afraid to enter the room, or required permission. It also looked like he needed all of his strength to hold himself up.

"Please come in, Father," Minor said, reaching toward the door with one hand and gesturing to the two chairs in front of his desk with the other. The frail-looking man continued to sway like he was ready to collapse. "Have a seat."

Warga grimaced as he turned his head, to glance down the stairs that had led up to Minor's office.

"The steps—are steep," he said, taking a deep breath before lurching toward the chairs, teetering like a drunken man on a tightrope. His hands whipped out to catch his balance on the closest.

He talked as he inched his way around the chair. "And my escort, Sisters Viola and Susan have business at Community Living downstairs. I'm to meet there and return to the church with them."

Minor had seen Father Warga before at charity events in the St. Mary's School auditorium and at a Christmas Mass one year when he was dating a Catholic—but they'd never talked. On those occasions, Warga had appeared red-faced and detached, almost like he was trying to avoid catching anyone's eye.

And Minor had also done a double-take once when he was driving by St. Mary's Church and caught the frail and twisted figure limping across the parking lot one summer day.

*What's the deal?*

Warga set himself gently into the chair. Closer now, Minor could smell whisky. *Maybe he wasn't as frail as he looked.*

"I am understandably curious to know the circumstances of Brenda's death. She was too young." The priest stretched his left leg out and winced at the strain. "Forgive me; I have trouble with my legs." Warga's eyes looked glassy. "The knees are bone on bone."

*You look like you've got trouble with everything from the hairline on down.*

The man had to be in his 60s, but his general ill appearance made it impossible to guess his actual age. His grayish skin was oily. Pockmarks covered the sides of his neck and face, and a raw red pimple disfigured his weak chin.

Warga held his hat in his pale left hand and raised the other to pat his thinning, colorless hair into place.

"May I ask, Father?" Minor circled his desk and took a seat. "How did you 'fail' to help Brenda?"

The priest lowered his hand and then unbuttoned his overcoat and suit jacket beneath. He was very thin.

“I am not able to tell you much,” Warga said, shrugging. “Could I ask you what she told you about me?”

Minor watched the man mop more sweat from his brow. *Did he ever look guilty.* In fact, the social worker could not imagine a more loaded situation.

*A troubled woman dealing with trauma from her past kills herself, and then a priest comes in looking like he’s committed a crime and wondering what she might have said about him.*

So Minor entertained the notion that he’d been wrong. Perhaps, there was more to the story than a young woman’s guilt manifesting into a lifelong obsession.

“Father Warga,” Minor said, bracing himself to go on the offensive. “Do you have something to hide?”

Warga stared at him, his lips trembling, as more sweat ran down into his wiry eyebrows. He muttered something and then said, “I understand your concern.” His expression changed to open hostility, but it wasn’t directed at Minor. “My church deserves your scrutiny, and people have the right to question every single one of us.”

He turned the hat in his hands by its brim. “We all have much to answer for, but it’s not what you think.”

“What is it?” Minor asked.

“The Hamiltons’ confidentiality is sacred to me, but I will say what I can.” Warga grimaced as he straightened in his chair. “Brenda’s parents had tried doctors for some time, and I gave what support I could by way of counsel. When they ran out of medical options, they hoped that spiritual guidance, and Catholic Church—*doctrine*—might be effective.”

“Doctrine?” Minor said, staring across the desk. “You mean, like Hail Marys, confession, that kind of thing?”

“*That* kind of thing,” Warga said with irony. “And more that I am reluctant to say, but that is the very thing I am asking about, wondering if she told you what we did.”

“I see,” Minor said. “What did you do?”

“You must remember...there we had a fine young girl of 16, who’d had a perfectly normal life up to that point,” the priest said, shifting uncomfortably. “Yet, because of human nature she made a mistake, and her parents helped her compound the error.” He scowled. “I made it worse, and now she’s dead.”

“I could still see the promise in her. Everybody could,” Minor said, sighing. “You may not be alone anyway because I think I failed her myself.” His supervisor had been sympathetic, but had requested that Minor compile his notes in preparation for an investigation into Brenda’s file.

“I’m sure you did everything in your power to help her,” Warga said, evenly.

“I know, but I wish I had discouraged her from this move she took. The new apartment,” Minor grumbled. “She had been renting a place for years, and the people she lived with knew about her difficulties and could provide support on the home front.”

“And you feel that things might have turned out differently if she had stayed put,” Warga said, eyes flaring.

“Partly, but more to the point, it was *where* she moved. I thought she was up to the challenge,” Minor explained. “The Captain’s House is just a house. I know it and you know it. But its colorful history might have been provocative or dangerous to someone in her stressed mental condition.”



“I know the Captain’s House,” Warga said, cautiously. “But as you say, it is only a house.”

“She insisted on moving there, and got in at the first of the month,” Minor said, lowering his face. “I thought she was doing great. I’d never seen her so focused.” *And you were wrong.*

“She insisted?” Warga said, rubbing his raw, red chin.

“It was part of her, how did she call it: ‘her renewal.’ She wanted to prove something to herself. Face her fears,” Minor said. “Brenda dreamed about the place, or so she said, and she connected her troubles to it.” *That was why she had been anxious in their last session. It was all getting too real for her.*

He’d noticed the change, but hadn’t done anything!

“The house has a history,” said Warga, eyes gleaming.

“All houses do,” Minor said. “We’d have to live in tents if we wanted to avoid buildings with history.”

“She picked that place because she dreamed of it?” Warga asked, wincing at a random pain as he fidgeted.

“Yes, she felt a connection to it, and thought that confronting it would free her. She mentioned it to me when she spoke of dreams, and as part of our work, she kept a journal.” Minor felt heat at the back of his throat. “She wrote about the house in there, too. Brenda wasn’t always so certain, but I agreed that she had to confront her memories and the fears, so I encouraged her to keep pushing ahead.” He sighed. “I overestimated her strength.”

Minor had asked Brenda’s parents about her journal, but they were still shell-shocked. The stuff from her apartment had been delivered by the building manager with a check for her last month’s rent, but they hadn’t worked up the nerve to go through it yet.

The old priest was silent, his expression contemplative.

“Brenda must have known about the building’s past,” Warga said.

“As I understand it, the worst was a long time ago—ancient history.” Minor leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know about you, Father, but I try to keep ghosts out of my counseling sessions.”

“But she felt connected to events that had occurred there?” Warga asked.

“Yes, she’d never explain the connection, though. I should point out, she was a very depressed woman,” Minor explained. “She was delusional, reaching out for meaning.”

“Delusion? What did she believe?” Warga asked.

“She said she had committed a sin, and was being punished for it by supernatural forces,” Minor explained.

“And there are stories about a ghost in that house,” Warga said. He pursed his lips and nodded.

“Exactly, which would have appealed to her imagination,” Minor said. “But it’s hardly an explanation.”

Warga cleared his throat, and began, “When I counseled her at her worse, decades ago when she first went into hospital for treatment, she spoke to me of something that tormented and punished her in dreams.” He shrugged. “That was why I had always suggested the medical option. It was clear to me she was suffering from a disorder that required treatment. Schizophrenia, perhaps—there were any number of possibilities.”

“So, what happened?” Minor asked, sitting forward, hoping the new information might lift his spirits.

“That is why I am here, and wanted to know if she had...” Warga said, eyes rolling up as he dabbed his forehead and face with his handkerchief. “If she told you about what we did.”

“Which brings us back to the Church doctrine you mentioned. What did the Hamiltons want you to do?” Minor asked.

“They had tried psychiatry, and the pharmaceutical approach—to little effect,” the priest grimaced. “The Hamiltons had run out of answers and were desperate. Well, people turn to God at such times.” He grunted. “Why not, we tell them to.”

“What happened?” Minor watched the older man climb to his feet.

“You have to understand, the girl was in great need, and she believed something *external* or *supernatural* was harming her. She was so convincing that her parents had begun describing certain phenomena similar to what Brenda claimed to have seen,” Warga said. “There were soon enough criteria that...”

“What did you do?” Minor leaned forward.

“You must understand that I do not believe in these things, and for the Hamiltons’ sake I should not say more...” Warga shuffled forward with hand outstretched to shake. “But I think you will agree that the power of suggestion can be *great*.”

“Faith healing?” Minor rose. “You tried faith healing?”

“No. Twenty years ago,” Warga whispered, “We attempted to perform an exorcism upon her.”

“An exorcism?” Minor frowned. *What?*

“Not a real one,” Warga explained hastily. “Science has documented the power of suggestion...”

“So a fake exorcism had more to offer Brenda than modern medicine...” Minor continued, “Oh my God, 20 years ago, she was 16—just a kid.”

“It wasn’t *fake*.” Warga leaned against the desk and wrapped his clammy fingers around Minor’s hand. “Though I supposed that *unsanctioned* as it was, it may as well have been.”

“So—so, in church thinking,” Minor reasoned, “*unsanctioned*, an exorcism wouldn’t work.”

“There are gray areas. Certain criteria were met and the girl was suffering. The medicine wasn’t working, her parents were at wits’ end,” Warga rasped, releasing his hand.

“Wits’ end is right,” Minor said, adding sarcastically: “You must be happy with the results.”

Warga looked at him with hooded eyes for a half minute before sighing, and limping toward the door.

“Thank you for your time but I am sure the sisters will soon be ready to depart,” the priest said over his shoulder.

“So you just came down to see if she’d spilled the beans about the exorcism?” Minor asked hotly, following him to the top of the stairs.

“As you say, it was fake,” Warga said, wincing as he gripped the banister and lowered his foot gingerly to the first step. “Suicide. My God, for a Catholic, it is a terrible thing.”

“Brenda was in a bad way,” Minor said, shaking his head, relenting when he saw the agony behind the priest’s features. Then anger surged. The magnificent stupidity of the priest, the arrogance of the Church.

*An exorcism!*

“Bad enough she hung herself, Mr. Minor,” the priest said, pivoting on the point. “What did she use to do it? Specifically. Do you know?”

“I talked to one of the EMTs who were at the scene,” Minor said, frowning, riding a wave of contempt for the twitchy little man. “Brenda used a clothesline.”

Warga’s florid complexion paled where he swayed on the first step. He twisted his lips into a massive frown.

“Look,” Minor said. “I’m sure you had her best interests in mind, but in the future, please contact me before you do another exorcism.”

*An exorcism! Maybe the poor woman wasn’t crazy after all.*

The priest glared at him, but his expression quickly softened.

“Please don’t tell anyone about this,” he said, eyes glancing up into Minor’s. “It would not serve any purpose, and would only color Brenda’s reputation.”

“As long you promise to leave ideas like that in the Stone Age where they belong,” Minor scolded calmly.

Warga nodded his head slowly, and after taking another step he turned to Minor.

“Brenda was Catholic,” he grumbled. “What could be so bad that she would risk damnation to escape it?”

###

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