

AFTER THE EVIL

A Jake Roberts Novel

Cary Allen Stone

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“Cary Allen Stone is a brilliant writer of psychological thrillers and murder mysteries. He writes with a keen eye for detail—the graphic violence is chillingly realistic. He delivers a taut, darkly introspective, cunning and well-executed plot by leaning towards the fallible side of his characters. He understands the criminal mind avoiding the stereotypes that dominate crime thrillers. There is a good balance of chemistry and conflict, good and evil that fans will find enthralling. His characters become embedded in our psyches and the pace of his unraveling of his thriller is a ride not easily forgotten. Cary Allen Stone is an important name to watch. This is one superb crime writer!”

—Grady Harp, Amazon Hall of Fame Top 100 Reviewervine Voice

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To Tyler for all of her love

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After she placed the duct tape over his mouth, it became very difficult to make out some of his words. “No” was muffled, but reasonably understandable. “Don’t” didn’t sound quite right, but she got the idea. She mimicked his muted pleas pretending to feel his fear and pain. It was the end of Father Anthony Moralli.

He began his last day on earth on an airliner. His destination was a resort-gambling oasis, which coincidentally included a well-stocked pond of young females. He was on what he liked to call a “personal pilgrimage.” The expedition had nothing to do with religion. Anthony simply wanted to, no *needed* to, get laid. To accomplish the task, it required leaving the confines of his parish to maintain the façade of his vocation.

Father Anthony loved the whole religion thing—the ceremonies, hearing confessions, and especially saving lost souls. He planned to start saving his soul right after saving all of the others. After years of religious studies and training, he concluded it was beyond his

comprehension to truly understand God, so he simply preached the commandments, and left the rest to God. What Anthony really understood were the basic physical needs of a man. He struggled with his vow of celibacy, finding it to be in direct conflict with his deep and firm conviction, that sex was a gift from God. To abstain, he believed, was a slap to the Creator's face. The "Love thy neighbor" commandment was his favorite, and he took every opportunity to apply it to his life. Of course, that did not include molesting boys like some of his classmates in the seminary. He boarded the flight sans white collar, and slumped into his assigned seat by the window, in the emergency exit aisle.

A good-looking man with dark, wavy hair and olive complexion, Anthony gave his best Elvis smile whenever women smiled at him. His deep-set, dark eyes suggested compassion, mixed with forgiveness. They also hinted at a touch of mischievous intent. In airline terminology, it was easy for the good father to make his connection. Certain a nap during the flight would pay benefits later that evening, Anthony closed his eyes, and quickly drifted off to sleep. While he napped, the handsome, incognito stranger tempted female "parishioners" inside the Church of the Holy Aircraft Cabin. The older women sighed and relinquished the temptation then placed a gentle hand over their husbands'. A few of the younger, adventurous women on board, felt up to the challenge, each waited for his nap to end.

Lori first noticed Anthony, as he searched for a place for his Reebok carry-on bag in the overhead bin. She made her way around the other passengers, and offered to help him. It was one of her duties as a flight attendant.

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Safety was her first concern. Passenger comfort was another. She carefully choreographed every move. As her uniform dress rose up along with his bag to be stowed, Anthony smiled. Lori's compelling cyan-hued eyes, Angelina lips, and cascading California blond hair, held Anthony's attention. Everything about her confirmed the Creator was truly a master artisan. Drawing stares was commonplace for Lori. The women envied her stunning looks, while the men behaved like schoolboys. Manifested passenger, Anthony Moralli, held Lori's attention. He seemed different than the others, she thought.

* * *

She playfully protested while he fondled her, as if they were in the back seat of a '56 Chevy, at a drive-in movie. Passengers in various stages of maturity, who stood near them, stared with disgust. Any children present were oblivious to their sordid adult behavior. They were distracted by all of the other things associated with flying and airport security.

"I don't care. I want some Susan Johnson right now," Nick said.

With feigned indignation, she corrected him.

"I believe, as recently as two days ago, it changed to *Mrs. Nicholas Parker*."

He covered by teasing.

"I forgot."

Susan's arms dropped to her sides, and she frowned. She wasn't finding his brand of humor very funny. Cognizant of her distress, he pressed two fingers to her lips as he pulled her close. They ended with an embrace, and a passionate kiss. When their lips separated, Nick obsessed.

"Susan, I need you. I can't live without you, you know that."

The embrace, the kiss, and the sentimental words, accomplished what he wanted. She melted in his arms.

"Nick, I love you so much, you're everything to me—you're my life."

Holding his face with both hands, she kissed him again. He stroked her shoulders, and let his hands slip down to fondle her spandex-smooth behind. A worried look appeared in her brown eyes.

"Be safe my love, and come back to me," Susan said.

He reassured her with a promise. Nick was the consummate sincerity machine, and had the uncanny ability to charm his female victims, better than any of his contemporaries. The other travelers, observing the two lovers, rolled their eyes and groaned. Finally, the captain released his grasp on her, and turned to reach into the back seat of his oversized Lincoln Navigator SUV. He gathered his flight and overnight bags, and placed them curbside.

After a final caress, Susan stepped back to take one

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last adoring look at him. She blew him a tender kiss goodbye. Although she would have liked to stay longer, she was already late picking up her daughter from school. Nick pantomimed catching the flying kiss with his hand, and pressed it to his lips. She pivoted, and after an awkward climb into the driver's seat, cranked over the engine. The Bose CD player blasted out her favorite rap song. He hated rap music, but tolerated it enough to appease her. She gave him a doting smile and a brisk wave goodbye. Knowing how much he cherished his toys, Susan concentrated on her driving, and was extra careful with the SUV.

With a pathetic pout on his face, he stood at the curb, like a little boy being dropped off at camp. His fingers slowly, and sequentially fluttered in the air, to emphasize his displeasure at having to fly off without her. Nick watched her drive away.

As she made the turn at the end of the terminal to exit the airport grounds, he quickly turned to look in the opposite direction. It wasn't too long before a Yellow Cab pulled up alongside him and parked. The back door sprang open. A pair of firm, long and proportioned legs extended from out of the back seat of the taxi. Although she was petite, the heels made her at least four inches taller. Her tight blouse accentuated her artificially inflated breasts. The plaid skirt was snug, and scarcely enough cloth to cover her dignity. Nick had met the barely above-legal-age woman at a club, when Susan was out of town visiting relatives.

“Hey, babe,” Nick said.

The other travelers, who had witnessed his earlier carrying-on, rolled their eyes knowing his new wife had just driven off moments ago. They became furious when he scrutinized the young woman from head to toe, as if evaluating the purchase of a slave. It was understood she would play that role later in the evening, to satisfy just one more of his sexual perversions.

“Oh Nick, you look so hot in your uniform. I’m getting wet just looking at you,” Tricia said.

She squealed delightfully. Tricia knew how the game was played, and was adept at using suggestive sexual innuendos, having lost her innocence when she was an even younger girl. Nick was a successful airline pilot wanting to play. Tricia wanted out of her boring town. She also desired to have his upper-level income spent lavishly on her. She knew that meant he would tug hard on her leash, before she reaped the reward. Putting out, to get out was fine with her, even if it meant humping a man twice her age. Besides, age didn’t matter to a generation who believed sex was solely for pleasure, and a lifetime of commitment wasn’t as important, as financial security. As Nick snuggled with Tricia, he sensed the men standing nearby were enjoying their own filthy fantasies. Nick devilishly grinned, knowing their women were growing more nervous by the second. The performance reached a climax, when the captain gathered his baggage on wheels, and Trisha held out her small overnight bag for him to take.

“I packed all of your favorite things,” Tricia said.

With a broad smile, Nick added the undersized bag

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to his. He reached out to take her hand, and they walked into the terminal together. Nick wasn't sure he could hold off until their destination. The fierce animal desires he had for her, pulled at him. He thought they might find a quiet place to use. Then again, he cherished sexual tension as an integral part of the chase, so he decided to simmer, rather than boil over. The men standing curbside watched her provocative gait, and sighed right up until the automatic doors closed behind the old guy and his juvenile date.

* * *

Soft fingertips lightly stroked his forehead. He blinked trying to clear his vision. His head was throbbing. He could barely make out the shape of a face. He thought the facial features resembled a woman smiling at him with one of those after-great-sex smiles. He struggled to remember who she might be. He couldn't focus. The room appeared to be underwater, as if the ship had overturned at sea. Nothing made sense. The last thing he remembered was becoming extremely drained and drifting off.

Where...how...who was...

There was something restricting the movement of his arms and legs.

Name is...name is...is...

The face with the smile that floated past him reappeared, he couldn't remember. Blaring in the background, he heard lyrics and hammering of heavy

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metal music. He recognized The Cult.

It's the way that you feel

It's the truth in your eye

Cause you're up against the world

And still you rise

Holly? Jean? No, Lori, The flight...

What was holding him? He passed out again, until he heard the words that shocked him back into reality.

“Poor Father Anthony. That is it, isn't it—*Father Anthony?*”

The effects of the drug had given Lori more than enough time to secure him, and search through his wallet.

“Lori, what's going on?”

He slurred the words. As he tugged against the ropes, it hit him.

“You know?” he said.

She bowed her head.

“I want to confess my sins, Father. Will you hear my

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confession? I want you to absolve my sins, and forgive me,” Lori said.

“What is wrong with you?”

His head fell back onto the pillow. He tried to compose himself, but he jerked back up again with anger and revulsion.

“Are you *insane*?”

Her jagged reaction, to his interrogatory outburst, caused a quick reevaluation of his options. His head fell back again as his mind raced. There wasn’t any way out of the tight spot he was in. He had to be repentant, and negotiate.

“Lori, what do you want from me? You want the truth? Okay, it’s true—I’m a priest. I don’t have any excuse for my actions, except to say, I’m just a frail human like all men, and I sin, too.”

He studied her face to see if he was getting through. She bit at her lower lip, while contemplating his answer then she smiled, and slid her index finger from his forehead down to his lips, where they rested for a moment.

I really enjoyed kissing you.

Her finger continued down, and stopped at his genitals. She massaged him softly. He glanced down at what she was doing, and squirmed.

Its just some weird sexual game she plays.

He tried an end run.

“Did you like it? We could do it again, make love again. Just untie me.”

Lori smiled deprecatingly.

“Now Father, we never did make love. And as far as untying you, you know I can’t do that.”

“Untie me, goddammit,” Anthony said.

“Oh my, thou shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. You’re just like that little pope of yours, and the archbishops, and bishops—the pious hierarchy, so holy when you want to be, and so arrogant with authority. Priests think they have all the answers and can tell the rest of us how to live.”

Anthony turned away, ashamed. He shifted, trying his best to distance himself from her.

This can’t be happening.

“This is some kind of a joke, right?”

He couldn’t conceal his fear.

“Father, I can assure you this is no joke.”

Lori looked off into the distance.

“Do you believe in life after death?”

Her eyebrows rose. Lori focused on him waiting for

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his answer.

You are a handsome man.

“Of course, I do.”

Her gaze left his as she looked down, and watched her fingertips dance around his manhood. She posed another theological question.

“If heaven is such a *heavenly* place, why does everyone want to take an *eternity* to get there?”

He had to think about that one. He often thought that heaven must be a small place out of necessity, and hell enormous. After all, there were far more of the damned, than there were saved in the world.

“Is evil the same in every religion Father, or is evil different from one religion to the next?”

She stared at him.

“Father Anthony, you aren’t a very good person.”

His answer was sarcastic.

“Even Jesus wasn’t loved by everyone.”

“You are not Jesus, Father Anthony.”

Bowing her head, she made a request.

“I want you to hear my confession.”

Reaching over to the nightstand, she grasped the roll of duct tape. Tearing off a small piece, she ceremoniously placed it over his mouth, while his head thrashed violently from side to side. As hard as he possibly could, he struggled to free himself.

Lori started confessing.

“Father, like yourself, I have taken the Lord thy God’s name in vain. I have not honored my mother or my father. And I am about to break the commandment—Thou shall not kill.”

She looked deeply into his wide, terrified eyes.

“Bless me Father, for I must sin again.”

Anthony perspired profusely. His pounding chest heaved. Tears fell down the sacrificial lamb’s face. With his eyes closed tight, he hastily prayed for God’s forgiveness of his sins. When he opened them again, he saw the raised, shimmering blade of the knife. He tensed and shook violently. He screamed from behind the tape sealing his lips. The good father felt the first, but because of the shock infiltrating his body, not the rest of the repeated punctures to his torso. If Anthony’s God were truly merciful, He, or She, would gift Anthony, on his deathbed with the painless “golden hour.” Another heartbeat passed.

His eyes rolled back and disappeared. Had a heart monitor been attached to him it would have revealed a complete cessation of all cardiac function, with flat brain wave tracing. It would have confirmed that Father

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Anthony Moralli had left for the next life. Then with the artistry of a gourmet chef, she dragged the blade down his chest, and severed his genitals. A massive river of blood spilled from the wound between his legs. She held the organ up, while more blood drained down from her hand to her bent elbow. It made a muted thud when she dropped it onto him.

To complete the act, Lori stabbed him one last time, directly into his heart, and withdrew her hand. The knife stood erect, like a tombstone protruding from his unmoving chest. Father Anthony mouthed his last words behind the duct tape during the brief seconds he had left, but she never heard them. She had no idea he had forgiven her. She walked to the foot of the bed where she sat down on a chair facing him. While staring at the corpse, she became lost in an out-of-body experience that took her mind along for the ride. Her fingers roamed until she found the special place between her legs. The face of her dead husband appeared over Anthony's, and spoke to her.

That's right baby. Daddy loves you.

“Did I do it right, daddy? Like you taught me, daddy?”

You're daddy's little girl.

She recited while matching the rhythm of her hand.

“Daddy loves me, daddy loves me, daddy...loves...me... Why daddy, daddy it hurts. Please stop, daddy, no more, daddy. Mommy, make him stop!”

Like every time before, she could not reach a climax, and the rapid motion of her hand ceased. Lori awoke from the dream and became mechanical. From the bathroom, she retrieved a white washcloth. Returning to the bed, she soaked a corner of the cloth into the puddle of blood between Anthony's thighs. She climbed over him to the headboard, and wrote crimson letters on the wall—*Anthony*.

She retrieved her things, including the CD from the stereo. She was careful to leave the room clean, with no way to connect her to the murder. Nobody knew she was with him. She took one more look before leaving quietly. It was just before midnight when Lori returned to her layover hotel. She showered then climbed into bed and fell asleep. Her alarm clock woke her, and within an hour, she met with her crew in the hotel lobby. Like an apparition, she would completely disappear without a trace. The early flight departure gave her the distance that would prevent her capture. Like all of the other murders she had committed, this one would confound and mystify investigators.

As her flight departed into the early-morning haze, she contemplated what she needed to do when she got back home. She would stop by the food store for groceries. Renting a movie was an option. She had to water the plants, and there were bills to pay. She also thought about the man who had beaten her and who sexually abused their young daughter on the pretext of love.

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The odor drew the first witness to the gruesome crime scene. She reported the repugnant smell to the front desk. When the manager arrived, he knocked heavily on the cottage door. Not receiving a response, he announced “Manager” and went inside. After a few short steps, he saw all he needed to see, and radioed the front office to call the police. The girl with the halter-top, and tight denim shorts, looking on from the doorway, let out a terrifying, chilling scream. Her boyfriend ran to join her. Both stood frozen and gawked at the twisted carcass with the severely contorted expression.

While the three of them waited for the police, they debated going back inside to see if the victim was still alive. Finally, the brave manager told the two lovers to stand back while he checked for a pulse. Forcing himself to go back in, he made his way to the bed. Just as he was about to touch the discolored wrist, the feel of a hand on his arm nearly sent him into cardiac arrest. A Kevlar-vested female officer, behaving in typical maximum-threat fashion, quickly herded him and the other two witnesses away to safety. With her laser-sight illuminated, she tightened her grip on her weapon, and held it in front of her as she searched the premises.

Blues and reds flashed in rapid succession against the drizzle and overcast. The entire cottage was illuminated in white light as more emergency personnel arrived. The first responders were soaked in adrenaline as they performed their duties. The discovery of the dead man was contagious. News trucks with painted station logos arrived, and extended their antennas high into the night sky for satellite feeds. Reporters descended on the scene like vultures with their outstretched, hideous wings.

They went to work on the carcass using blood to sell valuable advertising space. The first reporter on the scene, desperately seeking network recognition, spewed directly into the camera lens the earliest details as investigators relayed them.

...The victim, a Caucasian male, was stabbed repeatedly, and castrated. Although unconfirmed, this reporter has been told by sources close to the investigation, that the victim is a Catholic priest. Just moments ago, Bishop Archibald, from the Mother of Soul's parish here in Gulfport, has administered last rites...

It was riveting television. “Reality” death always held a captive audience. The news stations played the gruesome scene repeatedly, albeit with parental warnings. Jurisdiction of the crime scene, a treasured pearl of law enforcement, passed from the Gulfport locals to Special Agent Mika Scott, when she and her Evidence Response Team arrived from Quantico a few hours later.

* * *

After waiting for over an hour, I recline on the couch, but shift into several uncomfortable positions. I can't sit still. I hate having to surrender my thoughts and my emotions to him. God forbid I say something that causes him to take me off the streets. I would leave, except the department's policy requires all cops involved

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in a shooting, have to see the shrink.

“I watched as the Molotov cocktail flew in an arc and crashed through the stained glass window. Jesus the Shepherd was at the center of the window only moments before.”

I feel like I’m suffocating, cornered. The place and surroundings couldn’t help, but make you feel flawed as a human being.

“The Molotov cocktail rolled across the sacristy floor spitting yellow and orange flames. Heavy, coal-colored, swirling smoke billowed out. Nothing could be done, while the blaze burned the house of God to the ground. Then the dark angel responsible, as if receiving an order directly from Satan, began the last barrage. The weapon discharged, and my windshield exploded. Shards of glass and debris flew all around me. I dropped to the pavement.”

After a long swallow from the glass of water on the end table, the rest of my nightmare slips out.

Easy Jake, don’t talk about anger in front of the man.

“One of the ‘cop killer’ round struck Sergeant Peterson a few yards away from me. I couldn’t get to him. I was pinned down then I took a hit. I didn’t feel it at first, the burn. I returned fire. My first round shattered the larynx, and the perp’s arms extended as if begging to be crucified. My second round tore open the chest. The black, fatigue-clad body danced beneath the yellowish

glow of the fluorescent streetlights. It stood like a statue, before finally collapsing to the pavement. My bullet-riddled radiator hissed. Stepping through the blood, I cautiously approached and kicked away the weapon. I took out my ‘cuffs, but the body appeared lifeless. My still hot Glock dropped to my side. It was over.”

Trying to alleviate the pains and stress in my body, I shift again. He sits quietly, hands clasped together, and gives me time to get it all out.

“The paramedic removed the ski mask, and her auburn hair limply cascaded down. Her face had a horrified look that said an angry God was already passing sentence. Her lips quivered, and I thought she was trying to speak. I dropped down to hear, but I only felt her last breath touch my face.”

I blink as the corners of my eyes begin to tear.

“Rapid cerebral replays of the shooting and heavy doses of guilt have dogged me since. She was just a kid.”

Abrams allows my words to hang in the air. His unnerving silence makes me squirm and twitch. Is he waiting for me to collapse? He asks a simple question with a calm voice.

“Can you go on, or would you like to stop here?”

That really cranks me off, so I blast back.

“Hey, tell me what I’m supposed to do here, what I’m supposed to say, tell me how I’m supposed to heal.”

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Abrams answers with a calm, compassionate tone.

“Jake, it doesn’t work that way. You had physical trauma from the gunshot, and the doctor prescribed a pill for the pain, but what’s in your head cannot be cured with a pill.”

Dr. Thaddeus Abrams, mid-forties, is wearing his trademark heavy-rimmed, black eyeglasses. He is soft-spoken and polite. In addition to his own practice, he is included in the department’s payroll. A shooter like me is supposed to attend therapy once a week. Those who work through their pain can regain their life and career. If the scars are too deep sometimes, recovery is impossible then it will be just a matter of time before their prolonged misery ends in suicide. I’m not going to be counted among the lost.

“I can’t erase what happened to you Jake. It will always be in your memory. All I can do is to try and help you find some closure and that’s going to take time.”

I know what I have to, but I don’t want to talk to him anymore. As I make my way toward the office door, I turn to face the eminent psychiatrist. The words I thought would come out don’t, so I close the door behind me.

“Jake?”

The receptionist behind the glass window in the waiting room makes a gallant effort to corner me for another appointment. Faces look up from their magazines, as I hurry my escape. I feel exposed. I can’t reach for the doorknob fast enough, but instead the door

opens in my face.

An extraordinarily attractive woman enters. She holds everyone's attention. We stare at her as if she were a model strutting down the runway at a fashion show. She seems unaffected by the gawking. We make eye contact and she smiles, but in my jammed up state of mind I can't smile back. Along my journey down the long, empty corridor I think about her. Walking out of the building into the stabbing sunlight that temporarily blinds me, I think about her. As the freezer chill of the air-conditioned offices dissipates rapidly in the heat, I think about her. When I open the door to my apartment I realize she is the only other thing I have thought about, in my bruised and crippled psyche, since killing that girl.

* * *

There was no resemblance to the other hard-core patients in the office. After checking in with the receptionist, she found an empty seat, and sat straight up with her purse neatly placed on her lap. Her breathtaking eyes stared straight ahead, and didn't acknowledge anyone in the waiting room. She didn't read any of the old and torn magazines. Instead Lori replayed in her mind, the entire visit she made to the cemetery before her appointment to see Dr. Abrams. Whenever she returned from a flight, she made sure she went to see her daughter Emily. In her daydream, she saw herself walking past the many headstones along the manicured lawn. She arrived at the one that rested above her daughter's grave. Her fingers lightly stroked the name on the marble then cleared the grave of fallen leaves and debris. She replaced the bouquet in the holder with freshly cut wildflowers.

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“Hi baby, mommy’s here.”

I missed you mommy.

“I missed you too, honey.”

Lori’s head tilted to one side and was followed by a sigh. Soft tears trickled down her cheeks as the anguish of Emily’s passing returned. After years, it still hurt. As all parents do when preceded in death by their children, she mourned the loss with heartbreak, sadness, and overwhelming guilt.

Where did you go mommy?

Wiping away tears, Lori tried to sound upbeat.

“I had a flight to Gulfport baby, just an overnight. We got back early this morning. I unpacked and came right over to see you.”

Did you have fun mommy?

“It was okay, it wasn’t fun, just okay.”

Lori changed the subject.

“Did you remember yesterday was my birthday?”

Oh yes mommy, Happy Birthday to you!

The child’s voice sang the birthday song. Lori’s dire expression turned to a half-hearted smile, as she touched her daughter’s headstone. It had changed from a piece of granite, to her young daughter’s face.

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I wish I could have celebrated it with you,

“I know baby, I know. You look so beautiful Emily, so beautiful.”

I love you mommy.

“I love you too, baby.”

Mourners at a nearby gravesite looked in her direction, but she quickly turned away from their curious stares. Without looking up again, she spread a small blanket on the lawn next to the grave. The recently mowed grass had a sweet scent. She sat down and brought her legs up beneath her chin. She wrapped her arms around them to hold them in. With her chin resting on her knees, she stared at a small beetle making its way through the grass then she heard the other voice.

Don't be fooled into believing that luck got you this far and will take you the rest of the way. Many have stood before a magistrate because of such flawed thought.

“I know, I know,” Lori said.

Don't take that attitude with me.

The voice was demeaning and punishing. She hated the voice, and would have done anything to make it stop. She whispered like a scolded child.

You listen to me. No one cares about you, but me.

“I won't disappoint you.”

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Lori was apologetic having heard the lectures before.

You have to follow the rules.

“Yes I know, no records. Don’t leave anything behind. Don’t attract attention. Know the geography. And alcohol is a truth serum—I got it.”

Well if it’s all so clear then what did you think you were doing in Gulfport.

“He was an authority figure just like the rest—”

Lori wanted to argue, but she knew it was useless.

Murder is as empowering as it is compelling.

After that, Lori didn’t hear the voices. The other mourners had all gone, and she was sitting alone in the cemetery shading her eyes from the bright, unrelenting sun. Before she left, she took one more look at her daughter’s name on the headstone. Then another voice, an unfamiliar voice, interrupted her daydream.

“Ms. Powers, the doctor will see you now.”

* * *

Terrorism had hit home, and was on everyone’s mind. Outside the terminal, airport traffic officers ordered the towing of unattended cars no longer permitted to park curbside. As Captain Parker walked briskly out of the terminal, and into the noonday sun, the last thing on his mind was terrorism. Nick was much more concerned about unintentionally revealing any evidence the sweet,

young Tricia had left behind. She had kissed him goodbye only minutes before with a heavy smear of lipstick then headed out the opposite side of the terminal. He wasn't sure he had gotten it all off. He rapidly surveyed the roadway to his left and right searching for the new Mrs. Parker, but she wasn't in sight.

Trisha had a wonderful two days in Los Angeles. Nick bought her expensive gifts, and took her to dinner at an exclusive restaurant. She screwed his brains out in return, which made them even she figured. The next time he called though, she planned to tell him to drop dead, unless there was nothing else to do in town.

Seeing his new bride, Nick waved as if she was the only woman on earth. She pulled up in the macho SUV and stopped at his feet. He liked it when women deferred to him. He expected them to treat him like God. After all, pilots thought they were. Mrs. Parker leapt out of the car, and rushed toward him, throwing her entire perfect body into him causing the air to burst out of his lungs.

“Oh baby, I've missed you so much,” Susan said.

“It feels like a millennium since I've been able to hold you,” Nick said.

He knew what to say, to get what he wanted.

“I've got to have you right now, Susan.”

It fascinated Nick how easily women fell for his smooth talk and lies. They were willing to do just about anything to have someone to call their own. They would

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clean, cook, iron and even squeeze out babies, for love. What was even more amazing, he thought, was they couldn't see it, didn't get it. To him, love was a fabricated concept created simply for a man to justify the fulfillment of a biological need to release millions of microscopic, aggressive sperm. A woman was nothing more than a late-night depository.

“Where’s Wendy?”

Parker asked knowing that Susan’s young daughter was an object of his degenerate affection. Susan made up a story because she knew Wendy detested him, but she could never figure out why. He would constantly spoil Wendy with lavish gifts that often made Susan jealous. She found his constant concern about Wendy’s well being reassuring, and believed that Nick was the perfect father figure for her.

“Home, she had homework to finish. You know how kids are.”

Nick’s face exhibited contrived concern

“Is everything all right with her?”

“Yeah, she’s fine, just a young girl trying to figure out the big world. It’s not easy you know.”

Seeing Parker in uniform, a traffic officer approached and reprimanded him.

“Captain you need to move it along, sir. The rules apply to everyone.”

“Sorry officer, you’re absolutely right, and we’re moving it.”

Nick’s apologetic tone saved him. He detested it when those he considered his inferiors, the lower rung, told him what to do. He didn’t take direction. He gave it. Nick opened the passenger door for Susan, and she slid her long legs inside so he got a good look. He grinned, and closed her door. Tossing his flight and overnight bags in the back, he gave a small wave to the impertinent officer. He thought about berating the man, but decided he was too exhausted after the weekend with Tricia.

I owe you one officer.

The Navigator cranked over, and Captain Nick Parker drove home with the woman he presumably loved, to the stepdaughter he wanted to make love to, later.

* * *

The magnificent mansion he shared with Mrs. Abrams made up for having to tolerate her incessant whining. An expansive estate, it was too much for two people. A brand new Bentley was parked in the curved driveway. The thought of having children was not even a consideration, because of the great imposition it would place on their own spoiled lives. Thaddeus Abrams loved his career, and all of the benefits that came with it. He especially loved when clients, such as the troubled, but stunning, Lori Powers stared helplessly into his eyes seeking compassion, comfort, and understanding. Life was good for the good doctor, and nothing was going to interfere with his happiness.

After the Evil

“So how are you, Lori?”

Abrams had a knack for sounding concerned, which was why he was so successful in his line of work. He was a master at giving the impression he cared about your miserable life. With Lori, he found his career to be particularly rewarding.

“It hasn’t been a very good week,” Lori said.

“Let me see, according to my notes, we were discussing your family history during your last visit. Why don’t you pick it up from there?”

He looked over the tops of his reading glasses at her. She closed her eyes and thought. The moment she felt prepared, and comfortable, organized, she began. Abrams gave a slight nod.

“I remember the very first time he slithered into my bed. He wanted me. I was too young, too trusting to protest, to say no.”

Her mood turned sullen. Abrams missed most everything she said after that. He just wanted to get her talking, so he could look into her captivating eyes, and listen to her smoky voice. Whenever she turned away, he would sneak a peek at her breasts and legs. Her first statement sent him drifting off into another fantasy daydream about her.

She stood in the garden below in the black French-cut bikini that was his favorite.

“Daddy was like a...”

He drifted into Fantasyland.

She lit candles inside the darkened room, and extinguished the match with a soft, sensual whisper. Romantic melodies filled the background as she nudged him onto his back on the bed. With a naughty, teasing expression, she took her hair up, and let it fall wildly over her soft shoulders. Her bikini fell to the floor.

“Mother didn’t have the courage to say no to him. When I turned to her, she turned away from me.”

He caught just a piece of that statement.

She straddled him provocatively and playfully, traced his naked body with her fingertips. Kissing his face and neck, she reached down between his legs.

“Dr. Abrams?” Lori said.

She had the impression Abrams missed the last few pages of her life story. He jerked back into reality, and recovered smoothly by asking a question.

“Who was *he*?”

“Who was who?”

“Go back to the part about ‘I was too trusting.’ Were you referring to your father?”

“I was referring to my ex-husband, doctor.”

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Abrams took a moment to think, while he wrote notes on his legal pad. She appeared to be confused about episodes between her father, and her ex-husband. The husband was missing, wasn't he? Perhaps the trauma of her daughter's suicide was affecting her memory. He couldn't quite put a finger in it.

"I'm sorry Lori, please continue."

Although relieved he had escaped detection, Abrams knew that he had missed something important. He had to listen closer, and find the underlying cause of it. As she pulled a tissue from the box on the table next to her chair, the doctor leaned forward in his chair. Certain he was listening this time. Lori continued with the rest of her story.

"I remember a night. It was raining very hard, thunder, and lightning. We were parked on a hilltop surrounded by dense woods. The leaves on the trees partially obscured the moon and stars. I had an overbearing feeling something evil was present. Lying back on the upholstery, sweating, frightened, with my legs spread, he entered me. I wanted to scream, but he wouldn't let me. Finally, he finished."

She dabbed the tissue in the corner of each eye then she squeezed the tissue tight in her clenched fist.

"Then his hand raised, and came down as if it were a knife."

Lori shook. Abrams flinched, and was surprised by his own reaction.

“Too young to comprehend the purpose of being struck, my baby cried as she sucked in her first seconds of life. She was so beautiful, my Emily. I was just fourteen.”

Abrams still couldn't put it all together, and it bothered him. Before he could ask another question, Lori spoke.

“I have a recurring dream. I'm alone, no one else is left in the world, except me.”

Abrams made the elusive connection between the father and the missing ex-husband, the daughter's suicide, the beatings, and the sexual abuse. He heard similar references from other clients he had treated over the years. He scribbled on his notepad and tore off the page then reached forward, holding the page between the two of them. Lori took it and read what he had written. It was an address.

“Unfortunately Lori, our time is up and as you know I have a few more patients waiting outside. I think we have made some real progress here today, in fact, so much so I need for you to continue this session later this evening at my home.”

He pointed at the page.

“That's the address.”

“I don't understand, Dr. Abrams.”

He moved closer to her and exuded compassion.

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“I believe we’ve made a major breakthrough today, and it is imperative that we discuss this further, before you leave on another flight.”

Lori considered the option Abrams presented, but wasn’t quite sure how that meshed with her revelations. As patients do, she trusted her medical practitioner. Taking the address he gave her, she stored it in her purse, and nodded. He desperately tried to appear reserved and controlled, while she stood and walked out of the office.

She was perfect.

Cary Allen Stone

2

After the shooting, and subsequent investigation by Internal Affairs, I was exhausted. I crashed into one of those comatose-like sleeps. Since then, I just lay in bed

for hours staring at the ceiling. Abrams said the depression is a normal reaction to what happened, and it would eventually subside. My apartment isn't far from the precinct. The neighborhood is nondescript, middle-class, what I could afford on my salary. There aren't any gated communities here. The nearest one would be lock-up inside the precinct.

The place is small, crowded with worn furniture, and has the comfortable ambiance of a bachelor pad. Being the dedicated cop that I am, I never used to spend much time here. Now, I hide inside the cave. On the porch, newspapers are piled up from the newspaper carrier who could care less. The mailman curses every time he has to jam more mail into my overflowing mailbox. The priest from Saint Dominic's stops by, but I don't feel holy. Over the years, I have seen stabbings, domestic violence, abuse cases, gunshot wounds—you name it. None of that damaged my head as bad as shooting that girl. The doctor prescribed Hydrocodone for the hole in my arm. I have taken much more than needed to stop the pain.

In days past, I used to take better care of myself considering the line of work I'm in. I ate right, worked out in the gym, got plenty of sunshine, and lived a relatively healthy lifestyle. My fellow law enforcement officers joked about it all the time, but found my efforts to be admirable. Now that's all gone and it's just my pills and me. Abrams isn't much help. Psychiatrists are a waste of time anyway. There was a time when I thought...hoped...*God* would jump in, and send an angel to save me. I'm sure He, or She, figured out I was going straight to hell anyway so why waste a perfectly good angel. I'm just going to have to deal with the bad juju

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single-handedly.

“JAKE, HEY JAKE! OPEN THE DOOR!”

The banging stops when I open the door. Harmon Blackwell, homicide detective and partner, bends down and picks up the morning’s paper out of all the others, which he nonchalantly kicks off to the side of the porch. He storms in throwing the newspaper at me. It falls to the floor as I turn toward the bedroom. My arm hurts.

Where did I put that prescription bottle with the child-resistant cover?

Finding it, I shake out another pill. A sip of Jack Daniels helps the little bomber go down easier.

“If you’re here for some talk-therapy—”

“No, I can see you’re too screwed up for that.”

“And stop taking those damn pills, man, what’s the matter with you?”

He doesn’t approve of my helpers. Harmon can kick my butt, without breaking a sweat. He likes it. You should see him on the street. “What did you say? What? Come here, I’m talking to you!” That’s Harmon. He lightened up a little when he got his detective shield. Homicide hasn’t been the same since. Harmon grabs my arm, the one attached to the bottle of pills.

“Jesus, Harmon.”

I flinch because he squeezes hard. Whenever

Harmon is near, I take the name of his Savior in vain. His moms taught Fred to never disrespect Jesus, or the church. He knows from several years on the street together, I have serious theological issues. He religiously corrects me about it.

“The old man wants you back at work, let’s go.”

He presses harder on my sore arm and I forcefully push him away.

“I’m on medical leave. That means you, and he, have to *leave* me alone.”

My butt falls into my Lazy Boy. With my eyes closed, I kick back and slip into a dark hole. For some strange reason, probably because I had blasphemed, I think about the nuns back in the orphanage who raised me from the crib. They’re the reason why I’m so dedicated. I remember they taught me I could accomplish anything, if I just tried.

“Get your sorry, white butt up and let’s go.”

He’s becoming more threatening than before, but he’s going to have to improve in the tact category, before he ever has a chance at moving up the crime fighter career ladder. While he speaks, I think about the girl, until she is replaced by whether or not, I think I could handle my job professionally ever again. He takes another look at me in the dim light.

“Roberts, are you listening to me? Man, you look like hell.”

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“Thank you for your support.”

I try to be as gracious as possible about the intent of his criticism. He shakes his head to emphasize his very strong feelings about it.

“Those pills are going to screw you up good.”

“Don’t you mean screw me up *bad*?”

“And it’s *red* butt. How many times must I tell you? How long have we been partners?”

“Red, white, I really don’t care, Jake, Fairchild told me to bring you back pronto Tonto, so let’s go.”

“Screw him.”

“Screw him?”

Harmon’s reaction, the mocking laugh, and “say what?” face, is classic.

“Yeah, screw him. It’s just another example of the white man, and the black man, keeping the red man down.”

I have no idea where that came from.

“Hey Geronimo, you need to give it a rest. Why don’t you dig deep down into your inner man, and get back to respectable?”

“I’m feeling like I’m already six feet down, just waiting for someone to cover me with dirt, and here you

are with a shovelful.”

I lean back, close my eyes again and think.

She was just a kid.

The next thing I know, I shout it.

“SHE WAS JUST A KID!”

“That kid put a hole in your arm. A few more inches and she would have put you *in a hole*.”

“She would have done me a favor.”

I fight back. I need sympathy, and I have no one else to get it from. I’m counting on Harmon to pull me up. The others talk about how lucky I was, but I’m not so sure. Harmon softens his tone for a moment, and asks a curious question.

“Did you cry?”

Tough guy Harmon never asked me that before. He obviously wants to know how it feels in case it ever happens to him. I can’t answer. We just look at each other. Finally, to break the awkward silence, I comment that scientists believe the universe is permeated with dark matter. It’s a thing Harmon and I do when things get confused. We read science articles constantly. It helps to keep us sane.

“Are you talking from my neighborhood?” he says.

“The string theory says that tension strands fill the

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entire universe and vibrate. The resonating creates life. It could be part of the dark matter.”

“The entropy theory says there is a degree of disorder in all systems.”

I shrug.

“Second Law of Thermodynamics, everything tends toward a greater disorder.”

“Yeah, that’s where we come in as *professional* lawmen. Hey man, we got to go, or the old man’s going to have my butt,” Harmon says.

He signals he is done playing, but I still need to play.

“Aristotle, flat universe with the earth at the center; Copernicus, 1514, the sun is at the center of the very same universe; Christensen, 1676, light travels at a constant speed; Hubble, 1929, the galaxy is moving away; Hawking, the universe is here for us.”

“Fairchild, today, get Roberts back to work,” Harmon said.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“She was just a kid, man.”

“Are you coming, Crazy Horse?”

He miss quotes the words of the great warrior.

Cary Allen Stone

“It is a good day to kick your ass. It is a good day to see Fairchild before *he* comes looking for you.”

“I’m not ready.”

I love Harmon Blackwell. He is there for me with no limits, or barriers. As he stands, he blocks whatever sunlight is shining through the shaded front windows. He looks interesting backlit. He leaves through the front door knowing it’s better to leave me alone for now. He’s gone before I can make another smartass remark. After the door closes, I see my Glock lying beside me on the table. How easy it would be to end the pain.

* * *

Her instincts told her to stay alert. She had an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach as she rang the bell, and waited for someone to answer the door. Behind her, an incredibly intense, one-of-a-kind sunset faded from the horizon. A smiling and anxious, Thaddeus Abrams briskly opened one of the carved-glass, double doors. His greeting was warmhearted. She returned a shy hello. He invited her in. As she stepped inside, the smell of freshly cut flowers, and burning scented candles filled the foyer.

Admiring the incredible craftsmanship that went into the construction of his home, Lori thought it was obvious a woman had designed, and decorated, the detailed interior of the residence. A man, however, had strongly influenced the exterior of the mansion, with its manicured lawn, stone and wrought iron work, and the steeply pitched roof. A visitor was given the overpowering impression of success and power.

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Lori felt uncomfortable and suspicious. Men, she had learned, could not be trusted. She hoped it wasn't the case with Dr. Abrams, because he was the best at what he did, and she desperately needed his help. It just seemed odd that he needed to address her issues under less than clinical conditions. When he took her hands and held them for too long, the red flags went up in her mind.

“Maybe, this isn't the right time.”

Lori pulled her hands free.

Abrams spoke in his professional tone.

“No, Lori, this is the right time. There are no distractions, or time constraints, like at the office. I often see patients here. I just need to find my notes.”

Leading her into the den, he pointed to a leather sofa.

“Please.”

She remained standing.

“Where is Mrs. Abrams?”

The familiar sensual, sultry tone of Lori's voice was missing.

“Mrs. Abrams...is out.”

He paged through his found notes.

“She does a great deal of charity work for the American Cancer Society, as Vice-Chairperson, very

devoted.”

“I’m not sure I want to do this, not here.”

Lori said it with a nervous undertone. Hearing she wanted to bail out, Abrams knew he had to make it clear why she had to stay. His next statement was more direct and to the point. He looked into her eyes.

“I know Lori. I’ve been in the psychiatry business a very long time, and have heard more than my share of the dark sides of people to know there’s a dark side to you.”

Startled by the remark, her eyebrows crushed in tight, and she felt a tremor in her hands.

How could he know? What does he want?

Maybe, she thought, he didn’t really know jack, and just wanted to frighten her into bed. Swirling the expensive scotch in his glass, he waited. Her denial didn’t come. When she turned away, he spoke, while he searched for a book on the shelf.

“Your choice of words, your expressions, history—it all suggests murderer to someone who watches, and listens to them for a living. I’m supposed to cure them, but you know, and I know, there is no cure, right Lori? No, once that line has been crossed, and in spite of some well-intentioned statements of regret and remorse, a murderer always looks forward to killing again. It’s the control, domination, and the godlike decision-making that make it so enticing, so addicting. Wouldn’t you agree, Lori?”

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She didn't reply.

“And who is to say what's right and wrong? Who is to judge? Murder is often seen as a means of accomplishing the goals of a shared societal belief system, whether it's war, abortion, or euthanasia. I think you get my point.”

After paging through the book he had retrieved from the bookshelf, he tossed it onto his rosewood desk. His glass was near empty, so he headed back to the bar. Lori knew she had to say something. She tried to do so as firmly and confidently as she could.

“So Dr. Abrams, what do you want?”

“A cold, calculated admission by default.”

Then he hammered at her.

“Let's see, the direct approach, okay how's this? You were sexually abused as a child. You didn't know what to do. It was a family member you trusted and believed in. It was hard to justify that your own father could hurt you in such a way.”

He saw fire in her eyes.

Now that hit home.

He fired another round.

“Why did you let it continue? Why didn't you tell someone? Why didn't you tell your mother?”

I knew what was happening to Emily.

The painful memories took over her thoughts, but none of it was as Abrams said. Her father was a good man and had nothing to do with her traumas. It was her transposition of what her ex-husband did to Emily. Lori was furious, but held back biting hard on her lower lip.

Abrams, you're a fool.

“You didn’t tell anyone, and all of the subsequent guilt, emotional scars and mental anguish, gave you countless reasons and excuses to kill.”

“You could never understand, and I’m not going to debate my life with you.”

In a businesslike tone, she asked again.

“So what do you want? To get laid—some kind of perverted sex act?”

A broad smile filled his face.

“Now Lori, I fully admit that in my office, while you poured your heart out, I had some of my most memorable fantasies. I thought about doing you on my desk. In fact, I want you right now, but first things first.”

He walked to the sofa and nonchalantly sat down. He motioned her to sit in the chair across from him. She took a seat as directed, not wanting to show any sign of aggressiveness. Instead, she wanted him to think she was completely vulnerable, and at his mercy.

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“Aren’t you afraid to be alone with me?”

“Well, let’s think about that.”

He looked off into the distance.

“No, in fact, the thought of being alone with you excites me. It probably has something to do with my mundane and boring life as a psychiatrist.”

He sipped at the scotch.

“I’m even quite certain, while you have been listening to me, you have considered at least five different ways to kill me.”

Believing he was in control of another dangerous murderer, he rambled on, and speculated.

“All that needs to be resolved in your mind is would anybody know? Who else knew you were coming here, *Mrs. Abrams*? Is there a surveillance system inside this enormous house? Did you leave fingerprints on the glass, the door? There’s a lot to think about, and you haven’t had time to think it all through—my murder that is.”

“You still haven’t told me what you want. What am I supposed to do, drop to my knees, while you’re aroused with unsubstantiated suspicion?”

“Is sex all that flight attendants think about?”

The smirk disappeared from his face. He stared at her with a piercing, burning look. As clearly, and coldly, as he could, he spoke.

“I want you to kill Mrs. Abrams for me.”

It was finally out in the open. The unmistakable words came out of the respected, successful, and talented Dr. Thaddeus Abrams—a trusted pillar of society. How disappointing, she thought.

He’s insane.

To Abrams, Lori seemed confused and lost about his last statement. He wasn’t sure what to do, if she didn’t go along with his plan. He tensed until she spoke.

“If you’re right about me, and I’m capable of such dreadful behavior, what makes you think I would do such a thing to your wife—for *you*?”

Abrams smiled, relieved to hear the question. He leaned closer to her. His hand waved around the room.

“Because Lori, she’s the only thing that stands between you and me. You kill her, and all of this is yours. In return for doing away with the annoying, predatory, and domineering Mrs. Abrams—you will enjoy a lifetime of *me*, untold wealth, security, and free consultations.”

“You can’t walk the walk, so you want me to walk it for you. And in return for my cooperation, you’re going to let me share in your wealth?”

She pulled at her lower lip with an index finger. Once again, she was convinced men were nothing more than testosterone-loaded, perverted animals that would say and do whatever necessary, to get what they wanted.

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The others had paid dearly for their arrogance. One thing was clear in her mind. Another male control freak was going to die.

Abrams felt somewhat relieved. She was at least considering his diabolical plan. He needed to push her to close the deal. He wanted to make it clear he was in charge.

“Well not exactly share the wealth, more like use the wealth. You are correct. I can’t walk the walk. I don’t have to, because I have you. Now talking the talk I can do, down at police headquarters.”

He gave her time to consider his proposal. She paced the spacious room with its ornate, expensive décor. She pretended to give his scheme her undivided attention, while the clock ticked down in her head. As she studied the various displayed artifacts, a familiar voice spoke to her.

They’re all the same. He’s just one more shining example of how disgusting men really are. You know what to do. You have my blessing, and my permission.

Until then, she felt cornered, trapped, and caged. Now that she had permission, it would be easy. Men were predictable. A simple mood swing was all she needed. He was a better-than-average-looking man, with beautiful eyes. She knew she would actually enjoy playing him. Mentally she prepared to be convincing.

“You would want me. Do you mean that?”

How many times do I have to play this game?

“I offer you my heart, and my soul. After all, you and I are going to burn in hell together. Might as well enjoy ourselves in this life.”

He waited patiently for her to answer.

“You don’t even know me, nothing about my life except...”

She played her role perfectly.

“I knew all about Mrs. Abrams, the social register, family history, moods and sexual needs. We’ve been married for many years. Love had nothing to do with it. I married her for the money. I’ll be *filthy* rich when the insurance company pays off on her carcass.”

Abrams held out his empty glass for her to refill. Deferring to him, she took it and approached the bar. He continued.

“I’m not looking for love. I’m in it purely for the money, and the pleasure it brings me—us.”

She decided to take the chance no one knew she was there. It didn’t make sense he would have told anyone she would be there, or be crazy enough to record the conversation. Abrams was still blustering when she dropped the pill into his glass. He took the replenished, tainted drink from her as she queried him.

“What assurances do I have, that after the fact, I will actually be sharing all of this opulence with you?”

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She thumbed through his CD collection while waiting for his answer. She was astonished to find her favorite, The Cult— *Beyond Good and Evil*. Bocelli had long since ended, and she replaced his music with hers. She pressed number three and play.

Thaddeus believed he had convinced her to kill his wife. He was feeling safe, and secure, but a little light-headed.

“You don’t get assurances. You simply have to trust me.”

He slurred the last two words. As he finished his drink, Lori watched his small head take control. She walked over to him and knelt down at his feet. With perfection, she played the role of seductress.

“After the evil, I feel release, freedom. It feels good, better than sex.”

She paused to let his imagination run wild.

“Daddy taught me. He taught me how to be a *bad* little girl. Do you want to see? Just thinking about it makes me so hot.”

He felt invincible as he watched her stroke his thighs. He controlled her, and she was going to give him everything he ever dreamed of. The room spun around once, twice then out of control. He blacked out, returned in a haze, and blacked out again. When he briefly came to, he tried pushing her away, but the push was limp. Fighting her was pointless. He lost advantage. His arms

flailed in random directions, but it was too late. The special evening Dr. Abrams had planned with Lori was over. His last breath included a death rattle. “Thaddeus” was written with his blood on the wall. Before she left, she made sure the room was clean. They found him lying in a pool of his own blood. His severed cock was lying beneath the bloody blade protruding from his heart. Lori had to kill “daddy” again. She succeeded, but still she didn’t climax.

She made the call to 9-1-1 immediately after she found him. A shocked and horrified Mrs. Anna Abrams, barely heard the sirens, or noticed the police officers rushing in. It would be a while until she was not considered the prime suspect, but it was less than an hour since Lori had gone. Ironically, it would be much later when Anna would collect a substantial sum from the insurance company.

His eyes fixed and open, Dr. Abrams became the star of the macabre crime scene. Newton was right. A body at rest tended to stay at rest. The phrase was uttered by at least one of the investigators, sometime during the evening. Most of the personnel present at the investigation knew the doctor, but not one understood why he, of all people, would be the victim of a homicide. At 11:42 P.M., the Medical Examiner pronounced Thaddeus Abrams officially dead.

Edward Fairchild surveyed the crime scene.

“Where is he?”

“Still out on medical leave, Ed,” Harmon said.

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“I don’t care. Drag him if you have to.”

It wasn’t that Fairchild was a heartless man. He simply needed the best investigator the department had. Harmon walked off to a less chaotic area, and pretended to make the call on his cell phone. He pretended, because he knew Jake wouldn’t pick up.

Jurisdiction once again passed from local to federal, when Agent Mika Scott arrived. The fact that the victim’s name was written in blood was the reason. To the FBI agents assigned to the case, the murderer had become known as the “Who’s Your Daddy” killer.

* * *

My torn bathrobe open, unshaved, hunched over and drooping like a Neanderthal, I’m pathetic in my current state of existence. Nudged by some unknown force, I reach down, and pick up the morning paper. Flicking it open, I see what I missed while comatose. Rubbing my eyes harder doesn’t help to clear them. The effects of the sleeping pills linger.

Newspapers have always been full of bad news. The big world outside was forever coming apart. There is enough on my plate, with my own little world crumbling, that I can do without reading the paper, but a particular sensational headline clears my cloudy vision.

Local Psychiatrist Murdered

Cary Allen Stone

Dr. Thaddeus Abrams, prominent local psychiatrist, was found murdered by his wife Anna. Special Agent Mika Scott with the Federal Bureau of Investigation was quoted as saying...

Ouch, I didn't like Abrams much as a person, or a shrink, but he was all I had. The article spews the grisly details. My hand slaps my forehead. In my first flashback, she had just arrived at the precinct as a new officer with a ton of spirit, fearlessness, and attitude. She wanted desperately to make the world right. She was never at a loss for words when defending her beliefs. My second flashback was of an incredible intimate moment we shared. Mika was completely unafraid to expose her sensuality and passion. She cherished romance, loving, and being a woman. I loved with her, but I'm a man. I was afraid to take the next step and it cost me.

* * *

Mika hadn't seen her previous boss since she left for Quantico, and a career with the feds. His hair, since then, had thinned and turned completely white. His familiar political smile still blinded. His cobalt-blue eyes still mesmerized her. Fifty, but built like a burly, young Turk, Ed acknowledged his protégé inside CID—the Criminal Investigation Division, with a warm hug.

“You look wonderful, Special Agent Scott.”

Fairchild's reputation for fairness was legendary on the force. As long as you paid attention to your safety and

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well-being on the street, and followed Fairchild's rules, everything was fine. If you made a mistake and admitted it, he would back you up all the way. If you didn't confess your sin, Ed made sure you were in Hell. He made you an example. It was rare anyone repeated the same mistake.

He took Mika under his wing when she arrived fresh out of the academy. It was his intention to protect her from the wolves. She was as attractive, as the day she first arrived for duty in a wholesome, didn't-need-makeup kind of way. Most of her contemporaries found her to be a hardened, clawed feline, until they got to know her. Ed just thought she was determined and feisty.

She mouthed a humble "thank you" and then was caught off guard by the change in his demeanor and tone.

"And just what the hell do you think you're doing pulling jurisdiction over my people, My guys are more than capable of solving this case," Ed said.

"Besides why so much interest in a local murder from the FBI?"

She tried to ease the blow, but wasn't about to be steamrolled either.

"Ed, have you been following this on CNN? The M.O. is the same in every case. The victims are prominent, powerful, authoritative men from congressmen, to Catholic priests, and now a psychiatrist. Our killer is off and running. The murders are coming closer together. I have a string of murders that cross state

lines. *That's* why the FBI is involved.”

Harmon, with a case file tucked under his arm, interrupted their meeting when he saw her. Harmon was a big man. With a single hand, he could crush the skull of a human being. He liked to say that he had a Rice Krispie punch. Snap—the head goes back. Crackle—the facial bones crack. Pop—down he goes never to come back. He affectionately raised Mika off her feet in a big bear hug. After placing her back on the earth, he looked her up and down. She was Jake's partner before him.

“Mika, you're looking good momma. What are you doing here? Come back to steal my boy away?”

The three former compatriots laughed aloud, each reliving cherished memories in their own thoughts. As the laughter ceased, an uneasy silence surrounded them.

“How is he?” Mika said.

Blackwell and Fairchild exchanged quick looks. It didn't require great intelligence to know something wasn't right. Harmon did his best to answer.

“Good...yeah, good...well, maybe not good, but—okay. I mean, well maybe not okay, I mean.”

He sounded like Mr. Kimble tripping over his thoughts in the television show, *Green Acres*. He saw the concern grow in her face.

“He took a hard fall. It's not been pretty, but you know Jake, he'll pull through.”

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Fairchild interrupted Harmon.

“Did you make the call?”

“No answer. I’m going there right after this. I’ll give it my personal, face-to-face sir, and report back with said subject with all due haste. In fact, I’m out of here.”

Harmon rotated in the opposite direction, but didn’t leave until he gave Mika another workplace squeeze.

“Later, baby.”

Fairchild watched Mika watch Harmon head down the corridor. When she turned back toward him, he just shrugged.

“Come on, Mika, I’ve got a lot of work to do if I have to baby sit the FBI.”

She looked back down the corridor.

“Right, there’s a lot of work to do.”

3

The medical examiner, a gremlin of a man in his early sixties, was anxious to explain the special nuances of performing an autopsy to his newest assistant. The enthusiastic young student hung on every syllable as if his career depended on it. It did.

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“You can hear what they’re saying if you know how to listen,” Moss said.

“A forensic pathologist is a physician trained in criminal investigation. Are you writing this down?”

Few of the other medical professionals there paid any attention to the gremlin anymore. He craved the spotlight, so they let him break in the new ones. The clinical and dire setting of the morgue caused Dr. Moss to do his best to keep it as upbeat as could, to take the edge off. The tiled room was Antarctica, with extra-bright lights in the ceiling. The two of them wore Plexiglas visors. The chemical smell, the discoloration of the human skin, and the fact a man had been murdered was just some of the gruesome details they had to deal with.

As he spoke into the microphone hanging over the cold, dead man lying on the even colder stainless steel examination table, a recording of his findings was made. For some stupid reason, the man would mimic a Gestapo voice then he would lean over the cadaver’s mouth as if the dead could answer.

“How are you feeling today, a little achy, muscles stiff? Got a little gas?”

He thought he was hilarious. With scalpel in hand, Dr. Moss proceeded with the “Y” incision. He recited the exact location of the incision he was making.

“Left shoulder, drag, split the nips, raise, and right shoulder.”

It sounded like a workout video, or dance instructions. Moss glanced at his new recruit to see if he was still standing. Most observers fainted, or dropped to the floor to puke. From the right shoulder, he started another deep incision that continued straight down toward the genitals. In this case, the victim's genitals were missing from their original location, and lying in a plastic bag at the end of the table. The assistant followed closely with his nose noting the escaping gas from the body cavity wasn't as strong as it should have been. When queried about it, Moss explained the open wound had allowed most of the gases to escape at the crime scene.

Moss also explained the difference between a slash, and stab knife attack. The student simply looked on and didn't seem fazed at all. Moss figured he'd surely get to him when he reached in with both hands and popped the victim's brain out later. If the "Y" incision didn't get them, popping brain always did. Moss waited for a laugh when he said he might take the man's larger organ home to surprise his wife. None came. Dr. Moss could only hope his next assistant had a sense of humor. The job was tough enough without one.

"What do you think God would say about what we're doing?" the student said.

Dr. Moss stopped, held the scalpel straight up, and considered the question. Then he let loose.

"There is no God. I couldn't do what I do, if I believed there was. People do horrible things to each other all of the time. Nothing stops them. If there was a

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loving, all-knowing, merciful God, why would He allow that?”

The student considered Moss’s answer. He wisely let it go. Their visors met.

“You’re right, doctor, there is no God.”

The future pathologist nodded toward the forensic pathologist who wasn’t quite sure if the assistant was for real, or just jerking him. It didn’t matter. It was time to get back to the gruesome task he had started. A murderer was running loose on the outside. Moss needed to finish the autopsy. After the “Y” incision, Moss began sectioning the organs. Tissue color and stomach contents were next. A ladle was used to scoop out the contents of the stomach. Plain brown paper bags wrapped around both hands were removed. The CST’s had bagged them to preserve fingerprints, and any other evidence present beneath the fingernails. There didn’t appear to be any defensive wounds. Moss made a special note.

Identification in this particular case was not in question. Dr. Moss knew Thaddeus Abrams personally. Moss agreed that dental x-rays for identification would be overkill, but he still planned to have the forensic odontologist make an impression. He thought that statement was hysterical, so he laughed. The student just nodded.

Well into his first autopsy, Moss’s assistant mentally prepared himself for what was coming next. He had heard it was dreadful, but it would not compare to what he witnessed. Moss moved to the head of the table. A body

was a body, but a face was different. Less than twenty-four hours earlier, words had come out of the mouth, and thoughts circulated in the dead man's head. The smile on his face distinguished the man from others. After making an incision along the curvature of Abrams's hairline, Moss folded back the face. With the electric saw elevated, he buzzed through the skull. A fine white dust filtered up into the surrounding airspace. It was similar to working on a home project in the garage. Archaic as it seemed, Moss chiseled away the skullcap. It made a popping sound and flew up. The assistant caught it in flight. Out came Abrams's brain and Moss held it up to the light as if he had delivered a child.

The student felt like retching, but needed the job. He remained standing. He also wondered if there were any last thoughts trapped inside the exposed brain. Completing the autopsy, Moss and the new kid labeled the blood, saliva and semen samples. DNA would be analyzed. All Thomas Moss had to do was write the report, which would cross the desk of his impatient and easily annoyed boss. The demands of the position made the coroner a man who wouldn't hesitate for a second to impale anyone who approached him at the wrong time, with shoddy work.

* * *

The cacophony outside Ed's office door included scratching computer printers, humming computer terminals, ringing telephones, and fax machines. The "homelesscide" were there too—homicide detectives with no home lives because they were dedicated. They scurried from desk to desk, while conspiring to stop the

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bad boys. The third-floor residence of the homicide division was chaotic. It always was. Ed loved everything about it. He was the glue that held it all together. Framed over his desk were the words “Myth of Full Enforcement.” They were in bold red letters. It was a constant reminder to him that not all of the law was applied equally to everybody, and in spite of all of the efforts of the good guys, some of the bad boys would get away. It was ugly and dirty out there on the street, but he did his best to make it all work. He shouted from his office door. Heads rose and it got quiet fast.

“People. I want you to go out of the box on this one, beyond basic police work. Above all, keep your heads. Do not, I repeat, do not jeopardize this investigation in any way. This is part of a federal investigation, and I don’t want this department to look incompetent in front of the feds.

He paused.

“Also, most of us knew Dr. Abrams. He’s been a friend of this department for years. He has been there for many of us when we needed him. For that, and for the sake of his wife, Anna, I want this perp found and brought to justice. Now you all have work to do. I want all detectives in briefing room A in ten minutes.”

They scattered like ants with their heads down, each multitasking. All detectives within earshot of Fairchild’s command hustled to the briefing room. Special Agent Mika Scott stood outside room A’s doorway. Ed joined her there. Fairchild marveled to her.

“The place has filled up since you left, with energetic, aggressive females proving they can do the same job as a man.”

“Do you have a problem with that?” Mika said.

“Should I?”

He thought about it a moment then shrugged.
“The complaining is the same.”

Beneath the bright, buzzing, fluorescent ceiling lights, Fairchild asked her if she thought it was quite a climb to the third floor. He was referring to the floor they were on, and the elevator that the architect neglected to add because the city refused to pay for it. She didn’t care about the elevator.

“It’s a tougher climb into a man’s world.”

“Get anything out of the National Crime Database?”
Ed said.

“I checked right before I came up. Nothing we didn’t already have.”

“You can start without me. I’ve got some calls to make.”

Ed watched his subordinates file past then disappeared into his office. Mika walked confidently into the briefing room. Another FBI agent followed her in and quickly took a seat after closing the door behind him. The male detectives in attendance noted Mika’s striking features and strut. One whispered to another.

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“Monumental pair of credentials.”

“And an amazing pair of qualifications.”

The rest surmised she was sharp, intelligent and prepared. Taking the hint from the second agent, everyone sat down and stopped talking.

“Good morning. My name is Mika Scott. I’m a special agent and profiler with the FBI. I even worked right here for Captain Fairchild at one time.”

She added a stern warning.

“If any of you harbor any ‘misogyny’ keep it to yourselves. For those of you with a limited vocabulary, that means a hatred of women as a group. We have something far more important to deal with than gender squabbles.”

She looked at each of them to reinforce her point.

“We want to apprehend a serial killer before he kills again.”

Both female detectives present gave a thumbs-up.

“Our most conservative estimates state that murder is on the rise across the nation. Serial killing, in particular, is becoming a national pastime. Humans are natural predators. Up until recently that predatory nature has been controlled, and kept in check by law, religion and television. Our over-entertained society seems bored with simulated death. Now there are calls for televised *reality* executions on death row.”

She paged through her notes.

“Background, you should know. Serial killers come from all occupations. You would suspect they are psychotic, or deranged, and some are, but mostly they are your everyday variety human, with a significantly low score in the feelings and compassion categories. Some of them actually believe what they are doing is normal and justified. I see a hand.”

A male detective had an observation he wanted cleared up.

“You seem highly emotional about this case, Agent Scott.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve been with the families of the victims—all of them. They want closure. Our killer is increasing his activity. The various crime scenes I’ve been to, suggest sadistic tendencies with sexual overtones. I want this one stopped and put away.”

Another agent slipped into the room and stood off to the side deferring to Mika. He was holding some papers. She smiled at him then studied the detective’s faces for reactions.

“Statistically, eighty-five percent are male; eighty-two percent Caucasian; fifteen percent are African-American; a mere two-point-five Hispanic and the remainder is Native American or Asian. They’re normally between the ages of twenty-two and fifty years old. Eighty-seven percent are loners. It’s rare to find one that is McNaughten Rule insane.”

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Ed spots me as he leaves the briefing room, and makes his way toward his office. I just entered through the double doors at the end of the corridor. He waves me over. Along the way, I say hello to several of my peers before reaching his doorway. The grip of his handshake is firm. Some guys feel the need to turn it up hard to establish control early on, but not Ed. His eyes are those of a professional hunter and warrior—eyes that see *you* in a crowded stadium. They were eyes that noted every characteristic, scar and tattoo. Standing before him, you could almost see the mental notes he was writing in perfect penmanship.

“Roberts, you’re abusing the payroll.”

“Stealing is a necessary form of survival. Steal a little, all of the time. Steal a lot, and do the time.”

“You’re a lawman,” Ed said.

He isn’t quiet during all of this. Most of the department is listening in on our private talk. Using well-chosen words from his body language, Fairchild sits on the edge of his desk and towers over me. There is no doubt he is in command. I take it all in, the sights, the sounds and the smoke from his cigar.

“Did you got your act together yet?”

It’s clear to me that my tactic of blatant disrespect, isn’t working and wearing him down like I thought it would. I’m no longer too proud to try for sympathy, so I go for the man’s heart.

Cary Allen Stone

“I can’t seem to shake the nightmares, feel like I’m on my seventh, eighth and maybe even my ninth wind. She was a kid, Ed.”

He puffs and the smoke rises and disperses into the fluorescent lights.

“So were the two jerk-off kids from Columbine, what did they have? Semiautomatics and Uzis! Fuck her. You play hard, you die hard.”

Fairchild’s been around. I’m not going to get anywhere with him. He gets off the edge of his desk, and does an end run back to his high-backed leather chair, where he positions himself for more intimidation of me. He leans forward.

“I want you on this case. I need a problem solver with initiative.”

“What you’re asking of me is hard.”

“Yes it is, but it’s the hard that matters.”

He stares me down. He prepares to hit me with the next punch.

“You’ll be working with Mika.”

“That’s impossible, we still have issues.”

“Get over it.”

I think about her. I always felt at peace when I was with her. She knows all of my secrets, weaknesses. She

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understands my inner, whining child. Mika somehow knows how to heal me. She is calm water to my battling raging seas. I need her more than ever.

Fairchild interrupts my thoughts.

“Don’t you have something more important to do besides harass an old man?”

I fight back the word no. Ed shuffles papers on his desk. I ask meekly as I get up and head for the door.

“Where is she?”

“Briefing room A, remember where it is? Glad to have you back, Jake. You’re one of the best. I need you, son.”

Whatever small amount of pride I have left begins ever so slightly to grow. I leave without saying another word. Without signaling, I cut into an open lane in the hallway’s rush hour traffic. Taking the off ramp to the briefing room, I feel as if I had been gone more than just a few days. As the door to the briefing room opens, everybody looks to see who is brainless enough to show up late. I take a seat in the back, close to the door as I can get. After my butt is in the chair, Mika restarts the briefing. I can only hope she notices the sentimental look in my eyes.

“Our serial killer is geographically transient, like a Theodore Bundy, or Henry Lee Lucas. He’s intelligent, and has kept us guessing. He’s done his homework. He is familiar with our methods and tactics. The crime scenes

are clean, antiseptic actually. Two things tie them all together. One, the victim's first name is written above the head in the victim's blood. Two, the victim's genitalia is castrated."

A hand is seen in the front row.

"Castrated?"

He made a notation on his legal pad as he spoke. He's new to homicide. He believes it was the perfect time to establish a rapport with Mika. Besides, Mika is hot, and he wanted to hear her say more about the victim's genitals in her sexy voice.

"Can you expand on that, Agent Scott?"

Having spent a great deal of her career among the lower animals of the species, well aware of how juvenile they become whenever sex was the subject, Mika answered unnerved.

"The perp cuts off the victim's dick, detective."

She waited, knowing what was coming next.

"Thank you, Agent Scott. Would it be true then our perp is not only a murderer, but a homosexual as well?"

"Very possible, detective. Do you have any special insight to offer us about such tendencies?"

She was clearly the top seed in the match. The paralyzed detective was left without a witty retort. The rest of the group proceeded to harass him with conjecture,

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catcalls, and whistles. After they settled down, Mika drove home the more gruesome details for our digestion.

“Our perpetrator appears to be motivated by anger, hate, and a desire to dominate. It’s likely he experienced physical, or sexual abuse early on in his life, and is seeking revenge for it. Usually serial killers are control freaks, just like most of you.”

That one did not go over well, but she wasn’t interested in their affection as much as their respect. She softened the blow.

“Well, like *all* of us.”

Their startled faces smoothed out.

“The murders are brutal and savage. He inflicts psychological punishments along with physical punishments. The victim struggles and our boy gets off on it.”

She scanned the room.

“Any more questions?”

I know better, I really do, but I can’t stop. It’s like a joke that rumbles around inside your head and has to be let out. I raise my hand. She has no choice, but to call on me.

“Yes detective?”

“Did they teach you all of that in *Quantico*?”

I ask with a perfect touch of sarcasm. She gives me the arctic stare. Fortunately for me, Fairchild walks in and interrupts with his usual philosophical speech regarding incarceration.

“And none of them ever finds Jesus, or has a change of heart, until they are in the slammer and somebody’s wife.”

He is the Chief, so he gets applause and thumbs up.

“Yeah, yeah, you have a copy of all the current data in those files in front of you. Get out there and make me proud.”

* * *

She floated with her eyes closed. Her toes protruded from the calm water like two miniature periscopes. Her outstretched arms waved slightly. There was no one else around. The water was warm and soothing. All she wanted was to float on her back down stream forever. She was completely relaxed, more relaxed than she had been for quite some time. The feel of the water wasn’t right. It felt more like oil, or syrup.

She opened her eyes to look at it and saw she was floating in a sea of blood. Startled, Lori awoke from her deep sleep, and quickly looked at the red digital numbers of the alarm clock on the nightstand. They said it was 3:23 A.M.

Where am I?

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The room was dark, except for some light coming from the street through the crack in the curtains. It was a common occurrence for someone who traveled as much as a flight attendant. Often crews experience a momentary loss in space and time. Cities and hotels, dates and time zones, become a blur.

Oh yeah, Philadelphia.

Lori thought about the dream of floating in blood. She knew the psychological ramifications of it. It was amazing how the subconscious worked. Knowing it would be difficult to fall back to sleep again until her 5:00 A.M. wake-up call, she decided to read. The only thing available was a magazine she had found left behind by a passenger on her flight.

The magazine, MAXIM, had an article about bizarre murders. Lori used the article as a source of reference, or comparison, to see how far she had gone over the edge. She had read right before nodding off to sleep.

Erzebet Bathory, Hungarian countess, killed 600 girls, bathed in their blood, and then had her servants lick her clean.

Gilles de Rais, French protector of Joan of Arc, killed 800 boys and then performed necrophilia acts on their bodies.

Roman rulers had wild animals ravage humans, while the empress Messalina would masturbate. From previous research, she learned that *ritual killing* was performed in order to consume the better human qualities

of the dead. What wasn't clear was whether the bad qualities were swallowed, along with the good. She laughed aloud when she read about *revenge* murder. The husband had put his wife in the oven, and baked her. When the police arrived, he was found laughing hysterically. She thought about her abusive ex-husband.

* * *

The look on her face told me I was in deep trouble. The pointed toe and lean on the hip punctuated by the crossed arms. Yeah, I was going to get it good. I was going on trial right there in the hallway in front of my peers. Legal counsel would not be provided. Contrite sounded like a good approach right now, a good suggestion.

“Good to see you, Mika. Harmon told me you were here.”

It feels like I'm ten years old again. Inside my cranium, I watch the stream of words forming into sentences then slide toward my mouth. Each of them is carefully scrutinized by some kind of verbal-quality-assurance mini-Jake. Then the motion picture of one particular night we shared begins. The opening credits warn me about the rating.

Her thrusts made the wind spill from my lungs. Her contractions were powerful.

Establishing some common ground by rebuilding on our past relationship might have helped, but she sensed it coming, and her eyes said not to go there. What I should

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do is fall on my knees to the hallway floor and beg her for forgiveness. I decide to drop the personal and go with the practical.

“Look, I believe we can still work together, we’re professionals. And, I *think* we’re still friends.”

I take my shot. Shifting her weight, she rotates to a more controlling stance. Her raised eyebrows scrunches down and rest over a serious face. She looks stunning in her business suit.

Stop it, Jake,

“Did you have to belittle me in front of them?”

The level of anger in her voice is deafening, but the words are a forced whisper through grit teeth. A strong retort would help, but the basic male grunt comes out.

“Huh?”

“I have a job to do, and it doesn’t help one damn bit for you to walk in late and make wiseass remarks.”

The best thing would be to take the high road and apologize. The worst is to disregard my inner sensitive female, and let my testosterone speak for me.

“Why did you leave, Mika?”

I reject the high road. I use a tactic I learned long ago, probably as long ago as in a classroom with the nuns. If asked a difficult question, buy time by asking a question. I also want to hear her answer, again. Mika’s

eyebrows crunch and she gives me an “I gave you a chance” expression. She answers with an annoying, rising inflection used by teenage girls.

“Because Jake, you had a significant issue with commitment.”

It worked. I use it on Fairchild and it always works. It worked on the street during investigations. My briefing room behavior is now the furthest thing from her mind.

“And don’t try that ask-a-question nonsense with me—I know you.”

On the outside, I simply raise both eyes. On the inside, the bells and whistles look like an arcade.

Run, Jake, run.

“Well what do you expect from a poor Native American boy from a poverty-stricken reservation?”

“Please, are you *still* using that?”

Turn it up, Jake.

“I guess it started in the orphanage—the commitment thing.”

My smile disappears as my head droops.

“When you start out alone, you don’t think anyone really cares.”

Slowly look up at her, Jake.

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“I cared, my parents cared. You just couldn’t see it.”

Her tone is less caustic this time. As a detective, I detect a shift toward sympathetic understanding. I push the envelope.

“You were lucky to have parents, someone to teach you about commitment.”

Mika considers for a moment. Her head twists a little to the side, and her eyes glance down at her conservative 9Wests. Guilt has its good points. A look away enhances the moment.

“My parents have always been there for me.”

She’s almost apologetic. She glances from face to face, as strangers pass us in the corridor, until her eyes lock on mine. I lightly brush her hand.

“Life has a way of punishing us for our mistakes. For the past few years, being without you has punished me. It’s been just me, and me.”

I feel bad about making her feel guilty. I didn’t mean to drive the conversation into this turn. I just went into survival mode, because I’m swinging in the wind. Mika’s voice is gentle and low when she speaks.

“Harmon told me about the girl.”

She takes my hand.

“You did what you had to, but just the same, I’m sorry. If there’s anything I can, well...”

Swallowing hard, I sheepishly continue the attack.

“Listen, I was way out of line in there, and I apologize. It really is good to see you.”

The words I should have used earlier spill out.

“Truth is Jake, I’ve missed you, too.”

Silence, thought, a look, and a dramatic pause pass by.

“But you must understand, I’ve been chasing this guy and I’m obsessed with caging him. Maybe after he’s caught...”

Maybe?

* * *

Mika never exaggerates. What she says is exactly what she means. She also has that uncanny, womanly way of seeing even microscopic details, like picking out a flaw in a diamond. Men can’t do that and miss the details. A man is only cognizant of the big picture after the billboard falls on him. I’m not good at much, but I know details better than most, and I really am good at my job. At least Fairchild thinks so.

“His simplicity clouds his complexity,” Mika says.

My curiosity compels me to ask.

“How do you know the killer’s a male?”

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I need to start at the beginning, so I can get a grip on what we are dealing with. For me, I need to place things in a logical order, or into an equation, so I can solve the problem. It's why Harmon and I fool with science. Cold, hard facts fill in the empty spaces in the equations and timelines.

"A woman couldn't do this," Mika says.

She looks at the people, places, and cars going by, but focuses on some metaphysical nothingness beyond them.

"P-M-S?"

I offer it in order to understand. Mika smirks without looking at me.

"That's how you men see us, don't you?"

Levity takes the pressure off for me. One minute I'm analyzing blood and guts, and the next I'm doing one-liners on the corpse. It's the same when I'm in a hospital, or a funeral parlor. The gravity of death brings out a nervous anxiety I have. Abrams probably knows the reason, but he is in no condition to explain it. What I do know is you can only wallow in human suffering for so long before you became cynical, sarcastic—and a comedian. Unless, you killed a girl whose entire life was ahead of her.

We walk past the activity at the front desk where officers move in random directions in search of truth and justice. We push through the main doors of the house and

head toward the parking garage. Along the way Mika describes the details of the “Who’s Your Daddy” case. I hang on every word deciphering, and sifting through her suppositions and intuitions about the killer. I guess she did learn a lot in Quantico. She is the expert now. I can learn a lot from her, if I don’t let my ego get in the way. The screeching tires of his unmarked car announce the arrival of Harmon who coincidentally severs our path.

“I’m driving, get in.”

Without hesitation, we both grab a door handle and climb in. Mika’s briefing goes uninterrupted, and I pretend not to hear Harmon’s rants.

“I hate when he drives. Man can’t see a stop sign, or a pedestrian. I can’t tell you how close we’ve come to running over everybody in this city, at one time, or another.”

Detective Blackwell is large, and even larger in his opinions, but he is my partner. His abrupt arrival is replaced by a very conservative drive through the crime-breathing back streets. He knows a shortcut as we head toward Abrams’s mansion. Some of the graffiti on the buildings is quite artistic. I recognize some of the tags from my days chasing gangs.

I just saw Abrams two days ago.

“We should have gone the other way. This ‘hood’ has never even heard the word ‘po-lees’ because the police won’t come in here.”

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Harmon was maladjusted to our current location, but he had a reason to be. He knew these streets better than any other cop, because grew up here. While Harmon is concerned, I know he likes to check the working girls in their tight, short skirts and five-inch heels.

“Oh momma, would you look at that?”

His head swings like a gate in the wind.

Mika could care less about the streetwalkers. Ignoring Harmon, she sounds frustrated.

“He’s one step ahead of us all the time.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Each of the crimes scenes, all ten, eleven now, was spotless. Not one single fingerprint has been lifted, except for those that should have been at the scene. There has not been a drop of saliva, semen, or DNA. There are never any witnesses. All that’s ever left behind is that hideous scrawl of victim’s names above the deceased. It creeps me out whenever I see it. Burglary and robbery are never a factor. All jewels, except for the family jewels, are where they should be.”

Mika starts pointing out directions for Harmon, and I start thinking more about the case.

“Why Abrams? What’s the connection? Is there a personal ad for lonely hearts? Was he kinky, perverted, something none of us picked up on over the years?”

As we drive up and into the driveway, I can see he

lived well. The residence looks more like a posh hotel. Every house looks huge to a man who lives in a one-bedroom apartment. We aren't even in the suburbs. Abrams liked to live among the natives and relatively close to the precinct. Mika said a congressman, a union leader, and a priest were some of the characters on the victim list. There did not seem to be a common thread, except for the authority thing. This is going to be interesting, and a challenge.

“Did we get anything helpful back from the ‘eternal care unit’?”

A common reference made by investigators, rather than ICU. The difference being, in the Eternal Care Unit, you're a heartbeat away from setting foot in the next place.

“I think Moss is still digging, at the morgue.”

“The report isn't due out until later today,” Mika says.

No one is home now. Anna Abrams can't bear to sleep there. The crime scene has been deserted, since the night of the crime. I missed the initial investigation. The only things left are the insects, the rancid smell, the bloodstains, and the revulsion. I take out my digital recorder and start making entries. I hate using a notepad, because my handwriting is poor to doctor-type unreadable. Besides my arm still has a bullet hole through it and it hurts to write.

The only difference between this scene and the

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others is the fact the victim was discovered early on. Mrs. Abrams arrived home from her charity function within an hour of his death. Because the time of death is relatively easy to determine in this case, there isn't any need for an entomologist to "bug" the corpse. Insects typically discovered the body before anyone else did. Depending on whether lice, mosquitoes or maggots got there first, they deposit their eggs in the eyes. The larvae, depending on their state of maturation, can give an exact time of death. Sometimes we get lucky if the mosquitoes get there first and are still in the area. It's possible to snare them. Often times they carry the DNA of both the victim and killer after the bites. This murder happened inside, so there is little chance of that.

Mika is right, "antiseptic" is a good word for it. The disheveled, trashed, disorganized mess you usually expect to find isn't here. There are dried bloodstains on the floor. The splatters are the right distance from Abrams. No doors were jimmed, and no windows had been broken. I have to believe Abrams knew his assailant. Fingerprint dust covers everything. No trace evidence such as fragments, filaments, or fibers, was found by the techs. This guy is knowledgeable and talented in the techniques of slaughter. The photos are back at the precinct. Of course, the area is already contaminated. The uniforms, EMS, investigators and even Mrs. Abrams have trampled through here. I wish I had gotten out here sooner.

Mika stands in one corner and takes in the panoramic view. She has been here before for second and third looks. Sometimes what you just don't see the first time, becomes painfully obvious the next.

“Looks empty without a body, I’m going to walk around outside and work my way in. There might be something between here and there, you never know.”

Harmon walks out into the hallway.

“Who had access?”

The words are meant for my recorder, but Mika answers, while pacing out the room for some reason.

“The wife, there aren’t any children. Closest relative is in Bloomington.”

She thinks she sees something, but it turns out to be nothing.

“The doctor wasn’t particularly friendly with the neighbors. He and Mrs. A traveled mostly outside of the immediate neighborhood, and its inhabitants. There weren’t any fights, or arguments, just no contact.”

“Clean, huh? Not much to work with, maybe Harmon will find something,” Mika says.

Any evidence, however minute, helps. Evidence doesn’t lie. The problem with it is. It can be misleading if your interpretation of what it is trying to tell you is wrong. This case is definitely going to take all of my stamina, because of the lack of leads. It’s going to take street smarts and intuition I have accumulated over the years. I speak into my recorder.

“Don’t look for what’s there. Look for what *should* be there.”

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The sound of heavy footsteps signals Harmon's return. He glances first at me then at Mika.

"I didn't see a thing."

"Did you dumpster dive?"

"First place I looked, nothing."

"What a surprise."

The sarcasm in Mika's voice betrays her normally cool exterior.

"You want to run through it?"

Harmon and I join in an affirmative nod. Mika runs through it all hoping that some minute detail has been overlooked.

"Abrams, Thaddeus, psychiatrist, age forty-six, Caucasian male, married to Anna. Case number: CR 897-4453. Address is here, six foot even, one hundred ninety pounds, brown hair, green eyes and small scar on right elbow. Victim found by spouse who has been eliminated as a suspect. Head facing northwest, face up, feet to the south and southwest, hands and feet secured as previous victims."

Harmon rolls his dark eyes and scrunches his face when she says the part about the castration. I can feel a phantom wound between my legs as well.

The first forty-eight hours are critical to a homicide investigation. I'm standing here at the forty-ninth.

* * *

It's been three days since Abrams's murder. As an insider, and a man considered one of their own, Abrams is talked about in the precinct with affection and honor. There are outpourings of sympathy for Anna. How could anyone know his soul was thrashing and burning in the flames of hell at this very moment?

My two partners drop me off at my apartment just after our visit to the mansion. It's late and I'm exhausted. I'm having trouble keeping my eyes open. My troublesome nightmares, return to duty, and seeing Mika again, all in one day has drained me. I can't decide what beat me up worse. The pain in my arm is still there, but not as bad. My little helpers are easily accessible and a cold beer helps. Sometimes, being alone can be too quiet. As I recline on my couch, I think about getting my television repaired, but most of the shows suck anyway. I never shop from home, never cared about the Middle East, or the fabricated lives of movie stars, and I definitely don't care about over-paid ballplayers. There are always the depressing news channels, but I deal with real life. I get all the entertainment I need on the streets.

On the end table, beneath my Glock, is a vacation brochure that reads:

"A small, rural town in Central Florida, Cassadaga attracts thousands of visitors each year for one unique reason. It's a camp and winter retreat for spiritualists... Current activities in the camp include psychic applications of: palmistry, Tarot reading, astrology, and numerology, past life regression, dream analysis,

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spiritual counseling and soul healing.”

Maybe a psychic can tell me who killed Abrams. I toss the brochure into the stack of old newspapers headed for the Waste Management dumpster. I'm anticipating, which nightmare will haunt and punish me, when I lay my head on my pillow. I hate waking up in a cold sweat in a dark room. I force my eyes to stay open but they fight me and win. In the middle of the night, a nightmare, once again, takes center stage.

The auburn-haired girl with the swastika carved in her forehead stares at me as she does every night. She asks me the same question, "Who gave you the right to kill me?"

I never have an answer for her.

4

The steamy hot water felt good. It caressed her naked body along its path to the drain. She saw it like a baptism that was washing her sins away. With her eyes closed, she thought about how rugged and handsome he was. She was taken by his boyish behavior, his sentimental eyes above the character creases in his face, and his deep, masculine voice. Jake was a classic lover-protector. With her head beneath the soothing waterfall in the shower, she thought about the last time they made love.

His two fingers lay across my lips, and stopped me in mid-sentence. I felt comfort and safety, pleasure in his arms. His eyes communicated his desires. I kissed his neck, his strong shoulders, and his chest. He straddled me. His intimate thrusts became more aggressive and intense, until we clenched and remained locked, pleading for the moment to last into eternity.

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Mika had suppressed those thoughts over the past years and chose to concentrate on her career. Seeing Jake brought the memories back. She wasn't sure whether to act on them, or place them on the back shelf of her mind where they resided for years. There was a job to do. She couldn't let her emotions blind her now. A serial killer was roaming, searching, hunting for more victims. With all of the Bureau's resources behind her, she still hadn't apprehended him. The steam floated and formed a cumulous cloud in the bathroom as Mika stepped out of the shower. All she saw in the fogged mirror was a faint apparition.

I still love him.

Reaching for a towel, she patted off the droplets. The case was taking an obvious toll on her. The aches and pains were brutal, and relentless. The mental strain threatened to crush her. Her phone rang. Mika moved toward the nightstand, covered by a large bath towel. Midway through the third ring, she answered it.

“Scott.”

“Mika, the medical examiner's report just came in.”

“Anything helpful?”

“Just the usual disgusting medical verbiage with no major revelations. I can have a copy over run to you if you like. Sorry to bother you this late, I just thought you'd like to know.”

“Not a problem, Ed. I would like to see it though. I

can be there in—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, it’s on its way, and don’t stay up all night studying the case. You need to get some sleep. You never know when the bad guy is going to climb up out of the coffin and strike again.”

“Thanks, dad.”

She heard him laughing on the other end.

“I mean that in a good way Ed, you’ve always been... You’ve always looked after me, and I want you to know that means a lot. I’ve been so preoccupied, I haven’t said ‘thank you’ like I should.”

“Good night, Mika.”

The call disconnected. She held it for a moment. Jake Roberts and her love life would have to wait.

* * *

Only five minutes counted down toward the end of the day, when she placed the key in the lock. She bent down to retrieve the last two days of newspapers then stepped into the foyer. She dragged her wheeled travel bag behind. Lori was traveled out. It had been a draining flight because of difficult passengers, an unfriendly crew, and the tiresome jet lag. She needed sleep. She wanted to be rested before her early morning appointment with her Emily. There was a lot to talk about.

The fire engine wailer from her alarm clock forced Lori’s eyes to snap open. It wasn’t an easy transition back

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from her fatigue-induced sleep. She sat up in bed drowsy, but it was as far as she got on the first try. She lay down again, convinced she was no more ready for the world, than the world was ready for her. It was an hour and thirty-eight minutes later, when she finally awoke for good. She shuffled off to the bathroom for a brief visit then went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. While waiting for the coffee, she retrieved the latest newspaper left at her doorstep to see what else happened in the world while she was away. As she paged through it, the headline on page three caught her eye.

No Suspects in Murder of Local Psychiatrist

FBI Agent Mika Scott was quoted late last night as saying that no further information is available regarding the Abrams murder case at this time.

They were clueless, as always, and she was still rocking. If they found out anything, it would have to be by accident, and Lori didn't allow accidents. She was far too careful, organized, and intelligent. The caffeine brought her back to life, and the whole grain wheat toast helped to absorb the acidic feeling in her stomach. She revisited the bathroom to apply makeup, and brush her hair. She bolted into the walk-in closet where her flowered sundress hung. It was Emily's favorite, and the one she would wear for the visit.

Have to get a move on, my baby's waiting.

Just as Lori reached for the front door handle, a knock startled her. No one except for the postman knew she lived there. She never invited anyone into her private sanctuary. Swinging open the front door, she hoped to sign for whatever it was, and be on her way. A tall man with a muscular build stood at the door, wearing a striped tie and a blue button-down shirt over gray slacks. He had a slight smile, but looked as if he was on a mission.

* * *

She was as beautiful in the early morning, just as she was in Abrams's office. I was excited when I was assigned to interview her for the case.

"Lori Powers?"

"Yes."

"Detective Jake Roberts, Homicide, I'm sorry to bother you."

I held up my wallet with my department identification, and shield.

"I just need a moment of your time to ask a few questions regarding Dr. Thaddeus Abrams. You were a patient of his, correct?"

"Homicide?" Lori says.

She studied my identification.

"Yes, I am, I mean, was. How awful, I just this minute read about it."

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She looks at the newspaper and shakes as if a chill has risen up her spine over the tragic news.

“I’m afraid I missed—”

She saw I wasn’t following.

“I’m a flight attendant, and I have been away for the past few days. I can’t believe it.”

She looks a little closer at me.

“Didn’t I see you in his office?”

“That’s quite a memory you have.”

“Not really. I deal with people all day long on airplanes. With the terrorist things going on, we have to pay closer attention now. I pay more attention than most crewmembers, because the whole thing frightens me to death,” Lori says.

She shudders. Her beauty and charm are disarming.

Pay attention, Jake.

“You’re right. I was just leaving when you walked into his office. Anyway, I got your name and address from his client list. Again, I’m sorry to bother you. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, I was on my way out, but for Dr. Abrams, if I can be of any help.”

She pivots as if working an aircraft cabin, and invites

me into her home. As she walks in front of me, her perfume inspires me more than questions about Abrams. We stop in her living room.

“He was a very good man, well-respected. I hadn’t been a patient of his for very long though,” Lori says.

“You were one of the last patients he saw that day, he was murdered later in the evening. I thought maybe something might stand out, something unusual, while you were with him.”

“Unusual? How do you mean?”

“Did he receive any distressing phone calls, or interruptions? It appears that he might have known his assailant. Did he show any signs of stress?”

I like the dress.

“No, did he show any before you left?”

She jams me up. I didn’t expect the question, but she has a valid point, because I was pretty much there right before she was.

“Ah no, he appeared fine to me.”

Now I feel clumsy, off balance and stupid for asking. It isn’t easy with her. I’m supposed to be doing the intimidating. I can’t stop looking into her eyes, and not like a cop looking for signs of deception.

“Can I ask you another question, Detective Roberts?”

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I can't stop the smile from appearing on my face.

"Normally, I get to ask all of the questions, but under the circumstances of *both* of us being his patients, I guess it would be fair."

"Why were you seeing Dr. Abrams?"

With a simple question, she makes me feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. My emotional state is fragile, and I'm trying to keep it under control, but for some reason I feel I can unravel in front of her without any penalties. The hurt floats to the surface. I can't keep it under water.

"That Miss Powers is a subject I really don't want to discuss."

"I'm sorry, I not trying to pry. I'm just curious."

Detective Roberts you are a handsome man.

For some reason, I can't help but feel at ease around her. She is warm and friendly. Her smile is enticing and personal. I get the impression it's only there for me. It's probably one of the reasons why she was hired as a flight attendant. A great smile is one way to distract someone with a fear-of-flying. Because Abrams isn't going to be any help, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't let it out. Sometimes it's better to confide in a stranger.

"I was involved in a shooting recently, with a militia group. A young girl was killed."

"The department requires a shrink visit after

shootings.”

I read about the kid with the Molotov cocktail and the assault rifle.”

She doesn't back away, and takes me straight on.

“You were the officer who shot her? You were wounded too, weren't you?”

“Yes I was, to both.”

“Well, I want you to know Detective Roberts, what you did was a courageous thing. You tried to make a difference in this world. You performed your duty, and protected the rest of us. I thank you for that.”

Amazingly, I feel redeemed and absolved. The back of my hand drags across each eye and I pinch my nose.

“Thank you, I haven't been doing well with it.”

“It must be very difficult for you. Was Dr. Abrams able to help?”

You have beautiful, honest eyes.

“It is, and no, but he tried. We really didn't have much time to get anywhere with it. I was resentful going to see him. I don't like exposing my weaknesses.”

She reaches forward and gently pats the back of my hand. I'm in the middle of a murder investigation, and she is standing there with her reassuring smile comforting me. A lot is racing through my mind.

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“I don’t have a degree in psychiatry, God knows I was a patient of his too, but if you ever need someone to talk to, someone to listen, well you know where to find me.”

She points at her address and phone number on my notepad.

“Thanks.”

I don’t know what else to say. It’s weird, but I don’t know what to do with my hands.

“What about you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

She looks at me with little girl eyes.

“After what you just told me detective, my story seems trivial by comparison.”

“I’d like to know, please.”

She becomes sullen and starts to pace.

“Well, my daughter, a few years ago, decided this world wasn’t a fit place to live in.”

She started to straighten things along the way she thought were out of place. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“She had just turned sixteen when... I never got to say goodbye.”

She looks off somewhere past me, while she uses a tissue.

Cary Allen Stone

“Is there a Mr. Powers, someone to help you through it?”

I try to make the question sound as if it’s coming from a professional level, rather than an invasion of privacy for personal gain. She looks at me with more sadness and anger.

“Mr. Powers deserted us years ago. He wasn’t much in the first place, but he really wasn’t much in the last place. The truth is, I wish he had left sooner.”

She looks away again during her recollection of how events of the past had hurt her.

“You know sometimes we protect our relationships, as weak as they are, for some strange reason.”

I’m glad to hear Mr. Powers is history. She never mentioned a boyfriend, so that door is open. Strangely enough, Abrams’s untimely departure may just have brought two of his patients together, for no other reason than to console one another.

“The same offer goes to you, Mrs. Powers. If you ever need someone to listen, I’m here.”

I hand her my business card.

“Lori,” she says.

She reaches out and offers a long, slender hand.

Maybe he is the one.

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I take her hand and hold it longer than a handshake.

“Jake.”

“Very nice to meet you, Jake.”

We both feel awkward, but sense something unique has just happened. I’m uncertain about what the next move is. The possibilities are endless. The moment lingers for a while.

“Was there anything else, Jake?”

“Will you be flying off soon?”

“Actually, I just got back and I’m leaving to visit my daughter. I make it a point to see her as often as I can.”

Her mood drops a few levels again.

“I miss her a great deal.”

I wonder what the militia girl’s parents think of me.

“Well, I have everything I need. I still have two more of his patients to see, so I better go.”

Lori offered an invitation.

“I’ll be back in the house about four, if you need anything else.”

She gives up another irresistible smile. For so long, I have protected my castle, and yet she easily breaches its walls, and captures it. I’m surprised by how much I want

to let the floodgates burst open. I go with a simple “Okay.” As her door closes behind me, I return to reality.

What would she want with a broken down cop anyway?

Lori watches me through the window.

I have a good feeling about you. Maybe you're the one.

* * *

It was a beautiful morning. The birds seemed energized, and the air smelled clean. White-topped, and gray-bottomed clouds floated indiscernibly by. There were breaks between the clouds that allowed laser shafts of sunlight to touch the earth. On her way to the cemetery, Lori stopped by the florist's shop and purchased a bouquet of daises and carnations. They were on Emily's list of favorite flowers. Rejoicing at the warmth of the sun, Lori made her usual trek through the miniature monuments, with names and departure dates, until she arrived at Emily's.

“Hi baby, mommy's here. I missed you terribly.”

She stood with her arms full of flowers. She didn't hear a reply. Lori tried again.

“Emily, mommy's here.

Silence, not hearing her daughter's usual greeting was a painful blow.

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“Baby?”

No answer. Lori stressed and listened closer, but still nothing. Standing with her eyes closed, Lori remembered Emily’s suicide note.

You should have stopped him. Why didn’t you stop him? I hate you. I will hate you forever.

Finally, a very subdued child’s voice spoke.

I’m here, mommy.

Lori looked rapidly left and right.

“Where are you, Emily?”

She became anxious, possessed. Her baby was near. She didn’t care if anyone saw her.

“Baby, where are you?”

I’m in the dirt, mommy.

Lori quickly gathered the flowers she had brought. She fell down on her knees and placed one hand on the grave. The other slid along the smooth headstone.

“Baby, what’s wrong? I came as fast as I could. Please, don’t be angry with me.”

Who is he?

“Who, baby?”

Cary Allen Stone

That man mommy, who was that man you were talking to?

“You mean the detective, Detective Roberts, baby? The man who came to see me? Oh he’s nobody, just wanted to ask me some questions.”

A groundskeeper, a black man with a rake, stopped to watch Lori. He stared at her, and she glared back until he finally moved on.

He’s bad mommy, a bad man.

“Oh no Emily, he’s no such thing. He was just asking about Dr. Abrams.”

Lori’s voice trailed off.

You mean the dead Dr. Abrams? Maybe he’d like to ask about the dead Father Moralli, or maybe the dead Senator Whitman?

Lori looked down not knowing how to answer. Instead, she started to pull twigs and weeds from the grass and tossed them to the side. She never liked when Emily was in a bad mood.

“Emily—”

Leave her be! She’s only concerned. Jake Roberts is a problem.

Lori quickly surveyed the cemetery for mourners.

“I like him. He’s not like the others.”

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She waited, but no one answered. Lori drifted off with her thoughts.

Daddy was on top of her. Emily gripped the sheets while he sexually assaulted her. It hurt, but she was afraid to tell on him. She loved him, and hated him. She did not want to be the cause of any more problems between her fighting parents. When she tried to tell, it was as if mommy did not want to hear.

Before he finished with her, Lori returned to reality then the image of Jake Roberts replaced the horror of the dream. A smile appeared on her face. Life did not have to be full of heartache.

Could he be the one?

Inside, her heart danced with a renewed sense of optimism. Lori felt hopeful again. It had been a long time since she had any feelings.

* * *

It's my job to be analytical and know the geography. An intense debate is going on inside of my head as I think about Lori. I want to feel her passion, to share every minute, to listen to her words, and be touched by her. I want to watch her breathe. My cell phone rings as I drive away from Lori's residence.

“Are you up for some lunch?” Mika says.

Imagine that, a call from Mika in the middle of my debate about falling in love with Lori.

“I’m close to Hennigan’s, got anything?” Mika says.

“As a matter of fact, I’m starving, and Hennigan’s sounds good. And yes, I think it’s a tumor.”

She didn’t like my wisecrack. I’m scolded.

“That’s not funny—I’d miss you.”

“See you there.”

I’m just a few blocks away from Hennigan’s. I see no need to race there. Mika isn’t even close herself. I hate waiting like a lapdog, tongue hanging out and tail wagging. The extra time gives me a chance to come up with an excuse, as to why I was given three interviews to do, and only finished one. Maybe Harmon has something so I dial his number.

I’d miss you?

As I wait for him to pick up, Mika pulls up alongside my car looking cranky. I climb out of my car.

“Everything, okay?”

I sense incoming trauma. She shrugs, and heads for the front door of the restaurant without saying a word. I hate when women do that. I hate the guessing game. I open the door for her. It was the restaurant management’s hope you would somehow confuse the place for a popular restaurant with a similar name. The food was good, and no one cared about the name anyway. Mika told the hostess there were two, and possibly three of us. The young girl marches us to a corner booth. After she takes

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our drink orders, she goes about retrieving them. Mika is still looking off into some far horizon, but finally speaks.

“I want this guy, I’ve been through each case a thousand times and nothing, but nothing, plus more nothing. What I do know for sure is, I have multiple deceased males. That’s the sum total of what I have.”

Without anything to follow with, I ask if Harmon stumbled onto anything.

“He would have called if he had.”

Her answer is abrupt, but I press on anyway.

“Was there any more out of the M.E.?”

“Moss didn’t have anything earthshaking, just basic autopsy stuff.”

She says it while scrutinizing the other patrons like a cop.

“The perp could be in here, right now, having lunch, and I wouldn’t know it.”

“Easy, we’re not in the Waterfront Tavern.”

My reference is to the infamous bar where several prolific serial killers had once tossed down a cold brew together. The county morgue is not my kind of place. I detest it. I make my living as a homicide investigator and am required to go there. I always think it’s full of creepy people who enjoyed a little too much what they did for a living. I often thought *they* should be investigated.

Fortunately, my ex-girlfriend turned FBI profiler is in command, so I don't have to go. I can just read the report.

Lori Powers.

Her face keeps popping up in the upcoming events marquee in my mind. Mika on the other hand has a different look about her today. Until Lori Powers, Mika was where I had hoped my luck in love would lead, again.

“Did you do something different with your hair?”

She looks at me as if trying to decide, whether or not I deserve an answer.

“No Jake, same hair, why? What's on your mind, something you want to talk about?”

She asks as she pulls out a file three actual, and not man inches, thick, press-a-ply's are stuck everywhere. She looks over her notes.

“How did your interview with...Lori Powers go?”

Being a detail person, she notes the change in my expression, and watches my head turn away when she says the name. I'm not fast enough with an answer for her.

“Jake?”

“Let me give Harmon a call. He might want to meet up with us.”

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I need to buy some time, and quickly press speed dial. It takes only a second for Harmon to answer.

“Hey big man, where you at?”

“Passing Fifth and Sycamore, why?”

“Hennigan’s. Thought you might like to join us. Got anything?”

I nod in Mika’s direction to show I’m on the case.

“On my way, be there in fifteen at the most.”

Harmon whispers into the phone as if Mika might hear his next sentence.

“Is she wearing the short red skirt?”

“Watch for those pedestrians.”

I sign off and wink at Mika.

“He’s on his way. Hope the FBI is paying for lunch. A man Harmon’s size can’t be fed on what I make.”

Mika is lost in thought. I’m afraid to ask what is going through her head. I think I’m out of the line of fire, and assume she’s thinking about the “Who’s Your Daddy” killer.

That was some shower.

She smiles.

“When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?”

Maybe I don’t get the question, or why she asked it, but I go along with it.

“In my neighborhood, you only had three choices—a cop, a fireman, or a priest. I’m afraid of fire, so being a firefighter was out. I like women, so the priesthood was out. That left only one option.”

“Organized crime?” she says.

“Actually, the ad said only Sicilian’s need apply, but I filled out the application anyway.”

I answer with a sneer. Mika starts to laugh. It’s the first time I have seen her laugh since our pitiful reunion. It wasn’t your normal belly laugh, more like an adult giggle.

Could we fall in love again?

It’s funny how distracted I have become from the trauma of the shooting, because of Lori and Mika. I must be healing. I can still smell the scent of Lori’s perfume on my hand. Mika’s eyes are more alluring than ever. I drift until Mika brings me back home again.

“What did they have to say?” she says.

“What did *who* have to say?”

“The Powers woman, and the others I asked you to question?”

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She keeps staring at me making me feel uncomfortable.

“Jake, tell me you did what I asked you to do.”

“I only got to Ms. Powers. I didn’t get to the others by the time you called to meet here.”

I shuffle the silverware and saltshaker. Because the case means so much to her, she is disappointed, I didn’t finish my assignment.

“What did *she* have to say?”

“Just that everything was normal, nothing out of the ordinary, no interruptions, phone calls, or any distressing events during her session.”

I sound too defensive.

“What was she wearing?” Mika says.

* * *

Flying at thirty-three thousand feet, and looking down at the blue-green earth, you could see concrete cities, majestic mountains, snaking rivers, and green fields. As the world rotated beneath your feet, you had the sensation you weren’t moving. You also had the impression the world was right, and full of peace. What you couldn’t see were the people, or the crimes they were committing. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center pushed the airline industry into complete disarray. The Federal Aviation Administration had mandated new security procedures that ran the gamut from the simple-

minded, to overkill.

While some concepts improved safety and security, others had to be trashed. Anyone observing a newborn, or handicapped, elderly person being “wanded” at a security checkpoint, had a difficult time accepting the changes.

In flight, the rules had also changed, with an increase in the use of Federal Air Marshals riding on board flights. Flight attendants were receiving self-defense training. Passengers were offering their assistance to crews if needed to overpower terrorists.

Captain Nicholas Parker was old school. Even before the attacks, he was fearless when it came to defending his ship. “Pilot-in-Command” to Parker meant he was in total control. He only trusted the man flying the plane, and *he* was that man. The down side to his courage and authoritarian attitude was that he used it to abuse crewmembers. The new reinforced cockpit doors were pure nonsense to Parker. As far as he was concerned, the door was only another barrier preventing him access to the female flight attendants. A perverted profiler, Nick profiled the female members of his crew to fulfill his sexual needs.

His requirements included young women, and the younger the better. Those in their late twenties were okay, as long as they had young girl features. Pretty was acceptable to him, but drop dead gorgeous was prized. Fortunately, for Parker that’s what the air carriers sought out as well, young and hot, for the discriminating business traveler. Megan fit the Parker profile. She had just turned twenty-one, and was new to the airline.

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Although she wasn't on the drop dead gorgeous side of the scale, she turned heads. The road kill neighborhood she had grown up in taught her early that life could be devastatingly harsh. She came from the wrong side of the tracks, and her future looked bleak. Nevertheless, she was determined to get out any way she could.

Megan's parents couldn't afford to help her out of the misery. The schools failed her as well. She knew it was only a matter of time before she would rise up and get out. She worked hard and managed to be hired as a flight attendant. She believed that all it would take to complete her story was that one pilot who would sweep her off her feet. She considered sleeping her way into a secure financial future, but believed she could get by with teasing. Keeping her eyes and ears wide open she too profiled targets. Upon being introduced to the captain, she recognized his potential and waited for her moment. All she had to do was hook up and play the game. In the end, she thought she would find the happiness she longed for.

“You've got the airplane, I'm going to the back,” Parker said.

The First Officer took command of the aircraft. After being introduced to Megan before the flight, he had locked his sights on her. Undoing his harness and seat belt, Parker got out of the left seat and swung a leg over the center pedestal. Standing in the tight cockpit, he looked in the mirror on the bulkhead wall to check his best captain smile. The first officer had flown with him many times before, and actually admired the old man for his virility.

“Good hunting,” the pilot said.

He reached for his oxygen mask, which was required by the regulations when one flight officer left the cockpit. Parker grabbed the front of his pants, and pretended to squeeze signaling his concurrence with the junior officer’s remark. His sneer said it all. Turning one hundred and eighty degrees, Parker exited the cockpit locking the door behind him. It was only a short distance, and a brief moment, and there was Megan. The bustling commotion inside the galley area seemed disjointed to unseasoned passengers, but was actually part of a well-played third act. Alcohol was served to frequent and first-time flyers with the intention of settling their nerves by keeping them well sedated. After all, though it wasn’t advertised, anything could go wrong at any time while they were held captive inside a manmade machine that screamed through the sky.

“Everything okay back here?” he said.

Parker turned up the concern and charm. Megan was the only flight attendant in the galley. The others were serving passengers from the cart. He glanced down the aisle appearing to survey the situation, but was really looking to see if any of the other flight attendants would interfere with his next move. They had already noted his presence, and were very much aware of his reputation.

“Yes sir, everything is under control. Is there anything I can get for you, captain?”

She added a few playful looks, and a sweet, elevated, innocent tone.

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“Some orange juice please, if it’s no trouble.”

He loved her deference to his authority. His eyes never left hers.

*Is there anything I can get for you, Captain Parker?
Why yes!*

“Megan, have you any plans for the layover?”

“No sir, I’m still on reserve, the pay isn’t much. I plan to stay in my hotel room, and watch some television, or read a book.”

She strategically turned away to fill another drink order. Parker pressed on.

“Well, I was planning to go out to a nice restaurant. No one else in the crew wants to go. You’re welcome to go along. It would be my treat.”

Food, he knew all too well, worked for junior flight attendants. They made so little money the first few years that they had to sacrifice meals. She flashed her bright eyes at him. Her excited, enthusiastic reply bounced off the galley walls.

“I’d love to go.”

As she finished preparing drinks, she stopped and looked at him fluttering her long eyelashes and adding a tilt of her head.

“That’s very kind of you for asking captain, thank you.”

“Nick. There’s no need for the captain thing, unless we’re flying.”

Of course, that only applied until he got into her pants, after that he would be Captain Parker again, and she would have to understand the difference.

“Okay Nick.”

She cooed back as she hunched her shoulders and played the game.

“What should I wear?”

“Well how about something that will show off the beautiful woman that you truly are,” he said.

She knew the just-in-case miniskirt she carried was perfect, and well worth the money she paid for it. If she could ensnare him, she was certain she could recoup the cost.

“I just might have something that will do.”

“Great, we’ll have a wonderful time, I promise.”

He couldn’t stand the pressure building inside his pants, so he smiled, excused himself, and returned to the cockpit. After he left, Megan glanced down the aisle to see if anyone had noticed the captain’s hit on her. One of the male flight attendants pantomimed a hysterical laugh back at her, but she wasn’t at all affected by it. She knew if her plan came to fruition, she’d be out next to Parker’s pool enjoying the sunshine, while the catty flight attendant in mid-cabin sucked in the thin air at

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altitude.

Back inside the confined cockpit, appropriately named he thought, Parker watched the first officer remove his oxygen mask. He placed himself back in command. Nick looked at the first officer.

“Signed, sealed and delivered, all that’s left is the crying.”

The copilot gave his best compensatory laugh, and a thumbs-up.

“How old do you think she is, boss?”

“What difference does it make? Old enough.”

The junior officer actually felt a tinge of sympathy for Megan. He knew that she like all of the others, had come into the airlines with stars in their eyes, seemingly unaware that piranha like Parker swam around them. Megan for some reason seemed extra young, extra innocent, and naïve to him.

What a shame.

* * *

A menacing eclipse appeared over our table. Harmon slides his large frame into the booth next to Mika. He knows we won’t fit on one side of the booth.

“Who you cheesin’ fo’?” he asks.

He normally speaks in perfect English, but every

now and again, he lets out his *brotherness*. He was great at it when the bad guys were around. Harmon and I reach across the table and do a fist bump.

“Yo, sup dawg. You feel me?”

I abuse the phrases, because I like the game. My inner-brother can't stay silent. Mika watches us hoping the nonsense will be over soon. Her fingers separate her flowing raven hair into strands. Her Asian features from her mother's side, complement her father's European complexion.

“We need another flood,” she says.

“A what? A *flood*?” Harmon says.

“Another flood like the first one you know—Noah, the Ark, two of each species? Except this time, we need to leave the males behind.”

She takes us down without breaking a sweat. Glaring at Harmon, Mika drops her chin, and raises her eyebrows.

“Do you have anything for me, anything the least bit encouraging?”

“You think it's that easy, don't you. You come down here, from the *F-B-I*, with all of your *high-tech gear*, and straight away, you want *results*. Well, in case you ain't noticed, this here ain't no F-B-I. We's just po' poleese fokes tryin' to do ourin' bes', missy,” Harmon says.

He opens his eyes wide to emphasize.

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Mika's shakes it off.

"No wonder I'm jammed up. I'm working with comedians."

She queries the room.

"Pardon me, ah excuse me, can anyone find me a *real* cop please?"

"Hey, you have the precinct's best, and second best, sitting right here," Harmon says.

Harmon deadpans at me.

"Which one is you?"

She continues with head bobs.

"You're absolutely correct. I have to say that you two, are the biggest dicks in here."

"Did you say the two biggest *dicks*? Now baby, you know which one has that birthright," Harmon says.

He pats my shoulder.

"How you doing, man?"

Harmon has saved my life on the streets on more than one occasion, and my butt with Fairchild many more. I watch Mika laughing. She's trying to decide which one of us is the biggest dick. I fall back in time.

Her hair fell to her shoulders after she loosened the

braid. Her eyes radiated with confidence and pierced deep inside mine. Her face was soft as I stroked it. Her scent was inviting me. I leaned forward, took her in my arms, and kissed her.

“I did find a clue,” Harmon says.

Mika’s head snaps in his direction. I’m pulled back from my daydream.

“Harmon Blackwell!”

“Well it’s not really a *clue*, in the *clue* sense.”

She waves her fist at him and follows with a threat.

“So help me I’m going to smack the shit out of you. Come on, what have you got?”

He answers with a small shrug attached.

“Mr. and Mrs. Thaddeus Abrams weren’t a happily married couple. She told me in so many words, you know like she forgot play the good wife. She was distracted for a moment, and let it out. It’s got to mean something don’t you think?”

“A struggling marriage. That could be why she spends so much time at charitable functions. Do we have any proof he fooled around?” she says.

“It might support the fact he knew his assailant,” Harmon says.

“Knew his assailant? I should say so. I think it’s safe

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to assume he wasn't on the clock giving good *therapy*, more like he was receiving some."

"Did we check his e-mails, or regular mail, maybe there's something there. Maybe that's the connection. Maybe all those gentlemen were soliciting sex over the Internet?"

Mika bites her lower lip while our orders are placed on the table. She is famished so she picks up a fork. With a big smile, the server turns to take Harmon's order. He asks for chips & salsa, with a cherry Coke. The young, black woman brushes against my partner leaving him the impression she finds him irresistible. He gives her one of those brother-type smiles. As she walks away, he turns to me.

"Did you see that? I could get into some kind of trouble with her, feel me?"

He is glowing hot, red hot.

I shrug, and continue trying to figure out what it is I have been served. It doesn't look like the picture in the menu.

"And I thought nothing would ever come between us Harmon, I'm really hurt," I say.

Mika's eyes dart between the two of us. She has consumed her meal while we played with our food.

"I'll check the phone records of our victims to see if anything matches. I'm leaving now so that the two of you

can have a moment.”

Harmon stands to let her out of the booth. With her purse in hand, she stands over us.

“I’m so glad I work alone. Thanks for lunch Jake. I’m going back to the house and review some phone files. Harmon, Harmon, over here, hey! She’ll be back. You’re burning a hole in her behind with your superhero laser vision.”

“She’s so fine.”

I slide out of the booth.

“Wait I’ll walk out with you.”

I point at Harmon.

“That leaves him with the bill, I thought the Feds were paying for lunch.”

Harmon turns in my direction.

“You going to be all right? Want to get together later and watch the Sopranos?”

His concern is real and appreciated. He is sitting down so I pat him on the shoulder.

“No man, but thanks, I’m looking forward to a quiet night of introspection and self-doubt.”

As we walk out, Mika has that look in her eyes. I’m sure I know why.

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“Lori Powers?”

I already have my delaying question on my tongue.

“How come you never ask how I’m doing?”

“Because, you forget, I *know* you Jake. I know if you want to talk to me about something, you will. I know when your inner child wants to speak. I’ve been there and done that, remember?”

Her arms rise to punctuate.

“And I know you just tried to dodge my question again.”

I look back with one of those stupid male looks.

“So Jake, what’s up with this Powers woman? Did you interview her, or are you in love again?”

I know what my desires are with Lori Powers, but I’m getting some weird signals from the Planet Mika. I don’t know what to say. I wasn’t expecting any emotional conflict over lunch.

“It got personal, didn’t it Jake? And now you’re headed back to do a follow-up with her, right?”

She looks down at the pavement.

“Well Detective Roberts, with that kind of dedication, I’m sure you’ll crack this case wide open, so to speak.”

She waits, but I have nothing to say.

“Well I’ve got to get back to the house. I want to go over the phone records. I also told Fairchild I’d touch base with him, keep him up to date.”

She looks past my shoulder at the city.

“There’s a killer loose out there. Just help me find him that’s all I ask.”

It would have been the perfect time to say something meaningful, intelligent, but instead, I watch her walk away. She slams the car door shut, backs up, and drives off. I hear Harmon come up behind me.

“She still loves you, man. Where you headed now? I thought I’d hang with you, you know, and do the *partner* thing. You see, we, the two of us, are supposed to spend time together, that’s what they mean when they say ‘partners,’ get it?”

I smile back, but my thoughts are about Mika, and Lori.

“Not this time, but I promise we will. Did you get anywhere with the girl?”

“I was doing real good right up until she found out I was the *heat*. Some people just can’t seem to take the heat, you know what I mean?”

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Cary Allen Stone

5

He was considered a visionary by those close to him, but somewhat off-center by the rest of the population. His enemies despised him, and were envious of his success. They called him Ironman, a reference to the comic book hero and Robert Downey. Hardball was definitely his game. He had the balls. His shouting could be heard all the way down the corridor. He scowled at those attending the meeting.

“My head is pounding with all of the science. This is too much to download, I believe that’s the correct term.”

He shifted to his left then swiveled away from them, brooding and annoyed. He contemplates.

Scientists, what a pain in the ass!

He rotates back to face them with a disgruntled look.

“All right, what you’re saying Dr. Caldwell, if I understand this properly, is we have gone from Tesla theory, to Tesla reality?”

“Correct sir,” Caldwell said.

Dr. Patricia Caldwell, mid-thirties, was giving a presentation on weapons of the future to her CEO. Her hair was pulled up tight in a bun. It was her nature to hide behind the walls of science and research. It helped to prevent any sign of emotion.

“In 1886, an obscure scientist named Nikola Tesla, the inventor of alternating current, also developed the principle of ‘resonance’ whereby objects can be altered

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by vibrating them. He said and I quote:

“It is possible to transmit electrical energy without wires to produce destructive effects at a distance and apply it for innumerable purposes including physical degradation and even death.”

Robert Scott, also a brilliant man CEO of one of the largest defense contractors in the US, considered the possibilities. He knew that conventional weaponry had to be replaced some day, so he was willing to keep an open mind.

“Physical degradation?”

He spun around again in his expensive leather, executive chair to face out the scenic penthouse picture windows. To his subordinates he was known as, “Attila.” He didn’t care what they called him as long as it wasn’t to his face. He contemplated the potential revenue boost Caldwell was talking about. A mid-level executive made an observation to Caldwell.

“This is high-tech war isn’t it? Like the crossbow was to the agrarians? The wave of the future is high-energy radio frequencies, and transient electromagnetic devices used as weapons?”

He beamed with excitement. The CEO rotated his chair and got back into the conversation. As he was about to speak, his executive secretary entered the conference room. She had been with him since the entire corporation was housed inside of a trailer. In her mid-fifties, she was still a striking woman. Maggie felt confident enough to

stride in and interrupt the conversation. She knew all his strange habits and idiosyncrasies. She also knew important details about his offspring, which included birth dates, anniversaries, and the grandchildren's names. More importantly, she knew how to handle all of the ex-wives. In her hand was a small piece of paper with a message from a visitor in the outer office who requested an audience with him.

“She’s outside?”

Maggie couldn’t conceal her smile.

“Meeting’s adjourned, take a recess class.”

His anxious face looked back at Maggie. Those at the table grabbed their papers, and almost ran for the door.

“Send her in.”

Maggie strutted across the floor in her tight pinstriped skirt, silk white blouse, and the five-inch heels she was legendary for. She stopped at the door and waved at the visitor who appeared a moment later. The next thing Robert saw was a timid wave from his daughter’s hand.

“Hi, daddy.”

Mika attached her little girl smile intended to melt his heart.

“Mika, where have you been? Wait. Have you a pen and some paper? Quick, write this down.”

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Taking out her notepad, she glanced at him with a quizzical look.

“1-8-0-0-555—

After the first five numbers, she stopped writing.

“Okay, okay, I get it. But you have to understand I’m a very busy girl and I have responsibilities.”

“You know you give me an icepick headache, and forget about the thousand broken hearts,” he said.

“I’d have thought the pain would be much lower.”

Grinning, she knew she had just one-upped him.

“Come here, it’s time for the big hug scene,” Robert said.

He held his arms wide open. They embraced like family members do after realizing they let life get in the way of their relationships. She was a sight for his tired eyes. To Mika, he was still her knight in shining armor. To Robert, she was still his little girl. She was just like him.

“What brings you to see old dad who has been in the same town with the same address and telephone number for forty years now? Need some cash?”

He reached into his pocket, but she waved him off.

“Those days are over dad, but thanks for the offer.”

She grasped his hand.

“The Justice Department didn’t send you here about those—”

A wide grin was followed by a chuckle.

“Justice could never catch up with you, Robert Scott.”

Mika thought about how much time had passed since her last visit. Dad was getting older.

I need to spend more time with him.

She wasn’t there for the cash, but she was there for his help and guidance. Like all fathers, he sensed she had a weight on her shoulders.

“What’s the matter, honey? Whatever’s wrong, I can fix it.”

“Not this time I’m afraid. Have you been following the news about the ‘Who’s Your Daddy’ murders?”

“Are you on that case?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Is that the one where the young woman, into Satan worship, chopped up her friend with a meat cleaver, bashed her head with a hammer, and then carved a pentagram into her chest?”

He displayed a squeamish, repulsed and agonized

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look on his face.

“Hmm, this is going to take longer than I thought,” Mika said.

“Good. We can go to lunch. Where—”

“Dad stop, I can’t go to lunch. What I need is some real good fatherly advice. I’m at a dead end. I’ve this case and there’re no clues, there’s little to go on, and people are dying. I can’t seem to find the answer.”

Her distress elicited his compassion. His hand raised and scratched at an eyebrow, while he paced.

“I’m really not a criminal investigator, honey, but have you tried a bribe?”

“A bribe?”

“Yeah, a reward for information? Pay a ‘snitch’ I think you call them. Money usually produces results. I remember for five hundred, you could send a guy to the hospital. For a thousand, he wouldn’t remember his name. For five thousand, he’d be floating face down. Guess that wouldn’t work for an FBI agent,” he said.

The joking ended and he became philosophical.

“That’s some job you do, always dealing with the bottom of the food chain, slimy bastards—just like old dad. Hey, why don’t you come and work with me. You could have a nice office, be a vice-president, you could take long lunches, and you could still deal with the bottom of the food chain.”

Mika laughed and the weight on her shoulders appeared to lift if only for a moment.

“Actually, dad, you have no idea how good that sounds right now.”

She let the offer float around in her thoughts for a while, savoring it.

“But I can’t. I like catching bad guys. I lock them up, and lose the key. I just can’t find this bad guy.”

She grabbed his arm and tugged.

“I thought you might have some fatherly wisdom gathered over the centuries that could help me.”

“Centuries, I look that old, huh?”

He dropped back down in his chair.

“I need to start working out.”

He pretended to take his pulse.

“I don’t really know what to tell you, except that if anyone’s going to catch the screwball—it’ll be you. You’re relentless, always have been, ever since you were this high.”

He held his hand out parallel about four feet off the floor for emphasis.

“The guy doesn’t stand a chance.”

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“I’m working with Jake on this.”

Mika’s eyes locked on to her father’s.

“Jake?”

He couldn’t hide his enthusiasm.

“I always liked him. You two were a good, no a great match, How’s he doing?”

“He seems okay now, but he had a rough one a few weeks ago, shot and killed a teenage girl. She had it coming, but he took it hard. He doesn’t want to show it, but he’s still struggling. Then on top of that, the department’s therapist, the one Jake was required to see because of the shooting, turns up as my perp’s eleventh victim.”

A head popped in at the conference room door. The eyebrows were high and the smile half-hearted.

“Are you ready for us yet, sir?”

Robert glared back. The door closed again.

“If it’s fatherly advice you want, okay here it is. Keep your chin up, and your head down. I don’t know what to tell you about the murders, but I do suggest you get out of crime fighting and get a life. You and Jake would still make a great team. You know when you two were together, you were happy. That’s the best I got, babe.”

She kissed his cheek while his words ping-ponged

inside of her head.

“Thanks dad, I love you so much.”

* * *

I was never good at relationships. It had something to do with being abandoned as a kid. It also had something to do with being a male. We either try too hard, or not hard enough. In our defense, no one ever taught us how to behave in a loving relationship. By the time we figure it all out, it's too late.

“Lori?”

“Jake, I'm glad you called.”

She recognized my voice. If she did nothing else, but talk to me with her sweet, sensual voice, I could listen for a lifetime.

“How was your day?”

It's important I don't scare her off. Cops have a way of making people feel nervous. I want desperately to tell her I think about her all the time.

Don't screw this up, Jake.

“Oh, it's been a beautiful day. There is a special feeling in the air I just can't explain. And to think it's not over yet,” Lori said.

She hoped I was picking up, what she put down.

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“Did you still want to get together?”

“I’m still at the office, but I’m officially off duty.”

The tight fist pull-down was only part of my celebration.

Be cool, Jake.

“It looks stormy outside, and I hate to drive in the rain. Any chance I can get you to pick me up?” she says.

“Sure, what time is good for you? I need to stop at home and clean up first.”

“Seven, if that works for you?”

“Seven’s perfect.”

I try not to sound over anxious.

“All I need to know now Jake is what you have planned for the evening.”

“I was thinking about a place that is rather unique and different.”

“Unique and different, sounds like I should dress to kill.”

* * *

It’s Quantico on line two, an Agent Wellington from B-S-U, Agent Scott,” the secretary said.

Mika reached for the black phone on her temporary desk.

“Thanks, Becky.”

“Not familiar with “B-S-U,” Fairchild said.

He shrugged at Mika and whispered.

“BSU—Bullshit University?”

She grinned and whispered back.

“Behavioral Science Unit.”

She got a smile and a nod back.

“What have you got for me Wellington, it had better be good. I’m drowning in the dead sea of clues here.”

She pressed speakerphone.

“Agent Scott, we added all of the new data, including our latest gentleman, to the stew and the CIAP matrix has formulated a few answers.”

Wellington tried to sound highly technical and official.

Ed looked lost. He asked for a definition again.

“What the hell is the CIAP matrix?”

She waved it off as unimportant. With a sensual tone, she spoke into the phone.

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“Give it to me.”

Agent Wellington had harbored that very thought on many occasions. He and Mika were new hire classmates, and he had a serious crush on her ever since. Although he never expressed his deep feelings, he was always the first to volunteer if she needed help. Mika, aware of his puppy love, took every opportunity to use double-entendres and suggestive phrases to tease him to death. He loved it. He worked harder at the job when she did. He kept up his hopes of getting into her pants. In Mika’s mind, she classified it as legitimate sexual harassment role reversal. Wellington took a breath and passed on his findings.

“Our victims are all powerful men—a politician, a priest, well you know the list. The only other authority figure he has not targeted so far would be a law enforcement officer. I cross-checked the victim’s phone numbers, there’s no connections between the victims.”

“I’d categorize him as organized. The fact that he leaves nothing behind supports that.”

“Very definitely, he doesn’t appear to have any other agenda, except for the authority angle. He’s not motivated by thrill, or lust, fame, social change, or religion. There is no robbery, or blackmail. He is, as you said, very good at killing and covering up his tracks. One thing is for sure. He knows who he wants dead.”

The frustrated Wellington pictured the two of them alone on an island. He would be Kirk Douglas, and she would be what’s-her-name, the actress. Snapping back to reality, Wellington continued. He kept talking only to

prolong contact with Mika.

“This one, while out of control so to speak, is definitely a control freak. Our killer wants to punish. Maybe it was something those dead guys had done to him personally, or what they represented. I don’t believe it has to do with his sexual orientation. Whatever it is, he is highly intelligent, very careful, and extremely detailed.”

“I agree.”

Fairchild yelled a question at Wellington from across the desk.

“What about timing? Is there anything in your computer that makes the timing stand out—dates, time of day, holidays, things of that nature?”

“I’m sorry, who is speaking?”

Wellington sounded annoyed. He thought they were having a private conversation. Someone was in his space with Mika.

“That would be Edward P. Fairchild, Chief of Detectives, Homicide. He’s on *our* side, Wellington.”

She emphasized “our” to make him feel as if they shared some special connection. She loved harassing the man.

“Sorry Captain Fairchild, I’m just being careful, it’s my job you know.”

Ed could care less about Wellington’s feelings, and

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his tone clearly conveyed impatience with Wellington's arrogance.

"And the answer is?"

"The exact hours varied, but all of the murders occurred late in the day. The methods were the same. The victims were drugged, bound, sliced and diced, with the male genitalia left behind as either a statement, or a warning. There wasn't any sexual intimacy during, or after each attack."

Mika wondered if Wellington was turned on using explicit sexual references. In the back of her mind, she always believed it was possible, had he not been in the Bureau, he may very well have been on the Bureau's most wanted list for sexual predators. Then again, he could rise to the top spot in the Bureau like J. Edgar Hoover did.

"He's smart. That's not to say Einstein smart, but he's street smart, cop smart, worldly. He's probably read a few basic psychology books in addition to knowing the law."

The agent started to predict and hypothesize.

"I'd say it's just a matter of time before he makes a mistake, or loses it all together. The rational mind will come back, and be devastated by what he's done."

"Are you reading from the Wellington crime fighting manual now?" Fairchild said.

His question was harsh. Since he began in law enforcement, he had serious issues with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. To him, they were overrated, bumbling prima donnas. He only dropped his dislike temporarily, since his protégé arrived.

Mika, interested only in solving the crimes, noted the male testosterone building and interrupted both of them.

“Do you have anything else for me, Agent Wellington?”

Wellington inquired as to when she would be returning to Quantico. He added everyone there missed her. He wanted to say he missed her. He didn’t care much for their long-distance relationship.

“Probably not for awhile, I don’t have a specific time. Our perpetrator pretty much will decide when I’ll return if your theory is correct. In any case, I’ve got a lot of work to do here.”

Knowing her answer was a setback for Wellington, she left him with a well-placed, optimistic tease.

“When I do get back, we’ll have to compare notes.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Agent Scott.”

“Later.”

Mika clicked off the speaker. She looked at Fairchild for a reaction.

“Are all male FBI agents as horny as he is?”

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“Sit Wellington, now beg Wellington,” she said.

They both laughed. It felt good to laugh again, even if it was at Wellington’s expense.

“You really enjoy this forensic profiling, don’t you? You like digging into people’s heads and trying to figure out why they do it. Me, I don’t really care why, I just want to know who, so they can be locked up and off the streets.”

Mika watched Ed walk around and sit on the edge of the desk. Fairchild was definitely old school. He was certain the way of things worked, how it was done. Mika shifted, and leaned back in her chair.

“I don’t know, I like it, love it actually, but at the same time, it frightens me. Sometimes I think it will overpower me. It wouldn’t take much to fall into its clutches by default. One minute I’m stopping crime and the next falling over the edge with it. Do you think that’s weird, Ed?”

His eyebrows slid together over the creases in his face.

“Serious?”

“Ed, profiling is just another way to get to the same conclusion. You use facts to see how. I use them to see why. In the end, we just want the bad guy.”

Ed looked deep into her lovely eyes.

“I’m going to be watching you closer now. Not

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because you're a beautiful woman, which is why I watched you closely all these years, now I'm going to watch so you don't go over the edge."

She stood and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"And I always thought you were like a father to me. To think that you're a pervert like the rest of the boys! There goes my last hope for mankind."

She looped her arm through his and they walked out of the office smiling.

"God, I miss this place."

"Come back," he said.

* * *

As I jump the last two steps of her front porch, a pleasant tingle of apprehension runs up my spine. It fades when she opens the front door. I feel lightheaded, dizzy and almost giddy. Lori is stunning. Always detecting, I make mental notes of her every feature, hair, makeup, breasts exposed by a drooping blouse, a platinum necklace, and a golden, silk Oriental skirt. Her cerulean eyes sparkle, and her smile invites. I wonder what it would be like to kiss her. I give her my best Jake Roberts smile.

"Well, I'm impressed, an on-time arrival," she says.

She notices I didn't get the joke.

"Industry talk. Sorry. Hello Jake, it's wonderful to

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see you again.”

I feel awkward, me the hard-nosed cop who has seen it all. She has some kind of mystical power over me. She is my kryptonite. At that moment, I can barely remember Mika, Harmon, my job, or the girl. I just want Lori Powers to like me. She controls everything, including my heartbeat.

“You look great, really great.”

The entire opening scene of our date is going by at light speed.

“So where is this ‘unique and different’ place we’re going to?”

“I thought we’d give magic a try, the world of deception.”

That brings a bewildered look to her face, which suggests I need to sell her on my idea.

“There’s a theater downtown where they perform magic shows. My favorite restaurant is across the street. I’ve always wanted to go to one of the shows, but I thought I’d save it for when I met someone special.”

Her expression changed to excitement. I had scored a point.

“What a fantastic idea, I’ve never seen a real magic show. Oh, this is going to be fun.”

Her reassurance opens my pressure valve.

“There’s only one problem.”

My head drops and I solicit her pity.

“I don’t have a car, you know, like a real car. I just have my department issued, unmarked cop car.”

I point at it in the street with a look of sorrow.

“Umm, that’s a police car all right.”

She contemplates for a moment.

“I have an idea. We can go in my car, but you’ll have to drive.”

She digs into her purse and holds out the key.

“It’s in the garage.”

Attached to the key ring is a dangling Lexus logo.

I dream about owning a Lexus, but on department pay there is no way I can afford it, unless I start taking bribes. Only with great self-control do I keep from jumping off the porch and running to the garage. While she locks up the house, I pull up hard on the garage door. A moment of silence takes place as I take it all in. Dragging my fingers across the smooth and silky silver finish, I make my way to the driver side door. As I open it, the rich smell of the leather interior permeates my nostrils. I breathe in deep as my butt slides into the seat. For a moment, just a millisecond, I almost forget the most beautiful woman in the world is waiting for me.

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Trying to impress her, I appreciate the extraordinary and exquisite things of life, I back out carefully. I also want Lori to know I can care for something, or someone special. I stop backing up when she is at the passenger door, and hustle around the other side to open the door for her. As she is seated, I get a smile. I'm in Fantasyland. In the driver's seat, I press the automatic door locks and try to be funny.

“I don't want you to escape.”

I laugh certain she gets my joke, but she has a strange look again.

The theater itself is impressive. The interior is elegant with deep, rich wooden pillars that elevate the ceiling toward heaven. Balconies surround the main floor, which is covered in thick, plush carpeting. The walls are adorned in tapestries, and mirror. Spotlights highlight the crimson curtains, drawn together on the stage. Classical music plays. I would never have guessed there was so much interest in magic shows. The place is sold out. I watch every man in the room watch Lori as we find our seats. It is obvious they are as captivated by her as I am. Each of them knows if she suggested an encounter, they would fall to their knees. As Lori stares up at the stage with anticipation, she takes my hand and squeezes it tight.

The curtains rise. So does Little Jake.

* * *

Megan was to meet the captain in the lobby an hour

after the crew had checked into the layover hotel. They would steal away to an elegant, expensive restaurant and dine the night away. Aware of his weakness for younger women, Megan planned to keep baiting him to come back for more. As she strengthened her position over time, she would convince him to leave his wife, and marry her. As she finished with her hair and makeup at the mirror, she stepped back to take one last look. She checked for lipstick on her teeth. The print top that accented her breasts and the short black skirt over black heels was perfect. She felt tempting. Her plan went even better than she imagined. The conversation at dinner was some of the best she had ever articulated. She laughed at all of his jokes and sympathized with him for the failing marriage he said he was forced to endure.

After the bill had been paid, they left the restaurant and decided to walk back to the hotel. It was a night she would never forget. The moon was glorious, the stars brilliant, and the outside temperature temperate. At her hotel room door, Megan maneuvered her computer-encoded room key in and out of the lock. Nick asked politely if he could come in as she gently nudged the door open. She stepped forward. She lightly touched the back of his neck.

“Nick, I don’t think that would be a good idea. The other crewmembers are on this floor. Don’t you think we should wait until—?”

In an instant, and without warning, she felt his hand contact her chest pushing her back into the room. She caught herself on her heels before falling to the floor. She watched as he closed the door behind him. Right before

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her eyes, Nick Parker changed from a charming, respectful gentleman, into a malevolent beast. The smile on his face was gone. As he walked toward her, she stepped back until she felt the bed against the back of her knees. He shoved her again and she fell back onto the bed. She was startled and afraid.

“What are you doing?”

“Take off your clothes.”

The shock of what was happening paralyzed her. She could not get her arms, or feet to move. She didn't have the strength to fight him. She could never have imagined he would behave in such a barbaric way. He removed his shirt.

“I'm not going to say it again, take off your clothes.”

He raised a backhand and she ducked to avoid the impact. Although he did not deliver the blow, she got the message. Paralyzed by what was happening, she could only stare at him. She thought to distract him long enough to get to the hallway, or to the phone to call for help, but instead she did as she was told. The scene passed by her in slow motion. After having believed she was stronger, Megan now trembled uncontrollably. He maneuvered out of the rest of his clothes.

“Resisting will only excite me. If you do anything, other than submit, I'll see to it you're fired. You know whatever story you tell, won't hold up against the word of a captain. I have a lot of friends at the airline.”

He tried to sound consoling.

“Don’t worry, nobody will ever know about our dirty little secret.”

The rate and depth of her breathing made her lightheaded. She couldn’t remember how he forced himself into her. She regretted drinking the champagne. She felt foolish for thinking she could control him, and closed her eyes tight while he unmercifully ravaged her. Frightened by her belief of his purported power over her, she did not resist. Then it was over. He huffed as he got off her. Megan lay on the bed motionless with her eyes still closed. She prayed she would not remember the nightmare. She felt dirty and violated. The thought he might attack her again gave her a chill, but he dressed at the foot of the bed while he watched her. She waited for him to speak, to apologize, and say something that would convince her he wasn’t an animal. She wanted to hear believable words of remorse, but the only words she heard included blame.

“You asked for this. It’s your fault.”

He continued to berate her, while he tucked his shirt into his trousers.

“You’re no different than the other crafty, conniving little harlots looking to hook up with a financial portfolio. You use your bodies to tease then pretend you’re surprised when you get this.”

He grabbed his dick.

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“By the way, you play the fearful, young prey part very well. I liked it.”

Megan was revolted and quietly cursed him inside. She wanted him to be afraid of her. She wanted him punished. As he leaned into her face, she tried to hit him with an open hand. He caught it in midair. They stared at one another with looks that could kill until he released her hand. He ratcheted her neck and held it tight. Megan started choking.

“That’s not going to work little girl, it’s too late for that.”

He released his grip on her throat. Megan’s shaking hands covered her face. She didn’t see him walk toward the door. Before Parker left her to the solitude of her hotel room, he left Megan something else to think about.

“Remember, keep your mouth shut. By the way, we’ll do this again, soon. Maybe next time you’ll persuade me I want to keep you.”

He left with a contemptuous smile confident she would not break. It was awhile before Megan got up and walked into the bathroom. She removed her clothes and entered the shower where she washed repeatedly. When she believed she had cleansed away his dirt, she dried herself. As if sleepwalking she returned to the bed and tore away the sheets letting them fall to the floor. She curled up on the exposed mattress, in the fetal position, and cried. She stared at the clock until it was time to leave.

She knew he would be in the van with the rest of the crew when they left for the airport. Normally talkative, Megan sat quietly and did not engage any of the other crewmembers in conversation. She was sure they knew what had happened. Parker, she thought, probably bragged about it. Although she did not acknowledge him, she could feel his stare during the brief drive to the airfield. She felt sick.

* * *

“I got something.”

The confident excitement in Harmon’s voice was unmistakable. He was dancing as if he had just finished six months on the road with James Brown. Mika launched herself at him grabbing at his strong forearms.

“What, what’ve you got? Don’t you screw with me, Harmon Blackwell, not in my present state of mind.”

Mika had been on edge waiting for something, anything to move the investigation forward. She had searched files and crime scenes hundreds of times. She shook Harmon hard. It felt as if the San Andreas Fault was quaking. Harmon acted out boxing with her, bobbing and weaving just to instigate. He added some irritating needling that caused Mika to go ballistic.

“Come on little FBI woman, bring it on.”

He stopped dancing and took a casual look around the room. He saw his co-workers were snickering behind hand-hidden smiles. As far as he could determine, he had

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to surrender.

“Okay Wonder Woman, you win.”

Fairchild was on the perimeter grinning. Mika stood in Harmon’s face with her hands pressed against her hips.

“Give it up.”

“I talked to a guy out by Abrams’s place, a guy we missed the first time around, a neighbor. The guy’s been out of town visiting relatives. He just got back. He said he saw...”

Harmon read from his notepad.

“A silver foreign car leaving Abrams’s driveway as he was driving away that night.”

Mika’s gaze went through him. Fairchild’s eyebrow arched. Everyone waited while she contemplated the development.

“That’s it, all of it?”

“Uh-huh.”

Harmon’s proud smile slowly washed away and he no longer expected a victory hug from Mika.

“A late-model, silver foreign car.”

She repeated it while turning away.

“Okay, it’s something, something is better than

nothing.”

She thought for a moment then in a flurry started shouting orders.

“I want to know who owns a late model, silver foreign car in a radius of fifty miles people.”

No one moved, instead they deferred to Fairchild for guidance. He didn't have to say a word because a simple gesture would have been enough, but he said it anyway.

“You heard the agent, get moving.”

The hustle began. Mika looked at him and mouthed the words “thank you.”

Ed simply returned a smile.

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Cary Allen Stone

6

It feels like we've known each other forever, and I have been born again. A lot fell out onto the table during dinner. The world looks pretty much the same to us. She *hears* what I'm saying.

As we walk to her car, we pass beneath a halogen streetlight that illuminates the parking lot. She reaches to take my arm, but that brings a grimace to my face.

"Jake, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, just a little sore."

"I forgot, I'm really sorry."

She displays real concern. I cradle my arm.

"Really, I'm fine. You looked like you wanted to say something just before."

I watch as my little do jet d'art shyly looks back at me.

"You'll probably think it's silly."

In all of my years on the job, silly wasn't something I had found anything to be. I want her to feel at ease and comfortable.

“There's no silly, now *stupid*, I know stupid, but not silly.”

She hides a smile behind her hand. I watch her eyes come up to meet mine. She hesitates, studies then decides to go ahead.

“I was wondering.”

“About?”

“I was wondering what a Jake Roberts kiss would be like.”

Her eyes widened.

A Jake Roberts kiss? She wants to know what a Jake Robert's kiss is like.

All I have been thinking about is what a Lori Powers kiss would be like. The only thing I wasn't sure of, was whether or not, I should chance it. We were both at a time in our lives when we needed someone to make us whole, someone to love. As my arms surround her, Lori's hands slip around my waist and up my back. Our embrace intensifies as we anticipate riding on an emotional wave. We hold on tight. Her lips press against mine and I spiral up into another galaxy. I forgot what passion was like, and I had given up on love believing I had been sentenced to the isolation of my cave long ago. Right

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now, at this moment, I'm not alone. Lori feels it too. After the kiss, she rests her head on my shoulder and whispers into my ear.

“I liked that.”

Her head tilts back as she looks at me.

“It's been a long time since I've felt this way, Jake.”

If only women knew how sentimental and romantic men want to be, how much we want that special someone to come along, and make us feel the way she made me feel. We lock in another passionate embrace, and kiss. The few moments it lasts causes all sorts of feelings to surface inside of me. The most important was feeling like a man again. The kiss ends and I can feel her trembling a little.

“Jake, I have never been kissed like that before.”

I get another incredible Lori Powers smile.

“Have you been saving that kiss just for me?”

A boyish grin appears on my face. No one ever said that to me before either. I wish I had something clever to say. For some reason, I'm thinking about how I learned to take down a suspect in the academy. It probably has something to do with the fact that I want to make love with her right now. I just don't want to scare her off. It also has been a long time for me. Besides, I don't want just a takedown. I want her for a lifetime.

“Command center to Roberts.”

Cary Allen Stone

She speaks in an elevated tone as the sensual expression on her face is replaced with a smile.

“I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

My hand waves toward the billions of stars over our heads.

“About how enormous the universe is, and how it keeps expanding, and about how one day it’s going to implode, and then all this will be gone.”

My eyes come back down from the stars and lock onto hers.

“And I was thinking about what it would be like to spend all of that time with you.”

“Do you mean that?” she says.

“Yes, I do.”

Lori looks up at the night sky.

“I’ve dreamt about finding someone who feels like I do, who understands, someone who means what they say, and someone with a genuine heart.”

We kiss surrounded in the silence of the night. Not much else is said on the drive home. The open moon roof allows the fresh night air in. The radio is off. The scent of her carries me to another place. We hold hands. Neither wants to let go. The garage door opens and I return the

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Lexus to its proper place. We walk to the base of her front porch and I pull her close to me. With both hands, I draw her face close. I want another Lori Powers kiss.

“When can I see you again?”

“Jake tonight means so much to me. I had lost all hope that there was someone out there like you.”

Her head falls onto my shoulder. With a slight tilt of her head, she says she has to fly in the morning, but it’s only a two-day trip.

“I’ll call you the minute I get back in, I promise.”

Her words circle my entire body as if held by a tether so I won’t fly off into the vastness of space. I run my fingers through the golden waves of her hair, and down over her soft neck. Her hands feel warm against my chest. We say goodnight with one more kiss then I watch her climb the porch steps. The walk to my car is only a step away, but I struggle to get my feet moving. The drive to my apartment is only a blur. Back inside, I stare out the window and watch the streetlights blow out like candles on a birthday cake, while a new sun rises over the buildings to the east.

I want to call her before she leaves on her flight. I need to hear her soothing, healing voice again.

* * *

“You’re wasting your time. He’s just an old guy who barely remembers ten minutes ago, I think he’s at half-

zeimers. Besides, I already questioned him, and I don't think he can take much more, unless you want me to rough him up a little. Man's got to be a hundred years old."

Harmon's frustration was maxed out.

Where are you, Jake?

"Bring him in, or if you think he'd be more cooperative in his own environment we can drive over there."

Mika thought it over and made a command decision.

"Oh forget it, let's go."

She reached behind her temporary office door and grabbed her FBI stenciled windbreaker. It was always a good idea to wear one for effect. On the other hand, showing your weapon when talking to a witness had a bad effect. It had a tendency to make them a bit forgetful and nervous. As they walked out to her car, Mika stated emphatically she was driving.

"Like it or not, I'm driving."

She could not make out what Harmon was saying under his breath, but she had a good idea. It didn't matter. She had a job to do. Rolling his eyes, Harmon hefted his mountainous frame into the passenger seat of her car. As she drove, he gave her directions with attitude and accentuated pointing.

"Left, here," he said.

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“Give the sarcasm a rest okay?”

Mika was frustrated too.

“I need your help, not another pain in my behind.”

Mika swung the wheel and the car careened around the corner. The weight of Harmon inside caused an imbalance and the car dipped to one side.

“Where’s Jake? Isn’t he on this case anymore?” Harmon said.

“You’re asking *me* where he is. You’re his partner. You’re supposed to know where he is. Did you hear from him this morning?”

Mika was being nasty because her patience was nearly gone. She was also painfully aware of what her father had said about the two of them, and how she still felt about Jake. She was also unhappy, even jealous, about the fact he was interested in a female witness.

Focus girl, you have a killer to find.

Harmon looked at Mika and shrugged.

“I think he’s still whacked about the shoot. Honestly, don’t know how he stays in the game.”

She looked back at Harmon distracted for a moment from her mission, while the wheels turned a little faster inside her head.

“He doesn’t let on it’s dogging him.”

“Yeah, well I thought Abrams was going to help him out of it, but that came to a screeching halt. He won’t go see anyone else. He doesn’t believe they can help anyway.”

“Right, turn right, next light!”

When this is over, I’ll be there for him.

As she made the turn, the hookers standing on the corner didn’t even draw an exclamation from Harmon. The turn put them right behind a traffic jam. Her small palm smacked the steering wheel as she surveyed the situation.

“This sucks.”

Harmon changed the subject.

“When do you have to head back to the Feds?”

He watched a group of tough young black kids outside a food store.

“You’d have thought they would have been more help with all of their fancy computers and experts.”

“Easy, don’t forget I’m one of their experts.”

She looked out the side window at the traffic.

“And why aren’t we moving?”

Harmon reached for the door handle.

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“Want me to go see what’s up? Most of these cars are small. I could clear a path for you, I’ll start with that little Honda over there.”

His wisecracks elicited a small laugh and subsequently eased some of the tension. Mika sighed.

“You know, Harmon, maybe I’m pushing too hard.”

He shifted in the seat and caustically scoffed.

“You think?”

In the passing of a millisecond, they glanced at each other. The tone of his comeback started them laughing. It quickly escalated into one of those laughs you couldn’t stop. The two of them roared until their eyes were tearing. It continued until Harmon held up his monstrous hands to call a truce, so that both of them could concentrate on taking a breath. After their empty lungs filled with precious air, it started all over again until Harmon forcibly yelled.

“Hey, traffic is moving again.”

Mika recovered and shifted into drive. Both dried their eyes and were back on the job. As she drove down the street, Harmon pointed out the old man’s house. Mika continued past Abrams’s residence, while she tried to visualize the killer’s escape route. Profiling was what she was trained to do. She had studied every word in Dr. Brussels’s texts, the man who originated the concept. Her instructors at Quantico gave her everything they had learned from years on the job. Mika was representing

them all. She was good at it, very good at it. Since she had been with the FBI, she had tracked down some of the most prolific serial killers.

The “Who’s Your Daddy” maniac was by far her most challenging case. She could feel the burn in her stomach knowing he had not been apprehended. It was taking too long, and it was affecting her confidence level. The flowerbed in front of the windows had captured his complete concentration, so the old man did not notice the car pulling into his driveway. As Mika and Harmon exited the car, they heard him lament.

“Too little fertilizer I guess.”

“Mr. Dickens?”

Harmon startled the old guy, causing him to turn so fast, they feared he would lose his balance, or worse, suffer a stroke. Harmon even started dialing 9-1-1, but stopped when he saw the old man wave. Squinting, Mr. Dickens held his hand over his eyes to watch them approach.

“Hey, you’re the policeman, aren’t you? Back again?”

“Yes sir, Detective Harmon Blackwell, I spoke with you early this morning. And this is Special Agent Mika Scott with the F-B-I.”

He said it slowly making sure he got through. Mika held out her identification. The picture of her and the printing were far too small for him to read, so he reached

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into his shirt pocket to retrieve his thick reading glasses. Harmon shot Mika an “I told you so” look. Mika batted her pretty eyes at him.

“Mr. Dickens, I’d like to ask you some more questions about what you saw the other night.”

“I already told the colored boy all I know.”

Harmon rotated to look at Mika with his eyes scrunched together.

“Why don’t I give Roberts a call and find out where he is. I’ll leave you here with the...Mr. Dickens.”

Not waiting for her permission, Harmon walked toward the car and pulled out his cell phone. It was always difficult for his big fingers to hit the tiny keys, so he used the eraser side of a pencil to punch them. Jake’s phone rang once. Surprise covered Harmon’s face when Jake answered. He didn’t know Jake was hoping it was Lori calling.

“Would you rather we stand in the shade, Mr. Dickens?”

Mika led him by the arm as they moved beneath an oak tree.

“About that night, you said you were leaving I understand, to visit relatives?”

Dickens nodded.

“That’s what I told him.”

“Which direction sir, were you going when...”

Harmon was furious.

“Where the hell are you, man? You’re supposed to be out here doing your detective thing. I can’t do all of this by myself.”

I want him off balance.

“I love you, man.”

I can picture him shaking his big head. The phone drops to Harmon’s side while his other two fingers pinch the skin between his eyes.

“That’s funny—‘I love you, man.’ Please, please, don’t go there.

“So, where are you?”

“Well, if you had been to the briefing, you would know that Harmon Blackwell, *colored boy*, broke the case wide open.”

It was his turn to yank my chain.

“You broke the case? Now who’s the funny guy?”

I make light of what he said, but I realize how far out of the loop I am. While I was out trying to recover my heart and soul, I apparently lost my focus. Harmon chides me.

“I’m here with Mika right now. We’re in the middle

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of interrogating him. She's already slapped him a couple of times. He's bleeding from the cut at the corner of his mouth. I get a crack at him next."

"Really, so Sherlock where are you?"

"Abrams's neighborhood where a neighbor, a real old, frail, tiny white man is telling us everything he knows. He's our only lead. I'm tired of covering for you so get over here. Heal already, you hear me, I feel your pain, but heal already!"

He let it sink in.

"I'm on my way."

"Was that Jake?" Mika said.

"The very same Jake we all know and love."

"Where's he been?"

"Don't know, I guess we'll find out when he gets here. Get anything from the old man?"

"Not much, a little."

She looked across the street at the deserted Abrams residence.

"Mrs. Abrams is staying with relatives while she grieves. We're right here, might as well go and take another look around."

As she crossed the street, Mika was lost in her

thoughts.

What am I missing?

She walked through the front door.

“STOP, STOP, F-B-I!”

Mika shouted and bolted toward the rear of Abrams’s residence just after opening the front door. The intruder didn’t heed her command. He moved gracefully and fast. If she didn’t know she was chasing a human, she would have thought the intruder had wings as he flew over furniture, and out the rear entrance. Harmon took off behind her while drawing his service revolver. He had no idea what she saw, or whom they were in pursuit of. He just did his best to keep up. The sound of her voice trailed off as more distance separated them, but he still had Mika in sight.

“GRAY SHIRT, BLUE JEANS, BLOND HAIR!”

Taking all of the necessary precautions before bursting through arched doorways and rushing around corners, Mika ran as fast as she could. She lost sight of the runner several times, but caught enough glimpses to continue the pursuit. She heard Harmon’s labored breathing behind her and prayed he could keep up. The man appeared to be in his late twenties, maybe early thirties, she wasn’t sure.

Come on Harmon.

Somehow, Harmon was able to call for backup in

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between the wheezing. As he ran, thoughts about chasing down running backs in college flashed through his head. His determination kicked up the adrenaline. Besides, he couldn't let it get out a woman had beaten him to the goal. Fences, trees, shrubs and homes blurred by them during the chase. More distance opened up between the pursued, and the pursuers. Mika prayed she would bring him down. Mika's breathing became painful. Rather than shouting again, she conserved the air in her lungs for the chase. Harmon shouted.

“SHOOT HIM!”

He thought the suggestion might give the runner something to consider, but it only made him run faster. Sirens wailed from at least three other directions, but none of those entering into the race were close enough to assist. Harmon shouted directions and progress into his handheld radio. As she ran, Mika saw reflections of red and blue in windows and against buildings. Backup was near, but her lungs were giving out. She slowed to a stop. She bent over and struggled to catch her breath. Harmon came up fast and passed her. She didn't see the grin on his face. A patrol car pulled up alongside Mika. She lunged inside the open rear door. In a desperate effort to continue the pursuit, she shouted and pointed in the direction she thought the runner had gone.

A small army of law enforcement officers disrupted the quiet neighborhood of Dr. and Mrs. Abrams as the search took on major proportions. The K-9 unit arrived to track the fresh scent. The chopper began a circular search pattern overhead. The runner knew he couldn't out run a radio. There had to be some place to hide. Although he

possessed strong lungs, swift moves, and great cunning, even the runner knew how badly he needed a break in the action. As he turned the corner, shelter from the ongoing pursuit came in the form of a small Presbyterian church. Frantically searching the exterior of the church, he found an unlocked door and went inside. He locked the door behind him.

Harmon had to give up. He had lost sight of the runner shortly after Mika did, and staggered to a stop. Still straining for breath, he managed to radio he had lost the prey. For several miles in all directions, a perimeter was established. Buildings, residences, vehicles and foliage were searched. A command center was established and Mika began broadcasting details, as she knew them. As I drove up Fairchild was getting out of a black and white.

Mika's tone was cold.

"Nice to see you could make it, Jake, I thought you would be interrogating Ms. Powers again."

"What do you want from me?"

While Mika glares back, I think about a sign I saw while racing here. It had a black background with white letters that simply said "Will the road you're on get you to my place?" It was signed, "God." Who could have known the runner had taken the advice. Mika rambled at Ed.

"All I saw was the gray shirt over jeans and the blond hair. He had a muscular build like he's spent a lot

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of time on a weight bench.”

Her eyebrows rose with an apparent respect for the perp’s athletic abilities.

“And he’s fast, real fast, he’s got cheetah in his blood. He was in the house, didn’t say a word, just bolted. The guy ran for a reason. He may just be some sick curious type, but I want to hear that from him.”

The radios were alive with call-ins. We could hear K-9 confirm their dogs had the scent. Fairchild let everyone else fill in the blanks. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Harmon. Winded, he crouched over with hands on his knees.

“Are you going to make it?”

Harmon gave me a disappointed look because the guy wasn’t in custody. He was also concerned eating too many donuts over the years had slowed him down a lot.

“I should have had him man, I should’ve had him. The white boy was fast. We could have used him in that game against the Gators.”

Football was Harmon’s life before he signed on with the department. He had scholarships to all of the Big Ten schools right up until his ankle was blown out. Fairchild chimed in.

“He’s still in the area. He couldn’t have gotten too far. You two ran him to death, and I’m sure he’s hiding out until he can get his second wind.”

Cary Allen Stone

Fairchild surveyed the surroundings and personnel present. More calls came in. Everyone was convinced the runner was still inside the net. The guys in the chopper reported there was no movement outside the perimeter. Patrol officers canvassed witnesses, and continued searching all vehicles in the area. We knew if enough rocks were turned over, he would be under one.

The church was empty. The side door was usually left open whenever the pastor was attending to church business. The runner proceeded into the vestibule, but didn't see anyone. He marveled at the beauty of the stained glass. The runner stood beneath a statue of Jesus Christ who died to save all of mankind. The runner knew he only had a few good deeds. He knew they were not enough for him to be rewarded in heaven. He had no misgivings about those pursuing him. They were anxious to send him to hell.

I'm just a gurney ride away.

He subconsciously grabbed the inverted bleeding cross on the chain around his neck. Inverted crucifixion was a harsher way to die. The heart would palpitate, while the victim choked on his or her own blood.

Evil has never disappointed me.

He heard a door creak open. He dropped down low. The singing and humming emanating from the pastor grew louder. Scanning over the pews, the runner watched as the pastor placed a large vase with a bouquet of roses on the altar. The man of the cloth took several steps back to observe the balance of the scene. He fell forward as the

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blow struck the back of his head, and lost consciousness immediately. Only the grace of God kept him alive.

“I could kill you and violate you. What goes around; comes around.”

The smug look on his face, and the words spoke volumes about the runner’s disdain for the clergy. He believed they allowed evil to go unpunished. The clergy were the real sinners. The time constraints required that he escape, so he decided against both killing the pastor and violating him. Instead, he took the pastor’s white collar and black cassock. The fit was close enough for him to pass.

“I’ll be waiting for you in hell.”

He walked out of the church leaving the pastor lying on the floor unconscious.

* * *

The man wearing the white collar was driving Pastor McMichaels’ new Lincoln Town Car. An officer signaled for the driver of the vehicle to come to a complete stop. He smiled and tried to present an accommodating attitude to the officer. He knew he had to play the cop to effect his escape. The officer stooped down to look inside the Lincoln.

“Where are you coming from, Father?”

“Antioch Presbyterian, officer.”

“*Pastor Powers*, my son. Fathers are in the Catholic

faith. And the church is a few blocks that way.”

“Yes Pastor, I know where it is. Where’s Pastor McMichaels?”

“Vacation officer, he’s finally taken a well-deserved vacation. We’ve been encouraging him for years to take one, but you know how stubborn he can be. I’m keeping an eye on the flock while he’s away.”

The runner smiled to reinforce the charade, and he quizzed the officer.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re looking for a man wearing blue jeans and a gray shirt. He has blond hair like yours.”

“This person you’re looking for, is he dangerous?”

“We just want to talk to him is all.”

“You must *really* want to talk to him judging from all of the commotion.”

The officer’s partner indicated he thought the pastor was okay to leave and waved for him to move on. Runner put the car in drive, and held the brake.

“Good luck officer, I hope you find your man. God be with you.”

With his escape assured, the runner tossed the white collar out of the driver’s side window a little over a mile down the road.

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* * *

It had been days and still no sign of the runner. The only report filed was from a Presbyterian minister who had been assaulted and stripped, inside a church in the area of the search. We didn't know if there was a connection. We haven't been able to find, or accidentally stumble onto anything tangible, that could end the "Who's Your Daddy" killing spree. Everyone, except Ed, was cranky. Mika didn't say much anymore. Harmon grumbled all the time. At least with Lori, I had someone to lean on. Seeing her over the past week had been difficult because of her flights, and my work on the case. While the quantity of time we spent together was meager, the quality of the time was abundant. We talked forever on the phone to try to make up for the separation.

Most times, a significant other can't deal with police work, but Lori remained interested in mine. She inquired about any progress in the investigation, and cared about my well being out on the streets. While she was there for me, I was there for her. She had been through a lot with her ex-husband, years of physical abuse against her, and sexual abuse of her daughter leading to Emily's suicide. It was a heavy cross for her to bear. She loved being a flight attendant.

On my way to Fairchild's office, I walk past the cubicles. A few familiar faces pop up. Wendy, our CID secretary, always asks about my arm. The faces inside Ed's office aren't smiling. A hydraulic lift couldn't have raised the mood. I'm the last one to arrive as usual, and close the door behind me.

“Now that we’re all here why don’t you get started?”

Ed gestures toward Mika who is leaning against the wall. She looks at each of us with a somber face, and takes a moment before speaking.

“As you know, it’s been quiet around here. Outside of the ‘runner’, there haven’t been any more leads on the Abrams’s investigation. Whoever is behind these killings has covered their tracks well. He knows police procedures.”

Mika’s sad facial expression deepens.

“The *runner*, whoever he is, or what he has to do with Abrams’s murder, remains a mystery. He could still be just some curious, weird guy that gets off on murder scenes.”

She looks at Ed, then to Harmon, and finally at me.

Harmon tries to console her.

“Hey sometimes, it just doesn’t go the way we want. We covered all the bases, turned over all the rocks, and nothing.”

Ed, the forever optimist, interjects.

“It’s not over. We’re going to hear from the killer again. Sooner or later, Judgment Day will come.”

Harmon breaks back in.

“What about the Vidocq Society? You know, up in

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Philadelphia. Do you know about them?”

“They’re forensic professionals who donate their deductive and scientific talents in order to thaw “cold” cases. They’re named after Eugene Francois Vidocq, a brilliant criminal mind turned detective. Their credo is Veritas Veritatum—The Truth of Truths.”

“They don’t just do ‘cold’ cases. They also take on open homicides and disappearances. Hey, it’s worth a try,” Harmon says.

“I’ll give them a call, guess it can’t hurt. I’m willing to try anything at this point. Anyone know a clairvoyant?”

Mika looks defeated. I’ve never seen her like this before. It’s my turn to throw a lifeline in her direction.

“Mika, maybe we should—”

With a wave of her hand, Mika stops me.

“Sometimes, it just isn’t going to happen. I can deal with it. It’s very frustrating not being able to complete the puzzle.”

Maybe dad’s right, take the job and fall in love with you again.

“Anyway, the Feds don’t want me to hang around with you guys forever, as much as I would like to. They think I’m picking up bad habits. So, I’m heading back to Quantico this afternoon. Maybe Wellington...”

Cary Allen Stone

She drops her head and gives it a small shake.

“He’s such a jerk.”

The “jerk” part relieves the tension and we all chuckle, until Ed speaks up.

“Why don’t you tell the FBI to stick it? Come back here and stay with us.”

He walks over and gives Mika a hug. The rest of us line up.

“That sounds real good right now, and I’m going to think real hard about it all the way back to the Academy.”

She has lost a lot of confidence.

“Who knows, because I can’t break this case, they may find someone more talented to take it on.”

She held up her chin like her dad told her. Ed smiles and encourages Mika.

“There isn’t anyone more talented in law enforcement than you Mika, they know it, and we know it.”

“Thanks, Ed.”

She gives back a half-smile. She looks at me and it feels as if we are breaking up all over again. I still have strong feelings for her, in spite of my feelings for Lori.

I should have been there for her.

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Everyone begins shuffling uncomfortably around the room. Ed is the first to say goodbye, and again the rest of us follow. Finally, Mika tries to end the misery.

“I’ve got to get going. I’ll call if anything comes up, unless it’s in Wellington’s pants.”

Her half-hearted laugh fades.

Thanks, everyone.”

She grabs her things, including the FBI windbreaker hanging behind the door, and gives us a small wave before leaving Ed’s office.

As I watch her walk, toward the doors of CID, I want to say something to stop her, but the double doors close, and the words never come out. I look at everyone in Ed’s office. The uneasy silence is a signal for us to return to the desks we’re rarely at. We failed this time. The murderer is free to kill again. All we can do is hope that if there is a next victim, some clue will put us hot on the trail. Harmon leans over to me, while I stare out of the window, lost in thought about Mika and better times.

“Hungry?”

“No, thirsty, I believe this one calls for an alcohol sedative.”

* * *

Leaving CID, I feel like empty. Harmon drags alongside me. Everyone knows to leave us alone. The two front doors of the precinct swing open, and we make

our escape, just like kids bailing out of school. Outside in the natural light of the sun, I squint.

“Where now?”

Those two words are all I hear him, the rest are indiscernible. We keep walking until we reach his car. My inner detective is tugging on me. I go over the Abrams’ crime scene again in my head to see if we missed something. There is also the possibility there wasn’t anything to miss. The killer could just be that good. The only witness, if he could be called one, was an eighty-year-old man with poor eyesight, and a bad memory that thought he saw a silver foreign car leave the driveway about the time of Abrams’s murder. I’m not sure it was the same day. Harmon drives in silence until he utters one word. It has nothing to do with the case.

“Sprites.”

He asks if I know what they are.

“They’re bright red flashes with blue tendrils, that blast out of the tops of thunderstorm cells for a few thousandths of a second, for up to sixty miles.”

I had just read about them.

“T-G-F’s are terrestrially-generated flashes, or upward lightning.”

I try to remember what else the article said. Harmon goes philosophical.

“There is some real cool stuff going on in this

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universe that we don't pay attention to."

He means Mika, and my lament slips out before I can stop it.

"I wish she had stayed."

"Hey man, you going to be okay?"

Harmon glances several times at me.

"Yeah fine, there's no show here, keep moving."

I play it down and quickly assert.

"It was just...good to be around her again, that's all."

"I thought you were all hooked up with that Powers woman."

"I am, it's just Mika and I go back a long way."

To prevent another sad Jake story, he changes the subject.

"Too bad we couldn't find the runner. He's dirty. I can feel it. Why else did he take off? If he were just a fan, he would have grabbed a souvenir. He was fast, Jake—fast."

"Maybe he didn't have time to grab a souvenir."

That's all I can think of to say. I don't want to think about it anymore. I'm burned out about it. I need some Lori-time. My demons aren't around when she is. Maybe

Cary Allen Stone

it's time to reevaluate my career.

“When are we going to stop for a few cold ones?”

“We're in the middle of the hood, Jake. A white boy, sorry, a *red* boy like you can get whacked out here for no reason, I'm looking for a safe place to—”

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7

“STOP THE CAR!”

“WHY?”

“STOP THE FRIGGING CAR.”

The tires screech and the car skid into the curb. I brace with my wounded arm because I'm not wearing my seatbelt. To my right, between the crack house hotel and the Korean market, is a dilapidated bar with a hand-painted sign over the entrance that says “Chipper's.” I look back at Harmon with a raised eyebrow and the devil on my face. Clint “Dirty Harry” Eastwood couldn't have played my exit from the car better. Standing on the sidewalk, I smoothly look left and then right. Sizing up the territory and in plain view, I slowly undo the strap securing my holstered Glock. Harmon walks around the car and comes up behind me contemplating my apparent death wish. I confidently strut toward the door and stop to read the sign. The two brothers on either side of the door are in no mood for my being there. I step between them to enter the bar. Harmon's hand grasps my shoulder.

“Are you sure about this, Geronimo?”

I stop and turn toward my backup.

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“A brave man once told me that if you are afraid to enter, you might never know the friend that awaits you inside.”

“He’s dead now, right?”

Harmon is more nervous than anyone.

I smirk, but continue into hostile territory. It’s the kind of place, where they check you for weapons at the door. If you don’t have one, they give you one. When they see me, the loud base tones stop, the casual conversations stop, and the balls on the pool table roll to a stop. The bartender can’t believe his eyes.

“What the fuck do you want?”

I can’t see Harmon behind me holding up his badge over my head. Nobody moves. I think I’m doing great, so I head for the bar and take a seat. Harmon puts his badge back into his pocket, and slowly sits down next to me. His head snaps in all directions, while I order.

“I would like a cold beer.”

I watch for movement in the mirror behind the bar, and see a few cue sticks come down off the rack.

“Harmon, what’re you going to have?”

The bartender has an impressive vocabulary. He shares his heightened curiosity in the form of a question.

“Are you fucking crazy? Ain’t nobody going to let you walk in here for a beer, I suggest you get the fuck

out, before they bust up my place, and you with it.”

He spoke directly to Harmon at the beginning of the sentence, but directed the end of his sentence straight at me.

“Do yourselves a favor, and get your black and white cop ass’s the hell out of here.”

“THAT’S RED ASS, MISTER.”

The startled bartender leans back aghast at my outburst.

“NATIVE AMERICAN. Two cold ones for my partner and me.”

I recapture control through some mystical anger management technique.

“And while you’re at it, buy the house a round on me.”

The silence is like standing outside during a new fallen snow. I think I hear Harmon contacting God behind me. He is either cussing me out, or damning me for all of eternity. I hope everyone in the bar heard the part about the next round, but all I hear is a deep, powerful, single voice from a table toward the back and to my left.

“Give the *red* man, and the black man, one beer.”

As I turn to acknowledge the man, into my field of vision comes the largest black man I have ever seen. He’s twice the size of Harmon. He head is shaved. On either

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side of him sits a skanky whore. He has gold teeth from one corner of his mouth to the other, with a diamond stud in both front teeth. His Armani suit must have cost at least a year's salary. Two sawed-off shotguns are on the table in front of him, along with one pink umbrella drink. With the snap of two of his fingers, both the size of legs, the music starts and another bank shot is made on the pool table. The bartender pours our beer. Speaking with trepidation, Harmon quietly gives me the man's history.

“His name is ‘Chipper’ as in wood chipper. He's the man here, proprietor of the establishment. Rep is he cuts his victim enough until the soon to be deceased bleeds out then it's a ride through the machinery. You think whoever killed Abrams is a badass. There's a bad ass. He knows it, too. And, he knows ain't nobody going to do anything about it.”

The urgency in Harmon's voice intensifies.

“The man spent a dime, ten long, hard years in deep solitary confinement. He killed several of his cellmates while in the general population. They couldn't prove it. The Warden wanted him gone. They just quietly let him go. ‘Silent parole’ they called it.”

My initial arrogance and demonstration of fearlessness dissipates in light of Harmon's revelations. Reality torpedoes my testosterone level.

“And listen to this *red man*, you can't kill this guy, He's been shot twenty-eight times, stabbed sixteen, strangled once. They even tried to blow him up. He keeps coming back. When cops are ordered to take him in for a

violation, they resign.”

“Let me get this straight, you’re saying there’s a pretty good chance our partnership could end right here?”

“Oh, I thought you were just plain ignorant, but you’re stupid, too?”

He shakes his head in mock ridicule.

I drink my beer, but try to be cool about it. I figure if it’s my last, I might as well enjoy it. I thank the bartender, who returns a derogatory social comment, as I toss a handful of cash on the bar. Standing, I turn with my hands visible to everyone in the bar. My partner leaves half a mug of ale behind. Harmon scratches at the back of his head, while I look directly at “the man” and nod a thank you.

“Don’t come back here.”

It is his terse warning. He points at the door. I walk backwards, but facing Chipper. Harmon’s back is against mine, as he takes the lead toward the door. As we step outside, we are surprised by the new gang-tagged paint on Harmon’s unmarked. He drives me home. I don’t have much to say because the last thing I want is for some girly whimper to squeak out from my mouth. I sense Harmon isn’t in the mood for clever banter anyway. Climbing out of the car in front of my apartment, I throw Harmon a wisecrack.

“Good night honey, call me later?”

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Harmon loses it.

“You’re one crazy bastard, DON’T EVER do that to me again.”

After watching him drive away, I go inside. My answer machine light is blinking and there is a message from Lori. She’s going to see her daughter, and would catch up with me after. She also said she missed me. I think about calling her. I think about Mika. I think about “Chipper” and how I could have been recycled mulch.

* * *

The face in the mirror refuses to tell me where that young, energetic guy is now. I feel weak. A steady wind could easily blow me down. My partner called and offered a ride, but I told him I was going to “work out” by walking in. It isn’t that far, and I need the exercise. Since Mika left, there’s no rush to get there. I decide to secure my tie later as I slide my holstered Glock into the back of my pants. It wasn’t possible to describe just how glorious a morning it was from inside the apartment, with the shades pulled down. Burly, cotton-textured clouds float over my head and mares’ tails drift through the alto-altitudes. The sun is already starting to singe the cobalt hue out of the sky. The foliage is painted in deep shades of southern green. As I walk, a gentle breeze wisps past my face.

Chipper didn’t kill me yesterday.

I wonder who will. Maybe it’d be a deranged suspect, or a revenge-filled prison escapee, or maybe it’d

be one of the militia girl's compatriots. The butt of my Glock digs into the small of my back. The house is still blocks away, and for some reason the walk feels farther than I remember it. My body is aching and in sad physical shape. As I pass the newsstand, I toss a few quarters at Sylvester, the newspaper guy, for a morning paper. He looks like he has lived two lifetimes and yet he keeps going. Tucking the newspaper under my arm, I pass by the parking lot and scrutinize it to see who is already in. Harmon's car is taking up two spaces. "Pig" is still splattered across the hood, along with other unsavory social slang, from the night before. Fairchild's car isn't in his space, that's good because now I won't get the "Where've you been, Roberts?" interrogation.

After climbing all three floors of "Cop Mountain" in the only cop shop in the country without an elevator, I head for my desk. A pencil ascends into the air above the cubicle next to mine. It does several ascending rotations like it's in the Pencil Olympics. On its descent, I snatch it in flight. A head pokes up above the cubicle wall.

"Hey, that's my pencil."

As I toss it back, the number two is snatched out of the air like a frog tonguing a buzzing fly.

I think about Harmon Blackwell. He's not only my partner. He's my best friend. He never loaned me money, or donated a kidney for me, but I love him like a brother. I never found much value in material possessions. I have Harmon. He keeps me going in this crazy, screwed-up world.

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“You beat the man in, you’re so lucky, Roberts.”

Harmon chuckles. It is a boisterous, devilish kind of laugh.

“It’s a good thing too, because I’m not covering for your sorry ass anymore.”

That’s what he says, but isn’t what he means. Partners understand all of the intricacies of mood swings and personality dysfunctions.

“Any new corpses lying around? I want something to do, I’m bored.”

My feet find a place between some reports on my desk. The usual anthill activity prevalent in the office any other day of the week, is nonexistent today.

“*No body knows...*” one detective interjects with a song.

“How are we going to justify our very existence? We’re investigators, we need something to investigate.”

I complain while my sore arm pinches just to remind me about the real world. Harmon leans across my desk. His grin is wide.

“Chipper called looking for you.”

* * *

Ed flipped open the cover of his notepad.

“What have you got, I haven’t got all day, and I need a name for the reward money.”

He wanted the guy to know he was an impatient man. The guy was weird, jittery, and nervous.

“Not here, it’s not safe,” the man said.

Fairchild took the call early. He got to the office before anyone else hoping to review the Abrams case file, and find a hidden clue. Sometimes, the mind will see something it saw a hundred times. All he wanted to do was help Mika. She was family, special, and that meant a lot to Ed. He didn’t want to let her down. He wanted his protégé to make it in the big time. The call came in asking for him personally. There was no one else around for backup. He had been there before, forced to deal with an obscure nobody with some hot new information. The news had broadcast little progress on the case, but mentioned the reward money was upped. The male voice on the phone gave instructions on the meeting place. He sounded sincere.

So there was Ed standing in a parking lot, with a guy who claimed to have important information, and the guy was terrified of something, or someone. The man in his late twenties, blond hair, was concerned about his safety. Ed surveyed the deserted lot and didn’t feel the same sense of urgency.

What’s with all of the drama?

“Let’s go inside. I don’t want to be out here where we can be seen.”

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The mysterious man walked away leaving Ed to ponder the intrigue. Reluctantly, Ed followed him. He wasn't at all concerned about his safety, but as an avowed homophobic, Ed had other distracting concerns about the guy. The man walked ahead of him, and opened the door to a rundown, deserted warehouse, leaving the door to slam in Ed's face. That made him mad.

What's with this guy?

Ed jerked the door open and went inside. It was pitch black, except for the blinding sunlight stream through a large window, directly across the way. Ed felt the painful, numbing voltage from the stun gun, and it took him down. That was the last thing he remembered. It had been too many years since Ed had worked the streets. He wasn't as sharp as he used to be. The skills of the once lightning-fast, young detective had diminished during his service behind a desk. When he started to come around, he had a severe headache, and his vision was blurred. He was surprised to find himself tied to a bed and naked.

“What the fuck?”

He tugged at the bindings that secured his wrists and ankles. Some of what Fairchild called the devils music was playing in the background. He could barely make out any of it. The song ended and instantly went into repeat. The music irritated Ed, but it was what the guy said that held his attention. It was clear the lawman was no longer in charge. Ed watched the guy read from the identification card inside his wallet, while sitting on the bed next to him.

“Edward Fairchild, Chief Inspector, Homicide.”

In days past, Ed had seen some scary sights. He lived through Vietnam and saw the vicious horrors of war. He had been in more than his share of fire fights on the job. He investigated senseless, violent and gruesome murder scenes over the years, but the fear and revulsion he was experiencing now far surpassed all the others. His assailant used isolation and control, the same tactics that Ed used against suspects during interrogations. On the wrong side of it now, Ed was vulnerable. He needed to stay calm and think. While he struggled to find a way out, he believed it was going to be his last day on earth. He would never again see his wife of all those years, the children he raised, or his grandchildren. He wet the bed. Embarrassed he closed his eyes.

“Ed.”

The perp shook his head and scolded.

“Look what you’ve done. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone, but you should be ashamed of yourself.”

He contemplated while he looked at Ed.

“Actually the blood will mix with it, and your secret will be ours forever.”

The man was visible now. Ed’s eyes and head had cleared. His dignity damaged beyond repair, he tried desperately to exhibit strength. He used the nickname given the man after the chase.

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“Are you the ‘runner’?”

“Runner? I don’t...oh wait—I get it. That’s what you call me, from the other day. Oh, I like that—the *Runner*. The look of satisfaction on his face was more than telling. He was enjoying the attention. While the perp mulled over his infamous nickname, Ed took the opportunity to try to establish some kind of rapport with his captor.

“Do you have a name?”

“I do have another name, and you know what? I’m going to give it to you, Chief Inspector Fairchild. It’s Michael, like the archangel, and Gates, like the rich guy.”

He got up and circled around to the foot of the bed while he spoke. Fairchild’s hunter eyes followed his every move. If there was any possible chance to get out of this Fairchild was ready to take it.

“In fact, because I’m going to kill you Chief Inspector, I owe it to you to tell you all about me.”

Gates stopped and thought for a moment.

“I watched Thaddeus Abrams die.”

Fairchild’s eyes grew wide.

“From a closet, I watched Abrams get whacked, and I mean *whacked*. She cut off his dick after she stabbed him to death.”

Gates grimaced pretending to be sickened and produced a fake shudder to highlight his supposed

revulsion.

“That *crazy* woman was ruthless. In the beginning, I was frightened, but then I got hard, you know—*hard*. Can you believe that? It was amazing.”

The excitement in Gates’ voice sent a cold spike up Fairchild’s back. The perp appeared to be otherworldly. There was nothing in the training manuals on how to deal with this kind of psychopath. Fairchild listened, studied him, and prayed silently. As if some calming force had just fallen over him, Gates’ demented demeanor shifted. His tone dropped to an almost apologetic whisper.

“I should probably back up a little. I was a patient of Dr. Abrams. We were lovers.”

Fairchild’s wrists began to bleed as the bindings cut into them, but he welcomed the pain as a sign he was still alive.

There is always a chance.

“You were lovers?”

“Yes Ed, lovers. Thad hated his old lady. Anna controlled the money. She dangled it over his head and made him dance like a marionette for it, so he wanted her dead. He knew that I had previous experience in that area when I came to him for counseling.”

“He was bound by law to tell us. Why didn’t? He worked closely with the department—”

“Ed, stop, please.”

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Gates pressed his cold index finger against Ed's lips.

“Don't try to figure it out. Thad was a very complicated man. He wasn't the man you thought he was, end of conversation.”

The fact that Gates had touched him was sickening enough, and Fairchild wanted to throw up. Gates' finger traced Ed's face to his forehead. He began stroking Ed's white hair. Fairchild tried to turn away causing Gates to stop.

“What's wrong Ed, afraid of the other side? Don't be so upset, I don't want you in that way.”

Ed's lips pressed tight together. All he needed was a weapon, and Gates' miserable life would be over.

“I don't like that look in your eyes, Chief Inspector. Here I am spilling my heart and soul out to you and all you want to do is kill me.”

Gates stood up and began pacing. He would stop, think, start pacing again, stop and glance at Ed again. He became agitated, and appeared to be debating what to do next.

“Michael listen to me, this can stop right here, right now. I will do everything in my power to get help for you.”

Gates' outburst came like a verbal tsunami.

“I'M NOT FINISHED TELLING THE STORY, ED! Let me finish the story.”

Gates held his tirade for a beat then shook off his anger during a brief private conversation he had within his mind.

“He wanted his wife dead, you see. I offered, but Thad said no way, that he wanted to keep me out of it. We talked about it every time we were together. Then *she* entered the picture, and Thad got a major heterosexual hard on, and guess who got pushed aside.”

Gates became more agitated. Turning toward Fairchild, he stiffened his body language. He sat back down next to him.

“About the time he realized that she was a bad girl well, I think that’s when he lost interest in her...at least sexually. That’s when he came up with the idea to get her to kill his old lady. He said that he loved me, and after the wife was gone, the money was his, we would go away together.”

A detective to the very end, Fairchild needed another piece of the puzzle.

“Who is *she*?”

“Lori Powers. Thad invited her over to his house that night for what he referred to as additional, required therapy. It was nothing more than a scam. He pretended to be concerned for her, and she fell for it. After she arrived, he spewed the plan about whacking his old lady.”

Gates shrugged it off like it happened every day.

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“She was stunned he knew she was a murderer, but she stayed pretty mellow, cool. She played him like I had never seen before. I was in awe as I watched. I was supposed to stop her if she got out of control, but as I said, it was such a rush.”

The blade glistened from the light in the room. Gates stroked it with a white cloth alternating between wiping it clean, and buffing it. Fairchild squirmed and tugged at the ropes, while Gates started pacing again. He watched Ed struggle and read his eyes.

“Don’t fight it Ed, it’s like being in space. No one can hear you scream.”

Stalling for time and advantage, Ed queried his captor.

“So why this? Why me? What do you gain by killing me?”

Gates froze in mid-step and nonchalantly looked at his victim.

“That’s a very good question, Ed.”

He pointed the knife directly at Fairchild and made a motion as if cutting from ear to ear. He smirked.

“You see Ed, oh I’m sorry I never asked you if I can call you Ed. May I call you Ed, Ed? Oh never mind it’s not going to matter in a minute, or so.”

Fairchild tried to pull hard enough to rip his hands from his wrists so he could slip out of the tie wraps. He

would kill Michael Gates with the stumps that remained. His pulse rate spiked.

“The reason you are going to be sacrificed, if you will, is because of my enormous respect for Lori. As I said, I’m in awe of her. She’s the *Mistress of Murder*, so beautiful, and so flawless.”

His hopes of escaping faded as he listened to Gates’ continued ranting. Having burned up every ounce of energy he had left while struggling to get free, Ed lay back on the bed breathing heavily.

“I watched her, Ed. I knew I had to emulate her. Is that the right word? I knew I needed to, if I was ever going to take her place. So I’m going to do to you what she did to all of her victims, only I’m going to get caught, then I’m going to confess to all of her murderous sins.”

“Why?”

“Why what, Chief?”

“Why get caught, what does that do for you?”

“Fame Inspector, it gives me a special place in criminal history.”

Gates took a seat at the foot of the bed.

“I lost the one I loved, she killed him. I have nowhere to go, no one to love, and nothing left. I am nothing. The only way I can punish her for what she took from me, is to take away her glory and fame. I’m going to steal her thunder.”

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Ed knew it was over and became sullen.

“But, because I understand her, and because I understand the act and crave it like she does, I must defer to the high priestess so she can continue.”

“But if you are caught, and she kills again, doesn’t that take away your fame?”

Gates stood up and walked around the bed to Fairchild’s side. He started to stroke Fairchild’s hair again making him squirm.

“Once I confess, she will have to go underground. Oh, she will kill again and the cycle will start all over, but no one will connect her to any of the previous murders.”

Fairchild objected, but Gates interrupted.

“And now, and this is going to make you very sad. I’m afraid, it’s time, Ed.”

Michael ignored Ed’s pleas.

“No, no, wait, I’ve got children, and grandchildren. I have a wife who loves me.”

“If you scream, I’ll only like it more, Ed.”

A demonic look appeared on Gates’ face. He raised the hand with the knife high over his head then brought it down hard and fast. Fairchild thrashed with everything he had left. His eyes squeezed tight, and his flush face crunched. His scream was deafening, but he didn’t feel the penetration, or the pain. A shuddering, shaking

Fairchild opened his eyes to see a telephone in his face. Gates' other hand held the knife an inch above his heart.

“Ed, now that you know how serious I am about this, I've got something for you to do.”

He waited for Fairchild's deep breathing to slow, and wiped his forehead with the white polishing cloth.

“Here, drink some water.”

Gates held out a plastic bottle of water for Fairchild to drink from. At first Fairchild pulled away, but thinking it might buy some time, he leaned forward to drink. The parched feeling in his mouth and throat dissipated. His breathing was shallower, but still pronounced. He watched his assailant and his executioner closely.

“I'm going to call your office. I want you to tell them where you are, and what is going to happen to you. I want you to tell them who I am. Tell them *I* am the killer. Can you do that?”

Ed nodded and trembled, while Gates dialed the telephone. After the second ring, Fairchild's secretary answered.

“Chief Inspector Fairchild's office, Wendy speaking, can I help you?”

“I need to speak directly to someone in authority regarding Ed Fairchild's murder.”

“Excuse me, could you repeat that, sir?”

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“Yes, I’m about to murder your boss, Ed Fairchild, and I would like to talk to someone in charge before I do. I’ll hold, but not for very long.”

Gates heard Wendy cover the receiver and mumble directions. He fully expected the phone line to be traced, but he didn’t care. He smiled mockingly at Fairchild as any one would when they were put on hold.

* * *

Wendy frantically asked if the caller was still on the line. The answer came slowly, as if it was taking every bit of his patience.

“I’m here.”

“Sir, Detective Blackwell will be taking your call. He’s on his way to the telephone now.”

Wendy was frightened and shaking so severely she didn’t know if the words that she said came out correctly.

“Thank you.”

Michael Gates waited and watched Ed struggling against the bindings. Harmon was gruff and not at all amused when he picked up the phone.

“This is Detective Blackwell.”

“Harmon, Harmon Blackwell? Just can’t run like you used to, huh.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“SIR, SIR? This is *Runner*. According to Ed here, that’s what you call me.”

Harmon was staggered, but recovered and dropped into his professional mode.

“Can you prove you’re the *Runner*?”

“Hum, well let’s see how many people know that nickname, or better yet, how many runners does it take to assault a pastor, or how slow is a big, dumb homicide dick? I could go on, but what’s the point? Listen, he may ramble a bit if you get my meaning. Listen closely, Harmon, because the next sounds you hear will be Ed’s last.”

Gates smirked while holding the receiver next to Ed.

Harmon’s hands waved in every direction for quiet. He shared the phone with Jake. They waited. A weak and exhausted voice came on the line.

“Harmon?”

“Ed?”

“It’s true Harmon, the runner has got me.”

“Ed, what the—”

“Harmon, LISTEN TO ME.”

Ed stared hard into Gates’ face.

“The corner of Twenty-third and Delaney, brown

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warehouse, I don't know any more than that.”

“You hold on Ed, we're on our way.”

“LISTEN Harmon, I'll be dead before you get here. The perp's name is Michael Gates.”

The phone was jerked away from Fairchild, but they could hear him shout in the background, to “Tell Lucille I love her.”

Gates started to speak, but Harmon cut him off.

“You touch him and I'll kill you with my bare hands.”

Calmly, dispassionately Gates replied.

“I've been waiting for someone to kill me for a very long time.”

He placed the telephone back on the receiver. There was no mistaking the look of resignation on Ed's face. Gates simply shook his head.

“I'm afraid it's time, Inspector.”

His heart pounding out of control, Ed focused on the eyes of the man who was about to end his life. He said goodbye to his wife again, and followed that with a brief prayer for the salvation of his soul. Gates allowed him to finish the litany before he leaned over and whispered.

“Ed, I promise I won't rape you.”

Ed Fairchild's last thought was the contemplation of that final statement. His mouth opened, his face contorted, his eyes froze, and his last breath escaped.

As he had witnessed with Abrams, Gates replicated every detail of Lori's heinous acts although the thrusting and stabbing was far more vigorous. He cherished each penetration of the blade, until he felt the rush of an orgasm. He backed away from the bed. The victim's genitals lay on the dead man's abdomen. The knife protruded upward from the center of the chest. He ruthlessly proved that the blood would mix with the urine forever obscuring their secret. He kept his promise, and did not rape Edward Fairchild.

He felt strong again. Gates knew he missed the hunt and the kill. Since he had hooked up with Abrams, he had gone dormant. Now, he was alive again. It truly was unfortunate, he thought, that it would all be over soon.

The white cloth was dipped into Fairchild's blood and "Ed" was written in blood on the wall. He had to leave some things behind for the "stupid cops" to tie it all together. Michael Gates, the sick, demented serial killer, calmly walked away from the warehouse and listened for the footsteps of fame to catch up with him.

* * *

There are times when you can't move fast enough. You claw desperately at space and time, but the harder you fight, the harder it fights back. Obstacles that would otherwise not have hindered your progress, find their way into your path. I can't get to Ed fast enough to save him.

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I'm driving because I have to. I don't care about Harmon's complaints, or who is in the way. We narrowly miss pedestrians and other vehicles as I swerve. The tires screech, sirens wail and blue lights flash. Harmon is alternately screaming, and crying.

I want Gates. I want him bad. I want to jam my Glock into his mouth and kill him. I want to save Ed. The second hand of the clock inside my mind sweeps faster. The seconds Ed has left are counting down. Ed believed in me. He taught me how to survive.

One more street and we're there. I can see the warehouse. SWAT teams leap out of their vans into the parking lot and surround the building. Black and whites cordon off the dirty street. Unmarked cars arrive from every direction. We all want to save him.

We're almost there, Ed. Hang on.

I slam on the brakes and the car stops abruptly in front of the doorway. Two uniforms are already there with their weapons drawn. A vice detective from the house comes out of the warehouse with a nine-millimeter Berretta in his hand, crying. Kicking my door open, I jump out of the car. Harmon grabs the detective, Williams I think his name is. He is sobbing and can barely answer. He finally forces it out.

“We're too late.”

“Where? Where?”

“Second floor...back—”

The detective's voice fades as we sprint inside and up the back stairs. As "We're too late" reverberates inside my head, I know there is no need to use precautionary entry tactics. My whole body is tense. My hands are trembling. I don't want to go in. I can't.

"Oh, no."

I'm riveted by what I see, can hardly breathe, or look away. Collapsing inside, I fall back against a wall. My Glock is gripped tightly in my fist. Any justification I had for mankind evaporates instantly. I reach out for Harmon, but he is lost in his own horror.

Ed is lying in a river of blood like a sacrificial lamb with his arms outstretched. He looks as if he is waiting for an embrace from God. My hand slowly rises to cover the open space of my mouth. Tears burn and sting my face on their way to the floor. After all the years on the job, I thought I could take it, was prepared, and desensitized.

Harmon is weeping, everyone in the death chamber weeps. The room is awash in heartbreak. The paramedics push through us. They are the only ones at the scene still holding onto a glimmer of hope that Ed might still be faintly lingering. They are wrong.

I don't know how, but I make it to his bedside. His vacant eyes stare upwards as if he was searching for his Maker to save him. His body is mutilated. Blood is still foaming out of his mouth, nostrils and each wound. I reach out to touch his still warm face.

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“I’m sorry.”

He cannot hear me.

“I’m sorry, Ed.”

Harmon comes up behind me and we lock in a hug. All of those who have raced to protect Ed Fairchild begin to slowly file out of the building. Nothing is right anymore. Nothing makes sense. Evil is still one step ahead of good.

Right now, after the evil, it’s up to Harmon and I to find Ed’s executioner. It’s our case. The impersonal detachment necessary of one human being to investigate the death of another is now required of us. We’ll have to bury our pain and wait to mourn another day. We have to find the “Who’s Your Daddy” killer, or *Runner*—Michael Gates. It’s personal. I make a silent promise to Ed.

I’ll find him, I swear. He’ll pay for this,

Harmon asks if he should call Mika.

I nod because I know I can’t do it. I know I will lose it for good. There is only one mind-set now, just one. I don’t care about anything else.

Harmon turns away and heads for a corner of the room. His hand draws out his cell phone and the number is dialed. I watch him wipe away tears thinking about how it is going to devastate her. I can barely hear him say it.

“Mika? Harmon. I’m afraid...you won’t believe...”

That’s all I can take. I close my eyes and picture what his words are doing to her. I never could take it when she cried. My fingers press against my temples.

His head shakes as he gives Mika the details. He stops talking and turns to look at me. Again, he shakes his head and stares at the floor, while giving her time to absorb it all.

There is work to do. My grieving will have to wait. I draw two latex gloves out of my pocket to begin the process of evidence collection. The others have already put in a call for the crime lab along with every other resource the department has to offer. I already know the victim, the where, and the how. When I find Gates, I will find out the why. Right before I put a bullet in his brain.

The process is simple and we can do it in our sleep. The cardinal rule is to not touch anything and contaminate the crime scene. Even in the initial dark moments, when each of us burst into the room, we were careful not to contaminate it.

I shout orders. The paramedics leave knowing their attempts to revive him are futile. They did their job and know when to leave so we can do ours. Other homicide detectives search inside. Uniforms roam near and around the outside of the warehouse searching for any possible clues no matter how minute, or obscure. A few uniforms canvass for witnesses.

SWAT, whose primary function is to take down

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violent offenders on-site, is not needed here. They offer to help in any way, but I tell them to pack it up.

The crime lab truck arrives, and the technicians assail the area with brushes, tape and the other tools of their trade. The department's photographer knows her craft and captures the scene properly on film. The flash goes off repeatedly. Because the latest victim is one of us, everyone works harder.

Someone has to call Lucille. Notification of next of kin is difficult enough when you don't know the victim. It's impossible when you do. Again, Harmon does the dirty job. I can't face Lucille, or the kids either.

Outside, members of the media are swarming. I hate them almost as much as I hate Gates. They are demanding to come inside with "It's the public's right to know" as their litany. I try my best to protect Captain Edward Fairchild's dignity, despite the fact I was unable to protect his life. I look over at him. A little over an hour has passed.

Out of my pocket comes my recorder. I start recording the gruesome details. The initial significant notable difference between Ed's murder, and Abrams's, is this crime scene is ripe with clues.

The postmortem changes begin with Rigor mortis decomposition, succeeded by the liver mortis skin discoloration. Ed's body is cooling down. I feel it. The techs finish with the body and make room for the coroner's people. The M.E., affectionately nicknamed "Quincy" by all of us, officially declares my captain, and

friend, deceased. Even hearing the word sucks.

The body bag is lying open on the gurney. With all due care and respect, they lift Ed's body and place his remains inside. The sound of the closing zipper is like fingernails on a blackboard. The process is cold and clinical. It has to be even for Ed.

Officers and investigators stop what they were doing and watch as he is taken away. Sobbing is heard everywhere. I watch scenes flash through my head of the good times with Ed.

He always had that quirky smile. Not long ago, over a cold one, during a discussion of human mortality, he said we were actually dying every day of our lives, from the time we were born. I had learned a lot about life from the perspective of a man who had seen more than his share of it. Sometimes, I didn't get what he was talking about, sometimes I did. Harmon broke into my memories.

“Mika is on her way.”

I never wanted her to leave. I thought of a million excuses to get her to come back, but not for this reason. Still, I was glad she was on her way.

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The rage was there along with the control and domination. The body position and the killing technique were the same, multiple stab wounds, and castration. Ed had struggled for freedom as evidenced by the wrist and ankle marks. There didn't appear to be any sexual assault. Painted on the wall was—Ed. It was the same, but not the same. As I talk into my recorder, Harmon walks over with a CD hanging on a pencil.

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“It was playing when Williams first busted in. He turned it off just before we got here. The CD player is set to repeat song number three. Maybe Mika will be able to shed some light as to its significance.”

“We’ll listen to it when we get back to the house. Did they get your conversation with him on tape?”

“I got it all. I swear, I swear on my mother’s eyes.”

“I know.”

My hand finds his huge shoulder and I grab tight. I want to make Gates suffer, too.

“Any witnesses?”

“The guys are still out there looking. It’s a bright, sunny morning and it’s not even 9:00 yet.

Someone had to be around, somebody must have seen something.”

We keep our own anger and rage harnessed in as best as we can. We need to stay focused and check the emotional baggage. As I look to see how much tape I have left on my cassette recorder my cell phone rings.

“Tell me it isn’t true. You tell me Ed Fairchild is alive. This is madness, absolute madness! The world has gone insane, I was just with him.”

It’s difficult enough without hearing her cry. Nothing I say will make it any easier.

“Harmon and I are still at the scene. We have enough right now to hang this guy, we’ll have more by the time you get here.”

She struggles to say she’d be here soon.

“I’VE GOT A CLEAN PRINT. I’ll take it to the lab and get started. I should have something for you by this afternoon.”

The tech is ecstatic. The CD player and the CD have clean prints that appear to be the same. I have an uneasy feeling about his enthusiastic state of mind. The technician might very well lose them both. A vision of O. J. Simpson’s botched investigation passes through my mind. I watch the tech carry them as if they were a human heart being transported for transplant.

“Fingerprints, CD, various fibers, and blond hair strands? What’s up with this guy? He’s never been this careless before,” Harmon says.

“Game’s over? Time ran out? He wants to be caught? If he is as intelligent as we think he is, he probably has another plan, an out, you know like insanity. Who knows? Who can figure out what’s in his head.”

Harmon tosses out “Mika?” to answer me. That one is easy to acknowledge. She would know. I don’t care why he wants to be caught. I just want to stop him. I’m willing to do that any way I can. A uniform bursts in shouting. He can hardly breathe from the hundred-yard dash he has just run.

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“We’ve got a witness.”

We give him time to stop hyperventilating, but anxiously prompt him. Swallowing hard, the officer provides the information.

“A guy down the street was walking his Doberman. He saw a male in his late twenties to early thirties, blond hair, ponytail, casually driving a late-model silver Lexus out of the parking lot right here.”

He points to the floor.

“Do you think it was Gates?”

Harmon looks at me then turns to the officer and asks if he got a plate number.

“Yes sir, Alpha-Nine-Three-Lima-Golf-Tango. He wrote it down, no mistake, He said it was as if the guy didn’t care if he saw it. I found him across the street, waiting. Said he didn’t want to interfere until we finished up. He said he didn’t want any of us beating him to death by mistake.

“What a jerk,” Harmon says.

Sometimes the public’s mentality is dumbfounding. You can only blame so much on the gene pool. Harmon shoves the officer in the direction he wants him to go.

“Call in and tell them what you’ve got. Get me an address, telephone number—anything. He’s making this too easy,” Harmon says.

Cary Allen Stone

“Who cares? We’ll follow the trail he’s leaving and take him down.”

From downstairs, I hear another officer scream out my name. We converge halfway. I can tell he is seasoned because the information he carries is presented with urgency, but with far less drama.

“Anything on the plate?”

“Better, a black and white’s tailing him as we speak.”

* * *

Harmon shouts into his radio.

“Do you hear me? Stop the vehicle, but do not take him. Advise that we’re on our way.”

We vault into my filthy, unmarked car. We can’t have some angry, overzealous officer taking him out before his time, unless it’s me.

Harmon doesn’t protest my driving this time.

“Damn Jake, this is too good to be true. What’s up with this guy? Clever enough to elude capture through multiple murders, and then suddenly he’s brain dead? I don’t get it.”

“Let’s just get there. We can analyze him after.”

I stop talking and concentrate on driving, on Ed, and on a psychopath. Harmon’s hands wave in all directions

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trying to keep me from killing us, or someone else, before we get there. My adrenaline is maxed out. Harmon is the first to see where they have Gates boxed in, and his hands flail around blocking my view. Sure as taxes, it's a late-model, silver Lexus. Sure as death, the plate numbers match. Sure as hell, inside waiting patiently, is Michael Gates. Officers surround the Lexus on all sides with weapons braced against their cars. Both of his hands are locked on the steering wheel. My braking technique almost costs Harmon some teeth as my car screeches to a stop.

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU, MAN?”

The senior officer on the scene approaches us as we exit my car. I study Gates from a distance of about thirty feet. With an emotional plea on Ed’s behalf, the sergeant suggests something, barely above a whisper, that would invite criminal charges against us. There is no doubt we all had the same thought. We have all seen the bad guys walk when they should have fried. Not an hour ago, I would have shot Gates myself.

“Plate, car and perp’s description are dead on. I think we should finish it right here. I’d hate to see some lawyer, judge, or jury let him walk, you know what I mean?” the sergeant says.

Harmon gets in the sergeant’s face and gives him a stinging reply.

“I want him by the book.”

“Just a thought. He’s all yours.”

They all loved Ed. I hope my reassuring nod is enough. It's hard to keep a cool head at a during a white heat moment. Emotions are peaked. It's never easy, but that was where all of the training had to come in. I have to drop the personal side of it, at least for now. Surveying the area, I see the media hounds sniffing at the scene. Gates sits patiently knowing if he moves. He is a dead man. It's not his time, yet.

"I'm taking command of the scene, Sergeant. Order him out, and I don't want to hear a single gunshot. I hear shots and I'll personally shoot whoever fired them, clear?" Harmon says.

"Yes, sir."

The officer turns rapidly and shouts the order into his radio. We watch as the officers holding a perimeter around the Lexus, execute their duties professionally as they are trained to do. Within seconds, it's over. Gates is cuffed and in custody. They are reading him his rights as we approach. He stares at me the entire time as if he knows something I don't. I can't wait to get him to the house. For Harmon, this man outran him during the chase. He's the man responsible for multiple homicides. More importantly, this man murdered Ed. Harmon's lower lip quivers. I squeeze his arm as he points an accusatory finger and shouts at Gates.

"You have the right to an ass-kicking. Anything you say, or do to prevent one can and will be used against you. Do you understand what I'm saying, punk?"

Harmon is blinded by rage. I bristle and take up a

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position between them, after I see Harmon's hand twitch toward his service revolver during his terse reprimand.

“Put the pin back in.”

It's the best I can come up with to settle him down. I can only hope Harmon is listening to me. Then I hear the sound of Gates' dispassionate voice. He is clear and calm as he watches Harmon.

“I hate monkeys in monkey suits.”

The statement alone could hasten his demise, but when he follows it by blowing Harmon a perverted kiss, I have to step in.

“Easy son, I want you back at the station in one piece.”

It was obvious he was fearless, daring, unapologetic and intractable. His has a contemptuous sneer on his face. I want to smack the sneer off his face. In my mind, I picture a 9mm bullet whistling and twisting through the air penetrating his smooth baby forehead. The cop killer is baiting us. Maybe he's hoping for a “suicide by cop.” That's what some of these crazy bastards really want. They're afraid to pull the trigger on themselves.

“I can't wait to get you downtown. Are you responsible for the murder of Edward Fairchild?” Harmon says.

Harmon's inquiry is met with the opening act of the Michael Gates show.

“The white man has been subverted by indulgent liberals, political prostitutes, corporate cannibals and the mongrelized media.”

As he is escorted away for transport, Gates shouts to the media vultures. Every beady look, and ridiculous sound bite, is captured on videotape. It freaks me out that Gates’ remarks are the same ones the militia used. The last remark he makes, a reference to the death penalty, barely makes it out of the squad car, as he is placed into the caged back seat.

All I have to do now is get him to the precinct alive, and get Harmon sedated. We walk back to the car, climb in and follow close behind the transporting black and white. I tell Harmon I will do the interrogation because he is excessively wired. He doesn’t argue with me. We make a pact along the way that assuming Gates is convicted, and whatever sentence he is given, after the trial—be it the drip, or the jolt, we swear to be there. If he does manage to be freed by some insane judge, we swear we will personally hold court and carry out our own execution of his sentence.

Driving off, we snake through the ever-present disgruntled onlookers, who jeer at us because they have issues with law enforcement. Reporters are running alongside my car screaming asinine questions. It’s amazing. The job isn’t worth it.

Maybe Lori and I will disappear.

Harmon, still full of his personal convictions and rectitude, can’t stop himself from voicing opinions all the

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way to the house.

“That’s one villainous, arrogant and cold-blooded, sadistic scumbag. Why didn’t he run?”

As I contemplate Harmon’s question about Gates’ lack of interest in eluding us any longer, another silver Lexus pulls up alongside. I’m surprised to see Lori. Her window slides down and she calls to me.

“Jake, hey, where are you going?”

I point ahead at the black and white.

“We just captured the serial killer.”

Lori is visibly stunned by the news. Her reaction is a contradiction. Maybe the thought of being so near a serial killer scares her.

“Call me,” she says.

* * *

I never had sympathy for the devil, assuming there is one. As the story goes, a fallen angel had a seat at the right hand of God. He knew the rules, and yet he still gave it all up. Either he has a huge set of cojones, or he is stupid. Interrogation room B is located on the third floor, behind the secure doors of CID. Inside the small room, roughly eight feet by ten feet, there are three wooden chairs, and a metal table. The paint is olive drab. There are no windows, except for the one wall with the one-way glass. I walk inside, drop a file on the table, and look at the pathetic Michael Gates. He smiles back politely

looking completely blameless. He is seated as far from the door as possible, because I want him to feel isolated and alone, disconnected from the world. I want him to feel vulnerable and exposed, like Ed felt on his deathbed. I want him to know that I control him. The runner is in ankle-shackles, how appropriate.

Gates will do everything in his power to try to control me, whether by the inflection of his voice, his movements, or by how much he is willing to reveal. We will play a game of introjections. I will feign an adoption of his sick values to gain his confidence, and he will either buy it, or deny it. In any case, I plan to go through all the motions. After I get him rolling, I will become a sympathetic listener. They all love to talk about themselves and their sad childhoods. Before we even begin, he makes a startling statement with a straight face.

“I want to confess,” he says.”

“Don’t you want to hear the charges first?”

I haven’t even smacked him yet.

“No sir.”

“You’re waiving your right to have an attorney present?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hang on, let me get the equipment and we can get started.”

There is no outward sign of hostility from me. As I

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get up to leave, Gates asks for some water. I can't wait to hear what I'm going to get out of him for a glass of water. Cracking the door open, I direct the officer outside to get the video technician and his equipment, and a glass of water. It doesn't take long before the equipment is set up and the technician signals ready. Again, he is read his rights for the tape and I take a seat. I listen while Gates, for some unknown reason, starts confessing.

God help him if he's jerking me around.

"...While dad was off on some aircraft carrier chasing international terrorists, mom was perfectly at home beating me. When dad came home, he took out his drunken rages on me. I hated them both. I hated my brothers and sisters who never felt the pain of the abuse."

A note is made on my legal pad to check with the Department of the Navy.

"I killed both my parents, used a shotgun and blew their heads right off, I made my siblings watch, and then I killed them one by one."

Grabbing my pen, I make another note to contact the National Crime Database to see if that case file exists. Frankly, I'm surprised by his candor. He doesn't hold back, and gives all of the gory detail, telling each story as if he's being interviewed by one of those whack job talk show hosts. The way he is just sitting there without a care in the world makes the process even more unnerving. While he talks, I can't help but think he looks like a good kid. Walking past him on the street, you would never have had a clue how close to the edge he was, or how

much rage was inside of him.

Was he from a dysfunctional family? Yes. Was he more than a predatory street punk? Yes. Is he evil? I have no doubt about it.

Because he appears to want to tell the entire Michael Gates' story, I do nothing to push him into running silent and deep. Instead, I encourage him with a few understanding nods. After two hours, he is still going strong with no sign of letting up. The last mental count I made, he had already confessed to fourteen murders. I'll press him for details of each murder later, but right now, I have to know one thing.

"So Michael, my question is why?"

"Why did I kill? I told you."

Before he goes off again about his screwed-up family life, I cut him off.

"Actually the lawyers and psychiatrists will deal with those issues. I want to know why you decided to reveal this information at this time. We had no idea who you were, didn't have a clue that you were involved. Why do you want to confess, why now?"

My eyes narrow and my jaw tenses.

"I want to release the demons inside, Jake."

Until now, Gates' eyes haven't left mine, but now he looks past me, and sits up straight in his chair. His facial expressions and body language reveal nothing. For all I

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know, he has been lying since he started talking. Time will tell if he is as brutal and evil as he claims to be. All I need for him to do now is to say on tape that he murdered Ed. Gates looks back hard at me and points his index finger to the side of his head.

“There are all kinds of things that aren’t right in here.”

The man is articulate, well read, and probably knows all the ins and outs of modern psychiatry, and criminal law. I assume he is setting up his insanity defense. The next few answers will determine what Michael Gates is up to, whether or not he will continue to cooperate, and whether or not he is looking for a deal. Gates searches the Spartan interrogation room. My guess is he is looking for a hole to crawl out of.

“I interrogated Ed before I killed him. I’m familiar with all of your interrogation techniques. I liked Ed.”

He watches closely for my reaction.

“I have been previously incarcerated.”

“You said something about that earlier.”

I make fictitious notes on my legal pad and glance inside a folder for effect.

“But that was for some small time crime. How and when did you graduate to the big time?”

“There are things you learn in prison you couldn’t possibly learn in a university.”

“But from a misdemeanor to murder?”

“You’re trying too hard, Jake. You don’t know me. You will never know me. I’ve had to make choices you are incapable of understanding.”

There is a noticeable change in his mood. I sense restlessness, uneasiness. He starts fidgeting.

“I knew my day would come. This is my day, Jake.”

Since the beginning of our talk, I have been using the relaxed “nothing you say is too big” for me persona. Gates is making me more irritable now, than when I first walked in. I oscillate between wanting to figure him out, and wanting to beat him to death. One thing I know for sure is, I have been in this chair too long. It’s no more made for my comfort than his, so I stand. Gates makes a shallow inquiry about my comfort level.

“Are you getting cranky, Jake? I didn’t rape him you know. I killed Ed, but I never touched him sexually. I want you to know that.”

Got him.

I try to count to ten, but that never works for me, a deep breath helps. I have to let that sick, perverted psychopath ramble on no matter how abhorrent the story is.

“Did you enjoy killing, Michael?”

“I would have to ask you the same question, Jake. You killed that young girl, did you like it?”

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His facial expression displays honest and sincere interest in my answer, yet I know he is testing me. Depending on how I react will now determine how much more I will get from him. I have seen it before. He's just like all the other wise guys trying to spar with their keeper. They think it empowers them. Gates studies himself in the glass.

"I had no choice Michael, I'm sworn to protect society. I didn't seek to kill her. Unlike you, I don't seek out victims." I give him time to digest.

"I don't like guns."

He turns impish, and slips into a childlike rhyme.

"A gun is no fun. No, I'd rather watch a face contort from my blade."

He looks upward for no reason, certainly not because he is seeking divine guidance.

"I'm completely amoral and malevolent, Jake. You can look up both words later. I don't just like to kill. I love to perpetrate evil, especially death. I embrace death. I don't fear it. I experience the eroticism of death through each of my victims. But I don't understand why they didn't love me."

"Why who didn't love you?"

He becomes animated and impatient. His hands clench.

"What are we talking about here, Jake? My victims,

of course, I mean why didn't I matter to them. Take Thad, for instance, we were fine until she came along."

* * *

Because of Ed's death, Harmon was temporarily the Chief Inspector. The new position was a blow to Harmon's entire outlook. No longer was he able to shirk certain disagreeable rules. Now, he had to enforce them with impartiality. From behind the one-way glass, Harmon grumbled to himself.

"There are real consequences for your actions, Gates," Harmon said.

Detective Melissa Collins joined him. She had been out doing follow-up at the crime scene.

"What do you have for me?"

Collins told Harmon that the coroner was about to start Ed's autopsy if he wanted to be present. Harmon told her to call the man and tell him he would not be.

"The news is out in the hall screaming for answers, sir. And the rest of us are collecting a fund for Lucille and the kids."

Harmon just nodded. She watched him reach into his pocket. All the while, he never stopped staring at Gates through the glass. Outside of the observation room, the air was thick with anger, frustration and sadness. The usual banter and excess volume between all ranks was noticeably absent. Instead, they spoke in muted whispers.

After the Evil

As Collins left the observation room, Harmon heard her apologize.

“Sorry ma’am.”

Collins almost walked into Mika.

As Mika turned the corner into the room, it was obvious she had been crying since leaving Quantico. Her eyes were swollen, and her lips were drawn in tight. She grasped Harmon. Her voice trembled as she talked through the tears.

“I just can’t believe it.”

Harmon threw his two big arms around her as if protecting her from an imaginary assailant. He searched above her head for God. A single tear trailed down his cheek.

“He got in early before any of us, took the call. All of the files were on his desk. He was trying to find something we all missed. He wanted so much to find it, for you.”

Harmon released Mika, nudged away another tear, and pointed an outstretched finger at Gates.

“That’s him, that’s the man. We have him now. He won’t do any more harm. And he will pay Mika, he will pay.”

Mika focused on Gates. Her mind whirled through all of the dismal, grisly murder scenes as she tried to put his face to each. She tried to pull together all of the

interlocking pieces of the puzzle in her mind. The last piece she placed was Ed's.

She also watched Jake inside the barren interrogation room. He was only inches away from the suspect. She instinctively knew what he was thinking. Harmon withdrew from her.

"I'll be back. I have to brief the vultures. Can you believe it? Ed's passing left me in charge."

The big man looked to her for sympathy.

"You're a wonderful successor to a great man. He'll be watching." Mika said.

Harmon forced a smile. He turned and quietly left the cramped observation room without saying another word. Mika stepped as close to the glass as was humanly possible. She placed a hand against it. She resumed her professional demeanor because there was work to do. She had to concentrate on the words of the man inside the next room. There could not be any doubt.

* * *

"Who is she?"

I ask patiently, although I'm tired of his mind games. He's arrogant.

You're busted Gates. Give it up.

"Lori Powers."

After the Evil

His answer staggers me. He could not have blindsided me better if he had used a Louisville slugger. I can't believe he said her name.

How did he know Lori?

"She was a patient of my late, great lover Dr. Thaddeus Abrams just like you. Small world isn't it?"

Gates presses a finger to his lips.

"Thad told me all of the intimate details of your two pathetic lives. It almost brought tears to my eyes. Ms. Powers' troubled past, you all brokenhearted over murdering that girl. I'm sorry, did I say murdering?"

He is pushing all of my buttons, but I can't react. His claim of Abrams sleeping with Lori is outrageous. I need to stay in the game to make he pays for every syllable. I need to hear all of it.

Focus Jake.

"So anyway, like I told Ed, Thaddeus got a hard on over her and—"

"You lost him to a woman? You killed Abrams over jealousy? Couldn't do it for him anymore?"

"THAD LOVED ME."

Gates finally loses it. Another place and time, and it would have been me tied to the bed, but I control the room while Gates feels the pain.

Cary Allen Stone

“I never said they were lovers. Thad saw her professionally. He did, for a while he told me, feel sexually attracted to her, but he got over it.”

That brings sigh of relief to my psyche. I focus on cool, impartial and all business.

“So why did you kill him?”

“Because Thad thought he was better than me, just like all of the others. They were controlling, dominating, misguided fools that deserved to die. The world is far better off now because of what I have done.”

Gates cools to a hardened, cold-blooded predator.

“I’d do them all again. Let me out of here, and I’ll clean up the rest.”

My heart is breaking, my soul is crying, and my head pounds like never before. I see Ed lying on the blood-soaked mattress. I see the girl’s frozen death face. I see Lori’s face with a look of bewilderment. I desperately need to walk away. Michael Gates is a biting, edgy character in a sick, perverted play. Standing, I march toward the door. He expresses surprise that I’m leaving, because he wants to continue blustering about his evil career and philosophies. I know he’s fucking with me, just to get me to reach over and strangle him to death.

“Michael, you’re done cleaning up. Keep in mind that those evil people you murdered are going to be sitting right next to you in hell for all of eternity.”

After the Evil

Slamming the door behind me, I know I would have lost control if I had stayed another second. The officer guarding the door asks if I'm okay. I can't answer. Gates finally got to me. I need to decompress. If I'm ever going to collapse under pressure from the job, this is the time. I have a pain that requires medication, so I reach into my pocket for what I have left of my painkillers. As I start down the hall toward observation, I'm surprised to see Mika come out. She sees the prescription bottle in my hand.

“No Jake, that's not going to help. We all need to pull together, as difficult as it is. I need you on this.”

My only other alternative is punching my fist through the wall. I don't want to disappoint her, or break her heart, not now, and not ever again. I look down at the pills in my hand. She is just what I need to get back to normal, and she's right. With a dour look on his face, Harmon approaches the two of us in the hallway. His eyes are wet and red. His words are quiet, but deliberate.

“That was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I had to announce to the world the death of someone I love.”

Mika and I exchange looks. We know what has to be done. We have to finish it. Just then, there is a commotion down the hall.

* * *

Down the hall comes a bright orange and yellow flash from the barrel of a gun. A clap of thunder

reverberates inside CID. The spent shell ejected from the officer's stolen weapon bounces and spins to a stop on the floor. Everyone scatters for cover. Most fall to the floor, while others find refuge behind walls, or under desks. Each of us tries desperately to control our panic. Weapons are drawn and the smell of cordite is strong.

“SHOTS FIRED! OFFICER DOWN!”

After the struggle with Gates, I see the officer fall back into the hallway. Crimson bubbles rise up out of a hole in his chest. A river of blood flows to the floor. His body quivers several times before he expels his final breath. I'm unarmed. My weapon is inside a lock box just outside of the door to the interrogation room. It's department policy to secure it there during the interrogation of suspects. Caught between the dead officer to my right, Mika to my left, the ceiling, floor and walls. I have nowhere to go. Gates steps out into the hallway and draws down on me. I fall hard to the floor. Curled up, I wait to feel the burning sensation of the entry wounds. A double-tap rings out. The sound of two thuds follows as if a hammer pounds on meat. Sometimes shock prevents the pain, I don't feel a thing. I see Gates go down. He lets out a high-pitched wail during the fall. Blood spouts out of the two holes in his chest. A trickle of blood drips from the corner of his mouth.

When she first saw Gates with the weapon, Mika shoved Harmon back into the observation room. She targeted Gates in an instant and fired twice. Harmon recovered quickly with his service revolver drawn and took a position in front of her. There was no way he was going to let her take a bullet.

After the Evil

Had I not hit the floor when I did, I'd have been joining Gates on the other side. That wouldn't have been so bad because it would have given me more time in eternity to torment and punish the worthless scumbag. Mika's expertise and precision with her service weapon, however, prevents my one-way ticket. I get up off the floor and race to Gates and the officer. Harmon checks the officer's pulse. He's gone. Gates is still breathing slightly. The stolen weapon is taken away. Mika comes up and stands over Gates with her hands locked around her Glock pointing it in his face.

He slowly opens his glassy eyes and coughs up more blood. He blinks several times until he can see her. Two words pass through his lips, but there is no sound to accompany them. There is no mistake about what they are.

“Thank you.”

A millisecond later Gates is dead. The only regret any of us has, except for Mika, is that he didn't suffer. A detective checks for a throat pulse near the hemorrhaging wound and nods. The division shifts into overdrive.

Mika asks if I'm okay. Grasping her forearm with one hand, I force a smile and brace myself, while my other hand searches my body for any sign of physical trauma. I hope everyone is too distracted to see my hands shaking.

“Fine, I think.”

My hand stops searching, but Harmon starts pawing

me for injuries.

“You okay, Jake?”

My hands are still shaking, but not as bad. Harmon notices. I check to see if Mika is okay.

“Are you okay?”

What it feels like to take a life cannot be defined, or described. Everyone reacts differently. There’s no way to prepare you how and what you should feel, or say. The reaction is very personal.

Mika stares at Gates. She knows what he was and what he has perpetrated on society. Like all of us, she wanted him to pay for his sins, but none of us wants to be the hand of God, to affect the final judgment.

As I take her service weapon, her hand is trembling, but she is amazingly strong-willed and takes command instantly. Individual officers respond and go about the job of securing the scene. The paramedics and techs arrive. Harmon commands the rest of the troops to stand down.

“It’s all over, people.”

I swear I hear Ed in Harmon’s voice.

9

It's 6 p.m. and dusk is approaching from the east. This morning our friend was murdered. By late morning, we had captured his killer. Through the hours since we

learned the details of his miserable life. By early evening, the perp was dead. It's a time of conflicting emotions. Mika and I walk outside and look for a place to hide. A dimly lit booth will serve the purpose. A bar is always a great place to hide in. Everyone in there is hiding from something, so they understand.

The place is small and nondescript, but nearby. Mika's head turns constantly as if she is expecting someone to notice her as the person who killed the psychopath. The media vultures are still circling the precinct. They don't have a clue who shot Gates. When they find out, the circus will begin.

"Is the world a failure, or are some of us just failures?" Mika says.

There's no real answer. Her mind is just wading through the morass, part of the post-traumatic thing.

"Does a guy like Gates plead insanity before God?"

She needs to get it out with someone who cares. I understand what she is going through.

"The shield says Fidelity, Bravery, and Integrity—not assassin."

"Don't even go there. Sometimes a situation requires violence. You saved my life."

She just became a member of the club. Few of us join by desire. The militia girl paid for my membership. Her facial expression changes from angry to uncertain.

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She alternately dominates the conversation then goes stone silent. Mika is analyzing, rationalizing. It comes with the territory. For her the color of truth has changed from black and white, to a medium shade of gray. The nightmares will come later.

“Back in 1999, I arrested a skinny, drug-infested, white-trash biker girl who was responsible for numerous robberies, rapes, abductions and murders. She flirted with me as I drove her in. Said she wanted to have Hard-core sex with me in the backseat. Didn’t faze me at all, I just did my job. Two years ago, I took down a male suspect, a Latin Kings enforcer named Bobby ‘Bang- Bang’ Benitez. He had just ‘hotshot’ a drug dealing competitor with a syringe full of battery acid. The remains of the victim grossed out all of the guys, but I took it without a problem.”

She takes a sip, pauses.

“Last year, I bagged another female suspect with so many rough edges a sandblaster couldn’t smooth her out. She had bleached blond hair, crooked teeth and a miniskirt that covered her snatch by a hair. Singlehandedly, that goddess had bludgeoned and stabbed four people. I hauled her ass in and never once had the slightest urge to vomit.”

Mika’s stories are nauseating me. I put my beer down on the table. I know what’s coming next.

“But Gates, Michael *goddamn* Gates, bothers me.”

After a few heartbeats pass I tell her.

“I don’t think you heard most of what he said in there. It might make it a little easier.”

“No I didn’t, I got there a few minutes before you came out.”

As I speak, I see Gates sitting in that interrogation room with a demonic look in his dark eyes.

“He professed bizarre, fanatic religious views, and anti-government rhetoric, his preference for castration. He said if he was horny, he’d get it on with the corpse, At times, he was perfectly calm then he’d flip into a rage. Not once did he show any indication of remorse. He made up some story about Lori and Abrams. God only knows how many corpses he actually left decomposing. He was up to twenty plus when you—”

I catch myself and apologize. She moves right past my apology.

“There was a guy in Russia, a guy named Rostov, who dismembered and disemboweled his victims. He ate their testicles after boiling them. As far as Gates’ bragging about the *quantity* of victims, he has a long way to go to pass up at least two others, one from Peru and one from Italy. And then there’s Dr. Harold Shipman from Britain.”

The server drops off two more cold ones, but neither of us is interested in getting wasted. It’s my turn.

“Strangely enough, Gates was a religious guy, full of God, penance, right and wrong—confessing. Obviously,

After the Evil

he didn't get it, the right and wrong part."

"Religion has always been a breeding ground for terror," Mika says.

After a half-smile and a nod, I continue about Gates' sick mental state, how he believed in what he was doing, and how he enjoyed murder.

"Of course, he enjoyed it."

Not surprised, she asks whether or not Gates mentioned anything about his sleeping habits, or pattern.

"Nocturnal insomniac."

"Makes sense."

She looks casually around the room and notices that the televised National League baseball game is interrupted with a news report about the shooting. No one else in the bar pays attention. We can see the report, but miss most of what is being said. The report cuts to Harmon briefing the reporters, followed by a photo of Gates, followed by an old precinct photo of Mika.

"Well, it didn't take them long did it?" she says.

"It never does. Get ready for the second-guessing. They come at you from all sides, dissecting your every move. The problem is they weren't there. They just know the outcome, the end result."

"Anything about his childhood, siblings, parents?" she says.

He gave me the standard abusive, unstable, dysfunctional family speech. Swore he didn't do drugs. He also said, and I don't if it's relevant, that he abstained from killing when he and Abrams were together."

Mika's internal hard drive downloads and processes the information.

"And he returned to the scene, that's the first time I've come across that in all of these cases. I should have put surveillance on the victim's funerals. He might have attended one, or possibly all of them."

She looks past me. I want to give her as much background information as I can, but I can't help tossing out my opinion.

"He gave me a story about why he finally led us to his front door, but it didn't make sense."

"Gates was a serial killer. He doesn't have to make sense—premeditative and spontaneous, targets familiar victims and strangers, antiseptic, yet he leaves enough evidence to hang himself at the last one. I think he's created a profile category all his own."

"He needed to die."

"He wasn't afraid of dying, he was more afraid of living. Maybe he finally realized that he was a monster. He didn't say 'thank you' to be sarcastic, he said it because he meant it. Self-destruction for some reason was impossible for him. He needed someone else to finish it."

After the Evil

“Like I said, he needed to die.”

Harmon tracked us down. His face is changed. He’s different now. Being thrust into the loneliness of command, and the circumstances surrounding, it’s taking an early toll on him. He isn’t smiling, but then again there really isn’t anything to smile about.

“It wasn’t hard finding you two. You can bet the reporters will figure it out soon enough, so I wouldn’t hang around here too much longer, unless you want to be in the spotlight.”

He talks just above a whisper and looks cautiously around the bar. Cop eyes scan.

“Jake, maybe you should take Mika—”

“Are you crazy? I’m a federal officer.”

Mika tries to throttle down the remark, but she draws some unwanted attention from the other patrons anyway.

“I can handle it,” she says.

“Jake, explain it to her, I’m not in the mood.”

“Harmon’s right, you’re going to need some room to recover, decompress maybe not right this minute, but it will start to dog you soon.”

Mika takes a hard look at both of us.

“I know you both mean well, but I can handle it. I need to finish this.”

Her lips firm up and the look in her eyes clearly says the discussion is over. I've known Mika long enough to know she isn't going to change her mind. It's time to swing the conversation in another direction. Harmon looks like he needs a boost to take the edge off.

"So Harmon, do I call you Chief Blackwell now?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'Chief'. Do you mean a respectful Chief Inspector Blackwell, or do you mean like an Indian wisecrack thing?"

"I'm going with the wisecrack thing."

"Funny Roberts, there isn't enough on my plate right now, so I need some of your adolescent behavior?"

Ouch.

The day has changed everything. The old Harmon is gone, replaced by one that's all business. I'll have to find a new way to cope because the jokes aren't going to smooth out the rough spots anymore. No jokes and no more helpers. I need Lori time.

"Any new information since we've been gone?"

Harmon leans forward on his two large elbows.

"Butzer and Rabinowitz found course materials from the university's Criminal Justice Department that describe how various crimes are committed and crime scene investigation. There were also books on psychology and profiling."

After the Evil

He glances at Mika and then looks for a server.

“They were in a closet in his room at his parents’ home along with a file full of obituaries. The guys are comparing names to the victims he claims.”

He waves at the bartender to get his attention.

“In the apartment he was living in, paid for I might add by Abrams, they found gray flesh trophies—skulls, hands, various anatomy parts—all packaged, catalogued and labeled by Gates.”

“Bet mom and dad are proud.”

Harmon and Mika deliver disapproving looks at me. Apparently, my level of compassion exists at a point somewhat lower than theirs. I just can’t understand how two parents can fail to notice that junior’s seriously different than the rest of the kids.

“The *parents*, Detective Roberts, are understandably traumatized as any parent would be after finding out such horrific things about their son.”

Harmon is stern. I shrug while running a mental list of the evidence. I tell Mika about the CD and ask her if it has any significance.

“It must have had meaning to Gates,” Mika says.

“Course we won’t find out why now.”

His subtle reference brings an unfortunate spike of reality to Mika, but she immediately dismisses the

remark.

“Everything suggests he’s our man,” she says.

“Why do you think he gave up?”

Harmon tosses in his supposition.

“In early Rome, the soldiers used to swear an oath by holding their testicles. They didn’t place their hands over their hearts, or on a bible. That’s where the word ‘testify’ comes from, the root word is ‘testes.’ Maybe Gates thought someone was sooner, or later, going to cut his off.”

“Maybe he just wanted to be somebody,” Mika says.

It’s painfully obvious we’re pretty much brain dead by now. The emotional reserves are depleted as well. All I can think about is getting some sleep. I look at Mika.

“Want me to—”

“No, I’m going back with Harmon. I need to look at some files before I go to sleep. I’m way too wired right now.”

I give her my “are you sure?” look.

“Yes, I’m sure. I want to look into them while it’s all still fresh in here.”

She points to the side of her head and gives me one of her reassuring smiles.

After the Evil

“Thanks Jake, but I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, then just call me *Hibernate Jake*. I’m going home and try to get some sleep. It’s been a long day.”

Harmon gives me a hard look. He places a hand on my shoulder for emphasis.

“Jake, I’m serious about this. I don’t want you taking any more of those pills, do you hear me?”

Harmon isn’t speaking as my friend and partner, now he is “the man” giving me a strict warning, but he’s right. I reach into my pocket, grab the small prescription bottle and hand it to him.

“Now *I’ll* sleep better tonight,” he says.

* * *

The very moment dusk turns to night, the streetlights illuminate. The city transforms into silhouettes and heavy hues. The residents of my city bathe in the shadows and morph into people they weren’t only an hour before.

The nature of the job requires constant evaluation and reevaluation. I’m stuck in this cerebral vortex about my ferocious craving for Lori, versus my career. Maybe I need to throw the big cosmic switch, and take a chance on a life outside of the badge. Maybe I’m just too tired and hallucinating. Everything revolves around my job. It has always been my reason for living.

I wonder if it’s too late to call.

Cary Allen Stone

In my righteous opinion, Lori has saved me. I was faltering, struggling and drowning in despair when she came along. She has the capacity to take away my pain with a simple word, or a single look. She understands, and knows exactly what I mean without a need for a long dissertation. When she's with me, I don't feel lost.

I'm going to take a hot, steamy shower, wash the job off then give her a call. I want to hear her smoky, sensuous voice.

Standing at my front door with my key in hand, I think about spending the rest of my life with her. I could be happy just watching a burning sunset with her. Peace, I need peace in my life, and I believe Lori's my answer and my salvation, amen.

* * *

The kitchen had always been a place of refuge for her. She found it easier to push away the troublesome thoughts there. Food preparation, particularly the cutting motion of a knife against meat, or poultry, replaced other more grisly recollections.

Lori was dining alone again. She missed having someone, a companion to be with. As she sliced through the tomatoes for her dinner salad, the dark memories pass through her mind. Her husband had been an angry, vicious man who was marinated in alcohol. The beatings she had endured, and the sexual abuses of Emily, were both mentally and physically devastating. There were times when she felt so loved that the horror disappeared in a mist.

After the Evil

The knife she was using to cut the tomatoes was the very same one that ended his miserable life.

She claimed that Mr. Powers had abandoned them, and even had the presence of mind to file a missing person's report with the police. The search went on for years, but he never turned up. Friends and neighbors believed her when she said he ran off. There was no extended family of his to contest the accusation. It was suggested that he couldn't handle the responsibilities of married life and a child. Some thought he left with another woman. Whenever asked about it Lori cried real tears, and everyone sympathized with her. They never knew the tears were for what she couldn't confess. As more time passed, they understood when Lori and Emily Powers became distant from them.

Emily never knew what her mother had done. Instead, she struggled silently with her own demons. She couldn't bring herself to talk about dad's secret, the late night, and drunken sexual assaults on her young mind and body. She was certain mom knew. The hard part for Emily was trying to understand why her mother let it continue to happen. As an adolescent girl growing into womanhood, Emily found it impossible to have any normal loving relationships because of him. She oscillated between the extremes of the religious sisterhood, and being a whore. She chose the later and the reputation she carried on her shoulders during her high school years was unbearable.

It all became too much for her and Emily decided to opt out. She left a letter describing how she felt about her mother's reluctance to stop "daddy" before she overdosed

on her sixteenth birthday. Emily's death crushed Lori. To recover she developed a ruthless determination to avenge her daughter's death. She decided to take the life of any man she encountered that played the same controlling, sexual games. Each execution was carried out with the same justification.

She found the process easy after she had murdered her husband, but after multiple homicides, she knew she couldn't get them all. It had to stop. Told that Abrams was the consummate professional and a trustworthy practitioner, Lori sought his advice and counsel. In her wildest dreams, she never thought he would disappoint her like he did.

Lori arranged the carrots around the meat, and sprinkled salt and pepper over the entire tray. With one hand, she opened the oven door. With the other, she placed the tray inside. After closing the oven, she set the timer and smiled when the thought of Jake Roberts surfaced. He seemed different from all of the others. He was sincere, considerate and caring. She had no doubt that his affections were genuine. She didn't believe such a man existed anymore, but there stood Jake. Lori was willing to try one more time to find love, to be loved. She had to know that someone could love her without inflicting pain and suffering.

Jake, please be that person.

Just as she finished the thought, the telephone rang and startled her. It would have been a perfect time for Jake to call, but the airline was looking for Lori to cover another crew member's flight the following morning.

After the Evil

Crew schedulers were considered the enemy by flight crewmembers. They turned your life upside down more than any microburst. Disappointment spread across her face. She needed time alone with him.

“No, I’m sorry I just got in from another trip, and unfortunately brought a sinus infection home with me, my head’s all stuffed up. You know I would otherwise, sorry.” She sniffled a few times to bolster her story.

They weren’t all cold-blooded. The crew scheduler assured her that he understood completely and recommended some cold medications that worked for him. He added that he hoped she would be feeling better soon and said goodbye. As soon as she replaced the receiver in the cradle, it rang again. She prepared to sniffle some more, but the voice on the other end was a pleasant surprise, a sweet sound to hear. Lori felt the butterfly fluttering in her stomach, and noticed how quickly her mood was transformed into a blissful state. There was no doubt she had strong feelings for him.

“Hi, Jake, I saw you on the news.”

“I wish there was some other reason for me to be in the news.”

I want her to know that I’m more than just a cop, one-dimensional, but I’m just happy to know she’s thinking about me.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” she says.

“For not calling sooner, for being preoccupied—”

She cut me off in mid-sentence.

“I’m just glad to hear from you, I understand, I really do understand.”

Lori has a way of staying ahead of me.

“Really?”

“Yes, I do. I hope you understand when I have to fly. It’s not easy being in a relationship with a flight attendant. I leave town for several days, travel all around the country, and fly back at odd times to get home. I hope that’s not too hard on you.”

“Waiting for you is like waiting for Christmas, Any chance I can see you tonight?”

I can’t see her smile, the small bite of her lip, or the tilt of her head.

“I’m in the kitchen right now preparing dinner, and there’s enough food here for a quiet dinner at home for two.”

“Half an hour?”

“Give me an hour, because I want to look my best for you.”

The thought of a quiet, romantic evening alone with Lori reenergizes me. I renegotiate.

After the Evil

“Forty-five minutes.”

“I’ll be ready,” she says.

I search for a better shirt and check my face in the mirror for a possible quick shave. My pulse noticeably elevates. Tonight is the night. My passion kicks in. I want to be primal and free, I want to be a man. I don’t want to think about the scum I deal with, about the girl, or Gates. I just want to be with her and not ruminate about the consequences.

If I use the lightbar, I can run all the lights.

* * *

Harmon grew up on the meanest streets, and was considered a traitor to his race when he joined the police department. He knew who the bad guys from the neighborhood were, and they believed he would use that information to persecute them. While he was street smart, Harmon Blackwell was also book smart, a man who played down his significant intellect. Ed once told me, “Brilliant is born; educated is grown.” Harmon was brilliant.

As he walked back into his new office, Harmon was exhausted after giving what felt like his thousandth briefing to the news people. They could drain your blood faster than an open carotid artery. All he wanted was a peaceful break in the action. The door to his office closed loudly enough to signal to everyone it was break time—Do Not Disturb. He dragged his chair out and collapsed into it. Opening the top drawer of his desk, he retrieved a

Scientific American magazine he had stored there. After adjusting his glasses, Harmon began reading hoping to finish the article he started days earlier.

The article described how the silicon chip currently used in computers performed its magic at two billion times per second by using fifty-five million transistors. However, in the span of a few years, mankind could reasonably expect computers to be developed that used single-molecule, DNA strands, or quantum-effect chips to perform godzillions of computations at light speed. He read another article about Biomed implants, microscopic nano-computers, injected into the body, that will seek out disease, and eliminate it effectively bringing an end to all invasive surgical procedures.”

Harmon leaned back in his chair.

Incredible.

It was going to be Harmon’s last chance to take a break. His head jerked up when he heard a knock on the door. He couldn’t believe someone was dumb enough to interrupt him. To his surprise, the door opened. Mika walked in. Since leaving the bar, she had found time to walk and think. It happened. Trauma made your feet move. You couldn’t sit still. You thought movement alone would somehow help you to lose the sunken ship feeling. Harmon noticed the distant look on her face, and the enormous amount of compassion he had inside of his massive body rose to the surface. If it was anyone else besides Mika who had interrupted his down time, they would be pulling their head out of their behind with both hands. He asked if she was okay.

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“Yeah, yeah...just been walking, thinking.”

“You’re not still debating the shoot are you? It was a clean shoot, justified.”

He waited. Without raising her eyes to look at him, she nodded.

“I know.”

She began to pace.

“What’s wrong? Come on Mika, we’ve been friends for a long time, let it out.”

“That’s not it, Harmon. It’s what Jake said tonight. It doesn’t add up, but I can’t seem to figure out why.”

She collapsed into a chair and stared off into space.

“It all points to Gates, he confessed, but for some strange reason, it bites at me that he wasn’t the one I was looking for.”

“Mika, Gates is dead, the case is closed. The public hysteria is over. You did a great job. We should be rejoicing and not analyzing.”

He walked over and placed a hand on her narrow shoulder.

“Personally, I hope I never hear the name Michael Gates again.”

She looked up with her two beautiful Asian eyes and

a pouting face.

“I guess you’re right, maybe because of the shoot I’m... I should get some sleep.”

“I’ll drive you. Where’s that hotel you’re staying at?”

“I don’t want to sit in that awful hotel room alone.”

Mika glanced up at him like a child seeking a parent’s approval.

“Would you drop me off at Jake’s?”

* * *

As she hustled around her bedroom, Lori recalled her early morning visit with her daughter. The visit was different from all the others, because she wanted to reveal to Emily her thoughts and feelings about a relationship with Jake.

Where have you been, mommy? You know how I look forward to your visits.

“I know sweetheart, and I’m sorry. Time seems to be moving much faster these days.”

Emily’s tone turned accusatory, angry.

It’s because of him, isn’t it?

Lori looked away from her daughter’s headstone where the girl’s voice always emanated from. She

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pondered the question for a moment and sighed.

“Emily, I really like him.”

Waiting for Emily’s answer and approval, Lori fidgeted with the leaves that had fallen on the grave.

“He’s different, gentle and thoughtful. He makes me feel happy again.”

She looked back at the headstone, but her daughter’s reply never came. The silence ended when the taunting voice spoke.

Another mistake, Lori. Didn’t you learn anything from all the others? Men are not to be trusted, or loved.

She didn’t want to hear it again, and her daydream came to an abrupt halt. She looked around the bedroom to regain her bearings. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she decided to make it work with Jake.

* * *

What a rush, I feel like a teenager on a first date. As I walk up the front steps, I feel I’m home. The muted exterior colors against the lush foliage suggest peace and happiness. I try to imagine what it would be like to come here every night, to Lori’s house in this quaint, picket-fenced neighborhood. It would be a gift to fall into her arms after a long day. As I reach the front door, I’m amazed at how pumped I am. Life seems to be starting all over again. After I press the doorbell, the front door

opens and Lori appears in a clinging, black, mid-thigh dress. Neither of us speak, we embrace and kiss. My hands roam over her shoulders and lower back. Her hands lock behind my neck.

The kiss lasts for more than the measure of a minute signaling that the evening will be memorable. Pleasurable thoughts swirl around inside my head. As our lips separate, she gently strokes my face.

“I’ve missed you, but I didn’t know how much until now,” she says.

She grasps my hands and pulls me inside. Any hesitation I may have had about falling in love with her ends here. All I have to do is keep my animal instincts in check. I need a distraction. During my official visit to her home, I noticed that the interior of the house was a complete reflection of Lori Powers. If it was millennium chick then it was in here. While Lori watches me pulling surveillance, I notice something is missing.

“No television?”

“Jake Roberts, you came here to watch television?”

“No, I’m just curious. That’s a great stereo system over there, an incredible CD collection, real paintings and expensive furnishings. I just don’t see a television.”

I throw my arms around her waist and pull her close.

“Which makes sense the more I think about it. Who needs television when you’re in the room?”

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The second kiss is followed by several more. The chemistry is powerful, pure peace and serenity. Lori looks into my eyes. She is breathtaking in the soft glow of the living room lights.

“Got in late last night?”

“Yes, didn’t you get my message? I left one on your machine. I did an all-nighter from San Francisco, a red eye. I’m actually glad you didn’t see me. I looked a mess.”

You are the one.

“Somehow, I can’t imagine you ever being a mess.”

I don’t want to let go of her. After the past few days, I desperately need to hold on to something, or someone, I can believe in, someone who’s real.

“Could we just stay this way for awhile? It’s been a real bad day.”

Her scent draws me in. My heart is exposed and I want her love to embrace it.

“Roger, you’re cleared for the approach, over.” she says.

The tease was provocative. Another kiss follows. She leans back and studies my eyes with concern.

“A bad day?”

Her interest in my life always surprises me. Most

people hate cops, but she is at ease with me, supportive. I feel my facial muscles tense as I look up at the ceiling. My job revolves around murder. I can't discuss that abyss with her.

"It's all right, Jake, I can take it. I want you to know I'm here for you. If you're hurting then so am I."

Her offer of support props me up and her eyes say it'll be all right. This case is more spectacular than most, so maybe I can. I decide to take the chance, this time.

"Captain Edward Fairchild, my friend, was the last victim of the killer we've been searching for. He was lured out by this guy, Michael Gates."

While she listens, I let go of her and move around the room, pacing help. Lori sits down on her sofa and leans forward with her hands clasped together.

"We didn't get there in time to save him, the whole precinct is devastated. Ed was family. We can't grieve, because the investigation is ongoing. The funeral is delayed because of the autopsy."

That statement hurts. The lump in my throat grows larger.

"Ed was a father figure to all of us, someone the whole precinct looked to for guidance, encouragement. He taught me everything about how to be a good cop. When I fell down, he picked me up, brushed me off, and sent me out again."

After the Evil

Michael Gates' face bursts into my thoughts.

“And that cold-blooded, psychopath murdered him, I didn't get to Ed in time...couldn't save him.”

Cary Allen Stone

10

“The key should be under the—” Harmon says.

Mika gets out of the car.

“I still have one thank you,” she says.

She didn’t feel it was necessary to explain why.

Maybe she would on some other day, an easier day. In her heart, she knew that she kept it as a reminder of happier times. She also felt it had some good luck attached to it, because whenever she was with Jake she always felt safe and protected.

“Are you going to be all right, Harmon?”

He thought about it for a moment.

“Yeah, I’m a big boy. And I’ve got more things to keep me distracted now that I’m—*the man*.”

He slumped down in the car seat.

“But keep next week open, okay? It will hit me hard then and I’m going to need a lot of special care.”

Mika blew Harmon a small kiss and waved goodbye. Since Ed had been so hastily taken away, it seemed more important than ever to see someone you loved as long as you could. You felt the longer you kept looking their way, the safer they would be. Ed’s murder proved no one was safe anymore. Mika watched until Harmon made the turn at the end of Jake’s street.

There were plenty of people out walking, and traffic moved briskly along the street. Mika decided to stay out on the sidewalk for a while and take it all in. She studied the faces and the surroundings out of habit. All she really wanted the rest of the night was to find comfort in Jake’s arms. She wondered what his reaction would be at finding her at his front door. She knocked and waited but there was no answer. Jake, she knew, was a light sleeper.

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She rang the bell and waited for a light to illuminate. She peeked through the curtain to see if his shadow was approaching. Finally, she found the key in her purse and slid it into the lock. The tumblers tumbled, and Mika walked in.

“Jake?”

She reached in the dark for the light switch on the wall. It was warm inside the apartment. She noted that the apartment hadn't changed much since she moved out. While she contemplated what her dad had said about settling down with Jake, she also wondered if her career had been the correct path to take. At the time, she was convinced that her career came first, and there would always be time for a relationship. Now, standing in Jake's apartment, she doubted it had been the best path to choose. Then it hit her with full force. The morbid thoughts consumed her, and she started to cry. She couldn't stop. Her legs weakened and collapsed beneath her. Lying on the floor, she was overwhelmed with feelings of exposure, vulnerability, and guilt.

* * *

“Gates made up some crap about you and Abrams. He made me angry, so I stepped into the hall for a break. He managed to take the weapon from the officer guarding him. He killed the officer. He went into the hall and tried to escape then he drew down on me, I was in his sights. I wasn't armed so there was nothing I could do. There wasn't any place in the corridor to hide. An FBI agent, a friend of mine, shot Gates. She fired twice over my shoulder as I dropped to the floor. I could hear the bullets

hiss as they passed by my ear. It was all of two seconds, and it was over.”

“Oh my God, I didn’t know,” Lori says.

She reaches for me. She grasps my hands and draws them to her lips giving them a gentle, loving kiss. Her dire expression turns to one of relief. She holds me close.

Good, Gates is dead mommy. Now they won’t know about you.

The aggressive, demanding voice follows Emily’s.

Kill Roberts before it’s too late.

A strange, twisted look appears on her face and it’s obvious I’ve said too much.

“Lori, are you okay?”

She recovers and looks up at me with her beautiful cyan eyes.

“I’m just so glad you weren’t hurt, I don’t know what I would do if you were.”

Our embrace is strong and suggests together we can do anything. She is an extraordinary woman and I’m a lucky man.

“I lost my friend today, but we got that sick sonofabitch. I won’t bring the job home again, I’m sorry.”

After the Evil

We both realize what just slipped out of my mouth. A grin appears on both of our faces.

“Jake, did you just say ‘bring the job *home*’?”

I’m actually glad it slipped out. It’s just as well because I want her to know how I really feel. She pivots toward the kitchen.

“Why don’t I get us both a drink?” she says.

“Is it all right if I put on some music?”

“Music’s good.”

Wandering over to the bookshelf, I can’t believe my Freudian slip about being home. As my index finger runs across her extensive music collection one CD stands out among the others. I stop there, index finger pointing, and remove it from the shelf.

What are the chances?

Inside the kitchen, Lori finds the appropriate glasses inside a cabinet. She holds out a bottle of Canadian Club for me to see.

“With Seven?”

“Perfect.”

Lori places the drinks on a serving tray. Tucked away behind the knife holder and concealed in a vial inside a sugar canister, are the tranquilizers she uses to disable her victims. Emily’s voice beckons her.

Cary Allen Stone

Kill him mommy, so it's just you and me again.

As Emily's voice fades, the other insists.

What are you waiting for? All men are evil. Kill him now.

Lori is terrified waiting for the voices to stop.

No, I can't, don't you see?

As my hand touches her shoulder, she jumps. She looks traumatized and stressed. I've never seen her like this.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing Jake."

She scrutinizes the look on my face and knows I'm going to need more information.

"Sometimes the flashbacks of the days with my ex-husband come when I least expect them. One minute everything is fine and a split second later, this. I'm sorry. Jake you shouldn't have to deal with this."

She blinks rapidly and exhales.

"Lori, you know by now I care about you. I mean I used the H-word tonight. I shouldn't have been talking about my work. I'm a homicide detective, and that's an extremely upsetting subject. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry for upsetting you. Please forgive me."

After the Evil

As I wait for forgiveness, she surprises me with a question as she points at the CD I still have in my hand.

“What are you doing with that?”

Holding it up, I rotate the CD and study it. After what I had just said about not bringing the job home, I’m not sure I want to tell her why.

“Again I apologize, while looking through your collection I found it. Gates played the same one at every crime scene. It’s played repeatedly on song number three. I’m not familiar with the group.”

“Do you think it means anything?”

Kill him mommy, he knows.

“Must, but I don’t know why. I was surprised to see it on your shelf, haven’t had a chance to listen to it. Do you mind if I do?”

I’m distracted and fascinated by it as I walk over to the stereo.

“Gates was one sick puppy.”

I set the CD on the tray and look for the play button

“You should have heard the things he said. What kind of sick mind has someone got to have to do such coldblooded things?”

“Why do you consider him a sick puppy?”

That question hits me oddly, so I stop with the CD and look at her.

“The mind is a crazy place, Jake. It’s hard to tell why someone would do such things. It’s difficult to say because of your friend, but sometimes, some people are led, destined, even directed to do such things. They don’t have a choice.”

I’m astounded by her defense of Gates. Many people, because of their circumstances and what life handed them, could give up and become bad, but they don’t.

“Are you saying Gates may have had an *excuse* for what he did? He was driven to kill?”

“I’m just saying circumstances have the power to change us, be it for good, or bad. Not everyone has the capacity to handle what happens to us in this life, that’s all I’m saying, Jake.”

My answer to her philosophy of understanding is brief, pointed, aggressive and sarcastic.

“So let me get this straight. I need to understand Michael Gates was abused, or spanked, or whatever, so it was okay for him to kill my friend, Oh, I get it, my God what was I thinking?”

The temperature in the living room plunges to bitterly cold.

See mommy, I told you.

After the Evil

“Jake, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. Maybe I’m just not ready, I don’t know. I think I’m going to need more time.”

I’m crushed. I have been suffocating her with my life and my job. It’s too much for me, so it must be too much for her. I don’t know what to say, or if I should say anything at all.

What’s wrong with you, man?

As I turn to leave, I stop, hoping she will invite me back into her arms. Her eyes plead with me. I gently close the door behind me. Standing outside, I’m numb. I make my way back to my car.

Walk away man.

* * *

“Daddy, it’s you’re little girl. I need you, daddy, I did a bad thing,” Mika said.

He listened while his little girl collapsed under a mountain of anguish. He was a powerful man, yet he knew he was powerless to rescue her. All he could provide was compassion, understanding and the familiar voice that dispensed the logic of life. His grip tightened on the telephone.

“Mika, where are you, baby? I can be—”

“No daddy.”

Mika forced out the words through her sobbing. She

knew she was stronger, but this time her raging emotions took complete control. There wasn't a chapter in the parent manual Robert could refer to, so he could help his daughter. It wasn't a subject parents normally faced. During his early years in Special Ops, he had killed, but never close up, never saw the victims. "DBD, Death by Detonation" his comrades called it. All he could do now was to listen to his little girl who was hurting. Robert Scott, captain of industry, who was highly regarded as an effective communicator, and hard nosed negotiator, struggled to hold back his own tears. Mika finally settled down and told her story. The fact he was listening meant everything. The words came out slowly.

"I just needed to talk to you."

"Where are you, honey?" Robert said.

"I'm at Jake's."

"Good, is he there with you?"

"No, I don't know where he is right now, but I'm sure he'll be home soon."

Her intuition told her differently when she first arrived. She took a shallow breath.

"We were at a standstill in the case—no leads, no clues. I had gone back to Quantico to regroup. Harmon called and told me Ed was murdered. I flew back immediately."

She stopped to wipe away tears.

After the Evil

“When I got back to the precinct, I met Harmon and we watched through the one-way mirror, while Jake interrogated the suspect. Jake left the room for a minute. He had been listening to the confession and it turned his stomach. After what Gates said, after what he has done—God could not have created such a monster.”

Robert sat down in his chair. He was careful not to miss even one word. Mika continued as more tears fell. She pushed hard to get the words out.

“Jake walked out into the hallway and saw me. He started walking toward me when there was a shot fired behind him. Gates had taken an officer’s gun, shot and killed the officer then aimed at Jake. He was going to shoot. Jake wasn’t armed. He dropped to the floor just as I fired, I thought I hit Jake, but Gates went down instead.”

She stopped speaking as every detail of the shooting replayed in her mind from the sound of the discharging weapon, to the spurting of blood, up until the last breath she saw him take. Her confession was over and she waited for forgiveness.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“Stay there until Jake gets home. He understands. I will do whatever you want, get whatever you need, sweetheart. You’re not alone, Mika. We’re all here for you.”

His voice cracked with concern and hurt.

“I love you Mika, so very much.”

“I love you too, daddy.”

Robert heard the line go dead. He stood for a long time staring out at the city lights through his office windows. He thought about life, the world, people, and about the human struggle with good and evil. Those same thoughts passed through Mika, right before she crashed into a coma-like sleep. It was the mind’s way to sooth the pain.

* * *

A brilliant astrophysicist said that chronology, particularly the past, is protected. He said that even if you had a time machine, and traveled backward, the past would remain intact. Yet, we always try to alter it. We try to paint it over in different colors of perception-red, reason-blue, and excuse-yellow. What we simply should do is learn to live with it. So far, the bad in my life is running far ahead of the good. I thought my relationship with Lori would change that. I was wrong. Falling in love happens all of the time in the movies, why can’t it happen for me? It occurs to me I’m driving in circles. Harmon is right I didn’t belong behind the wheel of a three-thousand-pound lethal weapon. I figure it’s time to hose down the fire inside.

For some strange, mystical, illogical reason, I pull up in front of Chipper’s place, alone. I remember Chipper’s warning, and I must be out of my mind. I guess that happens when you just don’t care anymore. My feet completely disregard the warnings from my brain, and I

After the Evil

resolutely march toward the front door. Beneath Chipper's sign, I come face to face with several of the brothers who are understandably irritated, and in shock.

"You got a death wish?" one says.

I must have, because I'm outnumbered and outgunned. An Uzi is brought up under my chin. I'm forced into a stare down with the brother holding the weapon, until I hear a familiar voice.

"You gots to be one dumb muthafucker!"

The words provide a temporary reprieve from an early demise, because the triggerman looks at Chipper. The big man prevents my impending death, not out of respect for the badge, or love for me, but because of his curiosity. He wants the answer before I'm executed. I look at the muzzle first then at the man behind the weapon.

"You have the right to remain silent."

Roaring with laughter, Chipper rotates his three-hundred-pound-plus frame. He starts banging the wall hard with his meaty fist as he gasps for air to replace the laughter.

"You are one crazy sonabitch. Come here."

My right hand rises up and nudges the Uzi away. The disappointed look on the brother's face says that in another place, and at another time, I can plan on a rematch. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, I make my way

to Chipper. He throws an arm around me, and leads all of us inside. At his table, he kicks out a chair indicating I should sit. I accept his invitation and do exactly as I'm told. As he wipes tears of laughter from his eyes, Chipper gets back to business.

“Whatchu doin’ back here, man? I told you the last time not to come back. Either you’re deaf, or jus’ stupid, I don’t know which.”

He sizes me up. He shifts his massive frame in his chair. He raises his empty glass. A full glass replaced it. The woman who sits to his right wipes his brow and strokes his baldhead. It occurs to me, I would pay money to see Chipper and Harmon in a wrestling match.

“But I jus’ gots to know, crazy man, what the hell are you doin’ here?”

My head bobs. I smirk. After a few shakes of my empty cranium, I respond.

“A woman.”

“Getouttahere, I knew it! You ain’t jivin’ me are you?”

“No jive.”

“Damn, how many times that story been told,” he says.

I force a grin. I don’t understand why I’m speaking to him like we’re best friends. Then again, he is the only one interested in my sad story.

After the Evil

“I need to fall into a deep, deep hole...and drown.”

The intensity in my eyes backs me up.

“I know dat’s right,” he says.

He looks around the interior of the bar at his contemporaries who are stunned by his taking me under his wing. The look is enough to convince them to go back to what they were doing, which they do with disregard for the fact I’m an officer of the law. Illicit business transactions take place. The jukebox cranks back up, and booms base lines against the interior walls as some nasty rap lyrics talk about killing white folks. The air is heavy with smoke. Chipper signals and a stiffer drink is placed in front of me. I can tell it’s strong by the smell. A few of these and I’ll be stiff, which is what I’m here for. It also happens to be the best money could buy. To my surprise, it’s on the house. I knock it back and as the alcohol slithers into my blood stream, I go into a form of temporary cardiac arrest. It feels as if my eyes are rolling back. I try to stay sitting up.

“So, what is your story, crazy man? I like sad, sentimental stories, they make me cry,” he says.

Chipper laughs so loud, I can’t hear the music any longer then he settles back into his chair, hands tented, and waits patiently for my answer. My glass has been replaced with a full one, again. I don’t even notice how, or when it arrived. Just as I open my mouth to answer, Chipper has a major revelation.

“Hey, you’re the cop I saw on the news, you and that

serial killer guy!”

He snaps his fingers. He also says it as if he doesn't have a list of his own victims to claim. I don't understand why I'm friendly with Chipper the serial killer, and not with Gates the serial killer. It's probably because Chipper didn't murder my friend.

“Blew the mutha away, and you've got lady problems, too? Hey bro, your life sucks.”

The man said a mouthful. After telling the amused Chipper the highlights, or rather the lowlights of my life, my day ends face down on the table in an alcohol-induced, deep sleep.

* * *

She held the frame with the picture of her beautiful Emily smiling back at her frozen in her sixteenth year. The photograph was taken the day before the suicide. It was the last happy moment they had together. It was the last happy memory Lori had. She hoped that would have changed with Jake.

I'm glad you made him leave, mommy.

Lori shrugged then the other voice broke into their conversation.

He's trouble, just like all of the rest. They hurt and beat, and you suffer. They all have to die.

She answered aloud because there was no one left to hear.

After the Evil

“But I really think he’s different than the others. He’s caring, gentle and passionate. He would be good for me. He would take care of me.”

He’ll abuse you. He doesn’t care about your pain. He wants filthy sex and to control you.

Emily spoke from the photo.

It’s just us, mommy, if it wasn’t for daddy I’d still be with you.

Tears welled up in Lori’s eyes. The scene of Emily’s suicide, the note she left, and the funeral all played in her mind. Watching the mourners throw the dirt on the casket was too much to bear. Maybe the voices were right, but he *was* different. She wanted him.

What if he discovers you’re dark secret?

She needed time to think. She had to find a way to make it work, and a way to silence the voices.

“I love you Emily, but I still need to live my life.”

Lori picked up the phone and dialed.

“Crew scheduling, Monica.”

“Hi, this is Lori Powers, employee number zero-zero-three-zero-one. I thought you might have a trip you needed covered, I’m available.”

“You must be psychic, because I was just trying to fill an overnight to Boston, interested? It leaves at eleven

in the morning, and will be back by midmorning the next day. Oh wait, I show you in the computer as out sick.”

“That was earlier, something I ate, but I’m okay now. I can take that overnight.”

“Great, I’ll show you on the trip.”

Lori listened. The voices were gone. She wandered out into the living room and listened closely, but she didn’t hear them anymore. After repositioning the flowers on the table, she saw the CD Jake had found. She picked it up and replaced it on the shelf. In her bedroom, where she thought she would be sharing the night with Jake, she instead gathered her things for the flight. She had just enough time to pack and get a little sleep.

Boston was a favorite layover of hers. She loved walking around the city and knew exactly what to pack for. She could go to the real “Cheers” bar regardless of the fact it didn’t resemble the set of the famous television show. Another option, if the temperature were right, would be to get some sun in the park with the swan boats. She also thought she might stop by one of the many palm readers to have her fortune told.

Maybe her future still included Jake.

* * *

“Man deserves to get wasted.”

Chipper gave specific orders, like a commander in the field.

After the Evil

“Call up his partner. You tell the man where he is, and to come get him now, I can’t have no white, red, or whatever the hell trash he is, sleeping on my pool table.

He leans over to see if I’m still alive.

“Should have gone into a life of crime, dawg, its easier. I mean it this time, don’t come back here again.”

After he pats my head, two more brothers hoist me up and carry me outside. An irreverent toss of my limp body lands me on the hood of my car. My carcass remains there until Harmon arrives. Everything stays blurry, until I hear Harmon’s voice, which startles me halfway back to reality.

“JAKE!”

There is no mistaking the disappointment on his face, in his eyes, or flying out of his mouth. Before, he would have taken it in stride. Now, as Chief Inspector he has a very different viewpoint. Harmon’s voice sounds as if it’s coming from somewhere inside a very long tunnel. He tells the detective he brought with him.

“Help me get him in my car. You drive his. We’ll drop him back at his apartment.”

His arms wave in several directions, stopping long enough to look at Chipper who offers up a taunting salute. The two of them exchange a cold glare. I’m not the only one who wants to see them go at it. The next thing I hear is a car engine start.

It takes me awhile to get my coordinates. The fog isn't lifting fast. I squint and press my fingers hard into my temples. It's hard to raise my head for some reason.

“Harmon, is that you?”

“Yeah, it's me.”

“Let me drive.”

I start laughing my butt off. I can't stop. The brothers watch the pathetic scene, until they can't watch any longer. Walking away, they wave us off with middle fingers raised. Harmon grabs the nape of my neck and shakes me hard. There is no doubt about it He is in one of moods.

“What was in those drinks?”

“Are you as out of your mind as you want me to believe?”

“HEY, who asked you to come get me, wasn't me.”

“No Jake, it wasn't you, it was your new friend Chipper. What is wrong with you? What in God's name are you doing there in the middle of the night—alone? Dammit, Jake.”

“Investri...grating.”

Harmon is livid. He had finally found a quiet moment, in a quiet room, to sit and decompress, when he got the call from one of Chipper's homies.

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“Investigating? Investigating what, how fast a bullet can travel though your thick skull?”

Too caught up in my own misery and too wasted, I don't even realize how much he is hurting. I haven't been a very good partner, or a very good friend. Still, he's here for me. His tone softens as he props me up inside the car.

“You'll be okay,” he says.

He patiently listens to my drunken ramblings.

“None of it worked out, man. *None* of it's ever going to work. My life is nothing but a waste of carbon and water.”

My head falls back against the seat then snaps upright.

“WE'RE ALONE! Do you get that? You, me, EVERYBODY! Sure, we all share the same space, but inside that space we're just ALONE.”

I have an urgent need I haven't had in many years.

“Stop the car.”

“What?”

“Stop the car, I'm going to hurl.”

“Oh no you ain't, you hold it in. We only have a few blocks to go.”

“I can't.”

I reach for the door handle. Harmon stands on the brakes and swings into the curb. Shoving the door open, I wrench the contents of my stomach on the pavement. The putrid taste is, putrid, and encourages another involuntary release. The heaving helps to reduce the side effects of the alcohol. After I toss the last of it, my head starts to clear, and I can hold a conversation. With nothing else available, I wipe my chin on my sleeve.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, I know, sorry again.”

“No I mean it, I’m sorry. I thought it was going to work out with Lori.”

“It didn’t work out?”

“No, it didn’t.”

“Sorry man.”

He grabs my arm.

“Maybe you’ve been looking in the wrong place, did you ever think of that?”

“I’ve used them all up my friend, there’s no place left to look in. I’m telling you man, it’s not out there for me.”

“Sure it is, the right one has been under your nose all along. You just don’t see it.”

He’s losing me. I’m having trouble with which way

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is up, and he wants me to think? I insist he is wrong.

Harmon parks in front of my apartment. It's after 3:00 a.m. and I smell bad from my night out at Chipper's. As I climb out of the passenger side, my peripheral vision sees my car pull up behind us, and the headlights go out. I hear a door slam and footsteps approach. Harmon leans out his window and shouts.

“Give me a minute.”

The footsteps walk away, and in the shadows, a cigarette is lit. Harmon looks at me from the driver's seat as I bend down to say goodnight.

“Jake, I dropped Mika off here hours ago. She's inside, and she's hurting. She needs you.”

He stares straight out the windshield.

“And you my friend, need her.”

I feel stupid. He's right. What would I do without Harmon? He waves me on and starts the car. The shadow returns, smiles, and slips past me into the passenger seat. I acknowledge his efforts to return my car. They drive off, my partner, and what's-his-name. I watch the taillights disappear. It's time to go home. The lights are off inside the apartment. She is either asleep, or waiting in the dark to blind-side me with a blunt object. God knows I deserve it. I go with asleep, so I try to be as quiet as I can. I close and lock the front door. I need to clean up my body, and my act. As I walk through the apartment, I see a trail of clothing—blouse, bra, pants, panties,

stockings, and heels. At the end of the trail, in my bed, is Mika, out cold.

Who's been sleeping in my bed?

I know what that is like. It was the same for me after shooting the girl.

* * *

It happens in steps. The first was staring at the bottle of barbiturates. Step two required a decision. The third step involved ingesting them, followed by a down wash of a fifth of alcohol. Of course, it should be one's preferred alcohol, since it would be the last thing you enjoy before step four. The last step, also known as the final step, was falling asleep and not coming back to this life, not ever.

Lori had all of the ingredients. She even rationalized Emily's choice, years earlier, didn't seem as misguided as she had once thought. She also considered the fact that nobody would care if she died. Lori was, after all, the last of her family line, there was no one left to grieve for her. What was the point of going on? Her job had lost its luster years ago. There were just so many times she could go to Paris, Rome—Omaha. The hotels sucked. All of the restaurant food tasted the same, and most were borderline outbreaks of salmonella. The crewmembers gossiped at the speed light. The worst part, there was nobody left to fall in love with. Jake was never coming back. She was certain of that. The others were never right for her. Even if Jake and she had made a go of it, how could her life ever return to normal? Sooner, or later, her secret would

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surface, and how would that be? Then, there were the voices. They would never let go of her.

Decision time approached, and Lori was stuck at step two. She looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall. She watched as the second hand circled for a complete minute while counting each second along the way. Maybe she should go to see Emily one last time. With the right words, Emily might agree Jake was right for her. If not, Emily might have some encouraging words to say about the philosophy of suicide.

For some inexplicable reason it was so much easier to end someone else's life than your own. Lori pushed the bottle of pills away and got up from the kitchen table. She wiped down the counter top and placed the dishes inside the dishwasher. All the while, she thought about Jake. A quick glance at the clock again and she decided to get some sleep. If in the morning she still wanted to end her life, she would. She turned out the kitchen light and walked through the dark to the solitude of her bedroom.

* * *

After toweling off the steam from the shower on the mirror, I ask the ragged face. The image says the same words back to me in reverse, at exactly the same time. A shower feels good, like starting over, a new beginning. The dirt of life that you accumulate and drag around on you everyday, is washed down the drain. The problem is, the dirt always comes back tomorrow. I'm feeling much better than even ten minutes ago. The only remnant left

of my social outing with Chipper is my churning stomach. Now what? Do I go out into the bedroom naked, climb into bed and press up against Mika as if all were fine with the world? Do I retreat and wait for my tired and worn body to be discovered beneath the covers on the couch? I retreat. As I make my way out of the steamy bathroom, I head for the bedroom door in the dark. I know the way. As my hand drags the door closed, I hear her voice.

“Jake?”

Her head rises above the pillow and I see her squinting into the darkness. Her hand tosses back the covers and exposes her naked body in the moonlight.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“I didn’t want to wake you, sorry. You need to get some sleep. I’ll take the couch. We’ll talk in the morning.”

Just as the door is about to close, I hear her.

“FREEZE, F-B-I.”

Her volume is startling. I don’t know which way to go, in or out. I leave it up to her. In a pouting voice, she gives me the answer I had hoped for.

“Don’t go, stay, I want you to hold me.”

We’d been there before. We didn’t make it then, why would we make it now? Why be crushed all over again? I didn’t think my heart could take another solid hit right

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now.

“Are you sure?”

I have to give her every opportunity to avoid the heartbreak and pain. I won't push, insist, or take advantage of her.

“I'm sure.”

She holds her arms out for me. I want to lie next to her and be held. I want everything to be right in the world. I don't want to make any more mistakes.

How could Mika be a mistake?

* * *

I love to read. In particular I am intimately familiar with all of the great philosophers from the ancients and the Greeks, to the Romans, on through the Renaissance, to modern. I have a good deal of accumulated philosophies of my own gathered from my years on the streets. It doesn't matter. With Mika's head lying on my chest, I listen while she talks about her life, and the questions we all carry around silently in our heads.

“I've decided to leave the FBI.”

That one I didn't expect. I'm not sure I heard her right. Maybe it was the after effects of my foray into Chipper's hazy world.

“Say that again.”

“I said I’m leaving the FBI, quitting, resigning.”

She repositions herself on the pillows against the headboard. She says it so casually it’s obvious she has already weighed the pros and cons. Tough call, I don’t know if I should encourage, or discourage, her. It is coming on the heels of yesterday. I had the same debate inside my head about my job after the shooting, still do. One minute my job is devastating, and the next it’s everything I am. We listen as a night shower begins to pelt against the windows. The storm intensifies and cleans the dirty world outside. We watch as lightning flashes illuminate the bedroom. Simple rules governed our lives inside. The hard lessons of life were outside that window, just like the storm.

A friend of mine used to watch out for me a long time ago. He saw to it I had a smile on my face when things weren’t going my way. It devastated me when he was killed in a small plane crash. Although I don’t believe in much anymore, the usual things like religion, politics, and people, I do believe he’s still watching over me. I can’t explain feeling his presence, like an angel. I decide to try to be an angel for Mika.

“What are you going to do instead?”

“Private practice I think, security—a private eye. That way I can control my life.”

That same thought has banged through my head on more than one occasion. The private sector is always looking for talented, well-trained professionals to protect them. The pay is good and the hours aren’t any worse.

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One has to play the game, maybe kiss some behind, but that's normal.

"I'm in."

I tell her with confidence. Mika rises quickly off the pillows.

"Do you mean that?"

"Yeah absolutely, I need a change."

Revelations, they come in many different shapes and sizes even aloud sometimes. I look at Lori. We don't speak, but the thoughts gush between us as if they were being shot out of a fire hose. It's funny how the world looks the same from her small dark eyes and my big hazel eyes. Outside, the thunder pounds against the pavement like one massive Huey helicopter, or a parade of Harley's. I can't help but wonder if it is a sign from my angel waving us off. Mika leans on my shoulder.

"I can't stop thinking about it, him."

"Gates?"

"Yeah, I know he deserved to die. I just didn't want to be the executioner. I guess you felt the same about the girl."

The words jam up inside my head.

"Still do. You think that's why we want out...because it would be easier to hide."

Cary Allen Stone

Be a good angel for her, Jake.

“Maybe.”

She grasps my hand and holds it against her breast. No longer mesmerized by the rain pelting the window, I look at her. I feel the warmth of her body against mine as we embrace. Our lips press together just like it used to be. There is no tomorrow, there is just the two of us floating in our own private universe.

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“Hi, I’m Benjamin, and I’ll be working the lead position. This is Kara, Bobby and back there sitting quietly by herself is poor Megan.”

They all giggled while Benjamin continued with his briefing.

“Meg’s a little down right now. Apparently, her plans to become the next Mrs. Captain Nick Parker have washed out.”

“Captain ‘Slick’ in the cockpit broke her heart last night, but that’s nothing new with him. That’s why he chases the new ones,” Kara said

Lori looked down the cabin aisle and saw a distraught face that didn’t just tell of a broken heart, or another sad rejection. To Lori, Megan’s face expressed severe inner pain. She made a mental note to ask her about it later.

“That’s too bad.”

After the introductions, the flight attendants scurried about the cabin preparing the aircraft for boarding. Following the deadly terrorist attacks there were many more things to check before departure. The crews were

more cognizant of the consequences associated with air travel. They exchanged small talk while they went about their duties such as who was sleeping with whom, who got fired recently, and there were thousands of weird passenger stories. While she completed her duties, Lori couldn't help but be drawn to Megan. The girl was young, almost too young Lori thought. She looked as if she hadn't graduated from high school yet. She also looked dazed, lost and afraid. With ease, Lori made her way to the back of the cabin until she was within a few feet of Megan, who didn't seem to notice her right away.

“Hi, Megan,” Lori said.

She held out her hand, but all she got was a brief nod back.

“I'm Lori. Is this your regular line?”

Lori watched closely to see if she was getting through.

“I picked up this trip late last night,” Lori said.

Lori's smile, the same that touched most everyone, finally affected Megan who acknowledged her. Megan, she guessed, was about the age Emily would be if she were still alive.

“I'm sorry, I'm a little distracted right now. I have a lot on my mind.”

She glanced at Lori.

“Yes, this is my line, has been all month.”

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Lori grasped Megan's shoulder.

"If you want to talk about it, I'm here."

Megan was taken by surprise. She backed away and turned toward the galley where she started to fidget with the drawers and doors. She didn't know what to say. Lori did her best to calm her.

"Megan I know it's none of my business, but you look a little spooked to me. As a crewmember, I need to know if there's a problem before we get going here."

Not wanting her abilities as a flight attendant questioned, Megan took a firm stand.

"I'm fine thank you, there's no reason for you, or anyone else to be concerned about me."

"Really, Meg, I was just offering a shoulder if you needed one. I've been doing this a long time. I know a little about some things."

A reassuring nod followed. Megan eased off.

"Thanks, I think I could use a shoulder right about now actually."

"Listen, I'll trade places with Bobby, and work back here if it's all right with you. I don't think he'll mind."

Lori flashed another irresistible smile.

"I don't want to be a bother."

Lori squeezed Megan's arm lightly.

"Not a problem, I'll get it done and be back in a few minutes."

She turned and walked up the long center aisle to relay the change in staffing assignment. There was no objection as Bobby and Benjamin were roommates. Passengers followed behind Lori as she made her way back to the aft cabin. They started filing into the various rows of assigned seats.

"It's just you and me, babe."

Feeling a little more at ease, Megan started to open up and confide in Lori.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't worry about it, we'll get to it later when everyone settles down."

Lori smiled causing Megan to finally smile back. They went about their respective duties. Each time Lori saw the chance, she tried to establish a stronger bond with her.

* * *

"We've uncovered some interesting information."

There is renewed excitement in Harmon's voice. He definitely isn't the same Harmon. Now he is Harmon Eldrige Blackwell—the Chief."

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He is direct, unyielding, and confident. It's apparent to even the least observant, that every detective in the room has a newfound respect for him. I know I do.

“Roberts, nice to see you could make it in today.”

Well, I thought I'd like the new Harmon. The jury is apparently still out.

“Good news Detective, the Grand Jury and Internal Affairs, cleared you on the girl shoot. I believe the official term used is ‘justified’. Of course, some of us knew it all along, but you apparently had your doubts.”

His words take a mountain of grief off my back. I wonder if anyone sees me breathe a sigh of relief. I glance at Mika who is standing by my side. She hasn't said a word about leaving the FBI to anyone yet, but I feel her squeeze my forearm. Harmon shifts his attention to her.

“Agent Scott, I believe you asked about residents in our fair city who own late model, foreign automobiles?”

“Yes I did, Chief.”

She is not as aggressive as she usually is and waits for Harmon to divulge what he has.

“We are all aware Gates was driving a late model silver Lexus when he was apprehended. What we didn't know, until late yesterday, was he leased the car the day before the murder. A receipt for the CD, also for the day before, was in the center armrest.”

Harmon waits for the exchange of looks to subside before continuing. Mika gives a quick look back in my direction and becomes more animated.

“Which would seem to indicate that he is a copycat killer, and not the original,” Mika says.

Harmon snidely replies, “You’re the expert, F-B-I Agent Scott.”

* * *

“Cabin service is complete and they’re all snoozing. It’s as good a time as any Megan to have our conversation.”

To get her to open up and reveal what was distressing her, Lori had spent the better part of the flight getting Megan to feel more at ease with her. Although hesitant, Megan was ready to talk about it, and there wasn’t going to be a better place than at thirty-five thousand feet over the eastern United States in the back of a Boeing 737. Well, home, or in a lounge, would have been better, but the aircraft was going to have to do. Both flight attendants sat down on the aft jump seats. Lori held on to a plastic bottle of Evian, while Megan sipped a Coke.

“Meg, I know we don’t know each other well, but sometimes that’s better.”

Megan agreed. She made a motion in the direction of the others.

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“They think I’m stupid and naïve. They laughed at me. I didn’t tell them anything. They just think they know what happened. I mean, they think I was taken advantage of by the captain.”

Lori shrugged slightly.

“This is about a bad date?”

When Lori saw Megan’s eyes well up with tears and her lower lip quiver, she knew it was far worse. She put an arm around Megan and gave her a gentle hug. Megan stared down at her Coke. Her trembling hands rose to wipe away the tears. Lori handed her some tissues. Megan buried her face in Lori’s shoulder, and didn’t speak as the tears fell. After several minutes had passed, the story unraveled in bitter pieces.

“I thought he was a good man, I mean, he’s an airline captain. People look up to them. How was I to know that he was evil and sick? At first, he was so kind, he helped me with my chair, and he was concerned about how I felt, listened to what I had to say. He was so polite, so caring. Then, without warning, he changed into a filthy animal.”

Lori began to realize what Megan wasn’t able to bring herself to say. Captain Parker had taken Megan against her will.

“Megan, are you telling me he—”

She didn’t have to finish the question. The trauma on Megan’s face and in her eyes told the rest of the story.

“I feel so ashamed.”

Megan sobbed uncontrollably while trying to hide from the view of the passengers. Lori put her arms around Megan in an attempt to protect her, although she knew it was too late.

See mommy, all men are evil,

Megan’s face became Emily’s. Lori felt every sting and bite that her Emily had suffered all over again. She understood Megan’s trauma all too well.

He should be punished, mommy,

As Lori held Megan, she suppressed her anger and outrage. She maintained a calm façade. Although it burned, she was determined to keep her anger buried deep within until she could inflict it on Nick Parker. He would pay for what he had done to that child.

“You mean this captain, the one flying this aircraft?”

Lori asked struggling to hold back her astonishment. When she was able to Megan faced Lori

“Please don’t say anything to anybody, and promise me.”

The fear in her eyes was obvious.

“He said he had friends and I could lose my job, that no one would take my word against his, because he’s a captain.”

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Lori pressed Megan's head against her. Megan's pleas became muffled and muted.

"When did this happen?"

"Last night, on the layover, please don't tell anyone, I don't want anyone to know, I just needed to—"

"I won't, I promise. Do you need any medical attention?"

Megan shook her head no. Lori knew she would keep the promise, but she also knew that Captain Parker would never ever hurt anyone ever again.

* * *

Sometimes what we say can burn a hole in someone. When he puts his mouth to it, Harmon's statements can burn down a forest. He likes to provoke a fiery reaction, be inflammatory. The verbal sparring he does is meant to stimulate ordinary, and mundane mental activity. Today isn't any different.

"All white people have black hearts," Harmon says.

"Are you referring to ancestry, biology, or character?" I say.

"Ancestry. According to noted prominent anthropologists, mankind began in Africa. Now if you want to talk character, a case could be made," Harmon says.

"You think all white men have black hearts when it

comes to character?" I say.

"A case can be made."

Mika seldom hesitates to speak up. It's in her nature. Besides, she can usually back him down. It's okay for Harmon and I to have mind stimulating discussions, but Mika takes it personal.

Harmon Blackwell, stop it. If you think I'm going to sit here, and listen to you make such a ridiculous statement then you better be prepared for a *wuppin*," Mika says.

"Did you hear that Jake? *Wuppin*—the white woman said *wuppin*. She can't help it because she is part of the tribe."

"What about red men?"

I keep the fire burning.

"Hum, do all red men have black hearts?"

After a quick glance at a fuming Mika, Harmon answers.

"All colors, all men."

She still hasn't told anyone she wants to quit the Feds, and maybe she won't. She is frustrated with us.

"There is something very wrong with you two."

The three of us left the house and are headed for the

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Abrams residence. The possibility that Gates was a copycat killer gives us cause to take another look. Maybe, in light of our new perspective, we'll see something different. We also plan to go back to the warehouse where Ed was murdered.

We have been to Abrams' residence so many times even Mika knows the shortcut through the 'hood. It gives Harmon a chance to scope out the streetwalkers. I must admit they look quite presentable today. He gives each one a friendly wave and some of the girls return a mock proposition.

"I wonder, because of my new position, if I get a discount."

"Maybe now you can afford one," Mika says.

Across the street from the Abrams' mansion, our Mr. Dickens is outside as usual watering, and tending to his flower garden. He doesn't even glance at us as we turn into the driveway. That supports my theory he never saw anything on the night of the murder.

The Abrams house looks almost forlorn with the shreds of yellow crime scene tape still fluttering in the breeze. It is midmorning, but the interior is dark. We don't speak as we wander through the premises.

The scent of death still lingers inside.

* * *

Captain Parker had noticed Lori from the open

cockpit door. He remarked loud enough to make his first officer jerk his head up from his paperwork to see her. Both watched as she introduced herself to the other flight attendants.

There wasn't enough time for her to enter the cockpit and say hello, as boarding began right after, and passengers obstructed her path.

Parker confidently spoke.

“It’s a long layover in Boston, she’ll need a guide.”

“Didn’t you bang Megan last night?”

“Of course, but I have an insatiable sexual appetite, and I liked to eat out.”

He grinned while staring down the cabin aisle at Lori.

“She looks like a gourmet meal to me.”

His copilot grinned at Parker’s blustering. He knew that some captains’ egos didn’t stop in the cockpit. Some needed the world to believe all women desired them. Nick Parker was one of them.

Parker finally lost sight of Lori and returned to his cockpit preparations. While Lori occupied his thoughts, he also planned for a backup just in case.

I’ll take another turn with sweet little Megan.

“Is twenty-six thousand still good on the fuel?”

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Parker said the fuel request was correct then he continued with his fantasy about Lori, only he added Megan in on the outside chance of a threesome. Benjamin poked his head in and asked if either pilot needed anything.

“A shapely blonde with great legs for me,” Parker said.

“A Coke for me,” the first officer said.

Both he and Benjamin had long since learned to ignore Captain Parker’s ramblings. After Benjamin left to retrieve the Coke, the copilot chided his captain.

“Didn’t you just get married?”

Parker ignored him. He didn’t like to be interrupted in the middle of his fantasies. Because the question was raised, he thought about his recent marriage to Susan. In his own way, he wanted her. She had a great body and she was always anxious to please him. He saw her as backup. He would have her if he failed elsewhere. She also had a seven-year-old daughter from a previous disastrous marriage. He coveted the little girl more than he coveted her mother. He had absolutely no illusions about who he was as a person. He was a good provider, but only did what was necessary and required to accommodate his own self-serving desires and interests.

By nature, he was callous, biting and crude. His lack of respect for women was surpassed only by the size of his ego. Parker believed it was his responsibility to enlighten all women in deviant sexual practices,

especially those never before touched. Even while he plotted a rendezvous with Lori later that evening, he stored a thought in the back of his mind for when he returned home.

Little Wendy is about ready for a lesson.

He never sought help for his sickness because he never once thought he had a sexually deviant personality. After all, he thought, the good guys had bad sides too.

* * *

It has always been my fervent hope that someday, with the help of genetic research, scientists would be able to tighten some of the loose screws walking among us. Of course, that would end my career, but it would be worth it.

I get down on my knees and look under the bed, beneath where the slaughter took place. I dig through dresser drawers, but only find the same stuff that was there when I last searched the residence. It has collected more dust, but that's about it.

“Harmon, help me move the bed over a few feet, it's too heavy for one guy.”

He walks over and places one of his huge hands on the frame, while I struggle with both hands. The bed shifts toward the far wall. The light from the bedroom window illuminates the carpet underneath the bed.

“Did any of the techs move the bed?” Harmon says.

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“No, I don’t believe so,” Mika said.

She pulls clothing out of the wash basket in the hall.

“I don’t think they were in here either. You know how techs are, if it isn’t lying in plain sight, they don’t bother.”

With my face inches from it, I search the sunlit exposed carpet for hairs, and other fibers. The nauseating smell of death permeates the bedroom. It’s distracting even to a seasoned professional like me. I don’t see anything.

“Where do you guys stand on the high IQ versus criminally insane question?” Harmon says.

“I’ve never been accused of being either. Gates had a high IQ. Are you asking if he was over the edge, or sane?” I say.

“Put me down for insane, there’s no doubt in my mind. You can’t do something like he did to Ed without having screws loose,” Harmon says.

“To commit such acts suggests insanity, right? And to be able to elude the heat as long as he supposedly did suggests above average intelligence,” Mika says.

Harmon and I exchange looks.

“I guess what I want to know is, was Gates that good?” Mika says.

She stops digging through the basket and looks at the

two of us.

“Or was he just incredibly lucky?”

This time Harmon and I exchange shrugs. I offer up some background for the discussion.

“When I had him in interrogation, he seemed as normal and sane as Harmon here. That was the eerie part for me. He spoke calmly, clearly, and detailed. He became defensive at times, but was in control of his thoughts.”

“Calm, clear and detailed right up until he grabbed the weapon and shot the officer. He had to be insane to think he could get away with that inside the house,” she says.

“But he was sane enough to know it would end someday, and he chose suicide by cop.”

That is the total of my two cents.

“I’m not talking about what method he chose to die. He *decided* that as well. It’s more, *why* did he want it to end? He was on top. It doesn’t make any sense, unless he really wasn’t the one.”

While I enjoy the challenging conversation, I think we’re wasting our time.

“Well that’s why we’re here, to see if we can prove it one way, or another, but I don’t see anything that’s going to help this case. Theory and speculation isn’t going to be enough.”

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Mika steps into the walk in closet and starts pulling things apart. She apparently sees no reason to preserve the crime scene any longer and no one in their right mind is going to occupy that room again until the professional cleaners come through.

“I’m going to take a walk outside and get some fresh air. I hate the smell in here,” Harmon says.

He gets as far as the door.

“As Chief, I need to call in to see how everything is going back at the house. I’ll be back.”

“Okay, Arnold.”

He’s not the only one who wants out. This is just one more in a series of futile examinations of this crime scene. I also have to do my duty, while on duty.

“I’ll be in the men’s room.”

“I’m almost done here. We can head over to the warehouse when you both get back,” Mika says.

I stop to peek around the corner at her before I hit the head. She looks back, smiles and makes a gesture that suggests we will escape for a quiet evening later.

Abrams’ bathroom is overly ornate. I hate this kind of excessive décor. It’s overdone, tacky, and a waste of hard-earned money. If you have, so much money that you do this to a bathroom then it needs to be reapportioned to those who could use the money just to survive. It warms me to know I am about to relieve myself in this

ostentatious room. I think the genteel thing to do is to run some water to disguise my running water. As I reach over to open the faucet, my eyes shift across the floor, past the shower, over to the counter, and finally to the faucet. With an easy grip, I go about my business. I desperately want to pea on a wall or something. Dogs are good at that. I look back at the loose drain cover. Something about it won't let go of me. Finally finished, I replace my best friend. I walk over and step lightly into the shower stall enclosure of marble and glass to take a closer look at it.

There, in the middle of the shower floor it's almost centered, but not completely. Stooping down, I take out the pencil I carry for just such occasions. I poke at the cover and find that one of the two screws that hold the cover in place is missing. It moves easily pivoting on the other screw. Out of my other pocket comes my mini-flashlight. One click and the drainpipes illuminated. I look, as far down as I can, but I don't see anything. The voice of an old friend of mine from Jersey echoes in my head. The accent is heavy and says—*Forgetaboutit*. As I stand and begin to walk away, something nudges me, my instincts maybe, or possibly my angel is telling me to probe deeper. It is probably nothing, but I march back to the drain for another look. If I didn't, it would bother me until I did.

My pencil slides the cover back and forth then I hear it. I *think* I hear it. I slide the cover back and forth. I hear it again. With every bit of self-control I can muster, I move it one more time. It tinkles. On the back of my mini-light is a screwdriver that rotates between a Phillips head and a straight edge. I use the Phillips end to unfasten

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the remaining screw holding the cover and gently lift it up. In the light from the bathroom window, and my flashlight, I see what looks like a small charm dangling from a chain. I hold it up to the light.

On the charm is an engraved name—Emily.

* * *

Logan International was a busy, high-traffic-density airport. International flights were in and out of there constantly. It was also one of the airports that a 9-1-1 hijacked aircraft left from, before flying into one of the World Trade Center towers. The security camera replay of the hijackers nonchalantly walking through security was burned into every American's memory.

Captain Nick Parker touched down smoothly on runway 4R and taxied to his assigned gate at the expansive terminal. He may have been a lowlife, but the man could fly. It was the last flight of the day for the crew. They deplaned and piled into the hotel van that would take them to the Marriott. Megan sat as far from Parker as she could. They didn't exchange eye contact the entire time, although Parker watched for an opening. He spent the rest of the ride clandestinely eyeing Lori. She could feel it. Although she had originally agreed to meet with Megan for dinner Lori cancelled at the last minute claiming fatigue. In fact, she had other plans. Lori spent the time in the van from the airport to the hotel trying to come up with an excuse to meet with Parker. By the time she walked into her hotel room, she was still trying to come up with something, anything to get to him. As she started to settle in, the telephone rang. It was Parker. She

was disappointed she simply didn't rely on his predictability.

Lori knew all too well how to play the role and she sang her greeting into the phone adding the proper measure of seductiveness.

“Hello?”

“Lori Powers?”

“Yes?”

She abhorred everything about him, particularly his voice, but Parker absolutely loved the intoxication of hers. He quickly shifted into his persistent mode and burrowed ahead not giving her a chance to speak.

“Hi, it's Nick, the captain. I didn't get a chance to meet you on the aircraft because of the brief turnaround time and the early boarding. And of course the hotel van was so crowded, so I thought I'd call and say hello.”

“Well hello, Captain Parker.”

They're all the same, mommy.

“Anyway I was wondering if you had any plans for the rest of the evening. I thought it would only be polite to offer dinner. There's a restaurant nearby called Legal Seafood. It's a great place, the best if you like seafood.”

“I love seafood.”

Lori cooed back. When she was done with him, *he*

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would be fish food. She laughed to herself when she pictured the fishhook and line dangling from his mouth.

“I’ll take that as a yes?”

“I’d love to go. Did you get anyone else from the crew to go with us?”

That was the last thing he wanted, unless he had a chance to fulfill his fantasy of seducing worldly Lori and baby Megan, but he knew that was a long shot. He did find it fascinating he was forsaking the younger, tasty Megan morsel for the somewhat leftover Lori buffet.

“You’re the first. If you like, I can make you the last.”

All she had to do was reel him in. She needed to keep Parker in his room. It would be the appropriate setting to make him pay for what he had done to Megan. It was the perfect place for Captain Nicholas Parker to go down in flames.

“That works for me, captain.”

“Nick, please.”

* * *

Mika couldn’t resist asking about Lori. It wasn’t the time, or place, for such a question, especially when I had in my hand what I hoped was a solid lead. All three of us were jogging back to the car. We needed to find out if Thaddeus Abrams knew an Emily.

Could she have been relative? A mistress?

Mrs. Abrams could answer those three questions. I have to answer Mika's.

"I thought I was in love, but I guess I was just in lost."

It's my only answer. It will have to do.

"I don't know what I was thinking, because I hate to fly, it's inherently dangerous. I would have had to deal with all of the security screenings, wandings, and taking off my shoes. And that was just to get into her house."

Harmon and Mika crack up and I escape further interrogation. Harmon can't resist the opportunity to skewer me.

"I thought you told me you were starting to bend to the left, so you needed a right-handed woman to straighten you out," he says.

It sounds like he hasn't fallen all the way into the dark hole. He still has his sense of humor.

"I said a right *minded* woman."

Superior rank, or not, he is going to pay for that remark in front of Mika later. Right now, the charm is like a magnet. We pile into the car. Harmon insists on driving. Mika and I don't care if he drives. Mika reaches across the front seat, and asks for the charm, so she can take a closer look at it. I hand it over. I can see a ray of hope in her eyes as she studies it. I have a feeling in my

gut.

What is it about that name?

Harmon decides to go for the flashing lights, and siren, as he becomes impatient about getting back to the station to see what the little jewel reveals. The excitement is growing in each of us. It's small, platinum, and hanging on a chain, but it's something, after months of nothing. It may very well turn out to be insignificant, but right now, we are tingling with anticipation. Mika is first out of the car. I follow Harmon. He is actually shoving uniforms out of the way. The dash isn't over until we are behind the closed doors of Harmon's office.

He grabs the phone and the file. He punches in Mrs. Abrams's number. Each time the telephone rings, the second hand on the wall clock freezes. No answer.

"Damn it! Where is she, some charity event?"

Harmon is close to exploding. I can tell because he never swears. Mika is pacing like a caged animal. The feeling we have something intensifies.

* * *

"Why don't I meet you in your room after I get ready?"

She threw out the suggestion and he didn't hesitate to agree driven by his basic male urges. As the handset hit the cradle, Parker did a victory dance. His blood was flooding his veins so much he decided to pass on the

Viagra. He had no idea he was being stalked like prey.

Parker never imagined it would go so perfect, and it was throwing off his timing, his entire routine. He stopped dancing and began to prepare for her arrival. He unpacked the candles, and the massage oil he brought along on every flight just in case the opportunity presented itself. He hustled around desperately trying to create an intimate atmosphere inside the otherwise boring, conventional hotel room. He reviewed the important memory items—compliment, be spontaneous and sincere, and savor the moment.

She's hot.

Two flights down, Lori's choice was the mid-thigh red dress. She had awesome breasts, but there was no doubt in her mind that Parker was a legman, and her killer legs would keep him off balance.

Killer legs. How funny.

In any case, she was determined to make the night one that Nick would remember for the rest of his life, as brief as that was going to be. A few well-placed sprays of perfume and Lori wanted to rock.

He's a bad man, mommy.

Lori cracked open her hotel room door. She heard Benjamin and Bobby out in the hallway. They were just leaving their hotel room and heading out to a dance club. She watched them walk just far enough down the hall to feel safe to hold hands. As soon as she heard the elevator

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doors close behind them, she took another look in both directions to see if it was safe to venture out. It would be tragic for Megan to see her now. It was fortunate that Parker's room was two floors up. Still, getting there unnoticed would be a challenge. Convinced that the coast was clear, and prepared for the events of the evening, Lori set out to accomplish her goal. As she quietly closed the door to her room, she wondered what Jake would think when he found out that Gates wasn't, and that she was, the "Who's Your Daddy" killer.

She had to put the thought out of her mind. She was good at that. As strong as her feelings were for Jake, and craving a normal existence, she knew deep inside it wasn't possible. She had to let him go.

You were the one, Jake Roberts.

As she passed, the elevator the doors opened and startled her. A young couple exited quickly wrapped in a cuddling embrace. She watched them kiss their way to a room near hers. She saw Jake's face on the young man's and her own face on the girl's. Not wanting to attract attention, Lori decided to use the stairs. Dressed the way she was, she could easily have been mistaken for a hooker. Holding tightly on to her purse, she climbed the two floors it took to get to Parker's room. Inside her purse, she carried only the minimum tools necessary to accomplish her diabolical task.

Just what do you think you're doing? How many times have I told you that you have to plan? You're going to ruin everything for us.

Lori did not answer. There was no planning anything, anymore. She had to do Parker for what he had done to Megan. He deserved everything he was going to get and more. There wasn't time to prepare. The avenging angel was willing to take the chance.

Don't listen to her, mommy. He hurt me.

"I know baby, mommy knows what to do."

She whispered, but her voice magnified and echoed in the hollow stairway. She looked for security cameras. The fire door to Parker's floor was all that stood between her and her goal. She slowly cracked the door open enough to scan the hallway. Seeing it was clear, she looked for his room number, the one she saw on the sign-in sheet when they first arrived. Fortune was with her when she found Parker's room only a few doors down from the stairway. That was going to be helpful later when she would have to flee from the scene of the savage, brutal crime.

* * *

Emily, who is Emily?

It seems like I just heard the name somewhere, but I can't place it. The charm holds my complete attention as it dangles from the chain. It hasn't been touched by any of us. After I saw it hanging on the drain cover, I had the presence of mind to preserve it for analysis. Harmon hangs up the phone.

"Mrs. Abrams said she doesn't have any relatives,

friends, or associates named Emily.”

Mika suggests a list of possibilities.

“Maybe we’re on another wild goose chase. Maybe it was there since the place was built.”

“That house, forget the crime scene, is spotless. There isn’t as much as a toothpick out of place. Someone would definitely have noticed the loose drain cover if for no other reason than to get it repaired,” Harmon says.

Full of hope, I agree with him.

“It had to be left there during the commission of the crime. And I don’t think anyone would have seen it during the initial investigation, because I only saw it by accident.”

“Did Gates ever mention an Emily?” Mika says.

“Not that I recall. We can read through the transcripts though and see if he did.”

“What about the car? Did they sweep it like the bathroom, or should we go tear it apart, too?” Mika says.

“They were pretty thorough, but we can always take another look. It seems to be a good day for second looks,” Harmon says.

His huge frame collapses into the high-backed leather chair behind the mahogany desk that used to be Ed’s. Something is making my eye twitch and rubbing it only makes it itch more. The new detective chick knocks

on Harmon's door. Five foot five, azure eyes and golden-haired Melissa walk in.

"Yeah, what did you find out?" Harmon says.

"No Emily's mentioned in the transcript, Chief."

"Thanks Melissa, tell Williams to bring me the other item we talked about, the, you know, the—"

Harmon's impatience was getting the best of him.

"The cloth?" she says.

"Yeah, bring it in here, will you?"

She bolted out of the office and headed for the crime lab. Where she really wanted to be was headed out to the streets to catch bad guys, but like Ed before him, Harmon felt the need to protect Melissa a little longer from that.

"What did you want that for?" Mika says.

"There were some questions earlier about the—"

"HOLY SHIT!"

My raised volume unravels both of them.

"What's wrong with you, man? You scared—"

Harmon stops in mid-sentence. His eyebrows clench as he reads my face.

"What is it, Jake?"

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Mika continues patting her chest to settle down, while she waits patiently for the rest of my revelation.

“Jake, breathe, WHAT?” she says.

“Emily, a silver Lexus, the CD, Abrams the psychiatrist, the abusive missing husband, and the daughter’s suicide.”

I put it all together. I make sure it makes sense before I tell them.

“WHAT, WHAT?” Harmon says.

Mika tugs at me. I reach out and take her hands. My mind is racing trying to remember, to recall, and to separate the days all at the same time.

“I KNOW WHO THE KILLER IS!”

I say it, but I can’t accept it. I feel an eerie chill run my spine almost like I’m an accomplice somehow. I kissed her, held her in my arms. I was falling in love with her. I wanted to spend the rest of my life—

“Say it Jake, what?” Harmon says.

I regulate my breathing and focus. I can’t believe what I am about to say to them.

“A daughter named Emily. The girl committed suicide a few years ago for reasons she never said, but I think I know why now.”

“Who,” Mika says.

“The killer drives a late-model, silver, foreign car—a Lexus.”

Nobody is speaking now except me.

“When I was there, I found a CD, the exact same CD in her collection.”

I shake my head because the initial exuberance of the revelation is wearing off. The ex-husband abused her and disappeared, that’s the reason why she was seeing a psychiatrist, a Dr. Thaddeus Abrams.”

I can’t say the rest. I’m looking at Mika.

“LORI POWERS!” she says.

“Jake, are you sure?” Harmon says.

“It all fits. It’s as clear as glass now. She’s a flight attendant.”

I turn toward Mika. The pieces fit.

“I bet if you track her flights, she was in every town your victims turned up dead in.”

“Jesus, Jake,” Mika says.

“Where is she now?” Harmon says.

“Home, as far as I know. I went over to her place for dinner last night and we started talking about Gates. She started defending him—*defending* him. She said I needed to try to understand why he did what he did. I told her she

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was wrong because of Ed. She broke it off. I left pissed. That's how I ended up at Chipper's."

Mika gently makes an observation.

"She must have really loved you, Jake."

"What?"

I'm not ready for female intuition right now.

"No, I mean she *really* must have loved you, probably more than you will ever know," Mika says.

"I don't get it, what are you saying?"

Mika walks over and sits down beside me. She nods toward Harmon who moves to stand in front of me. Her hand slides across to take mine.

"Jake, if you're right about her then I think she must have really loved you, because you are a law enforcement officer, a man in a position of authority."

From my hand, hers slides up my arm and around my shoulder. There was a gentle, sympathetic look on her face.

"You're the perfect profile of her victims, and yet she 'spared' you. She didn't want to hurt you emotionally, or physically."

Mika's statement starts to hurt, a sucker punch I feel right below my ribs. If what Mika is saying is true, I'm lucky to be alive.

Harmon shifts into overdrive. He punches a finger into the intercom.

“Call them all in, now!”

Wendy on the other end of the intercom dials the extension of the dispatchers downstairs. Within minutes, every detective in the precinct is told to report to the house.

Mika watches me. She understands the conflict of emotions going on inside of me.

“I’m sorry, Jake.”

* * *

Nick barely heard the knock on his door. Lori didn’t want to draw attention from the other guests at the hotel, although she was certain after Parker was found, she would be the prime suspect. He tried to be as presentable as possible under the circumstances. The sport shirt was new, and so were the khaki slacks, but the navy blue blazer had some miles on it. His hair was perfectly groomed after the shower. The captain was as GQ as he was going to get. He opened the door with a gratuitous, charming smile.

“Hey Lori, you look great!”

His brow crunched together and his mouth formed an “O” as she twirled to provide a panoramic view. She carefully accentuated her breasts with a deep breath, and pointed a toe at the end of a long, shapely leg.

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“Okay?” she said.

It was more of a purr. Not wanting to appear overly aggressive, she nevertheless stepped inside his room quickly.

“So, where is this incredible, tantalizing restaurant you’re tempting me with? You said it was within walking distance. I hope it’s not too far for these heels.”

She watched his eyes travel down her legs.

“It’s not far at all, close actually. The specialty is King Crab legs, mounds of them that will make you quiver.”

He was still admiring hers.

“I speak with authority.”

“Captain Parker, that sounds to me like you would know exactly what to do if there were great legs right in front of you.”

She raised her eyebrows and added a pouting mouth to her suggestive exclamation.

Right then, Nick knew how the evening would end. While he had originally planned to be the one doing the seducing, he quickly realized that he was the one being seduced. He decided to let her play it out.

“Nick, please.”

“Nick.”

She smiled.

While he saw her as just an easy flight attendant, she was still an exceptionally beautiful woman with an awesome body. He didn't plan on a long affair with her anyway. He didn't know much about her, and wasn't interested in her personal life. He just wanted to play.

“Are you ready to go? I have a table reserved for 8:30. The place is usually packed by nine,” Nick said.

As he spoke, he pictured himself walking through the front doors with her on his arm. The other men would be salivating with envy. He liked that. It was part of his modus operandi to wine, dine and be seen. It was mental foreplay for the master. She surprised him and piqued his curiosity. He never anticipated she would be spontaneous and unpredictable.

“We could, unless...”

She looked deeply into Nick's eyes.

“Well pretty lady, what did you have in mind?”

“Why don't we order up room service, something to get the evening started, say champagne?”

We still have plenty of time before the reservation, and you said it was a short walk.”

He read the playful look on her face and it intensified his expectations. If this went right, he thought for the price of a bottle of champagne, he might save the price of an expensive dinner, and still score. Pilots only thought

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about sex and money. Cheap dates were a win-win. He smiled and reached for the telephone.

“Yes, could you send up a bottle of your finest champagne to Suite 753? Thank you.”

He dropped the handset down.

“I have always believed it is best to give the lady what she wants.”

The grin on his face has a devilish twist to it.

* * *

Shouting orders faster than any of us can get them done, Harmon believes that any further delay could cost another life.

“Call Judge Thornton, he’ll write a search warrant.”

Mika is on a conference call with Wellington in Quantico. I can hear him trying to interrupt, but she tells him to shut up. Wellington got spanked.

“Follow up with her airline. Call her supervisor. Find out if her schedule coincides with the murder dates and locations. Call me as soon as you have something.”

She slams the phone down and looks at us.

“There, that’ll get the ball rolling.”

Harmon asks me if Lori is still home.

“As far as I know she is. She’s not supposed to fly until tomorrow afternoon. The only other place she might be is at the cemetery. She visits her daughter regularly.”

I try to sound as if I have a clue about her life. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, but I’m astounded by how much I don’t know about her. The floor is filling up with detectives. They keep looking at Harmon to see what’s up. They know it has something to do with the “Who’s Your Daddy” killer, but he was dead. Finally, Harmon addresses them.

“All right people, listen up. There has been some new information that suggests Michael Gates was not, repeat not, our serial killer. It appears now that he may very well have been a copy cat killer. We now believe the perp to be a female named Lori Powers. We have an address and we’ll head there right after this briefing.”

Melissa interrupts him.

“Sir, the search warrant has been signed by the judge and will be transported to the residence. It will be there by the time you arrive.”

“Thanks detective. Okay, here’s how it’s going down. Jake, I want you to make it look like you’re just visiting and draw her out. The rest of you will take up positions out of sight, and be ready to move on Jake’s signal.”

He gets my reassuring nod.

“Agent Scott is still tactically in charge of this case.

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You will follow her commands to the letter. I will only be on site as an official observer.”

He turns to Mika.

“Will you need the services of our fine SWAT team, Agent Scott?”

“No sir, I’ve already requisitioned more agents from the Bureau. They should be there when we arrive.”

“Be sure they wait outside the perimeter until we get there. I don’t want a bunch of over-zealous Feds fouling things up,” Harmon says.

“I agree, and they have been advised as such, chief.”

Harmon looks at all the detectives.

“Any questions?”

After the detectives present exchange looks, one asks about whether or not the use of lethal force is approved. That hits me in an odd way.

“If need be,” Harmon says.

Harmon takes the lead and I’m right behind Mika. The doors to CID close behind us. The rest of the troops follow with determined looks on their faces. Outside, in front of the precinct, car doors slam shut and the squeal of tires fills the otherwise quiet and peaceful summer evening.

We are on our way to catch the real killer.

Cary Allen Stone

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12

Parker knew Lori was a player. He thought about dropping the sincerity, and dropping her to the floor instead. Rough, raucous sex was probably the norm for her, he thought, as he watched her move about the room.

Their conversation was provocative, suggestive and salacious. He decided to restrain his perverted desires until after the champagne was gone. The expected knock on his door from room service came. Lori quickly excused herself to the bathroom. Parker opened the door and watched the waiter push the cart with the white tablecloth inside the room. Inside the ice bucket on the

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cart stood the chilled champagne alongside two tall stem glasses, and a single red rose in a vase. He tossed the waiter a five.

“Are you all right in there?”

From inside the bathroom, Lori answered while she tugged at her skirt and straightened whatever she thought needed it. She took a quick look in the mirror to check for smudges.

“Yes Nick, be there in a second,” she said.

I'm so proud of you, mommy. You know how bad he hurt me. Don't let him hurt me again, mommy.

She looked into the mirror.

“I won't, baby.”

Before she opened the door, she checked her ring to make sure that the sedative was still hidden inside. She was ready—show time. The door swung open and Lori stepped out. She gave Nick one of her special Lori Powers smiles.

“Sorry I took so long.”

She looked at the bottle of champagne.

“Oh, that looks inviting.”

Parker took the foil off and started working out the cork. After the anticipated popping sound, he poured a glass and handed it to her. Lori graciously accepted and

he poured another for himself. They raised their glasses high and toasted.

“To a night to remember,” he said.

To a nightmare to remember.

She held her glass against his.

“Nick, I want this to be a very special night, one you won’t forget for the rest of your life.”

He felt his pulse rate jump, and a throbbing between his thighs. He was an empty champagne bottle away from taking her. A quick glance at the clock on the nightstand revealed that their dinner reservation time had arrived.

“Uh-oh, we’ve got to go,” he said.

Lori sipped at the champagne. Their eyes met.

“Or, we can stay right here,” she said.

“That would be okay with you, pretty lady?”

“Nick, I really love champagne. It makes me lose my inhibitions. I feel like I’m able to experience things otherwise considered...improper.”

She was everything he had hoped for.

Thank God, I didn’t waste my time with Megan.

The thoughts that were running through his mind would alone be considered illegal in many states. He

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reached for the bottle, but Lori stepped forward and placed her hand lightly on his chest.

“You captains are always so concerned about us. Why don’t you let me take care of you tonight?”

Her hand dropped and lightly brushed against the front of his khakis. He missed a breath.

Oh God, she’s good,

With a slight nudge, she made him sit on the edge of the bed. He didn’t hesitate to accommodate her. Pivoting toward the cart, she refilled his glass while he focused on the backside of her dress. He followed the back of her legs down to her heels then reversed course and went up, until he became lost in the flowing curls of her flaxen hair.

Opening her ring, she let the contents fall into his glass, and poured champagne over the drug. The bubbles provided the perfect cover as the two ingredients mixed together. It would take only a minute after the glass was empty for the drug to take effect then she would be able to kill the rat.

In the midst of her preparation, she felt his hand touch her from behind. It slid down along her arm to her hand. She wasn’t sure if Nick had seen what she had done. She tensed. His other hand started to knead her behind. Abruptly, he spun her around and took her in his arms.

“I want you, you make me hard,” he said.

He started to kiss her neck and shoulders. She wanted to smash the bottle into the side of his head, but fought the strong urge instead.

“Hey, mister, what about the champagne?” she said.

“How am I supposed to get in the mood without some champagne?”

He manhandled her, groping from top to bottom. He put both hands on her hips and started grinding into her.

“I don’t need champagne.”

Nick was on fire.

“I’m already aroused, and I want you right this second.”

Stop him mommy. Stop him.

“Nick, Nick,” she said.

She tried to slow him down.

“We’ve got all night and what I have planned for you can’t be rushed.”

“Let’s get started right now. You make me so hot I can’t wait,” he said.

He tugged at her blouse. Holding her hands together over her head with one hand, he pulled her skirt up with the other. He fell on top of her on the bed knocking the wind out of her lungs.

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Oh my God! He did this to Megan.

She gasped for air and struggled with Parker trying to persuade him to stop, but he was relentless. He tore her panties while pulling them down. She wanted to scream, but knew she had to hold back. Then she felt him pushing violently against her thighs. Nick Parker forced himself inside of her. Her breathing became deep and irregular just as Nick liked it.

Kill him, mommy, kill him.

Lori tried to regulate her breathing so that she would not pass out. She found herself counting every thrust until he made his last. Nick stopped moving and stayed on top of her until he recovered. He rolled over face up on the bed with his manhood exposed.

“I’ll have that drink now.”

She wanted to crush his skull with the bedside lamp, or to sear his exposed flesh with a flame. She wanted to stab him with the knife in her purse. Most of all she wanted to cry. In order for her to finish him, she knew she would have to play the game a little longer as repulsive as that thought was. As she raised herself off the bed, she exclaimed.

“Nick that was incredible. The whole fantasy rape thing was such a turn on. My God, Nicky, it was so exciting.”

Did she really think I was pretending?

He opened his eyes as she carried on. Her response confused him.

“You liked it?”

She stood up and straightened her clothes. He sat up on the edge of the bed. He wasn’t sure what to do next. This was normally the time where he threatened the victim with their job, but she was into it.

“I can’t wait for round two,” she said.

She quickly reached for his glass. She held it out for him. Parker didn’t know what to say. He took the glass and slugged it down. Lori watched until he held the glass out for her to refill.

“Are you going to be able to sustain that energy level again?” she said.

“Well, I guess you’re going to find out, it’s still early,” he said.

“Aren’t you glad we didn’t make our reservation time?”

His eyes rolled. A deep yawn followed, and he was surprised by it. He looked at her with an apologetic look.

“Must have been a longer day than I thought it was.”

He yawned again then another time. He couldn’t stop and decided that he better splash some water in his face, and take a Viagra. He knew he was going to need one if she expected more. He got up and staggered into the

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bathroom closing the door behind him. Lori didn't want him in there. She wanted him to pass out on the bed. It would be difficult for her to carry him to the bed if he fell in there. She knew that the sedative worked quickly. Her anxiety level rising, she prayed he would come out.

I told you not to do this. Now look what happened.

Lori hated the voice. She hated being scolded and preferred only to hear her Emily. Lori heard a glass fall into the sink and break. She started to panic until the bathroom door opened, and Parker shuffled out. He kept shaking his head as if he were trying to clear it. He held on to the walls, as he got closer to her.

“I don't, I don't know what's wrong,” he said.

Lori quickly reached out to support him.

“Nick, what's wrong? You don't look well. Here, get over to the bed and lie down.”

A complying patient, he did as he was told. He finally blacked out after falling back onto the mattress. Lori quickly removed the bindings from her purse and secured his hands and feet to the bed. She removed the glimmering, stainless steel knife from her purse.

“Pay to play, Captain Nicholas Parker.”

* * *

There is no answer. I knock again and lean to look inside, but the house is dark. Lori isn't home. All I can do is retreat and discuss our next move with Mika and

Harmon. The officers, who are strategically hidden throughout the neighborhood, stand down on command and wait. Mika's cell phone rings.

“Scott.”

She listens while looking at me.

“Thanks.”

“Chick's flown the coop. Headquarters called her supervisor who called their crew scheduling department. They said she accepted a flight to Boston to cover for some other crew member.”

Harmon looks around until he sees the person he is searching for running down the street toward us.

“Here it is, Chief,” Melissa says.

She hands him the search warrant and Harmon proofreads it.

He turns and signals.

“Take it down.”

Two large male uniformed officers approach the front door and kick it in. With weapons drawn, they secure the interior and within minutes, they are outside.

“CLEAR.”

The three of us go inside and search for anything to support my theory. My gut says I'm right. Now I have to

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prove it. I know the interior, so I head to the back rooms. Inside her bedroom, I feel strange. The last time I was inside the house, I intended to sleep with her. There is nothing there now, so I walk back to Mika.

Harmon is in the kitchen and grasps a small, brown prescription bottle on the counter-top that had the name of a strong sedative on it. The pills are gone. He rejoins us in the living room. Mika's cell phone rings again.

“Scott.”

She glances around the room. At the stereo, she drags the CD case from the stack, opens the lid, and sees that the disc is gone. She holds it open to show me.

“Anything else? Have the plane ready to go when I get there.”

Harmon displays the empty prescription bottle. Mika relays what she has learned.

“She's probably going to do it again. They've found out what hotel she's in. My people are fueling the plane, and we'll be in the air in thirty minutes. You two are invited to go along.”

“Let's go,” Harmon says.

Outside he places Osborne in command and then forces his way into the driver's side.

“I'm driving.”

Mika looks hard at him.

“You really need to get over that.”

It’s funny, stupid actually, but with all that is going on, all I can think about is how much I hate to fly, fancy F-B-I jet, or not.

As I fall into the back seat, Harmon speeds off.

Lori Powers, what are you doing?

* * *

The mind is truly a remarkable creation, the way it operates. What goes on routinely inside of it is nothing less than miraculous. It can add and subtract, multiply and divide, all of what life throws at us. It is responsible for basic functions of the human body and can contemplate abstract concepts. It’s a fascinating thing, the human mind.

Inside Lori’s mind was a ticking clock counting down. Although there was no reason for her to believe we were on her trail, she sensed it. If there was one thing done wrong, it was that we severely underestimated the intellect and talents of the breathtakingly beautiful Lori Powers.

Standing at the foot of the bed, she stared at Parker. He was a pig, a wild animal that needed to be destroyed. There was no doubt in her mind and she didn’t even know all of the atrocious things he had done during his lifetime. All she really knew about Nick Parker was that he had hurt Megan, and he had just raped her.

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Don't let him hurt me again, mommy, please.

The other voice pushed Lori.

You've gone this far. You might as well finish it.

With the concurrence of the voices, she didn't waste another second. The ritual began. The third song on the CD played on the stereo beneath the television in the room. She kept the volume low enough so no one could hear. Lori walked to the side of the bed, the gleaming knife in hand. Parker laid spread-eagled, tied and still out from the powerful sedative. She was disappointed she wasn't going to be able to taunt him before he received his final punishment. She couldn't afford to let him scream like the others.

She stabbed him in his cold, black heart. The blood shot up in spurts. She dragged the blade across his throat severing the carotid artery. In an instant, Captain Nick Parker was dead. After watching him take his last breath, Lori reached for his manhood that had just violated her, and held it firmly with her free hand. Slowly and purposefully with an almost artistic stroke, she severed it and dropped it on his chest, just as she had done with all of the others. She thrust the blood-soaked blade into his heart one last time, and left it protruding there.

Now he won't hurt me again, mommy.

Lori placed the chair from the desk at the foot of the bed and sat down. Seconds passed and she reached into her torn panties and started to massage her private place. She quickened the pace and fell into her dream.

“Daddy, did I do it right? Was that what you wanted, daddy? Faster daddy, and don’t be angry, Faster daddy, I want...you...to...love me.”

Just like all of the times before, Lori awoke from the dream and felt nothing, no sensation at all. She slowly retracted her hand and stood. She straightened her blouse and adjusted her skirt.

Lori returned from the bathroom with a white washcloth in her hand. She mounted the bed, dabbed the cloth into the puddle of freshly spilled blood, and wrote one word on the wall. Unlike all of the other times, she didn’t wipe the room clean, or take away any incriminating evidence.

Someone knocked on Parker’s door and startled Lori. She froze. The last thing she could afford to do now was panic. She moved slowly toward the door to peek out through the security hole. It was Megan.

What was she doing here?

Megan had come to face Parker. She wanted to hurt him and tell him that she wasn’t going to live her life in fear of him any longer. No one answered while she stood in the hallway, arms folded.

Lori wondered if Megan would ever leave. Maybe she was having second thoughts and wanted Nick. Maybe Megan was a sick puppy playing games. Fast as that thought entered her mind, it was wiped clean. Megan was in real pain, and Lori had no doubt of that. Taking another peek out through the security hole, she didn’t see

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Megan. She heard sobbing and then the elevator doors open and close.

Before leaving, Lori thought about Jake and what might have been. With a smile on her face, she looked both ways before slipping out of Parker's room.

* * *

The powerful Gulfstream corporate jet owned and paid for by me, and the rest of the taxpayers, blasts off into the night sky. The sudden acceleration forces push me back into my seat. The FBI pilot pulls the nose up, and we seem to be climbing straight up into space. Then the hotshot banks as if we were in some kind of Top Gun dogfight. Mika smiles as she watches how uncomfortable I am. I hate to fly. Harmon isn't happy about it either. I see his massive fingers on both hands dig into the leather-covered armrests.

I'm not sure of too many things anymore. But I'm certain I can never be a pilot. There has to be something wrong with them. If the Creator wants us to leave the confines of gravity, He would provide us a means to do so, like wings. He gave us feet, end of discussion.

As we level off at some angelic altitude, I start to acclimatize. Landing of course will give me another reason to panic. I sit close to the defibrillators stored onboard. The aircraft has its own flight attendant. I can only wonder what she is costing me. Noting the grimace on my face, Mika smirks.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, better...sure.”

It is only the second time I have ever been in a plane.

“You’re probably enjoying this, watching me lose my mind at thirty thousand feet.”

“Safest way to travel,” she says.

“So, when we get there...”

Harmon leans closer to hear.

“One of the agency’s Suburbans will meet us and take us to the hotel. We’ll check the crew’s rooms and track anyone who may have gone out.”

“Do you think she’ll be there?” Harmon says.

“I hope so.”

“Can you get some agents to the hotel before we get there?”

“Good idea, hand me that phone over there please.”

After she completes the call, and sets things in motion, we all sit back and take some quiet time. I keep thinking about Lori and the times we had spent together. It all had such promise. The truth is still hard to swallow, and I still can’t believe it has gone this way. Mika interrupts my plane of thought.

“What are you thinking about?”

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“One minute I get it, and the next I’m totally confused. I guess she really did me a favor.”

I hope things work out for us. I hope she leaves the FBI and comes back home, and we can get out of this life. I don’t know how anyone can walk away from this. Just jetting around like this is enough for someone to suck it up.

When Lori’s finally in custody, Mika will be a heroine. She will be offered all sorts of rewards, maybe even a top cop job. It would be difficult for anyone to turn the offers down. I don’t know if she can truly walk away from it...just for me.

“How about you?”

“When this is over, I’m going to take some time off, and do some real soul searching,” she says.

She looks deep into my eyes searching for some sort of a sign, but I can’t give her one. She has to make the decision on her own.

* * *

Inside the security of her hotel room, the hot water cascaded over Lori and washed away her crime then she heard the voice.

Lori Powers, you’re a bad girl. They will find you.

“They will find you?”

She smiled as the water fell over her face.

“Maybe Jake will find me and we can run away together.”

She was no longer intimidated by the voices. Lori decided not to pack. There was nothing she had to take and no looking back anymore. Even when they found Parker, it wouldn't do them any good she thought. In spite of what the voice had said, they were never going to find her. It was time to go. Hurriedly, she departed the hotel. The only light shining on the city street came through the few shaded windows of the townhouses that lined it, and the bright entrance lights to the hotel. A few cars were parked along the avenue. Their owners had no plans to leave until the early morning rush hour.

The only sound outside, besides those from a few passing cars, were coming from her high heels. They made a clicking sound that echoed between the buildings. She picked up the pace down the sidewalk. Her breathing quickened from the brisk walk. Lori scanned for a nearby taxi and waved one down.

“Logan, please.”

The driver, a recent Islamic immigrant obliged. As she sat in the back, she removed a tissue from her purse and dabbed at the corner of her eyes. The driver stole looks at her in the rear view mirror at irregular intervals. He decided American women were hot. It was worth it he thought to be an illegal immigrant.

At the ticket counter, she bought a nonstop ticket. The flight to Portugal would be lengthy, but it was the first flight out of the country, and that fit her travel plans

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perfectly. Lori Powers would disappear before they arrived, and—after the evil she had exacted.

* * *

It is written in blood, his blood—a pilot named Nicholas Parker. The three of us stand at the foot of the bed and stare. Harmon doesn't speak. Mika doesn't say a word. Even if I knew what to say, I can't. Right up on the wall over Parker, written in dried blood red letters is—*JAKE*

The rest of the investigators present, mostly FBI agents and locals, go about the gruesome task of collecting evidence. The captain is going to be bagged, tagged and frozen in the morgue at least until the autopsy is completed.

The rest of his flight crew has been rounded up, and is currently sitting in the lobby in deep shock. They are providing as much detail as they possibly can in between the trauma and the crying. A young flight attendant, who can't be more than twenty, is shaking so severely they are going to sedate her.

There is one crewmember missing.

* * *

Lightning is direct current. A bolt can account for twenty to forty thousand amperes, two hundred million volts. A strike of lightning is calculated to be hotter than the surface of the sun. When you are struck by lightning, it leaves feather burns on your skin. They slowly fade

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after a few days, if you live. Death can occur in milliseconds.

Sometimes, I hate to be right. Sometimes, I turn the other cheek. Sometimes, I just want to run home and hide under the covers. There are times when I wish I had never been born.

I would rather have been struck by lightning than to live through this. At least it would have been over in milliseconds. What a world we live in.

All flowers look beautiful but some are poisonous, even deadly.

About the author

More by Cary Allen Stone:

***AFTER THE EVIL*—A Jake Roberts Novel**
***MIND OVER MURDER*—A Jake Roberts Novel**
***AFTER THE GOODE*—A Jake Roberts Novel**
***AFTER THE KILL*—A Jake Roberts Novel**
***STEALING ATLANTA*—A Cybercrime Thriller**
***THROUGH A MOTHER'S EYES*—True Crime**

Cary Allen Stone was born in 1953, began flying in 1972, and received his Bachelor of Arts in 1976. He was hired by his first airline in 1982 and has retired in 2014. Aviation has given him a unique perspective of life, and led to his writing. In 1992, he flew for film director Sir Ridley Scott. It gave him an opportunity to discuss his writing with Sir Scott who remains a major influence for him. In addition to his career in aviation and writing, he had a non-speaking character role in an AAA Club advertisement, has been an extra in “The Dukes,” and Phoenix film “Recession Road.” He has done voice-over radio commercials. He is a member of the Phoenix Writer’s Club, the Author Social Media Support Group and the International Thriller Writers.

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