

RED MONDAY

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**To my family, for their persistent support.
To Nicole, for telling me how it is.
To Meg, who liked the bit about killing.**

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ABSTRACT

RED MONDAY

by Bill De Herder

This first half of a novel is an absurd, darkly funny mystery thriller that takes place in the metropolis of Detroit. It features Philip Barnes, an underground private detective whose life is a consistent mess. One night, Phil receives a call from a stranger asking him to investigate the killing of a local reporter. But something doesn't seem right about this new case. Memories from Phil's first investigation haunt the text of *Red Monday*, a period of time where hallucinations of Phillip Marlowe followed him everywhere he went. Is Barnes's past catching up with him? As the bodies pile up, connections to a cold case surface. Phil must uncover the truth behind a string of abductions and grisly murders and keep his employer's girlfriend out of trouble, even if it kills him. With a fast plot, fun characters, and an obsession with classic film, *Red Monday* shows how sometimes real life can imitate fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

Red Monday started off five years ago with the phrase, “They say killing is as easy as breathing. Well, unless you’re asthmatic, anyway.” I remember writing that line. I remember that I was sitting in my dorm lounge, near the piano, scribbling on a pad of paper. I was a sophomore in college, going through a rocky break up with a girl I had been dating for the past five years. My sister had died a few months before. I was in a morbidly humorous state of mind. A macabre funk had taken hold of me. I just wrote that line and thought it was funny. I wondered if I could start a story with that line and where it would go from there. I began scribbling whatever came into my mind. Before I know it, I was writing a murder mystery where the main character mistrusted women.

Red Monday originally was a sixty page submission to my creative writing class. The original draft began as a meta-fictional parody of film noir with a self-aware narrator. My class had an enthusiastic reaction to it. They seemed to really appreciate the humor. Years later, students in the creative writing department were still telling me how memorable *Red Monday* was. I was glad others enjoyed the story. I thought it was funny too, but I never really considered expanding it into a novel. The story had too many flaws and I was convinced the narration style was far too silly for a publisher to ever find interest in it.

When I started college, I began to pay closer attention to movies. I devoured hundreds of them: the classics, the popular, the expertly-written. I read books on screenplay writing, directorial style, and classic actors. I took classes on film history. I grew to love the film noir genre I originally had decided to parody. I appreciated the shadows, the menace, and the intrigue. I watched films like *The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Third Man* over and over.

Tough guys, dames, and fedoras filled my head. By senior year, I began thinking about *Red Monday*'s main character, Philip Barnes, in a different light. I felt compelled to plot a whole new adventure for him.

By that summer, after graduation, I had written a few new chapters of a Philip Barnes story, but worried the full plot would not be enough to fill a novel. As a possible solution, I thought that I could combine this new story with the old one from my sophomore year, if I re-wrote the old draft. After some plotting, I decided it could be done by having separate 2009 and 2010 plots that came together at the end. I hammered out about ten new pages a day, every day, for three weeks. Before I knew it, I had completed the first full draft of *Red Monday*.

A considerable amount of cleaning had to go into the draft at that point, cleaning that took me over a year to complete. As I cleaned, I inserted some of the elements I am most proud of in the manuscript.

The Marlowe character was not in the original draft. I created him out of necessity. I realized that Phil needed help solving his mystery. It made no sense that a complete novice would be able to do the miraculous things he accomplishes in the plot. He needed a professional to guide him. Also, the original short story version contained a lot of jokes that were just too silly to be included, but were still very funny. The only way I could figure out to include them without disrupting the seriousness of the scene was to have someone besides Phil say them. That job fell to Marlowe, who was a hallucination and could largely go ignored by the other characters. By creating his character, I was able to have everything I wanted: a novice main character (an essential element in a thriller), a way for Phil to solve the murder and save the day, more serious narration, and funny jokes. Moreover, Marlowe is essentially a manifestation of Barnes's

anguish over Catherine's death. The hallucination of Marlowe's ghost is very much a hallucination about Catherine. His inclusion in the text deepens the reader's perception of Barnes's sorrow.

Marlowe is by far my favorite element in *Red Monday*. He also brings an element of post-modernism to the novel without forcing the narrative to dip into full-fledged post-modernism. Post-modernism often deals with the confusion of fiction and reality and the idea that truth is unattainable. Phillip Marlowe is a character created by Dashiell Hammett (note that the garage where James Whale's body is discovered is named Dashiell's Garage). Because Marlowe is a character who references other fictional works, he is naturally a post-modern force in the text. His presence in the story causes Phil Barnes to question fiction's relation to reality. Through much of the middle of the 2009 plot arc, Barnes struggles with using fictional detecting techniques to solve real murders.

As he follows Marlowe's advice, Barnes thinks he is closer to truth, but the end of the novel shows that not to be the case. Very late into the book, Barnes remarks to himself that film noir is not really about finding answers. It is about revenge and taking down as many big shots as possible. In *Red Monday*, the full truth is never attained because Barnes mimics Marlowe, a fictional hallucination. Barnes is able to avenge Catherine and save Maibe, but not determine the identity of the villain or the meaning of the mysterious card in his pocket. This ending both satisfies the reader and withholds a neat and tidy ending. *Red Monday* saves its readers from the typically uncomfortable post-modern ending where everything is thrown into uncertainty, but still plays with post-modern concepts.

One of the weaknesses in the first draft involved the relation between the 2009 and 2010 plot lines. I wanted something that would hold the two plots together while the reader waited for the plot to reveal how they were related. I came up with the symbol of the butterfly. The butterfly represents Phil's attachment to Catherine, his murdered ex-girlfriend. In the 2009 plot arc, Phil sees the butterfly everywhere and is constantly reminded of Catherine, giving the narrator an excuse to provide backstory at opportune moments. In the 2010 plot arc, the butterfly is still present, but only on Maibe's bracelet. I wanted to imply symbolically that, to Phil, Maibe was equivalent to Catherine. I thought that it would have been creepy for Phil to literally suggest that he could replace Catherine with Maibe. Instead, I wanted to imply that Maibe could possibly allow Phil to heal, to allow him to recover from being destroyed by a femme fatale. This idea comes to full flower by the end of the novel, when Maibe is placed in a similar situation as Catherine was at the beginning.

The color red is another recurring element in *Red Monday*. It might be the most important element, considering it even makes an appearance in the title. At first, the color red became a focus in the novel as a joke. In the original short story version, Phil Barnes used a ketchup bottle as a weapon. I chose this because in classic noir, the tough guy main characters never use guns, even though everyone else seems to have them. I wanted to make fun of this common element in film noir. I chose red ketchup because film noir is an entirely American art form. Ketchup is also very American (for reasons explained in the text). However, as the novel grew, the color red became much more than a small joke. Red, in *Red Monday*, is associated with violence. The ketchup bottle, then, became a bottle of violence that Phil could carry around with him. At the climax of the story, the way Phil sees the color changes, signaling a change within himself. The inclusion of this element deepens the shift within the narrator.

As a result of all these edits, *Red Monday* has become a funny novel that tells a deep and complex story. However, stepping back and looking at the project holistically, another notable point becomes apparent. *Red Monday* bravely attempts to balance the conventions of a murder mystery and an innocent-on-the-run thriller. These two genres possess conflicting conventions.

A murder mystery usually involves a professional or armature detective who is an expert criminologist. In a murder mystery, the plot focuses closely on the puzzle of the murder: the who, what, where, when, and why (or means, motive, and opportunity). The protagonist of a murder mystery typically works closely with police and has little personal involvement in the murder, beyond curiosity.

An innocent-on-the-run thriller features a protagonist who is being chased by two factions: the authorities and the antagonist. The story does not necessarily involve a murder, but must deal with a conspiracy. The main character is usually a novice and an unprofessional. The plot tends to focus on the drama and action of the main character running for his or her life. Typically, there is also a romantic sub-plot.

Red Monday manages to address all of these conventions. The murders of Catherine and James Whale are major conflicts. In the 2009 plot, Phil Barnes attempts to solve Catherine's murder in order to save his own life. In the 2010 plot, he investigates the murder of James Whale out of principle. Phil is usually working against the police or running away from them, but near the end of the novel, he attempts to gather incriminating evidence to begin a police investigation. The puzzle of the mystery is preserved in the text, but the plot is many times driven by physical forces (a chase scene, for example). As the plot unfolds, it becomes apparent that a conspiracy is

afoot and that Barnes must uncover it. *Red Monday* achieves a rare balance between two similar, but difficultly combined, genres.

However, the manuscript is not without its weaknesses. The female characters in the novel unfortunately take a back seat through much of the plot. Feminists would no doubt take issue with Catherine and Maibe's damsel in distress status, waiting for a male to save them. To compensate, I tried to bring out as much of their unique personalities as possible and to show them as strong characters. Regrettably, it was not logistically feasible to develop them as fully as I would have liked. In a very plot-oriented novel like *Red Monday*, there is little room to concentrate on minor characters. Any calm moments in the draft are mostly used to try to explain the last crazy plot twist before the novel springs into another action scene. I could only work in a small amount of backstory and development for minor characters where that information was most relevant.

Another weakness might be the plot. Knowing what I do now about plot structure, I probably would have plotted *Red Monday* differently. In commercial fiction, there is usually a set up to the major conflict for the first third of the novel. The set up ends with the introduction of the first major plot point. Then, all events climb toward a midpoint where things shift, another major plot point. Finally, the plot drifts to the concluding plot point – the climax – and the events of the story are wrapped up. *Red Monday* almost has two of these types of plot arcs staggered, which can be very confusing for a reader. The two plots move quickly when independent of each other, but when combined, the entire novel twists and turns into a pretzel. In an early draft, I had staggered the plot to alternate between 2009 and 2010 every other chapter. This proved far too difficult for readers to handle. Readers would have to take notes to remember characters or plot

points. Later, I decided to alternate every three chapters, giving readers at least fifteen pages in a plot arc before switching to the other. Readers seemed to have a much easier time with this arrangement, but I fear the draft's plot might still be too unwieldy for the average reader.

Flawed or not, I still have big plans for *Red Monday*. I intend this book to be the first in a series featuring Phillip Barnes. I have already written a sequel and am planning to start a third book next year. This first book shows how classic noir chooses to solve a murder mystery. The second novel, titled *The Soft Kidnapping*, showcases the classic cozy murder mystery method of detection (made famous by Agatha Christie). My vision is for this series to play with ideas of post-modernism while also dealing with exciting and intriguing murder mysteries.

I plan to send manuscript queries out for *Red Monday* as soon as possible. The publication process is slow and exhausting, but hopefully it will not be too long before a publishing house takes interest in the manuscript. Shortly after *Red Monday* is published, I plan on publishing its sequel. I have many writing projects in various stages of development and would love to try my hand at writing fiction professionally.

RED MONDAY

2010

Chapter 1

From what I heard, the mechanic walked out to the lot behind Dashiell's Garage. Mr. Whale's beat up Lumina had been left for him some time before. No one saw Mr. Whale drop the car off, but a note was left behind saying the car wouldn't start. The mechanic gave little thought to the car's random appearance and pushed it into the work area for a look. He popped the hood and noticed that when he cranked the engine over, the pump wasn't drawing any fuel. There was no leak in the gas line. He'd have to rip out the whole tank, drain it, and check the pump. Or he could just cut a hole in the bottom of the trunk to get to the gas tank and check the pump from there. With a little welding, Mr. Whale would have no idea someone had cut holes in his car. So, he grabbed Mr. Whale's keys and opened the trunk. That's where he found Mr. Whale, trussed up, gagged, and very dead.

On the night in question, it was dark out, but other than that, I had no idea what time it was. My clock had met an unfortunate end some matter of weeks ago when I'd dropped it into the bathtub. I thought the short-out would blow the circuits in the building so the asshole that lived upstairs couldn't practice his new electric guitar. The kicker was the short didn't work. It just blew out my breakers, not his. I should have known, but I wasn't thinking straight, it being 4:00am and me having nothing but cheap liquor and cold Chinese food in my stomach.

That's when I got the call.

"Hello? Is this Barnes?"

I asked who wanted to know.

“I understand you’re a man who can get things done.”

I looked over at the half-finished puzzle lying on my floor. It had been there for months.

“You’ve got the right man,” I assured the voice on the telephone.

I could tell the voice was male, and assumed the rest of him was as well. He had a brisk business tone. I asked him how he got my number. He said he hoped he hadn’t woken me. I told him not to worry, that justice and I never slept, sort of like Frank Sinatra on a coke binge.

Truth be told, I’d just been sitting in my recliner for the past hour, watching the electrical socket where my TV used to be. It was Monday. I hated Mondays. The phone call was welcome. I was sure the guy upstairs was about to start with the electric guitar at any moment.

“Do you know James Whale?” he said.

I told him I’d heard of him. He was an investigative reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*. Last year he broke up a ring of crooks that were posing as school employees and skimming checks out of the public education budget.

“Last night he was found killed,” the man said.

The man went on to explain about the incident in the mechanic’s garage. How he was found dead in his own trunk.

“Good thing he didn’t own a Smart Car,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“At least he was in one piece.”

The man said that he'd heard I was the one to call when bad things happened. I told him my fee: two hundred dollars a day, plus expenses. I told him it had to be cash. He agreed. I asked him again who he was and he said that he'd rather not say. He said he'd drop some money off tomorrow in a brown paper bag. I told him that would be fine. I would start when I saw the money. I hung up and leaned back in my recliner.

I was used to this sort of thing. I had a reputation. Sometimes people got killed. In Detroit, most killings went un-punished. The police had enough on their plate. They couldn't handle it if one person wanted to off another. But I could.

Take the previous month for example, a woman owned a store for twenty years and it wasn't doing so well so she decided to sell it. An old man bought it, cleaned it up, and after a few months started bringing in a huge profit. The woman called him, saying she wanted the store back. He told her to go to hell. It was his store. He paid for it. Every night the old man would lock up his store with two goons watching his back. The store happened to be in a bad neighborhood and it paid to have two big guys watching out for you. One night the woman decided to grease some palms and the two goons fell back for a minute as the old man walked ahead out of the alley behind the store. Two shots were fired. He died slowly. The woman got her store back, and no one was the wiser.

The police did what they always do: next to nothing. They asked around; got nowhere because no one was talking. They were unable to find the gun that shot the old man. Without a gun, they had no case. The family was desperate for answers. No one even suspected the woman who first owned the store.

That's where I came in. I wasn't a cop. I wasn't a private investigator. I didn't follow laws. I didn't even own a gun. I found people. Runaways, killers, rapists, whatever. Bad people. What happened to them after I found them was not my problem. Sometimes what happened to them was what happened to the woman who got her store back. She was dragged out of the Detroit River with two bullets in her gut. She had died slowly. The brother of the old man told me he did it himself.

I took one more look at the phone and decided to get up. I walked to the open closet where my 2010 motivational kitten calendar was hung. It was open to May. A kitten dangled from a tree branch. Written below were words encouraging me to "Hang in there."

I put on my shoes and coat. I was going for a walk. I'd probably wind up at the garage where they found Whale's body. I know I said I'd wait for the cash before I started, but even if it wasn't in my letter box the next day, I'd still find out about Whale's killer. Someone had to.

Chapter 2

I walked a few blocks from my apartment and took the bus downtown. There was a man who sat next to me on the empty bus and kept coughing into his hands. After the first few coughs he hacked up phlegm. He wiped the clear splatter all over his hands on a dried crusty patch on his jeans he must have reserved specifically for mucus.

Disgusted, I got off the bus early and walked the rest of the way through the cold, dark streets. It was frigid enough outside for me to welcome my jacket. The night shrunk in around me as I walked. Night in the city was real night. The light pollution blotted out the sky, leaving you all alone in the dark after you passed the pale glow of the street lamps. Sometimes the loneliness gnawed at your nerves, but there was nothing to worry about. On nights like these, even the muggers went home and turned on a bulb.

I turned the corner past an old gothic apartment building. The sound of feet moving quickly on sidewalk drew away from me. Punks running scared in the dark. My shadow stretched out in front, obscured by the shadows cast by a gargoyle above me. At first I thought the punks were being overly dramatic, probably high as a kite and fresh out of a horror flick screening at the late-night cinema. But when I noticed my silhouette on the sidewalk all twisted up with that of the gargoyle, I almost jumped myself. It was a fine night to be afraid of your own shadow.

A couple blocks further down the street, my feet stopped. I had reached Dashiell's Garage. Typical of Detroit, the garage was a beat up operation. It was an old building with smudged windows and dirty paint somehow stained with motor oil. Under the mellow streetlights, it almost looked haunting. I shrugged off an odd shiver running down my back.

The shop was located on 1546 Griswald Street. It was closed, since it was now after eleven. It probably would have been shut down the entire day anyway for investigative purposes.

I looked up and down the street, trying to assure myself that I was alone. The street behind me was quiet and dark. Traffic was dead on Griswald. There was no sound of brakes squeaking or engines running. No cars were parked along the curbs. There wasn't as much as a marquee lit up for two blocks. No one would see me.

Quickly, I made my way to the building, walking around the corner and towards the back. Four cars were parked lengthwise along the side of the building. I rounded the next corner and found a dozen more of all makes and models lined up against a concrete wall. The lot was like an ER waiting room for automobiles. These cars would sit outside until a mechanic finally got to fixing them. Rain, hail, or sunshine, they would remain motionless while their owners rode the bus.

It was eerily quiet and dark behind the garage. As I stepped along the pavement, every footfall seemed to echo off the building. Shreds of light shone in the cars' paint and the dirty garage glass. Behind the cars was a chest-high cement wall. Behind that, a grassy park spread out into the dark, the ground flush with the top of the wall. The trees were still. The silence bored into my brain. I had the feeling that something had died here.

I made my way along the line of cars. I didn't know what I was looking for. Sometimes that was a good way to start. Plenty of professionals skipped over useful information because they become preoccupied searching for something else. I was just there to see what I could see.

I passed a couple SUVs and four-door sedans. About halfway down the line of cars there was an empty space where I took it Mr. Whale's car had been. There was no police tape. The cops must have cleaned up fast. I wondered why. Usually the police like to keep a crime scene fresh and untouched for as long as possible in case any new clues come to light.

I took another look around. Cars. Pavement. Closed garage. There was nothing to see. No blood. No broken glass. There was no real crime scene here. That's why the cops wrapped everything up. Whale had not been killed at Dashiell's Garage, just found. Sure, the police could have hassled the owner of the garage, ruined his business for the week, and closed down the whole place, but what would be gained by it? The forensic team probably came and went early in the day. It would just not have been necessary.

But why would anyone want the body found at an old garage? Choosing where to plant a body is odd enough as it is, but in a car trunk? It was the last place I could picture finding a dead body. Well, maybe not the last place. Perhaps on my toilet or under the sofa cushions were further up the list. But my initial reaction was still genuine. Why a garage? Was it possible that there was something to see inside the garage? The mechanic had started working on the car there. Perhaps there was a clue still waiting to be found.

I turned and walked to the back garage door, my feet scraping the pavement. I could smell motor oil and transmission fluid. I tried to decide if this was the sort of business that would invest in an alarm or not. It didn't really matter. It was just good to know how much time you had before the cops showed up. Of course in this town sometimes they didn't show up at all.

I picked up a nearby chunk of broken concrete and lifted my arm to bust open one of the windows. That's when there was a sort of scuffling noise not too far off. I heard it behind me. I

froze, not sure if my ears were playing tricks on me. Was there someone else in the dark back there?

I could feel the blood draining from my arm. I must have stood there for a few minutes. I heard nothing. Silence took over again. Maybe it was the wind or the metal in the cars contracting in the cold. I shrugged off the creeping feeling I had in my gut and threw the concrete chunk through the window next to the aluminum door. There was a shatter and a thunk as the chunk hit the floor on the other side. I balled up my hand in my coat sleeve and knocked a bit more glass out. I leaned forward and began to step in through the opening.

Without warning, I was hit from the side. Someone in the dark did a flying tackle and I hit the ground hard. In a flash the body was off of me and up and kicking at my ribcage. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. It was all too fast. Was someone trying to stop me from investigating? Were they afraid I would find evidence in the garage?

The wind knocked out of my lungs, I groped in front of me and felt an athletic shoe before it hit me in the face. I grabbed on with both hands and wrestled the sneaker off. The kicking halted abruptly, the shadow yanking their foot free.

In a flash, the dark figure turned and ran. Was the person running scared? I staggered to my feet, still clutching my attacker's shoe. The silhouette in front of me was nimble. He jumped on one of the cars and leapt onto the park grass behind it. I scrambled after, slipping on the hood of an SUV and nearly breaking my nose.

We were both running through the park now. The figure zig-zagged around the trees and garbage cans, never slowing. I kept up as best I could, but the beat up Sketchers I was wearing

weren't the best for sprinting. Also, it probably didn't help that I was in my mid-thirties and still ate ice cream for breakfast.

The shadowy outline ahead was barely visible in the black, but I could tell that I was running on pea gravel. My muscles burned and my lungs heaved in exhaustion. I didn't know where I was, but the figure was drawing distance from me. My feet dug into the gravel and sunk in with every stride. The figure bolted right. I pivoted to follow and hit my head on something metal. I fell on my back. When I sat up, whoever I was chasing was gone. I looked around and saw that I was in the park playground. I had hit my head on the jungle gym.

Chapter 3

I woke up to the smell of old sweat. The shoe from the night before was nestled next to my face. I was in my apartment, twisted up in the sheets on my bed. The penguins on my boxers looked at me disapprovingly. They never did like it when I decided to sleep in.

I stumbled out of bed and kicked a couple ketchup bottles out of my way. I opened the blinds and let the light stab into my retinas. My aching head protested. There was a small lump on my forehead, but the reflection in the mirror by my dresser didn't show any signs of bruising.

My brown eyes glared at the lump. If my short dark hair had been a little longer, I could have brushed it over to the left and covered my injury. As it was, I was sure no one would notice that I had hit my head unless they were looking. My face was not too angular to begin with, my short square jaw being the one exception. I had a small roundish nose and boyish cheeks. The curve of the lump on my forehead would not be out of place. My face seemed to hide injuries well. I shrugged and turned away.

I showered, dressed, and ate some ice cream. The shower was hot. The ice cream was cold. The clothes were blue.

The ketchup bottles I buy always fit into my coat pocket. They are the smaller bottles, sometimes glass, sometimes plastic. Today it was plastic. It slipped neatly into the inside pocket of my ski coat. I would have to carry the shoe. I hoped the cabbie wouldn't try to start up a conversation with me about it.

The shoe was a size seven female. It was expensive and meant for running marathons. Whoever owned this shoe was two things I was not: female, and serious about running. I could run if I wanted to, you understand. It was just the starter pistols didn't scare me enough.

On my way out of my building, I checked the mail. Sure enough, there was an envelope with four hundred dollars inside. There was no return address. I pocketed the envelope and made my way down the block to Tony's Pizzeria, where Rizzo the cabbie usually hung out.

I found Rizzo and his cab parked out by the curb. Rizzo was cramming a 12" pizza sub into his face. He saw me, grinned, and said hi. The grease dripped off his chin and hit a stain already on the seat upholstery between his legs. The brown stain had been there as long as I had known Rizzo.

Rizzo had brown skin, a shaved head, and a broad face. He and I didn't go way back, but we went back. I first met him when I was trying to tail a slave owner in the red light district. I flagged a cab down and there he was. He was a good guy, and it's hard to find people you can count on in this crazy world.

He sat there eating in his baseball cap. He had on a t-shirt with Tupac's face on it that was too big for him. I told him I needed a lift.

He said, "No can do, man, I'm on break."

I said, "Scoot over, I'll drive."

He asked me if I had a license. I told him no, but I had a license to kill so it all worked out. He laughed and moved over. I sat down in Rizzo's grease spot and tried not to think about it as I drove off.

Without taking my eyes from the road, I set the shoe on the floor. Luckily, Rizzo didn't seem to notice.

"Hey, dude, where you goin' anyway?" Rizzo asked me, the grease now finding a channel down his right cheek.

I reached in my pants pocket and produced a white page I had ripped out of a phone book the night before. I pointed to the circled address.

"Rochester Hills? What the hell are you gunna do there? Go to a costume party?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'm going as an out of work bum who can't keep his nose out of other people's business."

He asked if he could come too.

I took one look at his shirt and said, "Sorry, you'd have to leave Tupac at home."

Rizzo was along as a necessity. I didn't have a ride of my own. I wasn't about to let him bumble along behind me on a case. There was work to do, and I didn't have time to explain every little thing to Rizzo.

"Fuck that," he said, "You're always doin' spy shit. I want in. And don't mess with Tupac, man. He's still alive."

"Yep, and him and Elvis are going to do a duet on his next album."

Rizzo nearly dropped his sub. "Fuck no they aren't. What the hell does Elvis know about rap music?"

The conversation spiraled out of control from there. We spent most of the ride arguing about nothing. That was how I usually got Rizzo to forget about working on a case with me. When we pulled up to the apartment complex in the address, I got out, grabbed the shoe from the floor, and told Rizzo to stick around for a few minutes. I made sure to park illegally so he couldn't argue about walking in with me.

Rochester Hills was a nice and upscale place filled with professionals of all kinds. Around here, income was up and crime was down. It was a good time to find yourself living in Rochester. Even the lower-budget rental units were peaceful and well-managed in this neighborhood.

The apartment complex I stopped in front of was typical. It was clean and relatively new with vinyl siding and fresh brickwork. I tried to picture myself in such a place and felt an odd queasy feeling in my stomach. For some time now, I'd been unable to move out of my current residence. I couldn't bring myself to get a job and clean up. I knew it. I wasn't happy about it. I'd been low for a while. Someone I loved very much died while I was unemployed and living in a ratty apartment. I guess it was just too hard for me to move on.

I found my way to apartment 11C and knocked. There was a light thumping noise and then a woman opened the door. She was short with long blonde hair. She was wearing a hoodie and stretchy black pants that made her look like she was right out of the movie Flashdance. Her long blonde hair was crimped and tossed onto her shoulders in a casual way. Her bright blue eyes shined in the sunlight as if she'd been holding back tears all day.

I was immediately struck by how beautiful she was. Smooth cheeks and pouty lips, she was the kind of girl I'd love to dream about. If I could dream anymore, that is. The nightmares

got so bad a while back I stopped remembering anything that happened in my dreams. I liked it better that way. If I didn't remember my dreams they couldn't haunt me during the day.

I asked the woman in front of me if her name was Maibelle Whale.

She said suspiciously, "Who are you?"

I held up the running shoe and said, "I believe this is yours."

In that moment, I could see terror in her eyes. Real terror. It didn't take long for panic to take over.

She gave the shoe a split second look then kicked me in the stomach. Pain shot through my ribcage. She bolted into the apartment while I crumpled into a heap on the ground.

I couldn't breathe and my eyes were filling up with tears. I fell backward. I could hear her screaming at someone. She was screaming for help. I was paralyzed and she was screaming for help.

There I was, suffocating on the ground, trying to get my wind back. I couldn't believe the messed up shit I got myself into sometimes. I was just trying to return the woman's shoe, for chrissake.

Then there was another voice, a man. He sounded worried.

I heard him say, "Jesus, Maibe, what the hell did you do, shoot him?!"

I looked down. I could see the ketchup bottle had been hit by her foot. It had squirted all over my shirt. I was wearing a blue cotton V-neck tee. I was disappointed it had gotten ketchup on it. I only had so many of those shirts left that appeared clean.

I gasped for air and managed to sit up. A man's hand was at my side to help me stand. I got to my feet, grunting.

The man said, "What the hell is going on here? Are you alright?"

I lost my breath again. I knew that voice.

Chapter 4

The man looked at me and then back to the woman called Maibe.

“Would somebody mind telling me what the hell is going on here?” he said in a panicked, yet assertive way.

His voice was very familiar. The face was unrecognizable, though. The man helping to prop me up was a very serious fellow. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties, but worry lines had already begun to scar his face. Perhaps this was why he took to growing a carefully trimmed layer of stubble on his cheeks. His blonde hair shone in the light, made glossy by the gel he used to carefully dishevel it into a very all-business style. He was wearing suit pants and a white Oxford shirt. Altogether, he could have been the most boring man I’d ever met in my life.

Maibe looked at me, still terrified. She had gone to the kitchen and grabbed a very big knife. I was glad this man was standing between us. She’d already wasted enough of my ketchup. I hated to think of her stabbing my bottle.

I looked at the man and stuck out my hand, “Allow me to introduce both of us. My name is Phillip Barnes...and you’re the asshole who called me last night.”

The man’s face scrunched and flushed red. He was visibly pissed. We were both surprised I had found him. I only intended to return the shoe and find out what Maibe had been doing at the crime scene. I had no idea he would be here and he had no idea I’d find out where he was.

He said, “Just what do you think you are doing here?”

I picked up the running shoe and tossed it to Maibe. She caught it with both hands, relaxing, but darting her eyes from me to the boring man in the business shirt. I got the feeling that now she didn't trust anyone and didn't know what to think. We were all a little confused.

I said to the man, "You mind explaining to me what Miss Whale was doing at the crime scene last night?"

The man turned his head to glare at Maibe, his face beat red. He closed his eyes a moment and took a long breath. After a heartbeat or two, he turned back to me and scratched his chin stubble.

"You'd better come inside," he said, the words coming out reluctantly.

After a few minutes we all calmed down. I sat on their sofa looking their place over while the man went to get me a towel for my shirt and Maibe Whale clutched her knife, sitting across from me in a chair and looking at me with an unblinking, feverish stare. I tried to avoid eye contact, afraid she might jump me.

I saw that the man and Maibe had a TV on the far wall and was relieved. I hadn't seen a TV in ages and was glad they still looked the same. I was always worried that they were going to change the shape from rectangle to triangle one of these days and I wouldn't know what it was when I saw it. My TV had been smashed almost two years ago, a part of my life I did not like to think about.

There was a poster of Katherine Hepburn on the other wall, a simple but tasteful coffee table in the middle, and a couple of old, but cushy chairs. The apartment was comfortable, made cozy by someone without a terribly high income. I couldn't really tell if the man lived with Miss

Whale or not, but there was no ring on Maibe's finger and a poster of Hepburn wasn't the sort of thing a man would volunteer to put up in his own home.

The man came back and handed me a towel to wipe off the ketchup on my shirt. Maibe stayed sitting in the chair a few feet away from me. The man sat next to her on the armrest. With a calm, but commanding tone, he convinced Maibe to put the knife down on the coffee table. You could tell she didn't want to. She hesitated as she did it and kept glancing at the blade while we talked.

We began to talk back and forth in short, polite, but suspicious phrases. The man said that his name was Faulk Bitri. He didn't want to tell me at first, but I let him think that I'd find out anyway. He said he was Maibe's boyfriend.

He reached down casually and put on a pair of glasses with black frames, the kind that were supposed to make your IQ higher. He looked at me imperiously through the lenses. It seemed to me that, Faulk was an alright guy. He dressed and behaved like he was a respectable member of society. Had a job. Was on time for things. Good credit history. He had that sort of aura. Of course, like all respectable members of society, he was also a bit of a prick.

"How did you come by this shoe, Mr. Barnes?" he asked, brandishing it like it was exhibit A.

I told him about going to the garage the night before, about getting the piss taken out of me by someone who runs fast, and about how I managed to work the shoe off in the fight. He turned to Maibe and asked if it was her shoe like he was a mother asking a child to spit out gum.

"Yes," she said, not taking her eyes off the knife.

“What the hell were you doing there, Maibe?” Faulk asked grimly, the color in his face beginning to drain.

She brought her legs up to her chin. I could see the pale white of her skin through the yoga pants. She glared back at Faulk with a pair of devastating blue eyes. The two looked as if they were about to have a fight. One they often had. One they both knew all the words to.

Before they started tearing each other apart, I butted in. I asked her why she was at the garage, hiding in the dark. Maibe turned from Faulk to me. Her eyes bored into my forehead. She did her best to appear commanding. She wasn't trying to parade herself as something higher than me. She just wasn't about to allow herself to be bossed around by both of the men in the room. Despite her attempt to be domineering, her head tilted to the side like a retriever looking for direction.

“Do you think I killed my father?” She asked me, her voice stern but still somehow soft like a summer breeze.

A small smile began to creep across my face, but I masked it by scratching my cheek. The mysterious girl in front of me was adorable. However, the last thing I wanted was for Faulk to think I was flirting with her. Miss Whale might have been beautiful, but I had no inclination to hit on her. I wasn't looking for anyone. I didn't want anyone. I was perfectly happy with being miserable. She was a client. That was it.

I said no, I did not think she killed her father. In reality, I never had, but I still wanted to know what she was doing there.

Faulk was red in the face again. He said to Maibe, “I thought I told you to stay out of it. I told you I would handle it.”

“I was just there to see what had happened,” she said, shrinking back into the chair and rolling her eyes irritably, “To see where he was found. I thought I could find something.”

I could picture it in my head. Maibe, sulking in the dark, looking for clues. Then I bumble in. I probably looked pretty suspicious examining the spot where James Whale had been found and then trying to break into the garage. I had no flashlight and was wearing a coat that could easily conceal a weapon. For all she knew I was looking for her. Was she afraid I would off her like her father? I wanted to know just exactly what was going on here.

I looked to Faulk with an expression of impatience. “Why did you hire me, Mr. Bitri?”

Faulk opened his mouth to speak, but stopped himself. His face turned pink, this time from embarrassment. Something inside him broke. I could tell things had not gone as planned for him. His shoulders drooped. The man was trying his best to do what was right.

“To keep Maibe safe,” he said. “She’s a hardheaded girl and she’s obviously very upset. When she heard what had happened, she wanted to start sniffing around all the bad parts of town.”

“I’m sorry if I hurt you, Mr. Barnes,” Maibe said, reluctantly.

She seemed to be chewing her words when she said the apology, but at least she said she was sorry. I gladly take apologies in all forms: stiff, snooty, sincere, letters, phone calls, cash, checks, or money orders. Especially from pretty blondes who work out more than I sleep. I smiled at her and she went on.

“I freaked when you started busting into that garage,” she said. “I thought you were my father’s murderer.”

Faulk frowned at me.

“You did what?” he said quietly.

The way Maibe had let it slip sounded bad. I could understand Faulk’s concern, but he did hire me to do a job. I told him not to worry. It was all in a day’s work. I wouldn’t get caught, and even if I did, nothing would come back to him. He did not appear to be put at ease by my words. At my assurances he merely raised an eyebrow.

The conversation paused. I chewed my lip. I wasn’t going to ask them a lot of stupid questions about alibis and motives. They called me. If you call me it’s not because you’re a clever murderer who is looking to set the dogs on the wrong trail. The police worry about that shit, I don’t. I’m the guy you call when you need things taken care of. I’m the loaded gun that clears the room. Even if Maibe’s presence at the crime scene looked suspicious I was sure it was innocent. I was willing to put a little faith in my clients.

I decided that my next step should be to take a look at Whale’s residence and see what I could dig up there. I asked if either of them had a key to James Whale’s place. They said they did and gave it to me. I thanked them and got up to leave.

I had just stepped outside of the door when Maibe trotted after me.

“Mr. Barnes,” she said, politely.

I stopped and looked back, her blue eyes sparkling at me. She walked closer and wrinkled her forehead in curiosity.

“How did you know it was my shoe?”

I thought back to last night. The attacker hadn't wanted to prevent me from getting into the garage. They were scared I was the killer returning to the scene of the crime. That's why they ran instead of beating me to a pulp. People with small builds usually had small shoe sizes. A dead body was extremely difficult to lift into a trunk. I knew that whoever owned the size seven female running shoe was a woman who was interested in the case enough to potentially be in danger, but probably was not the murderer. There was no mention of James Whale having a wife before. I had assumed the person I chased in the night was his daughter, who was easily found in the phonebook.

I smiled, almost laughing, and said, “It's the only way it made sense.”

2009

Chapter 5

Rambo used to say that killing was as easy as breathing. Jokingly, I always thought that was true unless you were asthmatic. Now that I actually have killed somebody, I don't know what to think. I get the feeling that I'm going insane. I have insomnia. I obsess about what happened last December. I think about how the killing just seemed so neat. It solved all my problems for me. Perhaps it created new problems, though. I don't think I'll ever know now who murdered Catherine Underwood.

It's January twelfth, 2009. I had the dream again last night. I think the nightmares are just going to keep coming unless I do something about it. So, I've decided to write down everything that happened to me a few weeks ago. It might be the only way to stay sane anymore.

My name is Philip Barnes. I'm average height, 33 years old, and still have a full head of hair, which I keep cleverly on top of my head. I'm not fat, but I haven't seen a gym in years. I dress badly, live in a crappy apartment, and wear boxers, not briefs.

I'm going to start at the beginning of all this business. What I thought was the beginning, anyway. After I lost my job at Ameriwide, but before I was running for my life. That's where the story started for me. How I got into all this. I think it will be best to go from there.

It was December, 2008. The snow was falling to a molten death, drowning in the Detroit River, like so many of the city's tenants had done before. I keep picturing the awful thing that happened that night. I can't sleep when I think of it.

The police told me that Catherine Underwood died with her boots and hands tied up. Her throat cut, she was choking on her own blood when she passed out. She could feel the gentle tug of the car being pushed into the river. She would not melt like the snowflakes.

I didn't know about any of this when it was happening. I got it all later from the police. They thought I did it. That's where all the trouble started.

I can tell you plainly that I had nothing to do with Catherine's death, and if you are willing to believe that, you are probably not one of the two men who came knocking on my door on the very early morning of December 10th, 2008.

At first I thought it was the hangover, the ringing, I mean, but then I realized that didn't make any sense. Booze did not cause hearing loss, unless I had got really confused about which orifice I was drinking with at the time. I figured it must be the doorbell. Whoever it was would go away. The ringing kept up and I remembered someone telling me that the postman only rings twice. Or maybe it was that he always rings twice. At any rate, this was not a postman. Or I had a line of postmen out into the street, all waiting to ring my doorbell...I told you I was hung over.

My head was killing me. I got up, which reads easier than it was. I actually got down to get up, sort of a rolling onto the floor and then a reassembling of vertebrae. Lumbering across my bedroom, I kicked an empty bottle of ketchup into a dusty corner and stumbled into the living room. My foot squashed a couple of half-empty boxes of cold Chinese food. I got some sweet and sour sauce on my toes and wiped it off on the hard wood floor.

My apartment was small and crappy, but it was all I could afford now that I was unemployed. At first I thought I would just stay here and float myself along until I landed stable

employment elsewhere. But I had lost my gumption to find job interviews and the money in my bank account soon dwindled. Now I was staying here out of necessity. The landlord lived far away and was too high most of the time to know I wasn't paying him.

The apartment featured a small sit-on-toilet-and-wash-hands-in-sink bathroom, peeling paint, a pathetic kitchenette, a bedroom, and a living room with nothing in it but a recliner, a bookshelf, an old TV, and a sock hanging from the ceiling. I hated living in it almost as much as I hated myself. I had let myself lose my job and the only woman I'd ever really cared about. I looked at living in the apartment as purgatory for my massive life mistakes.

My vision was blurry when the sock hit my face. I gave it a sour expression. The smell was too much. The sock sagged from the living room ceiling, held up by two pushpins. I'd hung it there myself and forgotten about it. The sock was filled with coffee grounds. I was using it as an air freshener.

Why I had decided to use a sock as an air freshener was a bit of a story, but mostly it was because my life was a mess. I had no job, no girl, etc. So one night when I was feeling pretty lonely and drunk I thought that the reason women didn't like me was because the apartment smelled like old Chinese food. I jumped onboard with this notion because it was the only solution that didn't involve blaming myself. I agreed that the overall odor of my apartment might be deemed unwholesome to the female majority. So to spruce up the place, I used a sock as a makeshift air freshening applicator. I figured that since dames like men who are strong and bold, I'd fill it with strong, bold coffee grounds.

I'd kept it up there for months under the lazy rationalization that it actually made the place smell better.

There was another knock at the door. I rubbed my eye, walked over, and opened it. Two emotionally bankrupt men stood in the doorway. By the way they were dressed, I knew they were cops. I also knew they were cops because the one on the left was shoving a badge in my face like he'd just gotten it and absolutely had to show someone. I immediately regarded opening the door as a bad decision and wanted to close it again.

I didn't know what to say. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong. I hadn't done anything right either. I didn't leave my apartment much anymore since I lost my job.

The policemen were in their late thirties and looked to be on the fast track to growing old. Mirror opposites of each other, the one on the left had weary, drooping eyes and a twitching mouth and the one on the right had twitching eyes and a droopy mouth. Besides that, both men sported thinning and greying hair. Potbellies poked out from both their jackets. I felt as if I had discovered Tweedledee and Tweedldumb.

I gawked and said sarcastically, "Is this about those library books I checked out in the eighth grade? Because if it is, I was going to return those, I really was, it's just I'm only halfway through The Catcher in the Rye right now..."

The one on the left spoke first. His voice was guttural. Like he'd smoked too many cigarettes in his lifetime and drank too little coffee in his morning. He introduced himself as Detective Welks of the homicide division. His partner was the guy on the right, a Detective Lazery. They asked if they could come in.

"That all depends on if old Chinese food has recently been declared an illegal drug. If so, the stuff all over my floor is something I'm holding for a friend," I said, completely unsure of

where all this was going, but also secretly wondering if the Chinese food on my floor would be enough for me to be charged with intent to sell.

Lazery sighed dispassionately, “We just want to ask you a few questions regarding your whereabouts last night, Mr. Barnes.”

I asked if they had a warrant. They said they didn’t need one. I told them to go out and get one anyway. We didn’t want a miscarriage of justice because they knocked-up Lady Liberty and threw her down the stairs.

Welks leaned forward, “Listen, we can drag you down to the precinct if we need to.”

With that, I felt my face start to sweat. I wasn’t as tough as I wanted to be. I was scared of cops. I was scared of jail. Being bored and surly was no excuse for landing myself behind bars for interfering with a police officer’s investigation.

I said in a half somber, half sardonic way, “All right then you can come in, but whatever you do, don’t lean on anything, I’m restoring this apartment to its original 1950’s decor and I’m just starting to get the paint to peel off the walls authentically.”

I moved to the side. They looked my place over like it was a pigsty. I knew that cops were allowed to use anything in plain sight as evidence once you let them in. They stepped inside and gave the room a good once over, Welks with his droopy eyes and twitching mouth, Lazery with his twitching eyes and droopy mouth. Together, they were certifiable.

The one that introduced himself as Welks solemnly offered, with a casual glassed platitude, that they were obligated to inform me of the death of Catherine Underwood.

I felt my heart jump into my throat. I closed the door behind me, shock on my face. I stood speechless before the two men.

I don't know how I felt in that moment. Did I feel sadness? I was surprised certainly, but Catherine and I had not spoken for two months. The last time we saw each other, we had a violent falling out. We said some things we didn't mean. I said she meant nothing to me. She said I was lousy in bed. I said she could stand to lose a few pounds. She called me a bad word. I called her a worse one.

After that I'd realized that she was the best thing that had ever happened to me. A part of me hated her. A part of me still loved her. All of me had still been holding out, hoping we'd get back together so I could find out how I really did feel.

I didn't know why the two detectives were telling me Catherine died. I could have read it in the paper. If they were here to milk me for facts, it would take them a while to get them. My headache was getting worse just thinking about it. I asked them if they wanted any coffee. They said they could use some, if it wasn't any trouble. It was no trouble, I assured them.

"We understand you knew Catherine Underwood, Mr. Barnes," Welks' twitching mouth followed me into the kitchen, where I started rummaging around and clanking bits of disassociated metal in culinary operation.

"Yes, we used to work together," I popped the top off the coffee tin and saw that it was empty.

I walked back into the living room and he twitched at me shrewdly, asking what me and Miss Underwood did exactly.

“Screw, mostly. Enough to get us both fired and me dumped, why?” I ripped the sock filled with coffee grounds down from the ceiling.

Welks asked when I’d last seen her. He watched me. I took a sniff of the sock and blinked the water out of my eyes.

“About six weeks ago, we got canned together. I remember it like it was yesterday, she wore blue, the slippers were pink...” I walked back to the kitchen and realized I’d forgotten to buy any coffee filters my last trip out.

“Do you know anyone who would ever want to-” He looked at me and I stuffed the sock into the coffee machine and turned it on.

He said to forget the coffee.

Lazery’s twitching mouth took up the slack, “You two used to work for Ameriwide, right?”

A phone rang. Welks rifled through his pockets like he spent a lot of time frisking people and produced a sleek phone. He opened it up. The conversation that ensued was short and mostly comprised of a Morse code of grunts, but I got the feeling it was bad news for me.

My heart rate was up now. What the hell was going on this morning? I hadn’t even figured out what day of the week it was yet and I seemed to be knee deep in shit. I was starting to panic, asking myself what time it was. I knew it was light out, so it was still early in the day by vampire standards. A chill ran down my back. At my current rate of bad luck, I’d be executed by nightfall.

Stuffing the phone back into the mysterious fold of clothing that so eluded him before, Welks hardened his expression.

Nudging Lazery, he said, "That was Commissioner Morris. They just found the body of one Cleveland Finch, mangled so bad they were picking his teeth out of his hair, looked like Picasso cooking a gumbo soup. Turns out Mr. Barnes here used to work under our little corpse."

I couldn't believe it. Two murders? And I was the link between them? I remembered it was Monday. I hated Mondays.

"Listen, I know what you're thinking," I said.

Lazery said it would be a good idea if I came down to the station so they could ask me some questions. I asked him if I got them right if I would win fabulous prizes.

Welks smiled, it was his turn to be sarcastic.

"Well," he said, "If you answer the way we hope you will, the state will pay for your last meal."

I told him that that wasn't really what I had in mind.

Chapter 6

I can't remember the last time I got any sleep. I think too much about what happened. The thinking doesn't get me anywhere. I've drilled it over in my head a thousand times. I've driven myself crazy and all I want to do is forget. The clues are all stale at this point. They lead nowhere. Whatever new evidence was left at the crime scene has been swept away long ago. I'm stuck. Catherine's death is a puzzle I will never solve.

Was I stupid? Did I concentrate on the wrong things? Probably. I had no idea what I was doing when I was thrown into the mess that took place after her murder. I'm no professional. It is entirely possible that I missed something important and now all I have to go off of is my memory. I keep thinking about it all because I've convinced myself that I have to know. And it is always possible that they are still after me, whoever they are.

So, after I write all this down, I'm going to forget. It might be the only way to get over her, Catherine, I mean. Catherine is the girl who haunts my dreams and she was beautiful when she was alive. When I think about her now, I have Philip Marlowe describing her in the back of my head, as if she were some kind of femme fatale. He says something about her like she had "the kind of legs that would stop air traffic" or "a smile that would melt a man right down to the last two dollars left in his wallet." I suppose in a cynical way that is true, but I have a much more sentimental perspective on things.

Her long wavy blonde hair coiled around my heart when she was alive. I remember she had the slow, poised movements of smoke. Catherine's eyes seemed to dreamily glide half-open as she scanned a room. Her smile reminded me of Grace Kelly, soft and mysterious, as if it

always concealed the true depth of what she was thinking. Now I miss that smile more than anything.

If she was a femme fatale, if she did lead to my destruction, then so be it. I am destroyed. I am resigned to it. But as I was brought into a cramped, dark room in a precinct in Highland Park for questioning, I was still fighting the good fight. I still thought I had a way out of this mess, that there was a way back to my normal life.

I hadn't worked for Ameriwide for two months. I mostly spent my time eating ketchup and ice-cream and watching the women on Spanish TV get all hot and bothered. But back when the dust on my bookshelf was only half an inch thick, I had a job. I was once something.

Ameriwide sold life insurance to an awful lot of people. Don't get the wrong idea about me. I wasn't a life insurance salesman. I worked in the claims department. My job was to write checks to "problem clients". "Problem clients" were those deemed by the department head as not in violation of the terms of their contract and required payment. In other words, they were the poor sops who died. For lack of a better phrase, it was a dead-end job. I never liked it, but it was a paycheck I could depend on.

Cleveland Finch was my boss. He was the department head. Catherine was his secretary. She'd pop in and out of my office to drop off file folders a few times a day. That's how we met, and how we started our affair.

It lasted a matter of weeks, but it quickly got out of hand. It started with long looks and blushes, quickly graduated to casual playful touching, then the not-so-playful kind of touching. The whole time I was in amazement. The way her eyelids seemed to float dreamily, half-open.

The way her long blonde hair bounced when she walked. I couldn't believe she was interested in me. It was almost too surreal. I was not normally the cool, collected guy who got the most beautiful girl in the room, but something just clicked. By the end of the first work week, we were making love on my desk.

It wasn't long before Cleveland found out about the two of us. Here he was thinking that Catherine was just a bad speller, once a day taking forty five minutes to file away one folder, and then he finds out that she wasn't "filing away" folders at all.

Finch became incredibly upset about Catherine and me. More upset than just the standard reprimanding of workplace etiquette infraction. I didn't know why he reacted the way he did at the time. Finch was not normally hot-headed. I knew something had to be wrong, but I had no way of knowing what.

As he yelled at us in his office, red-faced, I thought that maybe his wife had found out he had been cheating on her. I didn't know for sure he had been cheating, but an office rumor had started recently about him. I myself had seen him a couple times in Allen Park, going into a dry cleaning place down the street from where I lived, the same dry cleaning place I live next to now. Finch probably was having an affair. I knew the woman who owned the dry cleaning place. Her name was Andrea Miller and she liked to sleep around. She was new in town and needed to know new people. She usually got to know them by screwing them. Me included.

I tried to tell this to Welks after I got carted down to the precinct and shoved under the spotlight in a dark room, but he cut me short, professing that he didn't want to know about my sex life. I began to wonder if something besides his face was droopy and twitching.

He just sat there, looking at me and drawing gulps off of a Styrofoam cup of coffee. A lamp was in front of me on the table, positioned to shine a spot of light into my face, like in the movies. The room we were in was only about a six foot square. With three grown men standing in it, there was almost no room to breathe. I felt myself starting to choke on the air. Welks just stared at me with his drooping eyes, slurping his coffee.

I couldn't see what Lazery was doing; the damn lamp was too bright. Every time I tried to look over at him, all I could make out was a looming silhouette. When they weren't interrogating innocent men, the department must have run a tanning salon or something.

As I sat there baking under the light, they told me whoever killed Finch tortured him first. The coroner reported that he had been electrocuted, but by the burns on his body, the shocks were most likely not enough to kill him. Electrodes were fastened to his chest, leaving black marks that chewed into his flesh. Someone wanted him in an incredible amount of pain.

The burn wounds on the corpse did not show signs of healing, suggesting that the torture session had been conducted right before he was killed. Between the time he was reported missing and the time his body was found, the murderer could have dehydrated him into an insufferable delirium and shocked him until he talked. When he did, they killed him.

The official cause of death was a blow to the head, but it was difficult to say by what. The body had been beaten so badly and the bruises and welts were so prevalent, the object that delivered the final blow could have been anything from a lead pipe to a rubber chicken. The only thing the police knew for sure was that the body was moved. It was found by a shopkeeper who was working at his store in Highland Park, on Oakland and Beresford. The corpse had been thrown into the dumpster in the back alley. Imagine the shopkeeper's surprise when he opened

up the lid and found a dead man staring back at him. The location of the body ruled out the possibility of finding any relevant clues. The corpse could have come from anywhere.

I sat in silence, forced to smell Welks' tobacco-stained breath while he asked me questions. The air in the cramped room became increasingly stale. The heat radiating off the lamp wrapped around me. My answers were always, "I don't know." I could feel my heart beat starting to race. I knew I was completely innocent, but I got the feeling I should still be worried.

Where were you at the time of the murders? Is there anyone you talked to who can confirm your story? Had you been drinking? How much? When was the last time you saw either of the deceased alive? Other than personal hatred, did you have any reason to want either of the victims dead? Did you have access to a set of electrode clamps? The interrogation wore on. I was confused as hell and scared. I began to wonder if I would be arrested for murder and if the stunt I'd pulled with the coffee maker and the sock could help me plead insanity.

Welks didn't like my answers. He went out and came back with more coffee. The stuff was probably jacking up his nerves. His drooping mouth was starting to twitch and I worried that I wouldn't be able to tell him and Lazery apart.

"You're sweating, Barnes," Welks said.

"I know," I said.

"Miss Underwood was kidnapped from her apartment two days ago. The place had been ransacked," he said.

I thought of Catherine's roommate Robin and wondered if she had seen anything. I told Welks again that I knew nothing.

“Finch had been reported missing for almost a week,” he said.

I hadn't heard about it, I guess because the Spanish news stations just don't go in for all that sensationalist yellow journalism. Also, I don't speak Spanish.

“I don't know anything about that either,” I said.

Welks ran a hand through his thinning hair and said bitterly, “And I suppose you have no idea about the state the other victim was found in?”

My eyeballs stung with the sensation to cry. I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. Welks kept talking.

It was then that I learned all the details about Catherine's death. The killer tied her up so she could not move a muscle. She was placed inside an old Pontiac Grand AM from the nineties. Her throat was opened up with a blade, probably a fishing knife, and then the car was pushed into the water. The killer was trying to kill her and hide the body all at once. The car sunk to the bottom of River Rouge, but was later fished out by the police.

The car was dumped into the river behind an oil refinery in the middle of the night. A couple of winos who frequented the Belenger Park Lighthouse at night saw the car go in. They said something to the nearest barman, who promptly called the police. It was too dark and they were too far away to see who, or even how many people pushed the car in.

Lazery came forward from the darkness behind the lamp and flopped a pile of 8 x 10 photos face down onto the table in front of me. He began to flip them over, one by one. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear him. He and Welks obviously had a hunch that I had

committed a double murder for revenge. They must have been trying to scare a confession out of me.

The first few photos were of Finch. His body had been badly disfigured. He didn't look human at all. It was like somebody had tried to skin a cat with a lead pipe. His face was swollen and battered. The skin was black and blue. I could barely recognize him. I could see why the detectives were inclined to think this was an act of revenge.

My skin glowed under the lamplight. I felt helpless. It was all too late to help anyone. The photos of dead bodies were only belaboring the point. I tried to keep my ketchup and ice-cream down.

Lazery flipped another photo over. It was Catherine. My heart froze. The first photo was of her face. It was pale, almost blue. A thin red line passed across her throat. Lazery turned over the next one. The stinging in my eyes became unbearable. The heat from the lamp was baking me. The next photo was of her again. She was in the backseat of a car, tied up. It wasn't her car. She was dead. She was killed. And I didn't even know who to blame. The next photo showed the car hooked to a tow truck being dragged onto a concrete embankment. It could have been anywhere along River Rouge. I stared, my heart beating fast.

Lazery slid the last photo into the pile and flipped the stack over. He looked at me. I said nothing. Welks leaned forward. He seemed disappointed. They both did. I guess they had expected me to talk.

They suddenly told me that I was going to be held at the precinct for the rest of the night. They were allowed to hold me for a day without charging me. They needed that time to come up

with evidence against me, I suppose. I could have asked for a lawyer, but why? I was innocent. I was frightened and in shock from the photos, but I knew they wouldn't find anything at my apartment, if that was where they were planning to look. I hadn't done anything. I told them just that, but before I knew it, I was surrounded by bars and concrete.

The jail cell smelled like the penguin exhibit at the zoo. Wish I knew why, none of the people around were really the tuxedo wearing type. It was one of those rooms with only one toilet and ten people, and they weren't really the ten people I could picture myself sharing a toilet with. The concrete floor appeared to be stained in places. I dared not speculate what with.

I sat up thinking all night. Sleeping on a bench in a room full of violent and disorderly people was not my thing. I was already scared stiff before I even walked into the cell. Once the officer escorting me showed me who I'd be spending the night with, I really started to lose it. Everything was so surreal. My whole day had been a Cliff's Notes version of a Kafka novel.

You could tell who the repeat offenders were; they were the only guys dozing off. Other men distressedly stared wide eyed at the wall for hours at a time, but the ones who looked like they were out of Easy Rider gently nodded off. I looked over at a man wallpapered in tattoos sleeping like a Jewish child on Christmas Eve, snoring loudly without a single twinge of excitement or apprehension in his being.

I remembered that Catherine had a tattoo on her left ankle. It was of Winnie the Pooh chasing a butterfly. Her face was so peaceful in the photographs, so serene, as if she could have been sleeping in this very jail cell with me.

The photos were coming back to haunt me. They reminded me of a woman I lost. A woman I would never get back. I recalled a time when we were happy. I remembered drinking espresso with her at midnight in her apartment. Her eyes dreamily dipped from me to the cup back to me. She told me that having caffeine before bed helped her sleep. I wondered what she meant, my hand beginning to tremble from the drink. She smiled, a tinge of mystery on her lips. She saw my confusion and clarified that at first she always got really excited, but then she would be out like a light. Then she smiled again. It took me a full hour in bed to find out what she meant.

My heart sunk at that memory. I wanted to grant Catherine forgiveness. We were angry at each other for losing our jobs and being humiliated, but all that seemed so small and petty now. Whatever had happened was in the past. It was ridiculous to be upset anymore.

Maybe just a touch of it was my own personal fear. The cops were after me because Catherine and I had so much in common, and now she'd been murdered. If Catherine and I had so much in common, I'm just glad it didn't happen to me, at least not yet.

The fact of the matter was that I was in this thing, both feet, and deep. Whoever killed Catherine had already killed once, seemingly for no reason. Waiting around for the proper authorities to do something might lead to death, whose exactly was hard to say, but the odds weren't in my favor. Those photos might as well have been of me.

I was going to find the goons that did this, save my own skin, and get even with Catherine's murderer. It didn't seem like I had any other choice.

Chapter 7

I actually got some sleep last night. Recording everything that happened might be working. I think it's the process of putting all the pieces together that I find cathartic, even if I'll never get the last few to fit. So I'll keep going, putting words to paper for as long as it takes to tell the story. When I run out of words, I guess I'll have to find something else.

I had spent the whole night sitting up in the jail cell thinking about what happened to Catherine. Highland Park was on the north side of town. That's where she was found. River Rouge was on the south side. That's where Finch had been discovered. Two bodies on two different sides of town. Finch's corpse had been found in a dumpster. Catherine's body was sunk in a car. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the murderer had attempted to prevent the bodies from ever being discovered. They wanted Finch to go to the landfill and Catherine to rot at the bottom of the river. But the killer, despite all his efforts, had failed. The bodies were found almost immediately. How did they not know they would be spotted dumping Catherine where they did? How did they not know the shopkeeper every morning opened up the dumpster Finch had been placed in? The killer was one or both of two things: a novice, or an out-of-towner.

Admittedly, I was no detective. The only stuff I knew about murderers was from what I saw on television. So as long as murderers only knew anything about murdering from watching TV, we'd all be on the same page. I knew this point wasn't very likely, but I clung to it in hope because I was desperate and in a lot of trouble.

*I remembered from the movie *Silence of the Lambs* that serial killers usually struck on their home turf. As the killer killed more, he would venture further away from the areas he knew very well. Whoever killed Finch and Catherine had dumped the bodies in two completely*

different areas. This made everything I knew about serial killers useless. I took it as a sign that I was not necessarily looking for a serial killer, even though they had obviously killed more than once. I also took it as an indicator that I was completely out of my depth and had no real understanding of criminology.

I was relieved by the fact that I was probably not looking for some asshole lunatic. Perhaps in a warped way the murderer had used method and logic and merely screwed up. It was also possible that I was on the lookout for more than one person, since lifting a body into a car and pushing it into a river is hard work to do alone.

These points sort of made sense, and were all I had to go on. In the urine-scented cell, a Hell's Angels biker had fallen fast asleep beside me. His white hair was a wild tangle and the leather clothing wallpapering his body looked about as aged and weathered as he did. On his wrist ticked a red Mickey Mouse watch where Mickey's arms happily contorted themselves to point to the time on the dial. I used the watch to track the time I spent in the cell. By nine in the morning, the jailer told me I was free to go.

I arrived home by bus to some water-damaged white walls. Over the past weeks, I had strategically placed a few nearly empty boxes of cold Chinese food all over the floor. In lieu of my current furniture shortage, the boxes covered up a few of the bare spots. Orange sweet and sour sauce pooled next the open tops of the containers that had been knocked over. My cleaning lady usually failed to throw the containers away on account of the fact that she did not exist.

I flopped down to a set of dirty sheets on my single bed, determined to clear my name and find Catherine's murderer. But first, a nap. I'd thought long and hard about it my whole ride up

and I had reached an executive decision: I was going to take a nap. It was either a nap or a Redbull...and naps tasted better.

I dreamt about death.

In my dream, there was the backseat of a car floating along the Detroit River like a raft. Catherine was lashed to the cushions with barbed wire, which were shredding her beautiful skin, cutting through her clothing.

Someone stood over her with a knife, and slowly hack-sawed an incision into her throat. All she could do is gurgle in protest. She could not even scream. She could not even move her face to look afraid, or pained, or angry.

It was then that I realized that the river Styx ran through Detroit, and I was wading in it. I looked down and saw that I was not myself, but Winnie the Pooh. But I was not the Winnie the Pooh you read about. I was not the cuddly, red t-shirt wearing, honey gorging, Pooh. I was mussed and disheveled. I was naked and wild and drooling and ferocious and hungry. I wanted blood.

I barreled after the thing that had cut Catherine, and as my four paws carried me closer, I could see it was the butterfly. I leapt to catch it in my mouth. To devour it. To make it suffer. To crush it as it had crushed me.

Then, just as I came close enough to feel it in my jowls, there came a knock at the door.

I didn't even bother to get up. The last time I had answered the door I went to jail for it, and I had learned my lesson and paid my debt to society. I buried my face under a pillow, trying to block out the world.

The pounding at the doors stopped suddenly. A few seconds later, I felt two hands grapple angrily with the pillow over my head. Before I knew what was happening, the woman who owned the laundry service a couple doors down the street had flipped me over, pinned me down, and was yelling in my face.

“Where’s my money?” she said, her long blonde hair dangling down into my open mouth.

Andrea did not look happy, but then again, neither did I. She had startled me and I was scared both of her and of the possibility that I had just wet the bed. I was already tired and couldn’t think straight. Confused, I spit out the hair in my mouth and asked her what money I owed her.

“The five hundred dollars I lent you two months ago!” she hollered back into my face.

Sluggishly, it was all coming back, but the pain in my head was slowing my thoughts down to a molasses-like drip. I sort of remembered the money, but not exactly what I’d done with it.

Just like Catherine, Philip Marlowe probably would have called Andrea a femme fatale. Andrea was a good-looking girl and perhaps possessed some manipulative tendencies. She had a large chest and a skinny waist. At the very least, she could be very distracting to a man. She attracted male gazes wherever she went. Admittedly, even mine from time to time.

I could hear Marlowe’s smarmy voice in the back of my head as I looked into Andrea’s glaring eyes. He was saying things like “She was the type of girl you just couldn’t say ‘no’ to,

unless that 'no' meant 'yes' and "her hair was forged of golden curly locks straight out of a box of Rotini Twisted pasta".

Andrea's light frame came forward, her chest pressing against me as her hands gripped my shoulders, prying me out of bed. I swore I heard the moan of a smokey saxophone in a far off opium den. Marlowe took one look at Andrea's breasts and said, "They were the sort of curves that would make a man have angles." I shook my head and decided that Marlowe was insane. Andrea was bad news. I knew that.

My feet hit the floor reluctantly. She was shaking me, holding me upright, and asking over and over where the money was. I was starting to get an idea of an answer, but I didn't want to tell her. I knew she wouldn't like it.

I hadn't known Andrea for more than a year. She had not grown up in Detroit. When she came into town she started her own Laundromat and dry cleaner's. I met her when I needed my shirts washed. I thought she was attractive and we started talking. She never said where she came from and refused to talk about her past. I had always assumed she was outrunning an ex-husband somewhere.

After I'd met her we soon began seeing each other romantically. It never amounted to anything too serious and I think deep down we both knew we weren't right for each other. She was the type of girl to dream big and never do anything to pursue her aspirations. I was a guy who didn't have any aspirations. I knew that she would just end up blaming me for her not going anywhere. She would think I was dragging her down. Soon, the sex became stale, like a dinner party: only on special occasions, very polite, and never a spoon out of place. Then it stopped altogether. We sort of concluded to just be friends and left it at that.

However, recently Andrea had been acting strange, even for her. She would often times get a phone call and leave the dry cleaner's abruptly, refuse to let me into her apartment when I stopped by to talk, or jump at loud noises behind her. I became so weirded out by it all that I had lately stopped talking to her.

Now she was in my apartment, asking for money I did not have. She obviously needed it badly. For what reason, I did not know. I got to my feet, pulling away from her. I started telling her that I was going to get her money back for her, but she cut me off. She said she needed it now. She wanted to know where it was.

I didn't really want to tell her what I'd done with it, but it didn't look like I had a choice. What was she going to do to me anyway? Philip Marlowe was right, Andrea was a femme fatale, but doesn't being aware that someone is a femme fatale make them not a femme fatale? How could she screw up my life if I'd already decided to stay away from her? Philip Marlowe wasn't real anyway. My life might have been transforming into a detective story, but I didn't have to be so paranoid about everything. I would just tell Andrea what I'd done with the cash and that would be the end of it. I would get it back to her when I had it. I had more important things to be desperately worrying about.

I bumped into a wall on my way to the refrigerator and spoke unsteadily.

"Listen," I said, "there was this really cute girl working at the counter of the Chinese food take out place down the road, and she was really nice..."

Andrea's face went red as she yelled, "You lent some tramp five hundred dollars!"

I shook my head calmly. I knew she would react like this.

“Not exactly.”

“Well then what the hell DID you do with it?!” she fired back.

I slowly motioned to the dozens of Chinese food cartons scattered all over my apartment. She was shocked by my answer.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” she said.

I shrugged and opened the refrigerator. I looked around the inside for a bottle of ketchup.

I said casually, “My dear Andrea, I am as serious as the day is long.”

She walked up toward me. Her voice was low when she spoke, but she still managed to sound outraged.

“You spent five hundred dollars on Chinese food take-out to get into someone’s pants?” she said.

“The sauce was so sweet, and yet, so sour,” I said, pulling out a bottle of ketchup and squeezing some thoughtfully into my mouth.

Now that the truth was out in the open, I had nothing to worry about. I just had to remain calm and weather the storm. I knew it was ridiculous, but I had really thought that girl was cute. I needed an excuse to keep seeing her. So I kept ordering take out. Every time I was hungry for a couple of weeks I would order food there. The problem was, Chinese food didn’t stay in my system very long. I was always hungry. Before I knew it, the five hundred dollars Andrea lent me was gone.

Andrea seemed at a loss for words. She looked desperate. I wanted to know what was wrong, but didn't know how to ask. She said it was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard of. I offered the opinion that it wasn't. That people paying money for ketchup when there were thousands of free packets at every restaurant in America was much stupider. But people did it anyway. Not me, of course. I would steal handfuls of packets and squeeze their insides, one by one, into an old bottle. It was the only way to really get the full enjoyment out of eating it.

Andrea was a friend, and I got the feeling that I had shattered something inside her. Her eyes had a distant shine to them. She ran her fingers through her hair and tugged at the roots slowly. I was sad to see Andrea so distraught, but I was getting used to the look. It was becoming a habit of mine lately, disappointing people.

She sighed heavily. I squeezed more ketchup into my mouth and swallowed the cold liquid before I could taste it. She looked at the bottle in my hand and asked what I was doing. Andrea sounded resigned to whatever was happening to her, as if she had just lost a bet.

I told her I was having some ketchup. She asked why. I told her because I was hungry and she was getting on my nerves. My stomach growled in agreement.

"No," she said, sounding fatigued, "I mean, why aren't you eating anything with it? It's a condiment."

I told her it was because I was all out of ice-cream.

“Besides,” I said, “there is nothing more American than ketchup. It’s like America in a bottle,” I swished a fresh squeeze around in my mouth, “You can almost taste Washington’s shotgun diplomacy, you know?”

She informed me that Washington didn’t have a shotgun. I held that my point was still valid. She told me she needed her money again. This time it was more serious. She didn’t sound angry, just firm.

I felt bad for her. I tried to think of a way I could get her the money, but the only option I really had was to go out and rob a strip club or something. I pictured myself holding a gun to a stripper that was wearing only a thong and wondered where she kept all her walking around money. I blinked the image away as quick as it had come.

Andrea’s eyes locked with mine for a moment and I nodded reassuringly to her, as if to tell her I would get her the money. I wasn’t really saying I would get her the money, though, and most likely wouldn’t. She must not have picked up on the subtlety of the second implication of the nod because she seemed to relax, already exhausted from being so flustered.

Andrea blew a strand of beautiful hair out of her face, “I’m a little short on cash this week. When I gave you the money before, I didn’t know people were going to suddenly start wet-cleaning their clothes.”

I smiled at the phrase “wet-cleaning”. It was terribly clever. Andrea gave a weak smile back at me. There we were, just like we used to be: hanging out, having a few laughs.

I told her she didn't look so good. I wanted to know what was the matter. She said she was just frustrated. I didn't buy her explanation, but decided not to press any further. I'd just gotten her in a good mood and I didn't want to jinx it.

I bumped her shoulder with the bottle.

"Would you feel better if you had something to eat? I've got ketchup here. If you want you can put a little mustard on it," I said, jokingly.

She smiled more enthusiastically this time and said, "No thanks, I take my ketchup straight."

Andrea took the bottle from my hand and gave it a quick squirt into her mouth. She took to it like a fish to water, letting her tongue swim in it before she swallowed and handed the bottle back. We sat there a moment, marinating ourselves in ketchup. The moment seemed to freeze in time. Those few seconds we passed the bottle back and forth. I didn't know why, but something about it felt so right.

We joked for a minute longer. I told her that I regretted not buying expensive ketchup, but I didn't know I was going to be hosting a dinner party. She said the cheap stuff was alright. It was just no Heinz 57. She said it tasted more like Heinz 56. And we laughed.

Suddenly, Andrea's phone rang and she jumped, startled. She reached down into her pocket to silence the ring. The spell was broken. Andrea was back to being weird.

"I-I'll be back tonight," she said abruptly, "I need that money."

With that she left, with me still holding the ketchup bottle, poised to hand it back to her.

2010

Chapter 8

After my talk with Maibe Whale and Faulk Bitri, I promptly walked out of their apartment into the air of a sunny day. It was just barely warm enough to be outside without a jacket, but I was thankful I had decided to wear mine anyway. On days like this, a slight gust of wind could send chills down a man's back.

The cab was parked and waiting for me at the curb. Rizzo was still in the passenger seat when I came out. He had cranked up the stereo so that his rap music could be heard down the whole street. I could feel the vibration of the bass in my ribcage.

Rizzo must have placed a subwoofer in the car somewhere, probably the trunk. He probably thought it was a clever idea. If he ever needed to take it out so his boss wouldn't find it, he'd just unplug three wires and lift it right out. In the meantime, his stereo would be loud enough to shatter ear drums.

I shouted at him to turn the music down.

He did and said, "Hey, man, cool it. You gotta respect Dr. Dre, man."

My ears still ringing, I told him I did respect Dr. Dre. I respected the fact that he graduated third in his class, right behind Dr. Seuss and Dr. Pepper.

"Dr. Pepper's not a real doctor, man," Rizzo said very matter-of-factly.

I admitted that I, too, questioned Dr. Pepper's credentials.

I pulled out the telephone book page from my pocket and began to tell James Whale's address to Rizzo, so he could drive us there. I was stopped short by the sound of Maibe's voice behind me.

"Where do you think you're going?" she said slyly.

I turned and saw her standing there in her stretchy black pants and pony tail. I told her that she knew exactly where I was going and held up the key she had given me. I was confused. What was this girl playing at?

"Who the hell is this shawty, man?" Rizzo said to me, his eyes locked on Maibe.

"Daughter of the deceased," I said to Rizzo, "and she was just leaving."

Maibe nodded, "Yeah, with you."

She raised an eyebrow assertively. She was being completely serious. I didn't know what to say. Usually clients wanted nothing to do with my work. But she kept looking at me with a cold face, not moving a muscle.

I laughed. There was no way in hell I was going to take her along. I needed to look for clues in a dead man's house; the less people around, the better. She stood there on the sidewalk peering up at me. Her face was hardened steel, but she was too beautiful to take seriously. I leaned on the roof of Rizzo's cab and told her I worked alone.

She said, "I've seen the way you work. No way I'm letting you in my dad's place without a chaperone. You'd probably smash open the walls to look for clues."

Her voice cracked near the end of what she said. Maibe swallowed, less confident now. It was a little mistake in her stone face routine. I could tell she was a normally a hard-willed woman. But the emotionality of her father's death was getting to her.

She was starting to get on my nerves now. I had broken into that garage for a very good reason. She knew that. There was no reason to think I would do anything destructive to her father's things.

I told her plainly that even if I wanted to let her come along, I couldn't. Faulk was paying me to keep her out of trouble. If he ever found out she was along, I'd get canned.

Maibe reached into her hoodie and pulled out a cell phone. It was a small black device with a touch screen.

"The cops stopped by to talk to me this morning," she said, acting like she had something I wanted. "They told me what they had so far on the case."

"You're preaching to the wrong choir, girl," Rizzo butted in, "Phil here doesn't give a flying shit about the cop's case."

"He's right, I don't," I said, shrugging.

Maibe nonchalantly flicked the screen of the cell phone on.

"Well, you might not care, but before they left, the nice detectives did give me a number to call if I needed anything," she said, "and if you leave me here, I just might need to call and tell them about a man who attacked me last night. Who came to my home and harassed me today. And is going to break into my father's apartment."

Her feet were wide apart, in a powerful stance. She held the phone in the air, a single finger over-dramatically poised to press the call button. She wasn't bluffing. My services had not been her idea. She wanted to catch her father's murderer herself. I was a nuisance to her, but in the right context, I could be a useful nuisance. I could feel my face fall as I realized this.

"What about Faulk?" I asked.

Maibe walked forward and sat in the back of the cab.

"He's not the boss of me," she said casually.

So Rizzo moved over, I sat in the passenger seat, and we were off.

For the first few miles, it was a quiet ride. I wasn't in a talking mood and was mostly thinking of a good way to ditch Maibe. I didn't care how pretty the girl was, she had rubbed me the wrong way.

Rizzo was driving with the radio off, and I could tell the silence was eating away at him. His hand kept inching to the play button on the CD player and then shrinking back. I noticed the tape deck was empty and wished I'd kept my copy of Phil Collins: Face Value for this very moment.

Maibe fiddled with her phone in the back seat. Rizzo was looking through the mirror at her.

"You know, I don't get those phones," Rizzo said in an awkward attempt to break the silence, "That touch-screen bullshit. The salesman hooks you in with all this shit about a high definition screen, but what he fails to point out is that you're goin' to be putting your fingers all

over it. What genius thought of that? Next thing you know you're trying to watch *Avatar* through a cloud of fingerprints on this tiny dope ass screen. Then you're all like: Holy shit, is that an Ewok in *Avatar*? Then you're like: No, that's just some Cheetos I had for lunch stuck on my dumb ass screen. And who the hell cares if the screen is high definition when it's three inches big?"

Rizzo went on for a moment longer talking about touch screens as if they were the anti-Christ. After a few seconds, Maibe looked up at me, quietly annoyed by the racket he was making.

"Does he always go on like this?" she said.

"I like to think of him as a variety show," I said.

Rizzo stopped talking and shrugged passively. He reached down into his pocket, producing a stick of gum. He popped it in and started to chew with his mouth open. Now a great smacking noise began to fill the cab and my eye began to twitch.

Rizzo turned onto the ramp for I-75 and revved the engine high. The cab roared and plunged forward, merging into traffic. I held on tight to the seat belt, not entirely confident in Rizzo's driving. Rizzo had never been in an accident as long as I'd known him, but there had been close calls.

I glanced over at Maibe in her stretchy black pants and grey hoodie. Her pants hugged her attractive runner's legs in a way I found distracting. It struck me as funny that her grey hoodie should be so loose while her pants were so tight. This woman was a puzzle. As far as I could figure out, there was no way to get rid of her. She had me. Either she stayed involved in

the case, or she would say something to Faulk and I wouldn't get paid. I liked to avoid working for free if I could. Ketchup was worth its weight in gold, even if I didn't always pay for it. I didn't like it, but I had no choice. Besides, she wouldn't be able to find me after today. I'd be on my own soon enough.

Maibe seemed to sink into her phone. She stabbed at the screen with an intensity I could not understand. Everything got quiet, apart from Rizzo's cow-like chewing. I looked out the window. The traffic around us wove about busily. Some drivers talked on cell phones or read books, the others floored and passed them, flipping the bird as they went. Beyond the freeway was a host of buildings. There were the new office buildings that sat unoccupied and the old ones that sat condemned. I saw a dying city. Around me were the living dead.

We got off the freeway and pulled up to James Whale's house after a few more uncomfortable miles. I looked to make sure the address was the same as the one I'd torn from the phone book, but Maibe got out and started walking to the front door.

Chapter 9

Maibe was to the door before I'd even got out of the car. She was waiting for me, probably just realizing that she had given me the key to her father's house back at her apartment. She stood with her arms crossed and her head tilted to the side.

I was struck by how adorably pissy she was. The woman did a good a job of getting on my nerves, but something about her seemed to undercut my better judgments. Despite the hassle she was putting me through letting her tag along, a part of me admired her tenacity.

James Whale's house was a modest dwelling that stood on a short street in Hazel Park. There was a one-car garage on the right, a couple of windows and some bushes along the front. Cream vinyl siding covered the house. It somehow looked familiar to me and I suddenly realized that this was because every other house on the street was exactly the same.

I looked up and down the lane, each house a cream vinyl copy of the last. The houses were so straight and so perfect, that if everyone left their blinds up a man on one end might watch a woman undress at the other.

"Hey, man what are you doin'?" Rizzo shouted at me.

I turned around and saw him and Maibe by the door. Rizzo seemed nervous.

He said, "What are you John Mayer now? Are you waiting on the world to change?"

I smiled and walked to the door. I loved it when Rizzo made bad jokes, even in the company of strangers.

As I put the key in the lock, I said jokingly, "What's a matter, Riz? You look jumpy."

“As a black man, I try to follow two rules,” he said, his head darting up and down the lane. “One, don’t get arrested, unless you’re actually committing a crime, and two, never stand outside some white dude’s house.”

I opened the door and stepped inside, finding cream walls and soft carpet. Maibe told Rizzo not to worry, it was the middle of the day and none of the neighbors would be home to call the police. I suddenly noticed how odd it was that Maibe herself wasn’t at work.

“And what do you do for a living, Miss Whale?” I asked, closing the door behind us and walking down the hall.

“Graphic design,” she said. “I work from home a lot.”

I was unsure on how to handle what was coming. Maibe was in her dead father’s house. She was bound to break down and start sobbing at any moment. All it would take was a little nudge and she would be over the edge. I hated seeing people torn apart like that. I decided to keep Maibe active and involved. If I put her to work, she might just hold together.

I asked her what the police had told her about their case so far.

She gave a small laugh, “I thought you didn’t care what the police had.”

I reached the end of the hallway and gave the house a visual shakedown: a kitchen with clutters of dry food stacked on top of cupboards, a dining room with a chipped wood table and four chairs...

“I don’t,” I said detachedly, “Just curious.”

She followed me into the kitchen and began giving me a summation of the cop's investigation. The police said they were moving as fast as they could. James Whale's murder was a high profile job. They had all the men they could spare working on it. The police told Maibe they had some leads, but my guess was that was a lie. If the police had any real suspects they would have been arrested by now.

I kept Maibe talking as I looked the kitchen over. There was a small stove and a refrigerator. I resisted the urge to open the fridge and examine it for Chinese food and ketchup. I took a good look in all the cupboards. James Whale appeared to have very simple tastes in food. He was not a junk food junkie as I would have guessed. There was a half-eaten bag of rice on the cupboard over the stove and a stockpile of cans of soup. Pasta and sauces lined the pantry. There was one unopened bottle of wine under the sink that was dusty and seemed to have been there for months.

"Well what'd they say about the body?" Rizzo asked Maibe.

I turned and made my way down another hallway. I wanted to slap Rizzo. The body would have been the last thing I'd have brought up. I began to wish I'd told Rizzo to stay in the cab, but to be honest the thought of being alone with Maibe made me nervous. She'd already beaten me up twice.

Soft despair welled up behind Maibe's eyes, but she miraculously kept talking a mile a minute. She possessed the shrewd chatter of a newspaperman's daughter, unflappable and keen.

She said that the body had already been rushed through an autopsy. The report said he had died of dehydration. The exact cause was unclear. Apparently, he was strangled. The coroner

found small traces of rust on his throat, as well as a significant amount of bruising. It was clear that Whale was tied up, gagged, and put in his own trunk. The body's windpipe was not broken, suggesting Whale could have survived the strangulation. He probably just passed out from lack of air, and then his attacker tied him up and put him in the trunk.

I found the living room and began searching it. There was a couch and TV, some dog-eared volumes of *Reader's Digest* dated a decade ago, a VHS copy of *Hudson Hawk*, and a missing remote I found under a couch cushion. I halfway wanted to see what was on *Telemundo*, but needed to remain professional in front of my employer.

Maibe was still chattering on about the details of the cop's case. Her face now more composed, the threat of tears had passed, like storm clouds on a summer's day.

The mechanic told the police that he had received a call from Mr. Whale three days before the body was found. That call more or less corresponded with the time James Whale went missing. Obviously, in retrospect, someone was posing as James Whale. The poser told the mechanic that his car wouldn't start, and that he was having it towed to Dashiell's Garage. The car arrived the next day and the tow truck driver handed the keys off to the mechanic. Dashiell's Garage was very busy, as it always is, and none of the employees even so much as thought about working on James Whale's car for two days. Meanwhile, Whale lay in the trunk, half alive and baking to death from the sun beating down on the metal lid. By the time the mechanic found him, James Whale had been dead six hours.

I began to mull over what Maibe was telling me. I supposed that it was never part of the plan to have the car trunk opened. The mechanic was just too lazy to fix the gas tank the right way. James Whale was supposed to bake to death in that trunk while the car was fixed, then

someone posing as Whale would come to pick it up, and drive off to who knows where. The murderer could have even driven to a forest, dumped Whale off, and made it look like he'd died of dehydration. It was the perfect way for a murderer to maintain an alibi and make murder look like an accident.

Even if this was how Whale died, the whole thing stunk. The way it was done was very strange. They wanted Whale dead, but they wanted him to die in a way that would not attract suspicion. The murderer did not want the body found until they could plant it somewhere else, so they packed Whale away in a place that would buy some time. It almost worked, but didn't. They could have kept him somewhere else and waited for him to die, but for some reason they needed the car. The body didn't stay hidden, and the crime now looked more suspicious than ever. How could they have been so careful and cunning, yet still allow the body to be found?

The next room was the bedroom. There was a queen-sized mattress. The bed was unmade and the closet door stood ajar. I went through the dresser drawers and perused the closet. There was nothing but clothes and an old gun in a shoebox. It was an ancient Luger that didn't even look like it would fire anymore. It was probably just for show. Something to pull out when the burglars came.

Rizzo was standing next to me, scratching his head and scrutinizing a plaid shirt that looked like it was off the set of the *Howdy Doody Show*. I couldn't figure out why he was so damn obsessed with coming with me all the time if all he was going to do was sniff out mothballs. Of course I hadn't exactly gone to detective school either. I had no formal training and had to learn on my feet when I was just starting out. But how I got into this business was not something I liked to think about.

So far, I could see why the police hadn't taped the whole house off and bagged it for evidence. There was nothing here. Just a lot of normal, boring stuff. There was nothing in this house to suggest that any crime had been committed, apart from Whale's bad choice in clothing. I could see the police now, scratching their heads. For the most part, cops are pretty useless without their forensic teams and coroners. Bloodstains, murder weapons, tire tracks. When those clues lead nowhere, cases run cold fast.

I asked Maibe, "Does your father have a study or a workroom?"

I was careful to use the present tense when asking the question.

Maibe nodded. She pointed right to the room at the end of the hall. She had gone quiet. She must have run out of things to say. It could have just been me, but her eyes looked more moist than usual. I feared that water works were around the corner. I drew myself up and smiled at her.

"You take the next room." I said, motioning for her search the workroom.

She turned down the hall. I followed behind her, Rizzo behind me. I wanted to keep her busy and the tears out of her eyes. Like baseball, there's no crying in detective work.

"Well if all that is true about the body" said Rizzo, "Then how did they bust the car to hide it at the garage?"

"You really worry about the most superfluous details" I said, "And it's usually done by pouring something in the gas tank to gunk up the fuel pump."

“What the hell does ser-poo-floo-us mean?” Rizzo said, wiggling his eyebrows with every syllable of the word.

“It means you should have stayed in school” I said.

Rizzo shrugged, “Why? I’m the dude here who has a job.”

Maibe opened the door. The room was tiny. Inside were a small desk and a mountain of junk. There were newspapers piled on the floor up to my knee. Manila folders, stacked and rubber banded, littered the space before us. There was a closet on the far wall filled with an assortment of objects in boxes and old typewriters. This was a packrat’s wet dream and an investigator’s nightmare.

Maibe stood still. I couldn’t tell if she was unsure of what to do, or just unsure of where to start. Her blue eyes darted around as if remembering something. She pressed her pouty pink lips together into a frown.

Rizzo said, “Shit, what is all this junk?”

Maibe parted her lips and I could see her tongue drag across the bottom row of her white teeth. She suddenly snapped to attention and leapt forward into the sea of papers before us.

“This is where my father keeps all of the stuff he is working on, or has worked on,” Maibe said.

Her voice was just as soft, as always, but I could tell she was excited. She began carefully sifting through the junk all over the desk. I couldn’t help but to notice that she had used the present tense when speaking about her father. The poor kid still hadn’t come to grips yet.

“The police took his laptop as evidence,” she said, pointing to an empty square patch on the desk.

It was obvious that there was too much stuff to take in this room. The police would never pack up and catalogue all of the stacks of old papers or boxes of junk. It would take too long just to fill out the paperwork. They probably snatched the laptop because it was portable and contained most of the relevant information they were after.

She pulled out the bottom drawer and set it on top of the desk. Then, smiling, she flipped the drawer over. All the junk inside of it flopped out. Papers, letters, paperclips and staplers. The plywood bottom was up now and we could all see why Maibe was smiling. Duct-taped to the bottom was a flash drive. Maibe ripped it off and pocketed it.

She said, “My father likes to keep back-ups of what he works on and there’s a lot of people out there he doesn’t trust.”

“Sounds paranoid,” I said

I walked forward, careful not to knock over the stacks of newspapers.

“Do you really think there are that many people out there who wanted to see him dead?”

Maibe nodded, “He’s pissed off plenty of people who hold grudges.”

I picked through the pile of junk on the desk for a moment, then noticed an old hand-held tape recorder that had been dumped out of the desk drawer. It was the kind that people used to record the conversations they had with themselves. It was grey and worn, a relic of the nineties,

no doubt. A full sized cassette tape was nestled inside. The tape ribbon was stopped halfway through the spool. I put the recorder in my pocket and looked over to Maibe.

I told her the recorder might have something on it and I was going to check it out later. She said that was okay. I asked her what was on the flash drive and she said she didn't know. She hadn't spoken to her father in weeks. She had no idea what he'd been working on. She said he often hid flash drives under that desk drawer. Even when she was a kid he would hide floppy disks or folders.

I wanted to ask for the flash drive right there, hoping she wasn't planning on keeping it, but Maibe continued talking. I made a note to myself to snatch it from her at the first opportunity.

"I remember one time," she said, "he put photos of gunshot victims there just so I wouldn't find them. I was seven, and I liked to play in his office. I knew he was hiding something because he would snap at me anytime I came near the bottom desk drawer."

Outside, the wind picked up and a dog down the street started barking. I knew I should have been searching for more clues, but my gaze glued on Maibe. Her eyes seemed deep and wide like a child's. There was some wonderful quality about her that I could not place.

She said, "I found the photos the second he left the room. Of course, I was scared stiff over them. He thought he was so damn clever hiding junk there. I don't think he ever realized what a bad hiding spot it was."

Maibe stopped talking. Random muscles in her face began twitching. I could only assume that she was trying to hold back tears. Her eyes were bugging out at me, and her lips were

twisting up. I suddenly felt panicked. I was not the ideal shoulder to cry on. My shirt was covered in dried ketchup stains from when Maibe had kicked me. I couldn't remember if I'd put deodorant on this morning either. Nothing would be worse than to have a girl lean in for a cry and then have her start gagging from a lungful of BO. Hell, I could have been afraid that she'd go cry on Rizzo instead of me. Who knew? At any rate, I thought it would be a good idea to leave.

I told Rizzo to take Maibe to the car. She went willingly. I stayed behind for one last look at Whale's work room. It really was filled with junk. Old newspapers, clippings, notes that were years old. If there was anything important here it would have been on Whale's laptop, which unfortunately was now in police custody. The flash drive and the recorder were my only hope of picking up a lead.

Chapter 10

I sat in the old recliner in my apartment, listening to it creak every time my feet pushed me back and again when I came forward. My hand turned Whale's flash drive over and over. I stared at it. Wondering what could be inside. The flash drive was silver with a black rubber slip cover. The print on the side told me it had a sixteen gig capacity.

It had taken me a little time to wrestle the flash drive away from Maibe. She wanted it for obvious reasons. She wanted to look for clues. But I convinced her that Faulk might find it and she would land both of us in hot water. So as Rizzo and I dropped her back off at her apartment, she handed me the flash drive with a stern face and told me not to do anything stupid with it.

It was now eight in the evening, and the sun was beginning to settle over the rooftops. The public library closed at five. Otherwise, I could have just walked over there and plugged the flash drive into one of the computers. I would have to wait until the morning.

I didn't own a laptop. I could have afforded one. But I had lived like the lowest scum on earth since I was fired from Ameriwide about two years ago. I had taken lots of cases since then and was paid for them. And I hid the money in the last place anyone would ever look: my bank account. But the exact reason I didn't get up and go buy a computer was complicated.

I lived low in my apartment. I never bought anything, or lifted a finger to improve my own life. The paint was peeling off the walls. Empty ketchup bottles piled in the corners. Cartons of cold Chinese food littered the floor. The kitchen cupboards hung open, bare. There was no TV, smashed long ago. The place stunk so bad I hung a sock filled with coffee grounds as an air freshener. But I lived low for a reason: I felt low. I'd felt low for so long I wasn't even sure why

anymore. Just looking at me, you would never guess I had a nice nest egg in my checking account.

I knew that Tony down the street had a laptop, but he was closing up his shop by now. Besides, he had been refusing to talk to me since I crashed his car into a brick wall. I didn't mean to crash it, by the way. It was just hard to drive a car when you were being shot at by the serial rapist you'd been tailing all day. Accidents happen in my line of work.

I set the flash drive down on the floor. I didn't own a table. I reasoned the floor was a suitable alternative. They seemed to serve the same basic function. I tried to imagine that I owned a table that was the exact size of the room I was in and that I was sitting on it.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the tape recorder. I pressed the rewind button and heard the motor whirr to life. The fact that the batteries still worked was encouraging. It told me that Whale had used it recently. Exactly how recently was a mystery, but mysteries were what I solved.

When the ribbon stopped, I pressed the play button, cranking the volume up all the way. The speaker crackled and a muffled woman's voice spoke. The voice was distant, as if the recorder had been placed in a pocket.

"They don't serve any function in the system," she said, "They just show up once a month and collect a check."

"How much do they take?" a male voice said.

The new voice was closer than the woman's. A calm and deep voice, it was probably Whale's, but I couldn't tell what they were talking about. What system? Who was taking cash? The tape went on.

"Sometimes what a teacher would earn. Sometimes more," the woman said.

Whale spoke again, "And who got them these fake jobs?"

"The Mayor. Lots of them are his family members and friends. He promised them all a job, but there aren't any."

I stabbed the pause button with my finger. They were talking about men and women taking money out of the public school system, people who didn't have any real duties to perform just showing up and collecting a check. Whale had written a news story like that about a year ago now. It made a big commotion and got the Mayor in a lot of trouble. So much trouble he was put behind bars.

The mayor had plenty of money and connections. He could get Whale killed if he wanted. But it was unlikely the ex-Mayor would go after Whale now, even if he could manage it from jail. What could he possibly gain from killing a reporter? Nothing besides revenge. If that was the case, the informant would have been killed as well. If I was unable to find anything else, I might look into it, but something in my gut told me it didn't fit. Whale was a good reporter. He was so good he got himself in hot water with a lot of different people. Anyone might have wanted him dead. The question was who actually got up the nerve to do it?

I decided to fast forward and find something more recent. Perhaps if I didn't find anything significant, I would go back and listen to the whole tape more carefully. A couple

minutes further into the tape, the interview stopped and there were a few seconds of Whale reciting a grocery list: a jug of milk, potatoes, pasta, the usual junk. After that, there was an interview with a woman at the zoo about the new monkey exhibit. I fast forwarded again and found Whale leaving a note to himself.

“Deadline on the warehouse story is next Wednesday. Get it done. I don’t know how we’re going to ask for more time on this thing,” he said, sounding worried.

The voice continued.

“You’ve got to figure this out,” he said, “Try going back over all the old information afresh. There’s bound to be something you missed.”

My eyes blinked indignantly. I couldn’t help but to think he was talking to me. I had to figure it out. I had to go back over his information. Something had been missed.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. It startled me and I jumped. I stopped the tape and eyed the door suspiciously. I wondered who would be knocking at my door this late in the evening. No one had visited me since the case of the confused stalker. I supposed that it could have been the asshole neighbor from upstairs coming to apologize for his awful guitar playing.

It was now quite dark outside and my room was dimly lit by the single bulb in my ceiling. In the yellow glow I got up and moved to the door with quiet, gentle steps. I pressed my face against the peephole. What I saw made me frown. I recognized that blonde hair instantly.

I grasped the doorknob and inched open the door, only allowing my face to be seen through the crack.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Maibe’s blue eyes bored into my forehead and I could smell strawberry shampoo radiating off of her head. Smelling and seeing her might have been pleasurable if I hadn’t been feeling so anti-social.

She said, “I brought a laptop. Now let us in.”

She held up a black cloth bag. I noticed Rizzo to the right standing by the doorframe. He was shaking his head apologetically.

“Sorry man,” he said, “She wanted to know where you lived. I would have said no, but she gave me fifty bucks.”

“Nice to know you have a price,” I said.

Rizzo shrugged, “It’s like ‘Lil Wayne said: Fuck bitches. Get money.”

I looked at Maibe with an earnest expression, “Tell me you didn’t fuck him.”

Maibe rolled her eyes and pushed the door open. “Oh, please,” she said.

I smiled weakly at Rizzo and told him he might as well come in. Had I been a less cynical person, I probably would have told them both to beat it. As it was, I felt in the mood for self-flagellation. Two people marveling at my magnificent crap hole of an apartment seemed a perfect way to end the evening. I turned in time to see Maibe’s facial expression sour at the sight of my apartment. I remembered that she was a client and glanced down at what I was wearing. It was an old t-shirt, worn through near the right nipple, and a pair of pajama bottoms. Not the most professional outfit, but it would have to do.

Rizzo closed the door behind him and I could tell he too was amazed at the sight of my third-world living conditions. Somehow, this wasn't as enjoyable as I thought it would be. It would have been a better idea to tell them to beat it.

"Damn, you need to hire a decorator," Rizzo said.

"I did," I said, "Look what he did to the place. Chinese food everywhere."

I shook my head in mock disappointment. Maibe's nose wrinkled and she pointed to the ceiling, her mouth agape in confusion.

"Is that a sock?" she said.

"Air freshener," I said defensively.

It took a couple minutes to settle them down. They kept pointing at things in astonishment. They were like Japanese tourists at the world's tallest man exhibition. I told Maibe to sit down. She did and pulled a white MacBook out of her bag. She opened it up and turned the screen on. She asked where the flash drive was. Embarrassed, I bent over and picked it up off the floor. Maibe snatched it from me with a disapproving look, obviously thinking I had not been treating her father's things with care.

Maibe slid the flash drive into the MacBook. Rizzo and I walked behind my recliner.

The Mac's screen flickered, Maibe clicked something, and a window popped up. We were now looking at the contents of the flash drive. Thumb images of files filled the screen left to right, top to bottom.

"There's a lot of shit in there," Rizzo said.

He was right. The drive was full of files. Maibe scrolled down the list and there were hundreds of icons. Some were Word files. Some were pictures. Some were sound clips or web page URLs. Sorting through it could take days.

“I’ll just tell it to sort these by date and to look for the most recently updated,” Maibe said.

She clicked something else and the files reordered themselves. At the top were files that were dated a week ago on the time stamp. Maibe clicked on the icon on the top left. A half a second later, I had a pretty good idea of what James Whale had been up to when he was killed.

On the screen was a photo of a warehouse, probably snapped by James Whale. As Maibe clicked through the rest of the files at the top of the list, I saw that there were perhaps a dozen photos of the same warehouse from different angles.

The warehouse was smaller than a house, but larger than a shack. Rusted tin paneling covered the outside. The windows were too dark to see inside. The photos appeared to be shot through a fence with razor wire on top.

I reached into my pocket and held up the tape recorder. I pressed play. Static crackled out of the speaker. I fast forwarded it ahead and pressed play again. Still nothing but static. The tape had run out. I popped the tape out and tried the other side. It was blank. Whale’s note to himself about the warehouse was the last thing he recorded.

“Why did he take so many pictures of a broke down warehouse?” Rizzo said, a few moments behind my own thoughts.

“Where is it?” I asked Maibe.

She asked me why I cared.

I said, "Because I bet you dollars to donuts that that is where James Whale was killed."

She looked up at me with pained eyes and I realized what I said. I probably could have stated that a little better. I hoped she didn't break down crying. But she was going to have to deal with her father's death sooner or later. Participating in a murder investigation was an odd coping strategy.

"If it was that easy to figure out where he was killed, why haven't the police started investigating it as a crime scene? Do you know what they called and told me when I came home today? They said they were looking into Mack, his editor, as a possible suspect. They said he knew about Mack having an affair or something," she said.

I suddenly realized that I had misread Maibe's expression in the dim light. She was actually staring at me intensely. She might have been mad at me, or thought me incompetent.

Rizzo was looking at me, too. I didn't like both of them staring at me like that. I decided to tell them why I knew it was not Mack the editor.

I said, "This murder was not committed by someone with brains. It was committed by someone with balls. They took a risk, a big risk, and it did not pay off. You don't leave a body in a trunk for three days like that unless you are seriously not afraid of getting caught."

I drew myself up and sighed heavily. My blood pressure was getting up now. I was feeling frustrated, excited, and tired all at the same time.

“The cops haven’t investigated that warehouse, because they don’t have this flash drive. And even if they did have a copy of these photos on Whale’s laptop, they still wouldn’t be able to investigate it because they need a warrant to set foot over there,” I said. “Pictures of a warehouse on a flash drive with hundreds of other photos are not sufficient evidence.”

I then explained that I was different than the police. I did not need a warrant. I said I had something better. They asked me what it was.

“Indifference,” I said.

I asked Maibe again if she could tell me where the warehouse was. She frowned pensively and turned her head back to the computer. After flipping through a couple photos she found one with an address in the shot. By at the front of the warehouse was a sign that read: 3356. After flipping through two more photos Maibe found a shot of the warehouse taken from down the street. In the corner was the intersection sign: Chestnut Dr.

Maibe looked the street up on her touch screen phone.

“Oh, it’s near River Rouge,” she said, as if that somehow made things clearer.

I could feel myself stiffen. A woman I once knew died in River Rouge. A woman I did not like to think about. It was an event I had all but forgotten.

I walked to my room to change my clothes.

“I’ll be right out,” I said, then adding, “And let me state once again for the record that I do not give a damn about the cop’s case.”

Chapter 11

Rizzo's cab made a squeaking noise as we turned onto Chestnut Drive. Rizzo had taken Maibe back to her apartment a couple of hours ago. I told Maibe that we would check out the warehouse bright and early the next morning. That was a lie. We, of course, were planning to ditch her to check out the place ourselves. It was hard to convince her, especially since I went through all the trouble of putting on clothes before she and Rizzo left, but I think I managed it. I just didn't know exactly *how* I'd managed it. I was surprised when she left without much resistance, even if she was leaving from my smelly, cramped, dark, old Chinese food infested apartment. At any rate, I was crossing my fingers, hoping that she wouldn't show up to beat me up in the dark again.

I had no idea what I would find at the mysterious warehouse, but I knew having Maibe along would complicate things. I didn't have enough eyes to watch both our backs. I didn't even want Rizzo to come, but I needed a ride to Detroit's industrial center.

The map on Maibe's phone had shown me where the warehouse was. It was the last place anyone would want to find themselves. River Rouge was a waterway that flowed through the dirtiest industries in Detroit. Wharfs and warehouses lined the banks. A few tool and dye shops could be found in the area, but most of them had gone under. The oil refineries spread a stink for miles. The air smelled like burning flesh. As we came closer to the river, my eyes began to water from the stench wafting into Rizzo's cab.

From the highway, the refineries spread out below. The stacks pumped out massive gouts of black into the air. Red lights blinked through the night and huge flames leapt from the tops of smoke stacks. The whole landscape looked like the opening shots in *Blade Runner*. The flames

were there to burn off whatever was left over from the refining process, but that stink permeated the air. I could still smell it when we reached Chestnut Drive, even though I could no longer see the refineries.

The cab rolled along down the dark street, headlights lighting the way. I told Rizzo to slow down so I could read the addresses as we passed them.

There were lines of warehouses, just stamped out one after another, each surrounded by their own fence. Some of the fences had razor wire on top. There were no signs on any of the buildings. Some warehouses had smashed windows or unkempt yards with a foot of frost-bitten brush growing. The entire street was run down and about as friendly as a hobo with a needle sticking out of his arm.

The warehouses scrolled by and I read the addresses on the right side of the street. Rizzo's high beams crept along, slowly unveiling each new warehouse. After a couple minutes, I told Rizzo to stop the car. The warehouse we were in front of had an address plate that read: 3350. The warehouse James Whale had been investigating was only two down.

I didn't want to just stroll up to the warehouse in the photographs. For all I knew there was a night watchman, or hoods with Uzis standing right out front. I needed to be a little stealthier than coasting along in a car with its high-beams on.

Rizzo shut off the car and the headlights went out a second later. We were now engulfed in darkness.

"Well, Scooby Doo, what now?" Rizzo said, nervously.

Rizzo had seemed pretty excited to come along with me when I asked him for a ride, but now his face told me his feelings had changed, every muscle stretching unnaturally. His eyes opened up wide and his mouth hung agape. Perhaps he had not realized that we would be hanging out in a spooky warehouse all night. He was trying to put on a good show that he wasn't scared, but I could tell he was. To be honest, I was jumpy myself. I had no idea what to expect.

I looked down at myself in the dark. The khaki cargo pants and white t-shirt I had put on appeared grey. I turned my gaze through the windshield to the sky. There were no stars out and the moon was about a week away from making an appearance. Rizzo and I would be doing some lurking in complete blackness.

I said, "Stay close to me. Don't make a sound. If it looks like trouble, book it. Don't be a hero."

Rizzo nodded as if to confirm my request that he stay quiet. I reached up to the roof of the cab and switched off the dome light. I gave Rizzo a nod, then opened my door.

We both stepped out into the night with light feet and softly closed our doors. With my back hunched over, I began to walk down the street. I stepped up onto the curb and motioned for Rizzo to do the same. We both walked along in the grass by the curb to mask the sound of our footsteps.

The night air was cool on my skin, but not cold enough for me to need a jacket. I had put a glass ketchup bottle in one of the large pockets on my left pant leg. The bottle bumped against

my thigh with every step. I felt safer knowing it was there. In a tight corner, a ketchup bottle could do wonders.

Rizzo was only a couple feet behind me as we moved. When I glanced back at him I could see his eyes darting about. He was nervous. Nerves were fine, as long as he didn't lock up. I tried to keep my breathing as low as possible. I had to stay calm. I might have been scared, uncertain, but one of us had to pretend like he knew what he was doing.

I tried to remind myself that I had been in much worse situations than this. There was the episode with the counterfeiting ring in Greektown. Or the chef on Telegraph Road who murdered customers and ground them up for hamburger meat. Or the time I had to babysit a colicky one year old for an afternoon. These were all challenging exploits and accomplishments I held dear. Surely, tonight would not be worse.

I took a deep breath and stopped. We had arrived at 3354.

It was too dark to have a good look at the premises, but it appeared to be the same rundown warehouse from Whale's photos. Some rust was visible on the tin paneling, but I couldn't tell if the windows were intact or broken.

A chain link fence too tall to scale stood between me and the warehouse. It was at least eight feet high with razor wire on top. I had to figure out a way to break in, but going up and over was out of the question. There are easy ways of getting over razor wire. Usually, a thick rubber or leather mat could be thrown over the blades so that a man could crawl over unscathed. I thought about trying the same trick with the cab's floor mats, but decided against it. The mats

might not have been thick enough. I did not like the idea of scaling an eight foot fence to try it out, especially when people might be on the lookout for trespassers.

I reasoned that if this really was the place where James Whale was killed there would be a break in the fence line somewhere. Whale would not have been brutally strangled and stuffed into a car trunk just because he took some photos from the street. He must have broken in and gotten caught. I planned on finding where Whale had gotten through.

I got down on my hands and knees and began crawling around the perimeter of the fence. I waved for Rizzo to do the same, and he did. The grass softly mashed under my hands. I crawled left and found the corner of the fence line. City ordinance required that owners not build on the last two feet of their property lines. There was a good four foot gap between 3354's fence and 3356's. From where I was, the fence line stretched out into darkness. There was no telling what was down the corridor between properties.

Feeling my way along the chain link fence, I crept toward the back of the property. My fingers skimmed over the smooth stainless steel links. After a few feet, I suddenly felt a sharp sensation on my fingertips. Some of the links in the chain fence began to wobble. I stopped and gave the fence a gentle push. The links bent forward.

I smiled. James Whale had been here. I leaned my head in closer to the fence. In the darkness, I could make out that an opening had been cut near the bottom, the smooth links, now jagged. The fence had been sliced in two parallel lines, making a sort of flap door through the fence. Whale probably used a bolt cutter to make an opening for himself.

“Okay,” I whispered to Rizzo, “We’re going to slide through here. When you get on the other side, keep your head low and move fast.”

Rizzo offered a nod that seemed hesitant, but determined.

“I don’t know how I let you talk me into this, man,” He said, biting his lip worriedly.

“I didn’t. You’re the one always saying that you want to come along.”

“Well I’m beginning to wonder if you romanticized those stories you tell me. You didn’t mention fuck about crawling all over the goddamn ground in the dark.”

Rizzo’s eyes went wide with dread, and he added, “I think I stepped in dog shit back there.”

I nodded, impressed that he knew what the word “romanticized” meant.

I went first, flopping on my stomach and pulling myself through the gap in the fence. The ground was paved on the other side. The concrete scraped roughly on the palms of my hands.

I stood up, dusting my pants off. I had forgotten about the stink in the air. I took a deep breath and almost coughed at the polluted atmosphere rushing into my lungs. I needed to stay quiet. There could have been someone right around the corner of the building. Crouching, I ran quickly to the warehouse door. I pressed my back up against the tin wall to wait for Rizzo.

Rizzo scrambled on the ground and struggled to get out from behind the fence, his baggy shirt and pants getting caught on the cut chain links. I rolled my eyes and turned my head to look around the corner of the building. There was no one standing guard. Empty concrete stretched out in front of me. Down past the warehouse, the ground dropped off, and water took its place.

River Rouge was only a couple hundred yards off. The water dimly sparkled, reflections of some far away city lights shown in the river.

I frowned. There was an odd feeling in my stomach, a pain I had not felt in a long time. Something I had tried to forget flashed in the back of my mind. Catherine. Her name was Catherine. She had died in this part of the city, in that river. I never had a chance to save her. I closed my eyes before the queasy burn in the pit of my stomach had a chance to grow. The only solution was to forget. I hated being anywhere near River Rouge. It always brought up bad memories.

Rizzo noisily threw his back up against the warehouse next to me. He was grunting and pulling his pants up.

“Alright. Enough with taking this slow. Can we just get on with this and get out?” he said in a hushed voice.

I said, “You’re right.”

Rizzo’s dark eyebrows came down forcefully.

“Right about what?”

I sniffed the air and wrinkled my nose, “You did step in dog shit back there.”

Rizzo wiped his feet in the concrete in disgust. The smell of feces was definitely in the air. I hadn’t noticed it before over the stink from the refineries. We both snickered. The ice was broken in that moment. We were on the property, and we hadn’t been killed yet. So far, things were good.

We walked silently around the corner. I noticed a door to my left and paused. My hand went to the rusty old door knob. I twisted it slowly. The knob followed my motion. My eyebrows raised in surprise. The door was unlocked. That was either really fortunate, or really bad. I realized that the door would probably not have been left unlocked unless someone was already inside.

I swiveled my head around one last time to make sure the coast was clear. The street was empty, no one watching. I turned to Rizzo and brought my index finger to my lips. We had to be quiet in case someone really was inside.

The door pushed open with little force. The hinges creaked loud enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, but there was nothing I could do to dampen the noise. We walked inside the pitch black warehouse. My hands were out in front of me, ready to block in case someone jumped us. I could not see a thing.

I walked further into the dark warehouse. The light from behind was hardly bright enough to cast a shadow in front of me. Blackness wrapped around. I held my breath, trying to listen for any movement that was not my own. The door was only a few paces behind me. I told myself that if someone tried to rush me I could book it into the light outside. This thought seemed to help ease my nerves.

Suddenly, there was a click from behind me, and fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling hummed to life. I turned around, blinking my eyes in readjustment. Rizzo was smiling, looking pleased with himself, his hand still resting on a light switch by the door.

“Who’s gunna stand around in a dark room, man? There’s no one here,” he said matter-of-factly.

We were standing in a room with a wood floor and tin walls. The room was bare. No killers lurked in the corners. No armed guards were on the prowl. Not only were there no people, but there were no boxes or crates either. There was floor, wall, and ceiling. That was all. Perhaps that was why the warehouse had been left unlocked: there was nothing here to steal.

I began to think that I had gotten something wrong. Perhaps James Whale had never been here after all. Perhaps he had been here, but the killers moved somewhere else, aware that they were being watched. I started to pace the floor, trying to think things over. Rizzo walked from one end of the large room to the other, checking all the corners for clues. He was as disappointed as me.

It appeared that James Whale’s trail had gone cold. We went on like that for several minutes, walking back and forth, our feet thumping on the wood floor. I was stumped for what my next move would be. This set me back to square one. I would have to re-examine everything, leave no stone unturned. I had been cocky. I got careless, perhaps too in a rush to prove something. Maibe and Rizzo had distracted me. I’d have to go it alone. Investigate his work area, his editor, everything.

The pressure was on. If someone was coming back, if we were in danger of being caught in the warehouse, we had to act quickly. But I was too stubborn just to give up and leave. If there was something here, I wanted to find it.

We were making noise, just walking about. Our feet thunked harshly on the wood floor. Between our constant pacing, I somehow heard a faint scraping sound coming from the center of the room.

I immediately stopped moving. I motioned for Rizzo to stop walking. He paused with his foot in the air, raising a curious eyebrow at me. I listened more closely. There was without a doubt some type of noise coming from below the floor boards. My eyes tried to track it. My gaze drifted to the center of the room just in time to see a section of floor actually move. It was being lifted, as if on a hinge, scraping the floor around it because of its snug fit. I almost laughed. The wood floor was false. Maybe I was on the right trail after all.

As the trap door rose, a hand became visible, pushing it up. The hand dramatically lifted the square of floor up on its end then let it fall back with a slap. A man began to lift himself out of the open hole. Two hands with sickly pale skin gripped the edge of the hole. A head rose up, his bloodshot eyes facing me. His long raven hair and thick beard were unkempt. A boot positioned itself onto the edge of the hole and before I knew it, the man stood before me, tall and muscular. He wore a white undershirt that looked as though it had not been washed in a year. He looked like urine smells. The man reached into his pocket and withdrew a knife with a long and silvery theatrical blade.

The man did not smile or speak a word. He flashed the knife in my eyes. At about seven inches long, the knife could tear me apart. I suddenly got the gnawing sensation at the bottom of my toes that I was about to die.

He slowly crept toward me with the knife out in front. His face cold and emotionless, his eyes fixed on me. My heart raced. Adrenaline shot through my system. I was panicked. I had no

way of defending myself. I reached into my left pocket. My fingers knocked something cool and hard. The ketchup bottle. I gripped it tight, pulled it out, and brandished it at my attacker. The glass bottle shone heroically red under the lamps, but failed to appear menacing. The man who was about to kill me seemed unfazed.

It appeared that I had brought a ketchup bottle to a knife fight.

The man kept coming toward me at the pace of a zombie. A dead look in his brown eyes, he just stared. The man never noticed Rizzo behind him on the other side of the room, wide eyed, but apparently thinking clearly.

Without warning, Rizzo bolted at the man. Hearing a noise, the man turned. As he did, Rizzo collided with his left shoulder and the two hit the floor. It was a complete blindside.

Rizzo rolled away onto his back and began to crawl backwards. The man with the knife was already beginning to stand. Three steps and the man would have been in range to stab Rizzo through the heart. Rizzo's face had lapsed from cool and collected into sheer terror.

I charged forward. The man stepped closer to Rizzo. Rizzo's hands slipped on the wood floor in a panic. He was too slow to get away. I lifted the ketchup bottle high. My feet pounded closer. The man's foot landed between Rizzo's legs. Rizzo attempted to scramble away, but the man had already begun to raise his knife for a killing blow. I brought the bottle down swiftly onto the back of the man's head. The glass exploded on impact.

The man fell harmlessly with a thud, inches away from Rizzo's horrified face.

"What the fuck was that Silence of the Lambs motherfucker doing here?!" Rizzo screamed.

I looked down at the man's body and shook my head.

"No one ever expects the ketchup bottle," I said, satisfied with myself.

Our attacker's skull had been badly damaged by my blow. Shards of glass stuck in the bone under his scalp. His head lay in a pool of red ketchup that was quickly becoming mixed with red blood. The two fluids swirled around each other like old friends. The pool of red stretched out across the wood floor. There was so much blood pouring out, the man had to be dead. If he wasn't expired already, he definitely wouldn't survive waiting for an ambulance.

I said I didn't think the guy was going to get back up. Rizzo agreed with me. I helped him to his feet.

"I told you not to be a hero," I said sternly, "You could have landed on his knife."

Rizzo shrugged, "Hey, it worked."

I sighed. He had a point. I wouldn't have had an easy time with the knife man on my own, but I knew Rizzo wouldn't always be so lucky. I decided now was not the time for a lecture.

I turned to take a look at the trap door in the center of the floor. I lowered myself onto my stomach and poked my head in the hole in the floor. There was a room underneath, almost as big as the warehouse itself. There was a small step ladder that the man obviously used to climb in and out. The inside of that room stunk even worse than the air by the refineries. There were stockpiles of chemicals everywhere, barrels with labels ripped off, and a workbench with Bunsen burners and beakers all over it.

I popped my head out and said to Rizzo, “Well that’s why our friend looked like a zombie. He was one. Drug addict on a late-night fix. Meth, probably. Too stoned to know there were two sets of footsteps up here.”

I stood up and walked to the man’s body. I told Rizzo to go check out the lab downstairs. He left and I began to search the man on the floor.

There was no wallet in any of his pockets, but I did find a cell phone. Only one number came up in the contacts list, labeled “IN CASE OF EMERGENCY”. I checked the recent calls and felt my heart leap. That contact had been dialed the day James Whale went missing. I had no idea what was going on, but I felt like I was on the right track.

Chapter 12

The new day shone with blue skies. I stood on the corner, waiting for Maibe. I had suggested we meet for lunch, saying I had a lot to tell her.

A bum walked by without asking me for change. Cars with faded paint sped past the condemned buildings across the street. A wino dove through a dumpster just down a nearby alley. My apartment building stood only a few hundred feet down the street, three floors high with cracked brickwork. Lincoln Park was not the nicest place in the world, but it was home.

I was standing outside Tony's Pizza, wearing the cleanest clothes I could find: a button up shirt and dress pants. I wanted to look presentable, to compensate for the night before. My hope was that the image of me in professional attire would erase the embarrassment of me talking to a beautiful woman while wearing nothing but dirty old penguin boxers, but I knew it would probably take some time for that fiasco to fade from either of our memories.

I heard a shout to my left and turned. It was Maibe. She paid a cab driver and trotted up to me in her blue blouse and black pants. Her outfit made her look like she had walked out of a J.C. Penney catalogue.

"No boxers?" she said, smiling amiably.

I shrugged, "The penguins were unable to join us for lunch. They were unavoidably detained in a hamper."

She laughed politely, her nose wrinkling. The hamper was a gross exaggeration. The penguins were actually in a pile on my floor with the rest of my wardrobe. She lifted her hand

her hand to her tuck some hair behind her ear. A silver bracelet glinted in the light. The bracelet's charm caught my eye. It was a butterfly.

"I'm sorry, I just couldn't stop thinking about last night. I'm astonished you have such a thing for Chinese food," she said.

I opened the door for her, and we stepped into the pizzeria, the thick smell of sauce and cheese hitting us in the nose.

Trying to be friendly, I said, "A billion people in China are okay with eating it, why shouldn't I?"

I motioned to the corner and we sat at a car tire-sized metal table.

I asked her if she always took a cab to work. She hesitated, embarrassed. She said she had taken her car to work, but had decided to take a cab here for lunch.

She said, "I didn't want Faulk to know where I am. So, I left my car out front, in case he comes looking for me. I told the secretary downstairs to say I'm upstairs and the secretary upstairs to tell him that I'm downstairs."

I laughed, genuinely entertained by her story. She laughed, too, but more awkwardly.

Maibe asked where Rizzo was, and I told her what he had told me: that he had a real job. Rizzo was out driving his cab around, earning a paycheck. Maibe asked if I paid him yesterday after he drove me around. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out Faulk's brown envelope of cash. It was significantly lighter from all the miles I had packed onto Rizzo's meter.

"Yes," I said, "I paid him last night."

“I didn’t see you pay him when we left,” she said, mildly curious.

I hesitated. She still didn’t know that Rizzo and I had gone to the warehouse last night. I put the envelope of money away. She wasn’t going to be happy about what I had to say. I didn’t want to give her a chance to snatch the cash away from me.

A man spoke behind me, “Phil, who is dis beautiful and lovely lady? And why da hell doesn’t she know better than ta hang out wit you?”

It was Tony. I turned and saw his pot belly at my eye level. Tony always spoke with a Brooklyn accent. No one knew why. He’d lived in Lincoln Park his whole life. Everyone just assumed he’d either watched the Sopranos during an identity crisis, or lied about where he’d grown up.

“Hi, Tony” I said to his belly.

I was relieved that Tony didn’t appear mad after what I’d done to his car. I looked up at his face. His attention was completely on Maibe. Those wrinkled and tired eyes seemed to contain a misplaced happiness.

I wanted to apologize for wrecking his car again. All the times I’d told him I was sorry before never managed to make him feel better. He always had a morose look on his face when I went to see him. He loved that car for some stupid reason. He said his wife had given it to him as a present. I had no idea if that was before or after the car had turned into a rusted out junker.

I opened my mouth to apologize to Tony again, but he stopped me before I could get the words out. He glanced at my clothes and then at her. He stared me dead in the face with moist grey eyes. He was so calm.

“Don’t worry about da car, Phil. I’m over it. Da dearest things in life don’t last forever,” he said sincerely.

He nodded at Maibe, patted me on the back, and told us that he was going to make a pizza for us on the house. Pepperoni and mushroom.

Tony whisked off into the kitchen, gone as quickly as he’d come. Maibe’s face screwed up into a confused look. I knew I had to explain myself. I toyed with the idea of telling her about the time I crashed Tony’s car, how I’d been distracted by the flying bullets of a serial rapist I was not aware had a concealed weapon permit, but decided against it. The less Maibe knew about my mistakes, the better. Instead, I began to talk about the night before.

“After Rizzo dropped you off, we went to the warehouse without you,” I blurted out.

Maibe rolled her eyes and leaned back in her metal chair defensively. The sunlight pouring in from the street glared off her blonde hair, giving her a sanctimonious glow. She was mad, but willing to hear me out.

She bit her lip and calmly asked if we had found anything. I nodded. She leaned in, the light from the street leaving her hair and an inquisitive smile creeping across her face.

“What was there?” she asked with curiosity and excitement.

I had hoped that Maibe would react this way. She was a bereaved relative who was eager to know everything she could about her father’s death. I might have lied to her, but she was willing to forget that long enough to get information. I also got the feeling that there was something more than that playing below the surface of her demeanor. She was really enthralled by the detective process. She needed it. She needed to feel the pieces falling into place. I knew

what that was like. For the longest time, I thought I needed it too. To help with the pain. To help make sense of my strange life. Now I wasn't so sure. With the girl wearing the butterfly bracelet in front of me, I wasn't so sure.

I was going to tell Maibe everything I had so far, not just because she needed to know, but because I needed her to know. If I was right, things were bound to get a little hairy in the next few days. I needed people I could count on to know where I was going to start digging.

I tried to sound casual and said, "There was some evidence that your father had been there. But what was really interesting was that we found a meth lab hidden underneath the warehouse."

Maibe's smile managed to stay frozen in excitement while the rest of her face grew grave. She asked, "So do you have a line on my father's killer?"

"Well, yes and no," I said reluctantly, "We found a man at the warehouse. He was probably the man who brewed the drugs, and could have been a witness to the murder. We also killed him before we could ask any questions."

Maibe looked around her to make sure no one was listening, anger filling in where excitement had been a moment before.

"What the hell did you kill him for?!" she said in a low yell.

I shook my head and said, "Well, I had my ketchup bottle out and he wouldn't take a hint."

"I mean, you just murdered a man. You don't even feel guilty?"

“You’re right,” I said sarcastically, “That drug dealer with the hunting knife was probably about to win the Nobel peace prize. What was I thinking?”

Maibe slapped me hard on the right cheek. Pain bit into my face. For a petite blonde, she was pretty strong.

I rubbed my cheek. Maibe sat back into the light from the window, glaring as if she seriously wanted to break one of my bones.

“Calm down,” I said cautiously, “I do have a lead.”

I reached into my left pocket and pulled out the palm-sized black cell phone I had taken off the drug dealer. It was an old design with no features, but a new phone. I reasoned that the phone was probably only used at the warehouse and wasn’t owned by anyone. Whoever was on duty would have possession of it and only use it in case of an emergency.

I set it on the table. She picked it up and started to check it over.

“It’s a pay-as-you-go-phone,” I said. “There’s not exactly a clean way to track the owner or who uses it. I took it off the guy who tried to kill Rizzo and me.”

Her face was skeptical. Probably still harboring ill will against me, she wasn’t convinced the phone held any answers.

I continued, “Not many calls have been made with it. Look under the recent calls list and you will find a number had been called five days ago around midnight. The contact name is ‘IN CASE OF EMERGENCY’. You’ll also notice that there are no other contacts listed in the phone.”

Maibe shook her head, disappointed.

She said, “Do you really think this is a clue? Are you even sure my father was attacked at that warehouse?”

Rizzo and I had searched the warehouse after we killed the drug dealer. I figured I had to have been close to finding out what had happened to Whale if someone was already trying to kill me. We discovered no definitive evidence that Whale had been there, but we did uncover a few points of interest.

Rizzo and I had found crates of various chemicals in the warehouse. The labels and shipping addresses on all of the crates had been ripped off. My guess was that whoever was supplying the stuff wanted to make damn sure the crates wouldn't be traced back to them. It was true that Meth, and just about any hard illegal drug, could be made from over the counter medications, but the really good stuff, the kind people kill over, had to be made without impurities. That meant the chemist would need raw materials, and raw materials were hard to come by legally. Whoever this anonymous supplier was, they might have been the big cheese pulling all the strings. They might have been the boss of the man with the knife. And who better to call when something goes wrong than your boss.

We also found a heavy duty chain lying on the floor in the secret room. It was probably used to drag crates in and out from the trap door. The chain was about four feet long and was covered in a layer of rust that had been worn off in some areas. James Whale's body had been found strangled with rust on his neck. It was possible that Whale had been choked with the chain to the point of passing out, then stuffed in the trunk of his car.

Then, when Rizzo was shifting about crates, he found a fifty pound bag of sand shoved in a corner. I had no idea why it was there, but it had been torn open and quite a bit of it had been poured out. I thought back to Whale's car. Put enough sand in the gas tank, and the fuel pump wouldn't be able to draw any gas. The murderer could have tied up Whale, drove off somewhere, bought the bag of sand, and left the car at Dashiell's Garage.

I told all this to Maibe. She admitted that even though none of the evidence was solid, the facts did add up. She relaxed, appearing more receptive. I took a deep breath, the hard part was over. I had sort of convinced Maibe that I wasn't too far off base on the investigation.

I was done telling her about weak clues and dead witnesses. The rest of what I had was more substantial, even if it wasn't immediately clear.

"It gets better," I said, "Look up the number in the cell phone."

She pulled out her touch screen phone, brought up a search engine, and copied the number that was called the night James Whale was abducted. A couple seconds later, her face shot up from her cell phone.

"Are you serious?" she said suspiciously.

2009

Chapter 13

After I heard the door close behind Andrea, I tried to figure out what to do next. I knew that Catherine had been abducted days before she was murdered, but I didn't know why or by whom. I knew the more information I had on Catherine, the better. I would have to try to reconstruct her last days, in order to catch her murderer.

Where to start wasn't hard to figure out. A woman named Robin was Catherine's roommate. Robin was bound to have useful information, maybe even an idea of who could have done such a thing to Catherine. Talking to Robin seemed like a good idea, but what did I know, I wasn't a detective.

I needed to do some real detective work. I wondered exactly what that would look like. Philip Marlowe wasn't the smartest man in the world, yet he always seemed to stumble across just the right clue while slinking up and down a lonely alleyway or lounging in an opium den. Good clues could come from anywhere.

But I wasn't Philip Marlowe. There was no way any of the stuff he did would work in real life. I couldn't just stumble into Chinatown and happen across just the right hooker that remembered just the right detail that would lead me to a cold blooded killer. It wouldn't work for me. Marlowe had the benefit of being made up. Real life was much more complicated than all that. Mysteries went unsolved. Trails went cold. Not everything made sense.

Of course, I reasoned to myself, things that were made up were made up by real people, who lived in a real world, to be experienced by a real audience. Just as things from true life can

work their way into a fictional space, things from a fictional space might be able to bleed into reality.

At this point I went cross-eyed and decided to stop thinking so much. Philip Marlowe was not the issue here, Catherine was. I just needed to find Catherine's murderer. I didn't care how.

I decided to do the only thing I could: to call Robin up and ask her what she knew. There was no harm in that.

Unfortunately, calling Robin meant using a phone. My phone was on the fritz since a month earlier when I got drunk and tried to straighten the curly cord with an iron. I would have to go somewhere else if I wanted to call Robin. Even more unfortunate was the fact that there was only one person I could think of who was nearby and in possession of a working phone. That person had just stormed out of the room.

I sighed, unable to believe that I was about to walk to Andrea's apartment to ask her for a favor after she had just expressed how much she regretted the last favor she did for me. Life was full of cruel ironies.

I knew that I could have knocked on the door of the guy with the electric guitar upstairs and asked. I could have even run screaming through the street and asked a random passerby for a cellphone. But none of that was in my head. Some microscopic part of me wanted to go to Andrea, curious about why she had left the room the way she did.

I dressed, walked out of the apartment, made my way down the creaky wooden staircase, and stepped outside. It was a dull, cold day. I zipped my coat up to my chin as I walked down the

sidewalk toward Andrea's place. She lived above her Laundromat and dry cleaning service, which was visible down the block from where I lived.

Grey clouds reflected in the glass of the dry cleaners. The building was at least fifty years old, with weathered chrome window frames and a squat square build. It had seen better days, but it was run down when Andrea bought it. This was not the nicest neighborhood, anyway. There were worse looking buildings around. I was living in one of them.

My feet carried me toward the Laundromat, and I began to get a strange feeling in my stomach. I couldn't tell what was bothering me, but I suddenly heard a smoky saxophone play in the back of my head. A car honked as I ran across the street toward the dry cleaners. I heard the faint sound of a clicking pen.

I caught something out of the corner of my eye: a man in a brown trench coat, wearing a felt fedora. The brim of his hat pulled down, a shadow blotted out his face. I turned to look, but the man walked down an alleyway just as I did. I blinked, unsure if I had seen anything at all.

I shrugged and walked toward the small wooden door next to the Laundromat entrance. I climbed the narrow flight of stairs inside that led up the side of the building, onto the second floor.

The stairs fed out to a familiar cramped and dim hallway. A lone door with a deadbolt was eerily lit by the glow peeking through the cracks of the shaded window at the end of the hall. I stepped forward, the bare floorboards creaking under my weight. The smell of dryer sheets wafted up from below, giving the air the scent of Mountain Spring Freshness of Old Building.

I knocked on Andrea's door. There was no response. I could hear thumping noises inside, like someone was dropping and dragging something heavy. I knocked again.

"Yeah?" came a muffled female voice.

I said awkwardly to the door, "Andrea, it's me, Phil."

"What do you want?" snapped the voice on the other side.

The thumping noises continued. What was she moving around in there?

"I need to use your phone," I said more loudly.

"Like hell you do," she said, obviously still mad about the conversation we'd had only a few minutes before.

There was the clang of a metal pan, then more scraping sounds. I heard Andrea's voice over the racket.

She said, "Until you get the money you owe me, the only free phone call you're getting is from jail."

"Listen," I said only half convincingly, "if you want your money, you're going to have to let me use your phone."

The scraping sounds stopped. Everything paused for a moment, and then footsteps clomped toward the door. The deadbolt clicked open. The door opened a crack. Relieved, I started to say something to her.

"Andrea, I-"

But she just stuck out a phone receiver at me, without a word. The door was not even opened far enough for me to see her face, only her fingers. I gingerly took the phone from her hand, unsure what was going on and secretly marveling at the fact that Andrea still had a working land line.

“Thanks,” I started again, but the door slammed shut in my face. The dead bolt clicked. The footsteps clomped away from the door. I looked down. The curly cord of the phone stretched through the crack at the bottom of the door. The cord was not long enough for me to put the receiver to my ear, so I bent down. A dial tone droned back at me.

“Can you dial it for me?” I shouted into the door.

“Shoot,” Andrea said impatiently.

I shouted out the numbers for Robin and Catherine’s apartment in Troy. The phone chirped in my ear as Andrea keyed them in. A moment later the phone rang.

On the third ring, a woman on the other end picked up. I could tell it was Robin right away. She had a voice with the cold, sexy assertiveness of a stock-broking hooker.

“Hello?” She said impatiently.

“Robin? This is Phil Barnes, Catherine’s ex, remember?”

There were scuffling sounds in the background on the phone, as if someone were rummaging through boxes. This was hard to discern from the noises that had just started up again inside Andrea’s apartment.

“I’m really sorry about what happened,” I continued, “I’m trying to figure out who did it.”

I rolled my eyes at my own words. I sounded like an idiot, but how else was I supposed to get at what I wanted to know?

Robin yelled at someone, her mouth away from the phone.

“Don’t touch that! That desk belonged to my great Aunt Pike. Jesus, don’t they teach you people to ask before you touch other people’s things?”

Robin’s voice came back to the phone. She said, “Sorry. The police are sweeping the apartment for possible leads right now. These guys are terrible. They’re everywhere...crop dusting for fingerprints and God knows what else.”

I tried to picture Robin in her apartment with police and forensics men going through her underwear drawer. Robin was a neat freak. She was probably on the verge of a coronary watching all of her belongings get rearranged.

Marlowe’s voice played in the back of my head. I tried to remember if Robin was even pretty, but before I came to any conclusion, Marlowe had picked up the slack. His voice drifted into my ear, saying in a slow sultry rhythm, “This kitten’s got claws.”

I tried to ignore Marlowe. I asked Robin, “Have they found anything useful yet?”

“I think I saw a guy put some strands of hair in a bag. They weren’t Catherine’s. They think it could be related. Right now I think they’re desperate for any sort of clue.”

Robin's voice turned away from the phone again to yell at someone on her end. "I told you to leave that roll top desk alone! Don't you dare pry it open, I'll get you the key, dammit. Are you the reason your mother couldn't have nice things?"

Marlowe whispered, "Don't trust her, pal. Never trust a dame. She's got a great tush that calls out, 'pudding: two for one special' and legs delicious enough for the KFC value menu, but she'll tear you to pieces if you give her the chance."

He was thinking she was another femme fatale. The guy was paranoid. Not every pretty girl was out to kill him. I was fairly certain most pretty girls wouldn't even look at Marlowe, much less seduce him in order to murder him. Real people weren't like that. Real people didn't just bump off other people. Danger did not lurk around every corner.

"Shut up," I grumbled back at Marlowe's voice.

"What?" Robin said to me.

"Nothing," I said, "Not you. Someone else. Listen, I want to talk to someone who saw Catherine before she went missing. Do you know who that could be?"

Robin paused in thought. Marlowe took the opportunity to put his two cents in.

"Don't trust what she says," he said, "Unless you like the idea of getting tied down."

Marlowe paused theatrically, then added, "And by tied down I do not mean married."

I tried to ignore Marlowe and concentrate on the pain that was forming in my back from leaning over so long. Robin spoke to me over the line.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I told the police. The last person I am aware she was with was Doug Rollins, her boyfriend. Whoever took her ransacked the apartment first. It was like they were looking for something, Phil. I’d just gotten this place back together when the cops showed up.”

“I was talking about bondage,” said Marlowe pointedly, “Which I know you are not comfortable with.”

I flipped my middle finger at the front of my face, hoping somewhere in my subconscious Marlowe was watching. Needless to say, I’d never heard Doug Rollins’ name before. Catherine and I never spoke to each other again after we fought about being fired. It was not surprising she’d started a relationship with someone else. Now all I had to do was find out where Rollins was so I could question him.

“Thanks, Robin, you’ve been a big help. I’ll talk to this Rollins guy. He lives in the area, right?”

“Yeah, somewhere in Troy, I think.”

I thanked Robin again for helping me out and pulled the curly cord out of the phone receiver. After a moment, I plugged it back in, the dial tone returning as I did. I set the phone receiver down on the floor. As I did, I saw something to the left move out of the corner of my eye. It was the man in the trench coat again.

Chapter 14

The man in the trench coat and hat effortlessly opened the window at the end of the hall and stepped out onto the fire escape. The window closed behind him, the shades swaying in his wake.

I was confused. How had the man gotten past me without me even hearing him? I straightened my stiff back and moved to the window. I felt mystified, caught in a trance. My hands shifted the shades to the side and began to ease the window up. I grunted at the strain it took to move the window. The wooden frame slid up as if it had not been used in years. There was the distant sound of a pen clicking behind me, but I paid no attention to it. I slipped my leg through the window and onto the chilly fire escape. With one heave, the rest of me followed.

The fire escape was rusted and unstable. Down in the alleyway, the man in the trench coat and fedora stood, swiveling his head side to side as if to make certain no one was following him. After a moment, he turned and hurried down the alley, out of sight. I kicked the rusted ladder down. Gravity loudly clanged it into place. It never occurred to me to wonder how the man had gotten down.

I hurried down the ladder and dropped into the alleyway. I saw the man several paces off, running to the left down another alley. I heard the leather of his shoes slap the pavement. I saw the flutter of his trench coat follow him around the corner. I knew somewhere inside me that it was Philip Marlowe. Almost in a fever, I took off after him.

The fire escape clanged above, followed by the sound of a clicking pen. I didn't look up. I just ran forward. My feet pounded into the ground. I skidded to a halt and sprinted down the

alley to the left. I was now between the backs of two different rows of buildings. The alleys branched in every direction, complex as a deranged mind.

The trench coat fluttered around another corner to the right. I ran after it. I gulped for breath. My lungs burned in the chilled air. I couldn't separate the sound of my feet thumping the ground from Marlowe's footfalls. There was also a fainter footstep behind me somewhere. They all blended together, like hooves of a cavalry.

I swiveled to the right, following Marlowe. I was running as fast as I could to keep up, running without any thought to anything else, running at that speed that felt like continuous tripping. As soon as I turned the corner, I saw him.

The alleyway was a dead end. He stood facing me with his back to the brick wall. His trench coat draped dramatically to the ground and the fedora shadowed his face. My feet were moving too fast. I could not slow myself in time. In the fraction of a second before I hit him, I could see his face. It was my face. It was me. I was Marlowe.

The man in the hat and coat seemed to melt right into me. I felt nothing as he dissolved into my body right before I hit the brick wall full on. Phillip Barnes and Phillip Marlowe, we were now two Phils in the same body. I bounced off of the cold brick, ricocheting from the impact. I staggered backwards before falling into a heap in the long corridor of alleyways I'd just come from.

My forearms and chest hurt, but I was okay. I had shielded my head from hitting the wall. I took a moment to breathe. I wheezed, exhausted. A windy chill whipped down the long stretch of alley. I heard the sound of a retractable pen clicking again. I looked up.

A pale, big man loomed in front of me. He was bald, with a small face set perfectly in the center of his large pointed head. His body was framed like an overweight WWF wrestler. Masking the exact girth of his body was his clothing: a parachute of a black leather coat and blue jeans four sizes too big. It was the kind of clothing a gang banger would wear, but this man was no gang banger. He projected a kind of power. The way he stood with his feet confidently apart, the way he held himself over me. It was as if he was used to chasing people down alleyways until they fell.

In his hand was a ballpoint pen. He clicked it. The sound echoed off the brickwork around us. This man was not like Marlowe. This man was real.

The man took a step toward me, his legs swishing inside his shaggy slacks. He was a few yards down the alley from me, but I got the feeling he was closing in for the kill. My mind flashed to that scene in Grosse Pointe Blank where John Cusack kills a man by stabbing him in the jugular with a ballpoint pen. My heart seized with fear.

I clamored to my feet. The big man in shaggy slacks didn't seem fazed. He lumbered toward me with the same ominous pace as before, calm calculations present in the look of his face. I felt deep down in my bones that this man wanted to kill me.

I didn't know why he would want to do that, but I knew I had a job to do. I had to find Catherine's murderer. I had to dig. I had to reconstruct the last days of her death. I had to be willing to do what the police weren't. I had to be more motivated than I'd ever been in my whole life. I had to be willing to fracture, break, and explode laws. I had to be willing to not give a shit. It was the only sensible course of action. All I needed now was the courage to do it. My chest still hurt from hitting the wall. Somewhere in that pain, I found it.

I looked the man in shaggy slacks straight in the eyes. He stared back at me like a rhino. He did not seem worried about attacking me. He knew just what to do. He had all the advantages: height, strength, pen. I knew now was not the time for a confrontation. I needed to slip away, to lose him. That was my only shot at living long enough to find out whoever killed Catherine and who set this psycho pair of shaggy slacks on my trail.

Without hesitation, I turned on my heel, and bolted down the alley. Two beats of my heart later, I heard shaggy slacks start to run after me. Our feet slammed out of time. Hit footfalls were slower, heavier. The bricks blurred past me. The wind bit at my skin. I kept running for all I was worth, my legs and lungs burning alive.

An alley came up on my left, I dodged toward it. My right shoulder collided with the wall and I stumbled and caught myself. I could hear shaggy slacks behind me, his lungs heaving, his deep voice grunting. I tried to gain speed back into my stride, but it was no use. My adrenaline was spent. My breathing was out of control. I was slow. I was dead meat.

My eyes went to a grey back door near me. While my feet pounded forward, I recognized it. I realized I was at the back of Tony's Pizzeria. On bare instinct, my hand shot out and yanked the handle. The door swung out swiftly. I ducked inside, slamming it behind me.

The kitchen inside was hot and smelled like flour and tomatoes. Tony and two cooks started at me, bewildered. I turned back to the door. I was in luck. There was a padlock on a metal hinge. I snatched the padlock, slammed the metal hinge over the steel loop mounted on the jam, and rammed the lock in.

Just as my hand left the lock, the door jolted. Shaggy slacks was on the other side, trying to beat his way in.

Chapter 15

The pounding at the door was doing nothing for my shot nerves. The three men gawking at me seemed just as uncomfortable with the situation. All of them stood motionless, their hands grasping ladles and sunk in pizza dough. One cook's beard net seemed to be the only thing keeping his jaw from dropping to the floor.

"What da hell is that?" Tony asked me, slack jawed.

Tony was looking at me in the same way he looked at the TV when he was drunk, watching sports highlights on ESPN and trying to figure out why the Pistons were playing the Redwings. I empathized with his confusion.

I shook my head frantically and said, "I don't know. Someone's after me. I think he's trying to kill me."

The door slammed louder in response. It jolted in place and I wondered what was going to break first: the bolts holding the hinges or the ones holding the lock. Shaggy Slacks must have been putting his whole weight into it now.

I said, "Tony, I need your car. I have to get out of here."

I needed a ride to see Doug Rollins, before it was too late, before I was dead. Tony didn't even hesitate at my request. His eyes never left the door. Tony took his hand out of the dough and motioned the other cook to step forward. He did so, slapping a tomato sauce smattered ladle in his hand like a Billy club. The cook with the hairnet and beard dropped his ladle and grabbed the nearest sharp object, a pizza cutter. The three men looked noble, like a group of Italian Bravehearts.

Tony said, "Yeah, sure. Go out da front. We'll take care of dis guy."

The cook with the ladle nodded at Tony's words confidently, never taking his eyes off the slamming door. The cook was only a little over five feet tall. Like the other two men, he had an overgrown belly and nothing but pizza cutters and ladles to defend himself with. He didn't stand a chance. None of them did.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"Why, is he big?" said the pizza cutter cook, looking at the small cutter in his hand less bravely.

"He's like Godzilla in a leather jacket," I said, losing all sense of cool, "Just call the cops."

Confused, Tony nodded slowly, reached into his pocket, and tossed me his wad of keys. I snatched them out of the air hurriedly and started running. The blue lion key chain on the keys caught my eye. Tony always rooted for the Detroit Lions. They were a football team close to a record losing streak. If they lost one more game they would make history. If they won, well, as Tony would put it with a sad sigh, "I guess ya can't lose 'em all, can ya?" Well, I was a guy who had lost everything. I was the record losing streak incarnate. I didn't even own a car anymore. I couldn't afford Chinese food take out, for crying out loud. But I wasn't going to lose this. This murder, I was going to win. Nothing could stop me.

I nodded to Tony and slapped him on the back to thank him on my way out of the kitchen. He nodded back, still gawking at the door, which could burst open at any moment. The cook with the cutter was running to the phone to call the cops as I whisked out the front door.

Seconds later, I was across the street in Tony's car, a shitty old Cadillac with rust and mismatched fenders. I cranked the engine over, the starter making the noise of an air raid siren. The engine sputtered to life, with one of the belts under the hood squeaking like a flock of seagulls. I felt the pressing need to hurry. I dropped the car into drive and floored the gas pedal. As I did, Shaggy Slacks came barreling out of the alleyway next to Tony's. My heart beat wildly as the car peeled forward and took off down the street. Shaggy Slacks stopped running. He just stood and stared at me through my rearview mirror.

I arrived in Troy a few miles later. The metropolis surrounding Detroit might have been technically made up of different cities, but they were all only a couple blocks wide. You'd be in one place, travel two streets over, and you'd be in another. Royal Oak, Sterling Heights, Highland Park. They might have been very different places, but they were all built on top of each other. I'd lived here all my life and it all felt like one continuous city to me. Good streets and bad streets, nothing more. Troy was one of those good streets. Low crime. High income. Shopping mall. It wasn't the best place in Detroit to be, but it was nearing the top.

A quick stop at an internet café and I had Doug Rollin's work address. I assumed he would be at work, the day now leaning slowly past the noon hour. Finding his place of work was no trouble. Doug Rollins owned his own budding law practice. The company only established a couple years ago, it was likely he only had a few clients. Doug Rollins: Defense Attorney. I scrawled the address on a napkin. The practice was not far from the café, so I ducked into Tony's car and hit the road.

Five minutes later, I was standing outside a white two floor building with man-sized bushes lining the front. I walked to the glass front door and went inside. A sign in the lobby told me Doug Rollins' office was on the second floor, so I hurried up a nearby flight of stairs.

The glass door for the law practice was propped open. Doug Rollins's name shone in the window, neatly stenciled in gold paint. My first instinct was to be surprised that my assumption had been correct. Doug Rollins was actually at work only a day after Catherine's body had been found. But then again, this was a small law office. Rollins probably couldn't afford to take a day off work, even if a loved one just turned up brutally murdered. There was also the possibility that he didn't know yet, but that was unlikely. Why would the police come to me first? I was the ex.

I stepped into the office. The room smelled like carpet cleaner and potpourri. A woman secretary behind a desk greeted me with a forced smile. Middle-aged and wearing horn-rimmed glasses, I could picture her sneaking sips from a bottle of whisky hidden in her bottom drawer.

I said, "Is Doug Rollins in? I'd like to speak with him."

The woman eyed me pointedly, as if wondering what possible trouble I'd got myself in that I needed a defense attorney.

"Do you have an appointment?" she vacantly asked.

She paused only a moment before speaking again, indicating that my reply didn't really matter.

"Have a seat," she said, "he'll be with you in fifteen minutes."

The secretary turned back to her computer and made her best effort to appear busy.

I nodded, walked to the far wall, and sat in an arm chair under some windows. I leaned back into the fake leather fabric and tried to relax. The light spraying in from the window warmed the back of my head. I felt like I could almost fall asleep. There were times when being a detective could be relaxing. It occurred to me that if I were a real detective I'd be getting paid to sit around and wait for things a lot of the time. Then I realized that this morning I'd sort of hired myself as a private detective and in a sense already was getting paid to sit around and wait for things. I wanted to kick myself for having such low standards of clientele and realized that I probably wouldn't be able to afford my expensive services.

I stared at the wall ahead. A framed piece of office art faced me on the opposite wall. It was what a person might commonly find in an office. There was nothing special about it, a cheap print in a cheap plastic frame, but the image struck me instantaneously. The painting was of a million butterflies scattering into the sky while a net from below tried to catch them. I felt my heart beat faster. I felt cold sweat chill my back. I thought of Catherine.

I thought of her birthday, when we sat around talking about what we would do if we weren't such productive people. I said I'd go to book stores and spend my time tearing out the last pages of the mystery novels. Or take a Sharpie and censor all the romance books. "He inserted his BLACK LINE into my SQUIGGLE," I'd said. She'd laughed at that. She said that if she weren't so productive, she'd just lie around and not do much of anything. Maybe that's where I got the idea.

I remembered I gave her a necklace on her birthday, too. It was the same necklace she'd thrown in my face when she found out about Andrea. When she found Andrea's underwear tangled up in my sheets. When she discovered Andrea had seduced me when I was drunk. That

I'd cheated on Catherine without even remembering it. A part of me hated Andrea for that, but I knew it was mostly my own fault. I remembered Catherine broke up with me and, a short time later, Finch fired us.

I remembered her laugh. I remembered what she liked to drink. I remembered the late night phone calls and the early morning coffee. Dinners with menus written in French. Wine that tasted so bad it must have been expensive. Bars where even the piano players were tight. Driving a car to nowhere. I remembered movies and music. I remembered dancing. I remembered being nervous. I remembered being in love. I remembered it all. My head felt like it was on spin cycle.

I stood up abruptly. I felt closed in. I needed air. The secretary looked up at me as if I was having an attack. My feet briskly carried me out of the waiting room, down the stairs, and outside. I filled my lungs greedily with the chill outdoor air. My heart calmed down. The sweat stopped percolating on my back. I stood a moment, collecting myself.

It was then that a familiar tan car turned into the parking lot. Without even thinking, I jumped behind one of the large bushes in front of the building. I was sure I hadn't been seen. It was detectives Welks and Lazery's car, I had no doubt. I'd just been released from jail only a few hours ago. I was in no hurry to go back. Had they followed me? Was I going to have to outrun them like I had Shaggy Slacks?

Sure enough, as the car got closer, I could see through the branches of the bush that Welks and Lazery were inside. The car pulled alongside the front door and stopped. The two middle-aged men got out of the car and began to walk toward the door. Did they think I was in there? I tried not to make any noise, firmly planting my feet in the mulch and keeping my

breathing to a minimum. Lazery brushed his suit coat aside and unbuttoned the belt snap on his handcuffs.

Welks said to Lazery, “Are you sure about this? I don’t think this Rollins guy is our man.”

Lazery replied gruffly, “His hair was a match for the strands found at the scene. He has no alibi. It’s our asses if we don’t make a move on him.”

Welks shrugged uneasily and opened the door for his partner.

“Let’s get this over with, then,” he said.

The two policemen walked inside, the door thudding behind them. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least they weren’t here to arrest me again. I doubted the police would be able to detain Doug Rollins long. He was a defense attorney after all. Unless, of course he actually did it and they found some pretty heavy evidence against him. Hair strands in the bed of your current lover did not count for much. On top of that, lawyers were the last people on earth who would commit a crime, especially one as serious as murder. But perhaps Rollins was the anomaly, someone who naturally acted out against his profession and couldn’t help it, like a nurse who smoked. At any rate, Welks didn’t sound convinced Rollins was guilty.

After I waited long enough for the detectives to start making their way up to the second floor, I ran out from behind the bushes and toward Tony’s car. I wasn’t going to get to talk to Doug Rollins today, guilty or not.