

"Wendy, I'm t-tellin' you, the man's a serial killer. He has the body of a Greek God, but his mind is full of squirming maggots." Gena stifled a sob with a shaking hand, her body wedging back against the driver's door after twisting to face her roommate. "He's more depraved than any fucker we've ever crossed, and he's going to find me." Aftereffects of adrenaline rush magnified tremors in her fingers and lips while increasingly shallow breaths expelled carbon dioxide faster than her body could produce it. No doubt, the by-products of dizziness, cramps, and weakness crept into her awareness. Fear-sweat on her forehead glistened from distant flashes of lightning.

"Hey, slow down. Take a deep breath. You're new to this and easily spooked. Just because men are pigs doesn't mean they're murderers. Take the money he gave you and don't see him again. Change your number. Lay low for a bit." Wendy startled with the repetitive crash of thunder reverberating in the Honda's dark and eerie confines. "Can I at least see what's got your panties in a twist?" She reached for the black cloth covering her friend's evidence only to be pushed away.

"Oh God, Wendy. You shouldn't have come with me. He knows I'm a sophomore, but I didn't tell him which college. I don't want him to find you."

"Shit, Gena. I may be a student, but I can take care of myself." A note of uncertainty snaked through Wendy's voice.

From the back seat, Remie contemplated the wind's increasing fury, so like her own, sweeping yet erratic. Parked along a deserted back road hours before dawn didn't equate to a tranquil setting when listening to accusations of murder. *I should've brought Buckeye, even if I had to leave him in the SUV.* She'd just moved back to Portland and lacked the normal discreet channels of investigation derived from time-developed working relationships. *Not that I've figured out what the problem is yet.*

Small raindrops pattering the passenger window progressed to a heavy deluge that silvered with the dashboard's ambient light. It was a perfect night to snuggle under a blanket with a cup of cocoa and a scary book. Living the scenario brought the rancid taste of bile scalding Remie's throat.

"Girls, you know I'm a doctor, not a cop, right? What happened to toning life down to live like normal human beings? No more adrenaline junkie. Gena, it's not like you need the money for tuition. Jesus, if your parents knew what you were doing for thrills, it would kill them both." Years of schooling in forensic pathology aged Remie decades in the eyes of college girls too naïve to avoid such foolish and dangerous behavior. More than ten years difference thrust her into the role of adopted mentor to the neighborhood wild child with *crazy* tattooed on her brain.

"Jesus. I shouldn't have involved you either, Remie. You spent a night in the hospital last week after wrecking your car." Unspoken recriminations gathered around Gena like a smoldering blanket, the flameless combustion withering her resolve.

"I'm fine. The few scrapes and bruises have already healed."

"It was just a few tricks for kicks, no harm. It's not like I don't use condoms, and we've only done it a couple times."

"The *harm* is that there *are* real nutjobs out there. Deranged people you do not want to meet. Trust me. I see the results of their work every day during necropsies. It's what I do... remember?" Visions of Gena, cold on the autopsy table while an ME separated the upper part of her cranium to create a removable skullcap strengthened Remie's determination to see the situation resolved.

"Roomie, what makes you think he was a killer? Did he threaten you? Did you see a gun?" Wendy laid a calming hand on her roommate's arm. "Hell, everybody has guns these days. I've got a .357 stashed in my bedside table. Let some psycho come to my dorm looking for easy targets—he'll get a hollow-point surprise."

Gena, the cute little kid from the farm next door with wide hazel eyes and curly brown hair had grown up with a nose for trouble, yet usually lacked affiliation with high drama. With the start of the spring semester, the risky escapades should've ceased.

"While he was in the can, I picked the lock on his briefcase, thinking he was some kind of lawyer or something." If not for the frightened gaze bouncing between the *proof* clenched in her fingers and the nebulous woods on either side of the lonely road, Gena could've been any college student recounting a risky hazing ritual. The tone and pitch of her voice increased when she unfolded the fabric covering her stolen treasure. "I saw syringes full of *something*, along with empty containers, and these. I also found alcohol swabs and betadine solution. Who carries betadine in a briefcase?"

"You stole from a John? Are you crazy?" Wendy snatched the wooden box with a huff and a groan.

Detailing around the container's top edge included an intricate inlay bearing a darker grain. Similar designs decorated urns. "You better hope we can return them before he notices they're gone. Where did you hook up?"

Wendy slid the lid back on the six-by-six inch square. The smooth glide on concealed grooves further testament to the boosted prize's value. Shadows shielded the contents from Remie's view.

Wendy's high-pitched scream rendered the burgeoning storm to white noise, instinctual awareness hurling the box's contents against the windshield. Their arc proved too fast to visually track. Two pink lumps, small and irregularly shaped, formed the basis for a new nightmare.

The rattle and thump of the container ended when it landed perched on the steering wheel, upside down.

"Fuck! What the hell are those?" First medical school, then forensic pathology, enlightened Remie to evil's worst-case scenarios. Her mom once said that after indoctrination, nothing new would appear under the sun. Whoever created this mayhem transcended anything evolved from humanity's convoluted gene pool.

A sudden gust of wind and rain blew in as the driver's door flew open. Gena lurched forward and hunched away from the torrent of slashing storm riding the invading cool blast. Her descent into hell included a flash of silver and guttural laugh.