

Demons in the Crawlspace

Gino Brogdon

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FIRST EDITION

This first book is dedicated to my sons, Gino, Jr., John and Malcolm. Each man is a product of those who love us. I am a product of your love. I never knew the true meaning of love until you came into my life. You have been my hope and inspiration for much of the fortune in my life. I cherish you always and remain a better man because you made it possible.

Love, Dad

Foreword

There's nothing more gripping than a good who-done-it; and you are in store for a first rate one. Gino Brogdon, a practicing Atlanta attorney and former Superior Court judge, has created a story alive with gritty characters, entertaining dialogue, fast paced action, and an intriguing plot.

Demons in the Crawlspace is a story of Detective Frank Salvato, who has his own demons from a complicated and tragic past, as he navigates the interrelated crimes of missing children, murder, and child molestation. In order to figure out what has happened—and possibly to save the lives of two little girls—Frank has to overcome obstacles presented by negligent parents, mentally handicapped felons, Borderline mental health professionals, ambitious but incompetent prosecutors, showboating defense attorneys, and compromised judges.

At the center of this book is one of the most horrific crimes—one that, rationally, is hard to believe even exists—the sexual murder of children. As a practicing clinical forensic psychologist, I can testify that unfortunately, these do exist. It is hard to accept that the innocence and promise of a child can be destroyed by the pathology of adults. But those of us who work in this area know that it happens, and happens at an alarming frequency. If anything is evil, this is; and Gino Brogdon captures this evil in his excellent first novel. Gino brings to life this sick underside of life—he gives us a look at things we wish we could ignore. Psychologists, police officers, attorneys, correctional officers, and judges unfortunately learn to live knowing this dark underside of life—and *Demons in the Crawlspace* will give you a fascinating glimpse of it, too.

There are no vanilla characters in this novel. In all likelihood, deeply understood, there are actually few bland people in life—the seemingly bland may just be good at hiding their idiosyncrasies. Gino Brogdon makes both the street folks come alive as well as the upper crust. His

characters are multi-dimensional, with fascinating strengths and flaws, and part of the mystery is attempting to figure out the interrelationships among these folks.

I enjoy a good detective novel, if it is written well. As someone who works in forensic mental health, I think I have come to have high standards. John Grisham, who is also a practicing attorney, certainly knows how to pull this off. His legal details are fascinating because they are accurate and hence informative—the police work and trial are not seen from the distance of a Hollywood script writer but from the nearness of those who really know how the legal system works as well as how it doesn't work. Gino Brogdon's novel is in this tradition. He has tried cases involving sexual abuse both as an attorney and as a judge. His depiction of the behavior of the characters involved in this—of the police, of prosecuting attorneys, of witnesses and experts, of defense attorneys and of the judges— is spot on, part of the drama is the realism he brings to bear in this story.

But it is clear that Gino Brogdon also knows something that Grisham doesn't—Gino knows the street. Grisham is at his best writing about Ivy Leaguers as they navigate a corrupt large firm, i.e., a story of the elite. In contrast, Brogdon brings alive the flotsam and jetsam of society—the homeless, the developmentally disabled, the prostitute, the pervert, and the substance abuser. Their dialogue rings true, their blemishes are clearly drawn, and the pathos and tragedy of their stories are compelling. He does this with a humor and with empathy. Someone once said that to those who think, life is a comedy, and to those who feel, a tragedy. This novel brings alive both of these dimensions.

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Death is the comma between the magnificent life experience and the great unknown—the afterlife. Rather than enjoying life, many people waste this precious opportunity only to agonize about the inevitable. These aimless souls run from themselves while desperately yearning for elusive solutions to the unanswerable. Human nature and innate selfishness prompt many to cling to life with a death grip, never realizing its fragility. The reality that each person chooses to allow another to live is too frightening to reconcile with the virtues that comprise a civilized society. Murder is an astringent reminder that living is not a right but a frail privilege granted moment by moment and day by day.

Gino Brogdon

Acknowledgments

No one person or event is an island unto himself or itself. Each of us and what we do is a product of the divine confluence of many life forces. *Demons* is just that. The life forces that have contributed greatly to the making of this book are legion. I am greatly indebted to various volunteer and interested readers, family, friends, my editors, my critics, naysayers and my supporters who helped me to survive and thrive in this arduous but splendid experience of writing a novel. Your candor, patience, focus, commitment and attention to detail have made this book more than it otherwise would have been. My gratitude and my love are my gifts to all of you. Special thanks to my agent, Maureen Manning, and my publisher, Bruce Moran, for believing in me when others hesitated to do the same. A very special thanks to Carol Gaskin for sharing her critical eye, editorial scalpel and genuine encouragement.

Gino Brogdon

Chapter 1

It was a forgettable, rainy Tuesday morning in Walker City. I barely got one foot out of my sixty-eight Chevy before the rookie cop started bombarding me with information. This week's murder happened in the city's biggest eyesore, Butter Village.

"Sir, we got a hot one. An apparent 187 domestic. We got a call around 0500 that someone heard screaming and shots fired. When we got here, the killer had fled and we secured the scene and kept the nosey neighbors away."

"Good work," I grunted.

Crime scene tape looked like Christmas ribbon as it was draped around the trees and bushes that lined the front of this row of twelve apartments. Genuinely concerned residents and hopeless voyeurs tested the tape like teens waiting for rock concert admission. This government subsidized project was called Butter Village largely because its blonde brick veneer made it look like a giant stick of butter. Residents and others also called it Butter Village because the welfare reps passed out government cheese and butter at the village entryway. This mammoth stretched ten square, small town blocks. It stood out like a sore thumb in the declining west side's wood frame Victorians and cubby hole red brick bungalows.

I knew Butter Village very well because I had solved a number of murders that either happened there or the killers were found hiding there. It was the birth mother for some of Walker City's most worrisome, illiterate, fatherless young criminals. Abject poverty, hopelessness and desperation mixed to ferment this place into a criminal hotbed. Another murder here was no surprise.

The crisp-shirted rookie talked a mile a minute as he attempted to keep up with me on my fast-paced walk to the front door of the apartment. His uniform was quickly getting soaked but this didn't deter his rapid fire report.

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He was more out of breath than I was as we reached the stoop of the crime scene. I stopped to give him a chance to catch his breath.

Seated on the stoop were a few cops surrounding a young man who was sweaty, tired and staring into space. I didn't stop to talk with him because I wanted to give him time to calm down before he confessed to killing his girlfriend.

"Rookie, where's the body?"

None of the young cops had earned the right to be called by name. So I just randomly picked one or another out of the group to get the information that I needed.

"Sir, she's in the second bedroom on your left."

The pestering rookie was on my heels like a Chihuahua with separation anxiety. I almost could feel him breathing on the back of my neck. I stopped suddenly before entering the bedroom just to see if the young buck would bump into my back in his desperate effort to stay close. He did.

I turned and gave him my best what-the-hell-are-you-doing look. The eager beaver took an embarrassed step back and stiffened his posture.

"I'm sorry, sir. I just wanted to make sure that I gave you what you needed to figure this whole thing out."

"Give me some space, rookie."

"Yes, sir." He stepped back again.

"OK. What's her name?"

"We confirmed that she is Karen Imani Forge. The plates on the souped-up Buick in the driveway are registered to her. The landlord also confirmed that the apartment itself is leased to Ms. Forge."

"What else you got?"

"Well, she's the mother of two kids and apparently was living here with her live-in boyfriend."

"Where are the kids?"

"We put them in a squad car so they could keep warm and not have to see their Mom carried out."

"What's his name?"

"Sir, we don't have his name yet. He sounds like one of those live-in types. He's on the stoop and is pretty stoic right now."

"Well, don't let him out of your sight. I will get to him in a minute. Have the dust boys and the other crime scene folks gone over the bedroom where the body is?"

"Yes, sir."

"OK. You got a pair of those booties for my shoes and some gloves?"

"Yes, sir. Here they are."

I covered my Stacy Adamses with the pea green surgical booties and put on my rubber gloves so I could view the crime scene. The young rookie returned to the stoop.

Each of the apartments had identical floor plans. Two matchbox sized bedrooms and one uncomfortably small bathroom were situated in tandem between the postage stamp sized living room and galley kitchen. The hallway that ran the right side length of the apartment looked like a paneled tunnel. The front door opened into the hallway.

As I stepped into the hallway, the crime scene photographer and the print man were collecting evidence in the living room.

"You guys done in there?" I pointed toward the second bedroom.

"Yeah, we got all of the shots that we needed and dusted everything to pick up any available prints."

"Is it safe for me to take a look around?"

"Sure thing, Salvato," my favorite print man, Jason, assured me.

Only one of four single bulbs struggled overhead to light the hallway. The rest had been burnt out or broken off. With the sparse light from the kitchen at the end of the hallway, I could barely see the bedrooms on the left. The first was a small bedroom and was missing its door. In full view, the bunk beds inside were covered with children's clothing, covers and stuffed animals. The room was dark except for a weak side lamp at the foot of the stacked beds. A narrow, outdated bathroom separated the first from the second bedroom. It too was dark and smelled like it could use a good cleaning. I glanced inside and moved on to the second bedroom, which was the only room that still had a door. I noticed the padlock hardware on the outside. The door itself was dirty and speckled with gouges and deep indentations from being hit with a fist or another blunt object.

I slowly opened the door. The all-too-familiar smell of death greeted me. This was the smell of the slow rot that precedes rigor mortis. Just as the

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spirit is released from the body at death, so are the bodily containments. I could smell her last urine. These aromas didn't mix well with the taste of last night's stogies and bourbon conspiring inside my mouth. The past twenty plus years got me used to the putrid scent that confirmed the ultimate crime. This stench was a good sign. It meant that I was near the body and one step closer to solving the puzzle.

I learned to take a big whiff of the despair and get to the business of tracking down the killer.

As I stepped into the room, I took off my wet fedora and raincoat and placed them on the plastic hanger on the back of the door. My hands were beginning to sweat in the rubber gloves. The ten by twelve room was dimly lit by the small lamp on the night stand. The cheap wood-paneled walls were mostly bare except for a smattering of nail holes and nail heads. The three-bladed ceiling fan squeaked and wobbled as it revolved slowly above me. The centrifugal swoosh created a strange rhythm in the room. The sway of the fan moved the air just enough to make the awful smell tolerable.

Each of my footsteps crunched as I walked on the broken mirror glass that covered the floor. The caramel shaggy carpet was crowded with the stuff that most people leave on the floor until unexpected company forces them to clean up. Men's and women's clothes, shoes, dishes, papers and other mess created an obstacle course between me and the bed. The clutter was clearly the product of two adults.

A pressboard, six drawer dresser was on the west wall. On the east wall a tall, faux antique cherry wood armoire stood guard. The most compelling thing in the room was the picture of this lady and two little girls at her side. These were clearly her girls. They all had the same eyes. The black and white photo was stuffed into a cheap metal frame and was proudly placed on the middle of the dresser and next to a wrinkled half book of food stamps. Broken mirror glass was strewn all over the dresser top. A distinct bare spot in the glass showed where the crime scene guys gather a handful of fragments for prints and blood. The lady and the girls in the picture looked so happy. The lady smiled as if that day was the best in her life. Today she was lying dead on the bed.

The centerpiece of the bedroom was the wrought iron, queen-sized bed directly in front of me. It reminded me of my first apartment bedroom when I was married. Rena and I didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw

it out of. We had a bed that we bought for two hundred dollars. The furniture salesman was so desperate to get rid of his inventory that he threw in a cheap dinette set. We had our new furniture and plenty of new love, which we thought would feed us in the years to come. Unfortunately, our bed got stale and the love ran out. Hunger for fulfillment and just being a bad match forced us to go our separate ways.

The wall at the head of the bed was decorated with mirrored panels that were strategically placed to allow lovers to be the stars of their own porno scene. While many people conspire with mirrors to lie to themselves, neither the mirrors nor I dared to tell a lie at this moment. I saw a full view of myself. These mirrors reminded me that I was middle-aged. There was just enough light reflecting from the mirrors to show that my hairline was receding and that my vices were destroying my once athletic physique. The bags around my eyes were beginning to tell secret stories of my late nights of too much brown liquor, too many stogies and loose women. The challenges of fighting crime in this dying city were weighing me down in some other apparent ways. Though I had a linebacker's stiff back when I started chasing the bad guys, my slumped over posture made my suit hang like Abe Vigoda's in the Godfather movie. My belt buckle turned more toward the floor this year than it did in years past. Fortunately, my navy blue suit was large enough to camouflage the extra twenty-five pounds on my six-foot frame. These truths were the reason that my apartment didn't have any mirrors.

Having swallowed enough truth about me, I turned my focus to the victim.

The lean brown woman was lying there, naked. I wasn't embarrassed by her complete nudity. I figured that it had a place in the story of her death. In another setting, she could have been a runway model. Her athletic figure and pretty face surely gave her options that were brighter than scraping to get by on food stamps and later dying in a government project at such a young age. I got close enough to stand at her feet. The peacock patterns painted on her toenails were chipped and worn. They showed her penchant for the Vietnamese nail shops on the strip in this area. The noticeable calluses on her heels and the balls of her feet put pedicures low on her list of priorities.

I walked to the side of the bed to get a closer look. She was an attractive

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woman. However, her face struggled to hide an old black eye. There was a healed scar on the right lower lip. The premature wrinkles between her eyebrows were proof that she spent more time crying than laughing.

The lady's eyes were wide open as if she had just received the surprise of her life. They were fixed and sad. The whites were starting to brown. She had cried off most of her mascara. The parentheses around her full lips made this woman look ten years beyond her age. Her mouth was wide open partially because her tongue was beginning to swell. The butter colored teeth, dark lips and dried complexion indicated that she was a heavy smoker. The cigarette butts spilling over the sides of the ashtrays on both night stands showed that she shared this vice and the bedroom with someone else.

The position of the body at a murder scene often begins the story of the manner of killing. This woman's awkwardly twisted body posed more questions than answers. She was lying partially on her back with her arms strewn to one side. Her arms did not conceal the gunshot wound between her small breasts. The stipple gunpowder pattern that was burned around the pen-sized hole between her breasts was proof that the shooting was at close range. Her twisted torso leaned just enough to her left to allow me to see her back. The white mattress ticking beneath her was soaked with blood paste. I nudged her slightly to the left and used the flip light on my key ring to get a closer look at her back.

The exit wound was midway down her back and just to the right of her spine. The wound itself was caked with a drying clot that was the size of a fifty cents piece. Since there was no hole in the mattress near the wound, I looked around for the slug's resting place. Sure enough the cheap faux wood paneling had a hole in it just above the headboard. I dug the slug out of the wall with my pocketknife and placed it in an evidence bag. Although this woman lay on her back when we found her, she was shot while standing up. The murder weapon was nowhere to be found. Since there were no signs of forced entry, it was clear that whoever killed her had to have known her.

Despite the sirens and the rumbling sound of police directing crowds and traffic outside, there was an eerie peace in the bedroom. Every time that I have been alone with a freshly dead body, I've wondered about the underlying story. My mind was racing as to why she had to die—and who killed her.

I needed to talk with the killer. As I walked through the small living room, I noticed that there was very little out of place. No signs of struggle. No evidence of apparent distress either before or after the murder. The killer either lived here or spent lots of time in this apartment. The rookies and the suspect were still waiting for me on the stoop.

The whine of my opening the rusty screen door didn't cause this kid to raise his head. He stared into space as if he was sitting there alone. I needed to break the spell. I motioned to the rookies to give the kid some space. As I took a position at the last of the four stoop steps, I noticed the obvious blood spatter on the chest of his dirty wife-beater. His hands, arms and the front of his boxers that weren't covered by his baggy shorts were also soaked with blood. He was covered with sweat, blood and apparent regret. The smeared blood on him was likely hers. I figured that he tried to hold her in his lap after he shot her. Once he realized that she was dying, he must have panicked and hauled ass.

I stood there for a moment and let silence do its magic. He just sat there staring into the cracked concrete steps.

"Guys, where did you find him?"

An anxious threesome of rookies were watching the suspect like tenth graders witnessing their first fetal pig dissection. This was certainly their first murder visit.

"Back by the dumpsters, sir" one of the Musketeers spoke up.

"What the hell was he doing back there?"

"Sir, he was trying to take his clothes off. We grabbed him and brought him up here for you to get a look at him."

One of the three rookies was bold enough to do all of the talking. He was wiry with big ears and build and chin like a featherweight boxer. His uniform was dripping wet and a little too big. He looked a little goofy wearing the beat cop cap from the old days. The vocal rookie stepped forward when he answered my questions. Although I didn't let on as such, this impressed me. He wasn't cocky but self-assured. That kind of confidence would guarantee him a successful future in police work.

"OK, have you *ladies* secured the scene?"

Similar to jarhead hazing, Walker City cops had to cross burning sands to make it on the force. It was a time-tested tradition on the police force that

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rookies had to pass through a gauntlet of maltreatment before they could become good cops. I weathered that same storm and they would have to if they wanted to become good cops on my watch. They had to suffer all kinds of indignities, including challenges to their masculinity. Most took it all in stride. The quietest of the rookie trio obviously spent lots of time in the police weight room. His over-muscled body stiffened every time I referred to him or to the group as "ladies." Being in charge was so much fun at times.

My soon-to-be favorite rookie again answered for the group.

"Sir, the scene has been secured. There are no eyewitnesses at this time. The old man next door came out on the porch as we arrived and confirmed that he was the one who dialed 911 when he heard the screaming and the shots fired."

"Did you get a statement from him?"

"The suspect or the old man?"

I didn't respond but looked up. When I pulled my glasses to the end of my nose and cut my eyes at him, the rookie knew that I was calling him an idiot without saying a word.

"Sir, we got a short statement from the old man."

"I need you to get it done, pronto. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

I hardly ever looked at newbies when questioning them. They hadn't yet earned my respect. They needed proper training and conditioning to do this messy, thankless job, especially dealing with stiff.

I turned my focus on the likely killer. His bare feet were scraped as if he had been running. His nappy hair was unkempt, matted with lint and soaked in rain water and sweat. His sinewy forearms were raw with what appeared to be fingernail scratches. His ears and cheeks bore the same superficial wounds. The young man breathed deeply like a sprinter after breaking the tape. There was more than adrenalin running in his veins. Since he had had plenty time to get some air, I positioned myself in front of him so he could see my eyes.

It was near six thirty in the morning and the sun was barely peeking over the east horizon. I shined my flashlight just past his face but close enough to cause him to squint. His pupils were dime-sized. He was still staring into the steps.

"All right, what happened here?" I posed the question as if he had no choice but to answer my questions. I knew that he had no idea of who Miranda was or what it meant. My best chance to get the crucial information was before the suspect got all lawyered up.

The young man didn't lift his head.

"Look, I need to know what went on in here. We got a dead girl with a fresh gunshot wound and you got her blood all over you. So tell me what happened."

Still no response.

"Either you tell me what happened or I am gonna figure it out for myself. If I figure it out, it ain't gonna be good for you. Either way, I *am* gonna figure it out. If you don't fill in the blanks for me, then I'm gonna find a way to fill them in. Believe me, you don't want me filling in the blanks."

The young man started shaking his head from side to side. I couldn't tell whether he was saying no or just trying to shake out the cobwebs likely growing inside his confused mind.

"So make it easy on yourself and tell me what went down here."

From many past experiences, I knew that one way to get the suspect to talk is to make him defend himself. Since I really shouldn't have been asking him direct questions, I decided to talk around him. This would keep me out of trouble with a judge for sidestepping technicalities. Most folks can't remain silent while people are accusing them of wrongdoing.

I turned to the lead rookie. I didn't really care what he thought about my questions, but I needed to create a conversation about the murder that would get the killer's attention.

"Well, new nuts, seems to me that we got our killer right here. He's got blood all over him and she is dead as a damn doornail. All we have to do now is find the gun."

I paused and shook my head. The young man lifted his head slightly when I spoke as if the crime had already been solved. He was watching me. I was putting on a show.

"I mean, don't you agree, rookie?"

"Yes, sir! I certainly concur with your conclusion, sir."

Knowing that the young man was listening and watching, I continued. "Seems to me that this is an open and shut deal. He shot her because she

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probably wouldn't fuck him or some silly ass excuse like that. This one's a lifer for sure. He shoots her while she's fighting for her life. Open and shut. You guys should canvass this property and find the murder weapon. After that, we need to book this guy and get him ready for a good long life with the sodomites."

Then I turned back to the suspect.

"Was she your wife or your girlfriend?"

I let the question sink in. I pulled out the left over stogie from last night and lit the ragged butt. His body tensed as if he was trying not to burst. He raised his head enough for me to see his full face. The scratches and the stippling of the blood made his face a Dali mosaic. The kid looked at me pitifully as if he wanted to scream his innocence. I wasn't buying it.

"This is a damn shame," I continued. "You killed her and tried to run. It takes a coward to do what you did. A real man would never kill his woman."

I turned my back and shook my head so that he could see my disgust.

"I didn't kill her. I mean, I didn't mean to kill her." His affect was flat and monotone but his bottom lip was beginning to shake.

"So if you didn't mean to kill her, why did you shoot her?" My tone implied that the answer was obvious, even though it wasn't.

The young man paused a little longer than expected.

"It was an accident. I didn't mean to shoot her." There was more life in his voice. I could hear the defensiveness and the desperation. I wasn't gonna let him off the hook just yet.

"Sure you didn't." I taunted him smugly. "The way I see it, you're looking at a life sentence for killing your girlfriend. Did you rape her too?"

The young man curled over and began sobbing. I turned to him and listened closely. I got close enough to grab him because I wanted to make sure that he couldn't run.

"Oh God! Oooh God. I didn't mean to...I didn't mean to..." He was crying and saying something, but the sorrow mixed with a mouthful of spit made it impossible for us to understand his slobbery mumblings.

"Guys, let's give him time to get himself together."

As the kid moved closer to admitting this killing, the young cops

crowded him like a pack of jackals waiting for the dying water buffalo to stop kicking.

"Did you *ladies* find any witnesses? Did anyone see what happened here?"

"No one other than the old man and the two little girls that we found in the closet, sir," the eager, clean-shaven neophyte sharply responded. The other rookies watched and waited for their turn to impress me.

"Which car are they in?"

The rookie pointed to the second black and white parked in the driveway. It was still running, apparently to keep the girls warm on this rainy October night. I walked to the patrol car to see about them. Through the veil of nature's teardrops on the door glass, the girls looked at me. The overhead lamp inside the car gave just enough light for me to see that they were wet and frightened. These were the same little girls from the family photo on the dresser in the bedroom. The two little brown angels sat holding each other tightly. I recognized their look from my own childhood. I called one of the rookies over to tend to the little girls.

"Get a blanket from the trunk and put them in the back of my car. Here are my keys. Start it up so they can stay warm. They don't need to be treated like criminals. Now!"

The young rookie gathered the girls up in the blanket and carried them to my sixty-eight Chevy.

"What's your name, rookie?"

"Carl Coleman, sir!" He stiffened and stood wide-legged with his hands clasped behind his back. This was a classic response whenever a new cop responded to questions from superiors. Coleman could have been a stand-in for the dark-haired half of the Adam 12 duo from the corny but popular sixties police series. Coleman reminded me of myself nearly twenty years ago. Everything about me then communicated that I was ready for anything. My zeal to protect, serve and save the innocent from the guilty ran white hot. Years of wading in the cesspool of life's underbelly have thrown warm water on the embers.

"Good job with this one, Coleman."

Once the girls were warm and safe in the back of my car, the newbies took Derick Turner into custody for the murder of his girlfriend.

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On the way back to the station, I kept looking in my rear view mirror. They were afraid. Mommy was lying dead back at their home while Daddy was led away in shackles like a captured cheetah. The eldest of the two girls locked eyes with me every time I looked at her. Her eyes searched mine for answers. Her eyes yearned for my protection. Those eyes reminded me of my little boy. If eyes are truly the mirror to the soul, the little girls' souls must have been drenched in fear and sorrow. They were so quiet, so pensive. Both dared not release hold of her sister. Neither had any idea that life would certainly get worse before it got better.

Chapter 2

Life has a way of making a man mean and cynical. A nasty divorce and near financial ruin put the finishing touches on my faith in people generally. The little girls reminded me of little Frankie. I have missed my little boy since life took him away from me. At the least opportune times, thoughts of my baby boy invade my mind. I just didn't have enough time with him.

Assholes live forever but fate manages to take away the purest of the pure. I will never understand life's arbitrariness. Over the past few years, I can't remember exactly who I'm supposed to blame for what happened to my boy. He died because we all failed him, especially me.

At this point in my life I would be happy if the dreams would just stop. My shrink use to call them "intrusive thoughts" because I was awake when they would happen. I just call them bad daydreams. My Dad would say that you gotta fight against these forces. I surrendered years ago.

I used to be a good-looking guy before a life of too many cigars, hoagies, cheap whores and brown liquor got the best of me. Inside I still feel like the stud I once was. When I was in my twenties, I could lay it down on the ladies with the best of them. Since gravity started calling the shots and my physique took on a mind of its own, my bare chest fails to shock the females the way I once could.

I grew a Van Dyke at the suggestion of a little Asian number I met in a local bar a couple years ago. After three double scotches, I was ripe to hear whatever she decided to say when we first met. "Suni, pronounced like a bright day," is how she introduced herself. She always avoided telling me her last name. This introduction alone should have triggered my whore alarm. I didn't care. I needed a warm body, a connection even if it was superficial and for only a couple hours. My alcoholic libido drowned out any other distractions, including the don't-do-it alarm.

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Although she was Korean, I called her my little China doll. She had sultry eyes and a skinny little figure. All I could think about was having her little soft legs wrapped around me. Her voice was deeper than it should have been because she smoked like a chimney. My China doll liked Lucky Strikes, unfiltered and unprotected. She also would drink me under the table. Suni was the perfect distraction for that time in my life.

Suni knew just how to handle a naked, middle-aged man who was a couple sheets to the wind. I wasn't sure whether she learned these skills in some roadside Geisha school or whether she was born with the instinct to do what it takes. Suni was my stress relief. After a long day, I'd head to her place and fuck her lights out. At least she made me think that I did. More than her bedroom gymnastics, I just remember her smell.

With her oriental accent, she would whisper my name and send my moon and stars into orbit. She's responsible for me shaving my head. Suni said it was sexy. That was after I paid her two hundred dollars for the carnal connection. Thanks to a couple of blue diamonds, she wasn't disappointed. Deep inside I think we both knew where reality ended and the bullshit began. That's why she took the money and left. Damn. If she wasn't an anorexic, narcissistic, chain-smoking hooker with a modest cocaine habit, Suni might have been the next Mrs. Salvato. Time, my own insecurity, and fate saved me from that dark fantasy. Suni and her growing number of colleagues were a symptom of the downward spiral of life in Walker City.

The county seat of Thornton County, Ohio, Walker City was an ethnic melting pot of first order. Italians, Poles, Czechs, Germans, Irish and every hue of being found home in this faceless American City. Ethnic factions turned into neighborhoods. Restaurants, shops, vendors and smells defined the ethnic areas. Everyone was proud to be who they were, but not to the exclusion of other people. My folks were no different. They took great pride in their heritage while blending into the fabric of this solid, Midwestern city.

Walker City was also the center of commerce for twenty-six square miles. With its YMCA, Elks Clubs, string of bars, two city parks and Mosquito Lake, Walker City was the epitome of Middle America. Row upon row of wood frame two-story houses lined the flat concrete streets like a monopoly board. The local men wore t-shirts with the name of a local sponsor on the front in single colors. Often these shirts were part of the uniform worn in the summer softball league. Jeans or corduroys donned

with a pair of worn no-name tennis shoes or work boots completed the daily attire. This same garb was the favorite at restaurants, church, park outings and work.

The summertime entertainment in Walker City is fast-pitch softball at Packard Park. In summer, the city is truly alive. All of the concession areas in the park are full of families and friends cooking, eating and talking plenty of shit. Work, the games, an occasional cook-out or dinner at the Brown Derby occupied the time of most folks. The people are conservative, blue collar folk who lived in black and white, and rarely in the gray. There was a thick solid line between right and wrong. Most believed that the guilty should be punished.

With its traditional town square, surrounding businesses, majestic courthouse and quiet park nearby, Walker City was the place to raise a family. The local steel mills were hiring all comers with little or no experience. Everyone was making money and prosperity was had by all. Such a rich economy made way for the influx of the criminal element and others seeking to cash in on the small town boom.

Walker City had seen its share of changes over the last two decades. For years, the folks in Walker City enjoyed and participated in the growth and prosperity of the steel industry. Strong unions and plenty of work made Walker City the flagship city of the steel belt. Most Walkerites believed a man should work for his fortune and never cheat, lie, steal or hurt other folks to get ahead. Those same home grown, middle-American people made allowances for their leaders and others whose value to the city's survival greatly outweighed the impact of their misconduct. As a result, political corruption and police misconduct flourished amid the down turning steel economy.

Derick Turner's murder of his girlfriend was tragic but, unfortunately, not rare for Walker City. Ten years or more ago crime was low in Walker City because petty criminals were dealt with harshly. Bad guys did the time for doing the crime. If the judge didn't do his job, two things happened. First, he was voted out of office. Second, concerned citizens took justice into their own hands. Often they were waiting for the offender when he made bail. Vigilantism was never out of the question when the community didn't like the judicial results. It was known around the Midwest that a criminal facing trial in Thornton County made two mistakes. First, committing a

crime, and second, committing a crime in Thornton County. The conviction rate in Thornton County was over ninety-seven percent.

Despite this high conviction rate, safety and respect for persons left Walker City when the steel mills skipped town. High, non-negotiable salaries of unionized workers and the technology explosion made many steelworker jobs obsolete. The steel mills fled south for cheaper, non-unionized labor. Waning hope and high school football were all that the local folks had left.

As a high school footballer, I harbored the same dreams as most of my classmates. I looked forward to either playing linebacker for Woody Hayes or getting a foreman's job at Republic Steel. Neither came true. My six foot frame was simply too small to run with the big college hulks and most of the foreman's jobs were gone by graduation. Unfortunately for me, I thought that I didn't have to study much because I was captain of the football team. My predicament mirrored that of most of my classmates.

Most young men in Walker City who didn't leave for college sports stayed and took a wife, stable job and a place on a summer softball team. Those who were bright, ambitious and hungry sought the sheriff's office. Higher pay, better benefits and more prestige made the lure more attractive than coming with us at the Walker County PD.

In the eyes of many, the sheriff's department was higher on the law enforcement food chain. They protected the judges, served arrest warrants and subpoenas and were generally darlings of the local media. Many folks believed that the Walker City police consisted of the rejects from the Sheriff's office. This couldn't have been further from the truth. Even though the sheriffs made a little more money, most of them grew tired of handling parades, school traffic and executive protection. Those who wanted to be real cops jumped at the chance to work with the Walker City Blues.

Timing was such that I managed to sneak through an associate's degree program in criminal justice and land a job as a street beat cop in the Walker City Blues. I cut my cop teeth on breaking up street fights, writing tickets and wrestling an abusive husband to the ground while his black-eyed victim-wife dug her nails into my back. My superiors gave me the work that other folks didn't want to do. My list of undesired tasks included pulling derelicts out of nude bars, answering tenant complaints in the Brick City and representing the department at local high school graduations for kids with a

bleak future. I did it all and never complained. I gained the reputation of being the guy who never said no to anything. I have been street tough but wise enough to stay alive.

Although seven rookies started together, only two of us survived the gauntlet of police work. Three took bribes in the first six months. One was caught drunk on the job the ninth month and the other just quit. Perdexter "Dex" Eaves and I were the survivors. Dex was a purist when it came to police work. He never cut corners and was my conscience when I wanted to get the bad guy at any cost. Dex was the first to insist on Miranda rights before an arrest or warrants before kicking in doors. His cautious approach cost Dex his life. Unfortunately, he hesitated one night and tried to talk some teenaged punk into dropping his hand cannon. I was behind the kid with my Glock aimed at his head. Dex knew that I would not hesitate to kill the young punk. I eased my trigger because I wanted to give Dex's soft touch a chance. Dex's reasoning failed and the punk discharged his hand cannon into Dex's chest. He killed my partner of five years and forced me to blow his face into his lap.

After Dex was killed, I decided that I would never again allow the bad guy to get the upper hand on me. I also decided that I would go it alone because I could not survive losing another partner.

From as far back as I could remember, Thornton County was a hotbed for hardcore politics and corruption. The people elected judges and politicians who shared their tough-on-crime philosophy. They forgave a dirty cop who busted the bad guys and turned their heads from a mayor or judge who handed out tough sentences.

A cop in Walker City had little to aspire for. Advancement happened only in limited cases and if the stars and moon were aligned right, one might even wear the white Captain's shirt. Supervisory jobs came along only where someone died, someone quit or someone got busted for illegal conduct. When an opening came, politics kicked in heavy. If the chief, assistant chief, captain, certain lieutenants and the mayor wanted you to move up, then you did. If these many forces weren't in your corner, you might as well consider yourself in a dead end job. This undoubtedly left many with low morale and little inspiration to protect and serve.

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I stayed out of the political fray in my department. I made sergeant, then detective on my own merit. I didn't kiss anybody's ass more than I had to. I didn't take unnecessary risks. I kept my dirt in the dark and my chin low. I also took out insurance every chance that I got. Whenever I could take a snapshot of a captain's car in front of a whorehouse, or accidentally on purpose tap into the chief's call to his mistress, good sense dictated that I keep a copy just in case. My good sense and knack for keeping my eyes open and mouth shut made me a detective for thirteen years. These tools also kept me alive.

Chapter 3

Except for having to complete the paperwork from last night's domestic murder, it was an ordinarily chaotic Wednesday afternoon. I returned from my usual late chicken Philly lunch to a desk that had piles of papers, notes and sticky pads in nearly every conceivable place. An old cup of java rested on the top right corner of the desk much like a crown on a head full of hair. The butt of my second stogie was beginning to ferment in the corner of my coffee cup. The smells of burps from last night's bourbon punished me for breaking the rules and for working too damn hard. Even though the department rules prohibited smoking in the building, I often lit a stogie at my desk after everyone went home. Once I released the little girls to state custody last night, I needed two cigars and a bottomless bourbon glass to flush out my mind. I knew firsthand the nightmarish world of foster care that they had entered. Having spent the bulk of my teen years being passed from foster family to foster family, I understood that the abuse and neglect were likely in their future.

My world was being invaded by cases involving children and, in particular, little girls. Our sex crimes unit was working a new case involving allegations of several elementary school kids who claimed that they had married the Devil. Their stories were sprinkled with orgies, torture and consumption of human and animal flesh and feces. Understandably, some school officials were alarmed while others suspected parental foul play and sensationalism. Since a few of the kids accused the principal and a couple of counselors, the school board was thinking lawsuit right away. The kids' parents were circling their wagons too. It was a brewing mess.

This case was a hot potato around the department because two of the girls came up missing after they told their stories. Even though no one knew for sure if the girls were dead, there was plenty of suspicion and speculation to go around. This was just enough to start the brush fire of panic.

I glanced at my phone and saw the beginning of the next big chunk of my life. The note said, "Call LT. ASAP." I wasn't sure who wrote the note but I knew this call couldn't wait.

He picked up on the first ring.

"Hello, LT. This is Salvato."

"Salvato, we got a hot one. I know you've been working your ass off. However, the River Lady case and that new wife killing from last night are gonna have to go on the back burner. I gotta pull you onto this case. Two little girls have been missing and concerned neighborhood parents are going fucking nuts. They are having a news conference this afternoon to organize a search party and a town square candlelight vigil. I need to be able to say to the police commish that we are on it."

"LT, is this a murder?"

"Not yet. But I have a stinkin' suspicion that it's gonna be."

"Why does your hunch tell you it's murder?"

"Salvato, I don't really have time to explain the finer points to you about experience and hunches. Maybe one day when we don't have a fuckin' thing to do, we can sit down and talk about the finer points. But right now, I need your attention on this case."

"If it's not a murder, why pull me off the River Lady?" I decided to push back a little.

"Goddamit, Salvato! Right now I don't need a bunch of fucking questions. I need answers. I need you to tell me that you are on it."

"LT, I was just trying to..."

LT sighed so loud that I stopped mid-sentence. He knew that I rarely backed down from a challenge. He also knew that I didn't want to disappoint my mentor. Even though LT could be an overbearing ball buster, he knew this business. He also had the savvy to know when to back off. He took another calm-myself-down deep breath.

"Frank, I need to be able to count on you once again. Can I count on you?"

A long silent pause confirmed that both LT and I knew the answer to his question.

"I'm on it, LT." I replied dutifully.

"I need you to put all other shit aside. This is top priority. We can't fall on our asses on this one. If we fuck this up, you and I will be school crossing guards before you can say hallelujah."

"We will find these girls. Are we sure they are dead?"

"Hell if I know, Salvato. They have been missing for almost four days and our missing persons unit just sat on this fucking thing. Those guys don't know their keisters from a hole in the wall. They just sat on it!"

I could hear his frustration. He couldn't hide his panic. LT was a worrier by nature because administrative police work forced him to rely totally on other people. This was foreign to LT from his childhood days.

Copernicus Julius "LT" Thomas was a self-made man. The youngest of nine boys and two girls, he grew up on the outskirts of Cleveland. Even though many of the cops on the force thought that LT was short for lieutenant, LT earned his nickname as a kid hustler on the streets of Shaker Heights. While his brothers had the typical biblical, easy names, LT got his hook because the folks in his neighborhood struggled to pronounce Copernicus. Instead they just called him "L'il Thomas," which over the years morphed into LT.

LT was a juvenile street shark who made money on any available hustle. His wiry build and striking good looks made him perfect to separate any fool from his money. Cards, shells, dice and numbers were his play things. And he was really good at it. He had a handful of brushes with juvenile judges but received slaps on the wrist numerous times. When LT graduated to muscle jobs just before his eighteenth birthday, he ended up before the circuit judge. The judge was merciful in telling LT that he could either get out of Cleveland tonight and permanently or go to jail for five years. LT chose to move to the slower life in Walker City and become a new man. By the skin of his teeth, LT landed a job with the Walker City police and worked his way up through the ranks. With an earned reputation for being a straight laced dictator, LT headed up the department's biggest cases for thirty years. I had the great fortune to study at his feet.

"We should have been notified of this as soon as someone made the connection."

"What connection, LT?"

"The one between these missing little girls and the school where kids were making the complaints about the Devil."

"Let me look into this and I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Frank."

Cops are often very territorial in police work. Glory hogs would hold crucial information so they could be the heroes. TV coverage, a public commendation and a discretionary bonus motivated the missing person officers to keep this information as long as possible. The daily barrage of calls from parents, children's rights groups and the media let those fools know that they were well over their heads. Now that the proverbial shit has hit the fan, they pass it off to us. The public thinks that we, as a department, simply sat on this case. If these girls end up dead, heads were surely gonna roll.

"Although I have plenty of other shit to pray over, I will make this top priority. You can count on me."

"Salvato, you're the best that I have. I need your best." He sounded relieved and a little desperate to save himself from fumbling the ball in the big game. LT had gotten burned on a young cop who he sent to deal with a domestic disturbance. LT should have sent a more experienced cop but he thought it was a simple matter. A no brainer. The husband fought the young cop while the wife planted garden shears in the back of his neck. LT took a long time to recover from that. He was really good at blaming himself for things that were outside of his control.

I appreciated his accolades on this new case even if he laid them on me to motivate me to jump into this case with both feet. It worked.

"You got it, LT."

This case could not have come at a worse time. I had the new girlfriend killing and was right in the middle of another new case involving a young woman found bound, gagged and floating in the Mahoning River. I was sure that her parents were as distressed as the parents of the missing little girls. The girl was barely eighteen and had been recognized as salutatorian of Walker City High just weeks before her disappearance. The way that she was bound and drowned confirmed that her killer was a sadist. A Mahoning River tight liner hooked onto something heavier than a carp but more moveable than a Volkswagen. His fifty pound test line held up as he carefully reeled her in to shore. When the water rescue squad pulled her from the water, her body was badly decomposed. Her tormentor had tied her hands to her feet in a complex knot at the base of her back. He or they

then tossed her to a watery death. Fortunately for this girl, and according to the medical examiner, it was very likely that she was already dead by the time the sadistic bastards decided to drown her. The panties that were nearly touching her epiglottis were so soaked with blood and her stomach and lung oozing that they were useless for prints. There was nothing near or on the body that could have held a print. The water submersion made any semen or other body fluids undetectable. I hated leaving this one on the back burner.

My laundry list of to dos was a mile long. I needed to find and interview the girl's parents, her teachers and talk to the homeless folks who lived along the Mahoning. Surely they saw something connected with this case. I needed to gather whatever evidence was available at her school. The crime scene guys were blowing up my phone for directions and an opportunity to share their preliminary findings. But now LT was pointing me in a new direction, the River Lady case and the girlfriend killing case were headed for stale. Unfortunately for the family of Vickie Romano, her case was going to the back burner. While the interested family members sought justice and closure in the River Lady case, the little girls' case made the most noise. Walker City youth organizations and concerned citizens ad hoc groups were up in arms. The squeaky wheel gets the grease so little Jennifer and Miriam instantly became the top priority.

While I was on the phone with LT, the cute little redbone from filing nudged me and then put the manila folder on my desk. I sure wished that I was her type. Her smile seemed to turn on the lights in the room. She had an amazing head of thick, sandy hair. Such incredible skin. She always looked great and smelled even better. Upon first seeing Connie Redmond, I started working on the courage to ask her to have dinner with me.

"Uh, excuse me, LT. Thanks, Ms. Redmond."

I nearly had forgotten that I was on the phone with LT. She wiggled while she walked away from me. Then she stopped and slew me with a seductive glance over her left shoulder. I was suddenly unarmed but not defeated.

"Uh, Ms. Redmond. Uh, would you ever consider having dinner with this tired old soldier?" I projected my voice down the aisle way so she would notice my effort.

She stopped, pivoted and put her knuckles on her curvy, athletic hips.

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Standing with her black pumps slightly pigeon-toed and just beyond shoulder width apart, Connie smiled with a hint of surprise.

"Now, Detective. Why would I want to share an expensive dinner with someone who works all the time?"

"Because I need a break and you are the break that I need. So what do you say?"

"I say...," she looked up and to the left. "I will think about it, OK?"

That was good enough for me. The many witness interviews and confidential informant deals made me know that *maybe* is always an acceptable answer. She smiled and turned to walk away. The world of possibilities just became more likely. This was the beginning of something solid, something very necessary.

The investigative file was a shell of what I needed to find these girls. I was surprised that the file was less than an inch thick. A great deal more could have been done during these four days that the girls had been missing. Ordinarily, our department would have put a couple forensic investigators on this case after two days missing. I expected statements from their teachers, tutors, friends and parents. There should have been a list of registered child molesters within a five mile radius as well as a list of all convicted felons in the area. I hoped that the file would include any suspicious characters at or near the school. Instead the file consisted of a couple of phone message slips, school photos of the girls and handwritten notes from an unknown interviewer regarding superficial conversations with the parents.

The girls' photos were from the school kindergarten files. Jennifer had dark brown hair while Miriam was a blonde. Their innocent smiles, crooked or missing teeth and freckles highlighted their innocence. Miriam wore a corduroy dress with a long sleeve cotton blouse. Jennifer had a pink, striped shirt over a blue jean skirt. There was no detectable sadness or trouble on their faces.

LT sent a rookie forensic interviewer out to talk with Miriam's and Jennifer's parents. I wasn't impressed with the attention to detail as reflected in the interviewer's notes that were the main items in the file. These notes showed that these girls were first graders at Roosevelt Elementary School. They were obedient kids and new Brownies. The parents described them as "two peas in a pod." Jennifer's folks described them as best friends. The

notes indicated that their favorite place to be after school was the Jackson Center. It was the last place that they were seen together. One note described Miriam's parents as "guarded" and "acting like they were suspects" during the half-hour long interview. According to the interviewer, Miriam's Mom said very little and refused to answer questions regarding difficulties in the home. Miriam's Dad "said a prayer" before he reportedly professed his innocence and started demanding that the killers be found. "Rudeness and profanity" were written and underlined near notes about Jennifer's Mom and Dad. The note, "No tears from Mom" bothered me. Jennifer's Dad was described as "stoic." Undoubtedly it was a weird interview. I needed to see for myself so I got on the horn and arranged first for Jennifer's parents to return to the station for a good talk.

I had a brief but tense phone conversation with Jennifer's Dad to arrange a meeting at the station. Within an hour of my call, Jennifer's parents, Bob and Carol Perkins, arrived at the station with their private attorney by their side. I had them seated in the large interrogation room. For a few minutes I watched them from behind the one way mirror to get a feel for the way that the Mom and Dad were relating to each other.

"Hello folks, I'm Frank Salvato and I am taking over the effort to find your daughters." I stuck out my hand to Bob.

Bob looked at my hand as if I had just pulled it out of a monkey's ass. The lawyer reached across him and shook my hand in his place. Carol stared into space. Her heavy mascara, chalky complexion and disheveled clothing let me know that she hadn't slept a wink. Bob was freshly shaven, hair greased back and smelled like Aqua-Velva ran in his veins. He looked as ready for the world as the starched lawyer who sat between the parents.

"Hello, Detective. I'm counsel for these good folks. My name is Harvey Bluemink. I'm with the law firm of Taylor, Persons and Williams. If you please, I would like to address your questions since these folks have been through enough."

I smiled disingenuously as I cleaned my nails with his business card.

"Mr. Bluemink, I don't usually conduct interviews of fact witnesses this way. While I appreciate their right to have counsel here, it concerns me that you answer my questions. These folks are not suspects."

"Having handled a number of cases where the parents trust the police only to find themselves sitting in the defendant's chair, I take a pretty

cautious approach to these interrogations. You can either do it this way or you can get subpoenas."

"Look, I am just trying to help them find their daughter. If they want me to find her they can tell me what they know. Deal?"

"Let's just see how it goes. I will answer those things that need to be answered by me."

I just turned away from the striped-suited tyrant and began asking questions of the parents.

"May I call you Bob?"

"Sure."

"Jennifer was or is six or seven, brown hair, right?"

"That's right. Seven."

"What's her date of birth?"

"July 15th."

"I have seen the pictures. She's fifty pounds or so, right?"

"Yes. That's right."

"Where did you last see her?"

"I went to work that morning and..."

"What day was that?"

"It was last Friday."

"So Jennifer has been missing for nearly *five* days?"

"Bob, was there anything about her that day that made you wonder if she was OK?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, was she troubled or wanting to be away from home for any reason? Could she have run away from home is what I am getting at?"

Bob leaned forward and put both elbows on the table. He was looking directly at me.

"Sir, we had a happy normal home. Jennifer was as normal and well-adjusted as any little girl her age."

"I wasn't insinuating that anything was wrong."

"I don't care what you might think, Detective. I loved my little girl and I

took good care of her. So by 'wrong' I just don't know what you're getting at."

Bob's knuckles were white as he clasped his hands. Carol's posture also changed. She crossed her legs away from Bob and the lawyer. She wiped little tears and tried to breathe deeply.

"Bob, I wasn't getting at anything particular. I am just trying to get the full picture. I mean no offense."

"These people left their daughter at school and she and her friend went to the Jackson Center after school program," the lawyer chimed in.

I ignored him.

"So what time were y'all supposed to pick Jennifer up from the Center?"

"I believe my wife got there around five or so."

"It was six ten," Carol corrected her husband. "Bob, you don't know the times because you never pick her up or drop her off."

"Thanks, *Caroline*," Bob quipped sarcastically at his dismissive wife.

"Don't call me that! You know that I hate that name. Don't you dare call me that. Not here or anywhere."

The tension between the two was palpable and toxic.

"Carol, what happened when you got there?" I interrupted the cold war.

She never looked at me. She kept staring into the one way mirror on the far wall. It was as if she knew that I had a camera running behind the glass wall. Carol was correct. The camera was running.

Bob pushed back away from the table.

"When you arrived to get her, what happened?"

"The director, Big Jim, looked around in the rooms and then he came out and said that he couldn't find them."

"Jim who?"

"I think his name is Wellington but everyone calls him Big Jim."

"Did he say when he last saw them?"

"No. He broke into a cold sweat and started ordering the teenagers around to look for my baby. They couldn't find her."

"What did you do?"

"I drove back to the school and along Jennifer's usual route. I didn't see

anything because it was getting dark. Then I called the police."

"What else did the director say before you left the Center?"

"He asked me to give him a few minutes before I got the police involved. He kept apologizing and tried to assure me that my daughter was somewhere on the property."

"Then what?"

"As I said a moment ago, I called the police."

I turned to Bob to test whether Carol would further marginalize him.

"Did Jennifer have any other favorite places other than school and the Jackson Center?"

"Well, she liked to go..."

"Jennifer loved to be with her best friend, Miriam." Carol took the bait. "Her father would know that only because I told him."

The lawyer and I recognized that we were witnessing the beginning of the end of a marriage. In my many cases of missing and murdered kids, the parents' marriages fail from the enormous pressure of the loss.

"Carol, was Jennifer a happy child?"

She started to cry.

"Detective, please don't talk as if my baby is dead. She *was* and *is* the happiest little angel in the world."

"I need a smoke." Bob stood up, pulled out his pack of Lucky Strikes. He tapped the sealed pack on the back of his hand and cut his eyes at his wife as he walked out of the room.

"Detective," the lawyer stood and closed his leather attaché case. "I think we have given enough for the day. We have already given members of your department descriptions of Jennifer's clothing, her picture and other information."

"I'm sorry but who else did you speak to in homicide?"

"Homicide? You are now treating this as a murder? Here, Here! For hope, huh Detective?"

Carol looked up at me and put her face in her hands. She started sobbing.

"Counsel, one last question."

"OK, shoot."

"Several of the children who attended the same school with Jennifer and Miriam claimed to be exposed to some kind of devil worship or something of the sort. Carol, do you know anything about that."

She cried harder and louder but never answered my question.

"That's enough, Detective. My clients are through for the day. You can call me if we can provide more. C'mon Carol." The lawyer hugged his grieving client with one arm and led her out of the room. I followed.

"If I have questions, I will call them and they can call you if they think a lawyer is necessary."

Bluemink snarled at me. Ruffling a lawyer's feathers was one of my simple pleasures.

When I returned to my desk, I found Coleman perched beside my desk with the posture of a new secretary.

"Sir, you may well know that I asked LT to put me on this case. He asked me to do a little digging on the center where these girls were last seen. I was trying to help you get a head start on this case."

LT was guiding this investigation despite my role as lead investigator. I always loved self-starters. I wasn't sure why he felt that he should have his hand in this one.

"All right, Coleman, what do you have for me?" I sat back and sipped my lukewarm java.

"Sir, my preliminary background investigation shows that the center where the subjects were is the center of town for kids. The Kimberly J. Jackson Center of Hope was built fifteen years ago."

My ears were perked.

"Rookie, did you just say *subjects*?" When I sat up and leaned forward the young cop looked like a deer staring into headlights.

"Sir, I meant no disrespect."

"You'd better not, rookie. These are *children* that we are helping, not '*subjects*.'"

"Yes sir. Sorry about that. May I continue, sir?"

"Please." I clasped my hands behind my head and closed my eyes to listen.

"So the kids routinely go to this center..."

"Kids? What kind of kids? Rich, poor? Babies, teens?"

"Well, mainly kids from the projects and kids whose parents work and need someone to watch them for late pick up."

"What about the center? What kind of place is it?"

"The Jackson Center serves underprivileged kids. Mostly children of color but there are some who go to the center who don't really need a helping hand."

"What does the Center provide specifically, services?"

"Arts and crafts, organized sports and school tutoring. They also feed the kids."

"The parents mentioned someone named Big Jim. What do you have on him? He's the director, right?"

"He is a longtime community activist. Supposedly he's a guy who really cares about the kids."

"Rookie, seems like we need to start with the director. Have you spoken with him?"

"No sir. LT said that I should leave the key interviewing to you."

"We will get to him later today. What else do you know about this place?"

"Most days the center is busting at the seams from around 3:30 p.m. until 9 p.m.. The Jackson Center was funded mainly by local organizations such as the Elks, the American Legion, the Masonic Temple, the Chamber of Commerce and the Urban League."

"Why is this place the main watering hole for the kids?"

"The play rooms, arts and crafts, music programs and the food."

"How many kids are there in the place at any given time?"

"Not sure exactly but the place has a capacity for about three hundred kids."

"Is this place used for anything else?"

"During school hours when the kids are away, community groups, elderly bridge clubs, ministers' groups and local traveling salesmen use the center's seven classrooms."

"I want you to talk to some of the folks who hang around the Center. See what they know about these little girls."

"Yes sir."

"That will be all. Keep pluggin' away on the background stuff."

After the young cop left my desk, I grabbed a salad and finished reviewing the case file at my desk.

Chapter 4

A couple hours passed. While I waited for confirmation of the meeting time with Miriam's parents, I returned a few calls and gathered my papers in preparation for the visit to Miriam's parents. The phone rang.

"Salvato here."

"Sir, this is Coleman. I found some of the background stuff that you told me to get."

"Damn, that was quick. What'd you find?"

"Yes, sir. They are John and Barbara Samuels. Miriam was their only child. They were high school sweethearts in Erie, Pennsylvania. Jobs drew them here to Walker City. They've lived in the Bailey area for almost ten years."

"Bailey? Damn, that's high cotton. What do Miriam's folks do to be able to afford a house in Bailey?"

"The Dad is an electrical engineer with the Lordstown auto harness plant. Mom's a housewife."

"What did you find on him? What kind of guy is he?"

"The Dad is known to be a bit of a religious fanatic. I went over to the plant and talked to a few co-workers. They describe him as a weirdo. He was a high school football legend back in PA and has bragged about it a time or two at the plant. Apparently he never really made good on his talent. A big man, six four or so. He is a deacon in his church."

"What church do they attend?"

"Second Apostolic Temple on Hall Avenue."

"That's a holy roller church, right?"

"Yeah, John Samuels is actually the assistant pastor. If I may ask, sir, how do *you* know so much about that church?"

"It's a long story but I investigated the suspicious death of a young minister there a few years ago. They have some pretty bizarre shit going on there. When you get tossed into a place as weird as that church, you never forget it."

"You have seen everything, so that church must really be wild for *you* to call it bizarre."

"They pray over buckets of water and make the water move. They do exorcisms and shit like that."

"Sir, you saw an exorcism there?"

"No. I spent a little close time with a lady who became a member there. When she claimed to have been reborn there, I told her to stay as far away from me as heavenly possible. I never liked the taste of religious Kool-aid. Most of the so-called saved folks I know are the biggest sinners and the worst of the worst hypocrites. I have enough confusion in my life than to complicate it with conversations with a God who may not even be listening. None of that reborn shit for me."

"Reborn?"

"You know. Saved. Redeemed. Born again zealot. The kind of crazy shit that I had to swallow when I was a kid."

"I guess everybody's got a story, huh sir?"

"Yeah, they do. The sooner that you understand that, the sooner you will be able to understand and connect with people. That's an important step to becoming a great cop."

The rookie was quiet.

"All right, back to the Samuels family. What do the people say about the Dad? Is he outgoing, introverted, what?"

"I got a few brief statements from neighbors. They describe him as a bit quiet but having an intimidating presence. A couple folks said he was scary looking. One lady said she could see evil in his piercing blue eyes. Weird huh?"

"Yeah, that's interesting. It's amazing how many people see evil and divinity in the same places."

"So anyway, the most informative person was the mailman who delivers their mail. His name is Fourtnouy Jenkins. He's delivered their mail since they moved to the neighborhood nine years ago. He said that although the

couple is friendly to him, most folks in the neighborhood are leery of the Samuels family."

"Did he say why?"

"Not really. When I pressed him, he clammed up. But he did say something that was weird."

"What's that?"

"He said that Miriam wandered around the neighborhood alone too much and that it wasn't a surprise that she had been abducted. Then he clammed up."

"Get him down here to the station so I can talk to him. What about the Mom?"

"Barbara Samuels is a classic housewife. Seen but rarely heard from. The mailman said that he seldomly saw her because she rarely came to the door. Most folks around town never cared to remember her first name. She attends church more than her husband does but remains in his shadow."

"OK, rookie. Did you actually go by the house?"

"Yes sir. I did. There was a car in the driveway and lights on but I didn't try to talk to them."

"Give me the address. I'm gonna go by there when I get you off this phone."

"2323 Idewilde Street. Sir, I just want to say that I really..." Click.

No time for suffering through his shameless ass-kissing.

I headed across town to the Samuels home. Often drives through certain neighborhoods are strong reminders of the deterioration of what used to be a great small town. The neighborhood around my high school was a classic example of change. As a kid I envied the people who lived near Harding High School. Their houses always looked new. Their yards were perfectly manicured. It looked like they never knew struggle or trouble. The homes were all painted white, clean and exclusive. The exodus of the steel mills changed that scene and redistributed the suffering. As I drove past my alma mater on the way to the Samuels home, I saw countless houses begging for painting or demolition. Broken down cars became yard decorations while waiting to die on the once perfect grass. Except for the shell of the once magnificent homes, there were no reminders that hope once lived there.

The Bailey district was a different story. It held onto its pristine

character longer than other neighborhoods because it was home to special folks. The police chief's ex-wife and the mayor's girlfriend lived there. Several councilmen also called the Bailey District home. Potholes were fixed right away. Trash never collected on the streets in the Bailey district. Lowlifes and thugs knew that crime in Bailey carried mandatory jail time. This utopia was preserved while the rest of the city went to hell in a hand basket.

The Samuels' tudor-styled house was nearly indistinguishable from its neighbors on both sides. It was a white, two story haven. The cobblestone driveway and walkway to the house almost looked like the walk to the City of Oz. The house boasted big, storefront windows on each side of the double front door. I stepped onto the porch and heard the fierce bark of a miniature poodle. I could see his image running about behind the expensive beveled glass panes in both doors. I also saw someone walking toward the door. It had to be John Samuels because he cast a tall shadow as he approached and unlocked the door.

"Hello, may I help you?"

John was every bit of six feet four, clean-shaven and manicured down to his polished fingernails. He wore a starched blue shirt, argyle V-neck vest, blue jeans and penny loafers with no socks. He had stark blonde hair and the reputed piercing blue eyes.

"Sir, I am Detective Frank Salvato of the Walker City Police department. I am heading up the investigation regarding the disappearance of your daughter. Can I talk with you for a moment?"

He extended his over-sized hand. It wrapped around mine when we shook.

"Sure Detective. I have been waiting to talk with someone who can actually do something to find my little girl. Come right in."

I stepped into paradise. The house smelled like fresh cut Easter lilies. Every piece of furniture, every trinket and every other item was in its perfect place. This place could have easily been the feature of any home magazine. It was so clean that I doubted that they actually lived there longer than a day or so.

"Can I get you anything to drink, Detective?"

"Sure, Mr. Samuels. I'd love a..."

"Call me John."

"Cup of coffee."

"Coming right up."

John Samuels was so friendly that it almost disarmed me. He warmly shook my hand and even smiled. As he walked away to get my coffee, I noticed that the house had a crucifix of nearly every type on every wall. They were weird because the cross bar seemed too low. The over-sized throw rug at the front door bore a Charleton Heston-looking embroidery of Jesus on the odd cross. There was more cross above his head than below his feet. This image was superimposed over a Star of David within a large circle. The hymn "Old Rugged Cross" was playing faintly from the stereo in the large living room. There were no signs that a child had ever been in the place.

"I hope you wanted it black because I forgot to bring the sugar."

"Perfect. I usually drink it black. Thanks." I sipped the piping hot coffee.

"Let's have a seat here in the living room."

I followed the hulking man.

"John, I just wanted to get a little background on Miriam so I will have the information that I need to find her."

"I will give you whatever I can. Did you talk with Jennifer's parents yet?"

He seemed too eager to get the answer.

"I have and we can talk about that, but I need to ask you a couple questions."

"They are weird people."

"They who?"

"Jennifer's parents."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, they just need to be closer to Jesus. That's all. Have you met Jesus, Detective?"

"I have but we didn't really see eye to eye." He smiled at me as if I hadn't insulted him.

"Did you have a good relationship with Jennifer's parents?"

"Since their daughter and mine adored each other I didn't have a choice but to have *some* connection with them. If not for that relationship between our daughters, I probably wouldn't know them."

"Is there something about them that you just don't like or did they do something?"

"I guess they are good people at heart, however, they are out of God's covenant. As such, they must be handled very carefully."

He and I simultaneously sipped from our cups.

"You don't think they had anything to do with the girls' disappearance, do you?"

"I'm not saying that they actually took my daughter. I do wonder whether they were the folks that got this Satan stuff all riled up in our community. While Satan is real, he is a spirit, not an actual man walking around stealing children. I just don't believe that our girls are part of any cult deal. I just can't accept that."

It was telling that John broached the satanic stuff before I brought it up. A preemptive strike for sure.

"Do you think there is an actual satanic cult in this community?"

"Of course not," he laughed sideways. "That is just a bunch of kids with over-active imaginations and parents who jump every time their child whimpers. That's all it is."

"But, with all due respect, it is my understanding that Miriam and Jennifer told those same stories."

"My daughter told them only after spending too much time down at that Center and too much time with Jennifer's family."

Someone was walking around in the next room.

"Is your wife here?"

"No, she isn't," John responded sharply. "As you can imagine, this kind of thing puts lots of pressure on a marriage. Barbara has gone to her parents place in Erie for a few days."

Whoever was walking around in the next room had stopped and was now listening to our conversation. The wood floors had been buffed to a mirror shine and allowed me to see the shadow of someone standing just

outside the living room entry. John saw me look toward the shadow.

"Here, let me get you more coffee." He rose and took my cup and saucer and left the living room. I watched John's shadow join with the eavesdropper. I could barely hear him mumbling something and a softer mumble in return. The shadowy figure moved toward the staircase near the front door. I heard the stairs creaking and stop. The shadow remained in the stairwell. John returned with more hot coffee.

"When did you last see Miriam?"

"When she went off to school that morning."

"Was everything OK with her that day?"

"Yes, Miriam was a little spoiled but she was fine."

"Did she walk to school?"

"Of course not. We never let her walk anywhere. My wife took her to school that day."

"Jennifer lives nearby, right?"

"Yes. Just a couple blocks around the corner."

"Did Miriam ever walk to Jennifer's house?"

"Maybe once. We kept pretty good tabs on her. You never can tell what weirdos lurk in the shadows."

"Was Miriam supposed to go to the Jackson Center after school?"

"Yes she was. My wife was late picking her up that day."

"I may be speaking out of turn but why did you choose to have Miriam go to the Center after school?"

"What exactly do you mean, Detective"

"I mean no offense but you seem to be a man of means and the Center serves underprivileged children. I was just curious."

"Well, Detective, those underprivileged kids and my Miriam are all God's children. Besides, my wife and I thought that Miriam should have exposure to kids who are not as fortunate as she was. Humility and gratitude are the keys to God's kingdom."

The steps creaked as if the occupant shifted her weight. I took another sip of coffee. The shadow moved down one step. John saw my eyes divert to the staircase. He moved to the edge of his seat and gulped the last of his coffee.

"What else can I tell you, Detective?"

"I saw a couple photos of the girls in my file. Is that the way that Miriam looked when she disappeared?"

"Yes, for the most part. I dressed her and she had on a black pair of leotards and a little blue dress."

The stairs creaked again. John looked at his watch as if time was more important than finding his daughter.

"John, can I see Miriam's room?"

"I don't know what that would do for your investigation. Why would you want to do that?"

"I just wanted to take a look around to see if there were any clues. Is there a problem with that?"

There clearly was a problem because John tightened up and became very serious.

"Sure, but I am running late for an appointment and can only let you look around for a short time. Just follow me."

Whoever was listening to us on the stairs ran up and slipped into one of the rooms. I followed John.

When he opened the door to Miriam's room, the paint on the door jamb cracked. I smelled new paint. Except for the teddy bears on the bed, there wasn't anything childlike about this room. The queen-sized bed sat between glass top end tables. A lady's vanity supported bottles of nail polish, face creams and other health care products. This was hardly where a child slept less than a week ago.

"This is Miriam's room?"

"Sure is. My wife's sister has moved into it while she is here to help my wife in these tough times." He was uncomfortable.

It was more than weird that he let his sister-in-law move into his missing daughter's room. I looked around for a few moments and then we went back downstairs.

"That's all for now. Can I come back or call if I have more questions?"

"Sure, Detective."

John opened the door to let me know that it was time to leave, so I left.

Chapter 5

The next morning I made my way to see Jim Wellington. On my way to the Jackson Center, I grabbed a breakfast burrito and more coffee. This would hold me over until I could get a real meal, a stogie and a bourbon sedative before the night closed. Walker City's planners must have had me in mind when they decided where to place restaurants and bars. The right places always seemed to be in the right place whenever I needed to eat, drink or smoke.

As I turned onto Elm Road, I went over my mental agenda for the things that I wanted to accomplish with the Jackson Center director. I needed to get as much about the Center itself and its operations. I also wanted as much information on everyone who routinely had contact with Jennifer and Miriam. It probably would have been asking too much, but I was hoping that the big man could tell me the intimate details of the very private lives of these missing children.

As I arrived at the Center, there were just a few kids remaining and waiting outside near the side door. I parked in the back part of the side lot and entered the center at the gymnasium. Just as I came inside I saw him.

Big Jim was seated on the stage much like a king observing his fiefdom. His t-shirt was sweaty at the pits and he looked like he was taking a much needed rest. Three or so kids were sitting on the faux parquet floor, coloring in their books, while a couple others were rolling a kickball around. As I expected, Big Jim wasn't threatened by my presence. Instead, Big Jim turned to me and smiled.

"Good Sir. Welcome to the Jackson Center. Call me Jim. Can I help you?" Big Jim had a bellowing voice that matched his big body and mile-wide, toothsome smile. He had a thick mustache that made him look like the fun-loving walrus from the old cartoons.

I couldn't help being disarmed. Everything about this man was Indian summer warm.

"Thanks so much, sir. I am Frank Salvato. I work with the Walker City police. Can we find a quiet place to talk?"

"Sure."

Big Jim managed to free his large body from the small metal chair. Big Jim had to be barely five feet and six inches but every ounce of three hundred seventy-five pounds. The deep creases in the bend of his elbows and the large calluses on the butts of his ashy, stubby hands let me know that he had wrestled with his weight for many years.

When Big Jim shook my hand, I couldn't help but notice that he had rings on nearly every finger. One of them was from the local Masonic temple. He must have put on these rings as a baby from the way that all of the rings were so deeply imbedded in the flesh of his stubby fingers. He wore a large gray t-shirt that read, "Love is the Answer." From outward appearances, Big Jim was not a simple man.

As we left the gym and walked through a side meeting room, I walked behind Big Jim and watched him waddle. While he walked, Big Jim rocked like a little boat in rough seas. He huffed, puffed, and grunted from one destination to another like the little engine that could. What was left of the heels on his Rockport comfort shoes confirmed that Big Jim had been rocking from side to side for a long time. I could tell that walking from room to room was a real chore because of the thick, ever fresh sweat line that ran down the back of his t-shirt.

We ended up in the dining hall. The place smelled like jello and grilled cheese sandwiches. The tables were haphazardly decorated with immovable childish etchings, but they were spic-n-span clean. The floors were buffed to a new ice shine. This place could have passed for a Marine mess hall.

Big Jim and I sat at a long mahogany conference table. As soon as we were seated, he pulled his dingy handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the rivers of sweat flowing down the back of his ears and neck.

We could barely hear the roar of children because we were now two rooms away. All we heard was the clanking of pots and pans being washed in the kitchen. Every once in a while the hump-backed cleaning lady would brush by with an outdated vacuum cleaner.

I shifted in my seat to face him. I was taught in many a police interrogation seminar that witnesses open up when your posture is likewise open. When we entered the room I made sure to sit on the same side of the table as he did. I knew that any table or desk between us would only widen the gap that made our first talk awkward. I turned to Big Jim and uncrossed my arms.

"I'm here to investigate the disappearance of two little girls."

"You mean Jennifer and Miriam, right?"

"Unfortunately, yeah. Jennifer and Miriam have been missing now for almost a week and their parents are coming apart." I added.

"Jennifer and Miriam's parents wanted the two girls to spend as much time together as possible and to avoid becoming latchkey kids. Both sets of parents worked jobs with little or no flexibility in arrival and departing times. Leaving early every day to pick up the children was tantamount to asking for six months of vacation each year. Since all needed and valued their jobs, Jennifer and Miriam's parents took small advantage of the Jackson Center's hospitality. This made the center the perfect place for them." It was almost as if Jim had rehearsed this part.

"Yeah, it's kinda sad. They were sweet kids." I intentionally said *were* to test whether Big Jim would tacitly agree that the girls were likely dead.

Big Jim looked down. I couldn't tell whether it was despair, regret or that he was hiding something. Then I went conspicuously silent. Many people have great discomfort with silence. The way to get suspects to talk is to let the deafening silence and the annoying buzz of the fluorescent lights cause linguistic hemorrhaging. The lights in the dining hall did the trick. Big Jim adjusted his rotund load a few times and then broke the silence.

"Detective Salvato, this all..." Now, it was my turn to interrupt.

"Jim, the same rules apply to you. If we are gonna be friends, you gotta call me Frank. OK?"

"Fine, Frank. This whole thing has blown me away. Those little tikes were two of my favorites. I took a special interest in them. It's always the good ones that fall in harm's way."

Big Jim spoke of the girls as if he assumed that they were dead. Immediately my nose began to itch. Whenever my nose itches, somebody's lying or hiding something. My gut was telling me that he was about to tell

me something pretty important. Maybe a confession? How would he know that the girls had been harmed? I nodded in an effort to keep him talking. He continued.

“I watched them as closely as I could. Most of my watching was to keep them from the older kids. The last thing we want is for a little one to be trampled by a group of teenagers. So I kept the groups separate. I swear, I did my best to protect those girls.”

Big Jim’s attempt to exonerate himself was desperate and obvious. I leaned toward Jim and placed my elbows on my knees to get closer to his face.

“Jim, were there any particular teenage kids that you either took a special interest in or had concerns about?”

Big Jim immediately crossed his arms and sat back. He looked like a Buddha who had just been denied seconds on dessert. From his body language, I knew that I had just stepped on soft soil. He sighed deeply and stared at me for an uncomfortable moment. He was staring as if my last question didn’t deserve an answer. Then, with plenty of attitude, Big Jim got back in the game.

“So what are you saying, Frank? Are you trying to say that I let someone harm these girls?”

I pressed forward.

“Jim, look, your cooperation may save these girls’ lives. Please tell me what you know.”

“Frank, I am doing the best I can. I did what I could for these girls. Uh, can I be candid with you?” I thought he was already being candid. The way that he asked the question I figured that the snow job was under way.

“Sure, Jim. Give it to me straight, no chaser.”

“I have been running this center for a long time with no problems. Except for a little weed sold outside and a fight or two, we have been lucky. I don’t need trouble. I’m doing fine without it.”

I felt like I was on to something. It’s a weird thing when the mind kicks into overdrive. I was rifling through my mental rolodex of techniques to capitalize on this situation.

As a young detective I learned that a witness who feels a personal stake in the well-being of the victim will feel compelled to rescue the victim if

given a chance. I immediately put this tool to work.

"Jim, I truly believe that whatever you have to say, it may save these little girls. You may be their only chance at coming out of this thing alive. I have the impression that you were their guardian angel while they were at the center."

He relaxed his arms.

"I was their guardian angel. I took good care of them. I don't want them to be harmed, but this ain't my doing. I just don't need any trouble for the center."

"I'm not sure what kind of trouble you are trying to avoid, but I am certain that it will not justify letting these little girls die. Jim, their lives hang in the balance. They wait for you to help them."

Jim sat quiet and stared out of the nearby window as if the answer was waiting on the playground.

"Jim, if you are the guardian angel you say you were to these children, then help them. Help them by telling me everything you know."

The other technique that I used was to exalt him to high status. I made him the most important piece of the puzzle. It worked like a charm. Big Jim relaxed and began to speak.

"There is a group of young punks that hang around on the weekends. These boys come from bad family environments. They just need attention. One of them is a little slow but a nice kid."

"What's his name?"

"Lester Robinson, he's the slow one. He's nineteen but acts like he's still in the fifth grade. Probably was the nicest of all. I tried to pull him into the fold and give him some responsibility around here. But he wasn't ready for that. Fortunately he left and I didn't have to deal with him anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I saw Lester helping out with the kids during a kickball game. He was really good with the little ones. He has a soft voice and a gentle touch. A few of the kids had a difficult time with his lisp and stutter, but after a while they loved him. Things got weird so he left."

"Weird? Like how weird?"

"He just turned out to be a strange kid. Nothing that I could really put my finger on."

"When you say 'gentle,' does that mean he actually had physical contact with the kids, the girls?"

"What are you implying, Frank?"

I had offended Big Jim. He struggled but eventually rose from his seat. He now was standing and ready to end things. I tried to recover.

"Jim, I meant no offense. I was just trying to..."

His voice slightly louder, Big Jim cut me off. "You certainly are trying to put words in my mouth. I don't need no more trouble. This interview is over, sir. If there is anything else, you are gonna have to come back at another time. I have plenty to do."

And he turned and lumbered toward the exit door.

I looked at Big Jim for a second and then left the building.

As I drove away, I saw Big Jim in my rear view mirror. He was standing just outside the exit door. He looked relieved to see me go as he wiped more sweat from his forehead. Truth be told, I had enough information on Lester to start taking a real good look at him. My hunch was telling me that this case would be over soon. There was more to Lester's role in these girls' disappearances. I was determined to find out as much as I could. I also felt like Big Jim had more to tell.

Chapter 6

It was Thursday. I spent most of the day still thinking about the sour note that Jim and I struck in our last encounter. Not having gotten the information that I came for, I surely didn't want to burn a bridge that I would someday have to cross to find safety.

I needed to let the fires die down before contacting him for a second interview. Clearly, I raised his anxiety in our first meeting. Some of that anxiety was intended; however, I needed to put him at ease if I ever expected to get more vital information. I figured that he had time to get his bearings back and relax about my effort to find the girls' killer. I decided to call the big man and request a second meeting.

"Hey, Jim. This is Frank Salvato."

"Frank, I had a suspicion that you'd call. What can I do for you?" His tone was stand-offish and cold. Apparently he was still salty about our earlier meeting.

"Jim, I feel like I put us off on the wrong foot. I had a couple more questions that I need to discuss with you. Is there any way that I can pop over there sometime soon and talk with you?"

"Why can't you just ask them to me now?"

"Jim, I'd prefer to talk to you in person if you would grant me that privilege." I had to sound like my tail was tucked deep between my legs in an effort to get this unexplainably guilty man to relax.

The big man breathed heavily to communicate that my request was an unreasonable imposition. But he paused rather than saying no.

"OK, but I don't have lots of time to throw away. I have told you everything that I can think of, so you are probably wasting your time."

The tension from our first conversation still had a heartbeat. It poisoned but didn't kill our second telephone exchange. As soon as he said yes, I

jumped into my purple lady and made a B line to the center.

The parking lot of the Jackson Center was empty when I got there. Thursday nights must have been a time when the kids went home early. The quiet gave Big Jim and me the best chance to get to the truth.

I saw Big Jim waiting at the door. He had no other apparent purpose other than to greet me. This was a good sign that we would have more than a cursory talk.

As I got out of my car and shut the door, he was looking at me. Big Jim's smile wasn't as warm as before. His whole vibe was thin and edgy. Nevertheless, I wasn't gonna let his discomfort stand in the way of me finding these girls—alive.

"Nice car, Frank." The big man forced a compliment to break the silence. It was telling that he never noticed my beautiful lady beauty on our first meeting. Then again, he only saw her ass as I drove away the first time.

I smiled in appreciation and ran my index finger along her driver's side door and the front left quarter panel. This stroking was always my way of showing her love.

Big Jim turned and I followed him into the center through the side door. He continued talking to me while he waddled and rocked toward our destination.

"Yeah, she's a beauty. That's when cars were cars."

"Thanks. I couldn't agree more. She's a sixty-eight. Love of my life. Never had a woman like her before. She performs when I need her to and shuts up when I need silence. My purple lady never lets me down."

I looked back adoringly at my Batman purple, drop top, sixty-eight Impala and the metal door slowly closed. Big Jim chuckled at my lustful comments about my car.

"So she's got style, looks, personality, love and femininity all in one? Damn, Frank, I gotta get me one of those! Does she have a sister?"

We shared another laugh.

"Once you get one of those, Jim, you can't turn back to just women."

Big Jim seemed to relax. I was relieved. Big Jim's friendly small talk put me at ease too. Once we were seated, our roles had flipped.

Big Jim immediately launched lots of questions while I provided answers.

“Frank, have you talked to Lester or his friends yet?”

This question placed me in a dilemma. I didn’t want Big Jim to use my information to complete his suspected cover-up. I also didn’t trust that he was not involved with the disappearance of the little girls. So I lied.

“Jim, I haven’t really acted on much that you told me. I wanted to make things right with you before I started ruffling feathers around town.”

He wasn’t fooled. He sat back and crossed his chubby arms in disbelief the way my aunt would do when Uncle Bunkie started lying about being in the war. The truth was that I had started asking around to see if I could find some dirt on Big Jim that would link him to the girls’ disappearance. I also already started a background search on Lester and couple of the other boys who my rookie cited as hangarounds at the center. I knew that Lester was likely trouble if only for the company he kept. I also had visited Lester’s house on the South side to talk with his aging grandmother. She wasn’t there but she was still on my list of folks to be interviewed.

Even though the investigatory machine was in full throttle, there was no way that I was gonna let this likely suspect know which rabbits I decided to chase.

My sociopathic charm kicked in with Big Jim.

“Jim, I need more from you to get me pointed in the right direction. I need to know more about Lester and the girls. I need to know more about his friends. I need to know more about the center and you. Please, can you help me?”

Jim replied in a refreshingly earnest tone. “Frank, I will do all that I can to help you.”

He must have felt bad about having kicked me out a few days ago. His tone and the earnest way he pledged his support let me know that I was talking to a new man.

In the next three hours I learned more from this man than I could have gotten in any skilled, month long interrogation. Jim had such a warm and loving recollection of these two little girls. He described both girls as guarded and continually circling their wagons. To bridge any gaps, Big Jim did all he could to celebrate and embrace them.

Big Jim rewarded the girls for performing well in the pottery classes. He often displayed their artwork in the glass showcase at the front door of the

building. He complimented the girls and tried to remain quiet when they would unexplainably burst into tears upon his embrace.

Big Jim learned over the years when to ask questions and when to be just a shoulder to cry on. His girth was substantial and physique so wide that he often was the perfect mantle of support. Big Jim always hugged the girls at the same time. According to him, they got a real rise from these hugs. As Big Jim expected, these same hugs would slowly make way for trust. Once they trusted him, Big Jim could unlock the girls' urge to tell their stories.

Upon the passage of days, then weeks and finally months, the girls' trust in Big Jim grew. It wasn't long before they began to confide in him about otherwise mundane matters such as crushes on boys, pressures of school and disputes between the two of them. The latter allowed each girl the confidence to seek Big Jim's counsel without fear of revelation to anyone, including the absent best friend.

Short but intense conversations with Big Jim were followed by his country-wide famous bear hug. Over weeks and months the subject matter of these talks with Jennifer and Miriam graduated from puppy love to strict parents, and then fears of being alone and bedwetting. Big Jim's interest was piqued as each little girl told stories of home life. The descriptions of life at home made sense of the girls' daily desire to stay at the center as long as Big Jim would allow.

Jennifer's comfort in talking with Big Jim matured much faster than Miriam's. It was Jennifer who began to tell stories of being alone with Miriam's father after the Mom and Miriam had gone. Purposely avoiding more disturbing details, Jennifer made it clear that she hated being alone with Miriam's father. Jim always had a bad vibe from Jennifer's Dad whenever he came to pick her up from the center. Jennifer confirmed that Miriam felt the same way about her own Dad.

Big Jim felt like this was beyond his training. He held a two year associates degree from Thornton Perimeter College in family counseling and physical education. While he was a great listener, the girls' stories about their family life, especially about their fathers, would scare Big Jim. He would gently guide Jennifer away from these conversations and toward more comforting topics. Miriam spared him because she didn't like to talk about her Dad. Whenever Big Jim would ask about home life, Miriam would change the subject or simply say she did not want to talk about it.

Big Jim and I suspected sexual abuse was involved, even though neither of the girls confirmed the same in their sessions at the center. Over the years, I learned the clues to sexual stuff that usually haunts cases involving kids. Big Jim attended a number of courses in counseling and was somewhat familiar with the issues surrounding the counsel of a child who has been victimized by sexual abuse.

We both read between the lines in the girls' heavy-hearted stories. Jim knew the dangers of aggressive interview styles and the inadvertent poisoning that could occur if the interviewer was inappropriately supportive or suggestive as to any aspect of the child's story. In light of this, Big Jim handled Jennifer and Miriam's stories with kid gloves. He never pressed either girl to confirm the sexual violation.

Although both girls told him things that would make the most skeptical listener gasp, Big Jim focused on several things that both of the girls mentioned repeatedly.

"Frank, both Jennifer and Miriam cried as they talked about their disdain for the meetings and the fact that the meetings would take place in the tunnels."

"Tunnels? Where are these tunnels?"

"They never told me exactly where but it sounded like they were underground somehow. Somewhere locally. They sounded like sewer tunnels."

"What else did they say?"

"Both girls also talked about a leader named 'Felix.' Sometimes they'd call him Daddy; other times they would refer to him as 'The Supreme One,' 'Prince of Darkness,' or just 'Lucifer.'"

"Who is this Felix guy?"

"I'm not sure but I have the feeling that he is a local creep right under our noses."

"Did they say what other adults were involved?"

"Well, yeah, but I can't remember who they fingered at this very moment."

I didn't believe him. He looked down and to the left when his memory became conveniently faulty. He was hiding something.

"What else did the girls say about this ordeal?"

"Neither girl ever gave a last name or any identifiable description. Both Jennifer and Miriam made it clear that Felix was in charge and that he held ultimate power. Both described his power over the adults, including their parents, and his power to take and give life. This all happened in the tunnels."

"Did someone actually get killed?"

"Frank, when the girls referred to the taking of life, I would ask them, 'What do you mean?' When I got close to the murder stuff or the 'the taking of life,' both Jennifer and Miriam would clam up fast and solidly. So I backed off."

"So you have mentioned 'tunnels' a couple times. What about these tunnels?"

"The girls' descriptions of the tunnels were so vivid. Jennifer described an escalator-type contraption that transported scores of children and their fathers into a dark tunnel-like dungeon. She recalled smells of garbage and what sounded like the smell of dead animals."

"Jim, how the hell did you sit on this?"

"I didn't know whether they were making this up. I didn't want to get everyone all up in arms and have the police running through my place for nothing."

"Goddamit, Jim. What if this stuff is true? Then what? You could have saved these girls."

Jim dropped his head. He and I knew the answer to my question. I didn't want to lose the rest of his story so I got us back on track.

"What about the other little girl, Miriam?"

"Miriam described the tunnel as accessible only from some kind of trap door of a basement in an old, haunted house."

"Did she say where the house was?"

"Not really. It sounded like it was somewhere near her house or near Jennifer's house because neither girl talked about going for car rides to get to these places."

"What else do you remember them saying about the house?"

"Not much more about the houses."

"Houses, plural?"

"Yeah, both girls talked about two or three really 'old' houses next to each other. Apparently, whoever captured these girls took them to the dungeons in the day so they could see and remember the look of the houses."

"What about how they got there? The tunnels."

"Frank, this is the really eerie part. Both girls told stories that the tunnels stretched for miles and that they heard weird sounds and smelled bad smells. Jennifer told stories of burning smells and echoes. Miriam described cement walls and drains allowing moonlight to come in. Both began to shake and get teary when they talked about the Devil. According to Jennifer, he had a full red suit, tail and all. They were really scared."

Jim's hands were shaking. He couldn't make eye contact with me. I wasn't sure as to what to do so I just stayed silent. He kept swallowing as if he was about to throw up. I sat back to give him space and to make sure that he didn't hit me with the guilty spew. Jim had to break the silence.

"Frank, you gotta know that I wanted to help these girls. I just didn't know how to do it without messing things up. You know?"

"Jim, I'm not here to judge you. I am struggling with this whole story."

Big Jim looked at me with tears in his eyes and pled for my understanding.

"Frank, please understand that I wanted to help these little girls in the worst way. I just didn't know whether they were telling stories. I couldn't risk everything if I wasn't sure. I just couldn't. So the coward in me won. I did nothing."

"Jim, I don't know what to say. What things were more important than the safety of the girls?" My face must have been obviously judgmental. Jim wiped his tears, sniffed the remnant of snot from his mustache and steadied himself.

"Frank, you just don't understand. Things are a bit more complex than you seem to think. These are pretty far out stories from very young, confused kids. I couldn't go off accusing respected citizens of things that I couldn't prove."

His tone and posture took on a sudden and noticeably sharp, self righteous edge. I was disgusted with his flimsy and disgraceful effort to justify his neglect. I decided to let him enjoy the false impression that I

understood and, more importantly, that I let him off the hook for putting the girls' safety behind his own concerns. While my mouth was still, my mind was cluttered with possibilities. I judged Big Jim. His options were many but the right choice was clear. He should have protected these kids. These little girls now face harm because this bastard was trying to save his precious building—and himself. The shame and self loathing were so thick in the room that it felt crowded.

"Jim, who else can I talk to who had contact with the girls?"

"Martha, my administrative assistant and chief counselor."

"What's her last name?"

"Patterson."

"When will she be here again?"

"First thing in the morning. Frank, I am so sorry."

"I know you are. I am too." We were sorry for different reasons.

Now was a good time to give Big Jim a chance to breathe. So I left.

Chapter 7

It was Friday morning. I arrived at the Jackson Center just about the same time as the Thornton Bridge Club, a group of thirty or so octogenarians whose lives revolved around a never-ending bridge tournament. I had the privilege of holding the door for three scores of ladies who had outlived their third husbands. Jim was at the door to welcome his renters. He was in much better spirits than when I left him the night before.

"Hey Jim. How's it going."

"Just trying to keep my head above the fray."

"Good idea, my friend. I came by to see if I could catch up with Martha. Is she around?"

"Yeah. She's in the cafeteria setting up the hands for the bridge tournament. Go on in."

"You wouldn't have a hot cup of coffee layin' around, would you?"

"Martha will get it for you. Just tell her what you need when you get in there."

"Thanks Jim."

I made my way past the small groups of chatting grandmothers and found the cafeteria.

"Martha Patterson?"

"That's me. What can I do for you?"

Martha was a cute woman in her forties who spent too much time at the buffet and too little time in the gym. I was in good company. She was a pretty woman with curly brown hair, big hazel eyes and smooth medium brown skin. Her dark blue velour sweat suit did its best to hide her tummy and other middle-aged bulges. She had a warm smile and exuded the confidence that it probably took to run the Jackson Center.

"Ms. Patterson, I'm Detective Frank Salvato."

"I figured that from the fedora and trench coat. Plus Jim told me that you came by and wanted to talk with me."

Since she pointed out my bad manners, I took off my hat and coat and placed them on a nearby chair.

"Can we talk somewhere quiet?"

"Sure, give me a moment to finish putting these decks of cards out and we can find a place."

"How does a tired cop get a cup of coffee?"

"See the urns by the breakfast bar? Help yourself. The cups and condiments are right there too."

"Thanks."

As I prepared my coffee I noticed Martha watching me. She didn't seem nervous but she was very cautious and circumspect. Once she finished placing the cards, Martha directed me to the little private dining area next to the big cafeteria.

"Now," Martha let out a restful sigh as she took her seat. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you from here?"

"I was born in Lithonia, Georgia, but my parents brought me here when I was a little girl."

"How did you get to know Jim?"

"Years ago we were sweethearts. Even when our personal relationship ended, I was still in love with his heart. And I love children so I came to work for him at this Center."

"How long have you worked at the Center?"

"Seven years."

"Tell me something. Did you have much contact with Lester Robinson?"

"Hell no. That boy had problems from the start. I tried to tell Jim that, but he had to learn it the hard way."

"What kinds of problems?"

"He was just weird and Jim let him get too cozy with the kids. I'm probably speaking out of turn. Let's just say that Lester worried me and I

told Jim that he should keep an eye on him."

"And did he?"

"Well, something happened and Jim ran that boy out of the Center. I never found out what exactly happened and Jim never wanted to talk about it."

"Does he come around anymore?"

"He's around, just not at the Center."

"Where would I find him?"

"The first place to start is his grandmother over on Comstock. She's a sweet lady. Everybody loves her and feels sorry for her having to raise Lester."

I got up to get a refill of java. Martha watched me.

"What did you do before this job?"

"I was a marriage counselor..."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. I received a master's degree in social work from the Ohio School of Professional Psychology and built a strong practice as a marriage and family counselor."

"What made you stop?"

"It was just too rough. I just got worn down from trying to stop people from tearing their children in half in a divorce. I found out fairly early that I wasn't a good enough swimmer to navigate the waters of infidelity, betrayal, mental illness, domestic abuse and life's other albatrosses. But there was a bright side."

"What's that?"

"I discovered that my real talent was working with children. Counseling and disarming troubled children became my professional specialty."

"Then why aren't you still working with kids?"

"I am, but in a different capacity. I had to switch even from the adolescent counseling. Especially after my last case."

"What happened there?"

"Over the years I witnessed well-coached five year old girls put their

Daddies in jail on trumped up allegations of touching and rape. I saw little boys who swore that they saw Mommy in a disgusting threesome. I struggled to maintain healthy skepticism regarding fantastic stories told by little kids. That was at least until I met a little girl and for this discussion I will call her 'Tina.' She was a seven year old who was being torn apart by two parents fighting desperately to gain sole custody. Tina wasn't real fond of either of her parents mainly because all trust was gone. Tina told the ordinarily tragic stories of a physically abusive mother coupled with a shouting, drinking father. She detailed bilateral domestic violence as well as her 125 IQ would allow."

"Sounds like you had been through this drill before. What was special about Tina's case?"

"Tina had an intense anger for both of her parents. She was angry because she claimed that they made her spend time with 'Him.'" Martha made the quotes with her fingers.

"Who was that?"

"After a couple of the interviews, Tina began to open up to me and to talk about this guy taking her to the 'tunnels.' There is only so much that I can share with you because of confidentiality."

"I understand."

"Tina told the same stories that I later heard from Jennifer and Miriam. The details were strikingly similar since these girls had no way of knowing each other."

"What details?"

"Tunnels, chanting. Eating flesh and killing babies."

"Someone had to respond to Tina's story in the court case, right?"

"The judge blew it off as coaching and a child who watched too much television. Since the judge wasn't impressed, the police found it laughable."

"Did Tina's story ever go public?"

"As public as any courtroom could be. I actually testified in the divorce case regarding custody. The judge and jury actually laughed when I said that there may be something to Tina's stories. The details were too real."

"So what ever happened to the case?"

"The judge awarded custody to the Mom and split the assets almost down the middle."

"What happened to Tina and her story?"

"Her story faded into the land of forgotten things and she's probably somewhere drinking or doping her pain away."

"How did you learn of Jennifer and Miriam's stories?"

"From Jim."

"Did the girls ever identify any other kids or adults involved in the cult?"

"Other than the guy named 'Felix,' they were pretty tight-lipped on the whole ID thing."

"Why didn't you guys go to the police?"

"First, there were no reports of babies missing or bodies found. The girls' parents thought that Jim and I were just crazy trouble makers."

"So you went to the parents?"

"I didn't actually go to them but I did talk with both Moms. They wanted no part of me or the trouble that they thought I was about to cause."

"What did they say when confronted with the stories of the Satan stuff?"

"Jennifer's Mom accused me of being in cahoots with the Devil. Miriam's Mom told me that I didn't know what I was getting into and hung up the phone."

"I had no idea that this had been brought to the parents, but sure explains a lot."

"Who did you talk to in my department?"

"I didn't. I had been made a fool once before for trying to get to the bottom of this kind of thing. I wasn't going to be laughed at and embarrassed again. Especially if the parents didn't believe their own kids."

"Have you talked to anyone else about this?"

"Yeah, my girlfriend, Violet."

"Had she talked to the girls or had any contact with them?"

"She probably did since she's a vice principal at Jennifer and Miriam's school, Roosevelt Elementary. But she ain't gonna be much help."

"Why?"

"She's more skittish about this stuff than I am. Besides, she wants to make principal and won't want to get out on a thin limb for this."

"Can I ask you one last question?"

"Of course."

"Do you believe the girls' stories?"

Martha sat back and looked at the ceiling.

"At this point, Detective, what difference does it make? They're dead now, right?"

"I'm not sure. Are you?"

"Let me put it this way. There are things going on in this world that we can't see, smell or taste. I believe in evil. There is a reason that kids all over the world are coming out with similar stories. Now I don't know how to explain that no one has been able to actually catch the evil people in the act, or been able to find bodies, tools or anything to validate the stories. I think there is something to this that our society is ignoring, either because we can't stop it or because we are part of it."

"Thanks, Martha."

Chapter 8

Having talked with Martha, I headed straight to the home of Sadie Robinson, Lester's grandmother and the neighborhood matriarch. She lived at 382 Comstock on the North end of town and was a fixture in this community for seventy-seven years. Her little wood frame house was a shrine to hard work and not making waves. The swindlers, punks and predators knew to leave her alone because she was so connected downtown, and an incredibly sweet lady. She bothered no one and stayed below the radar.

After meeting with Martha Patterson, I grabbed a burrito and root beer and headed to see Miss Sadie. Her whole street was quiet largely because most of her neighbors had lived there as long as she had been there. I parked in front of Miss Sadie's house and looked around for Lester hiding in the bushes or climbing out of a window. Miss Sadie spent lots of time in her garden. Tulips, roses, violets and other flowers made a giant bouquet in her front yard. I chuckled to myself as I saw collard greens, cabbage, snap beans and tomatoes growing on the side of the house. I knocked on the wrought iron burglar door.

"Miss Sadie?" I called in a louder than normal but pleasant voice. Since she might have been hard of hearing, I knocked extra loud the second time and called again, this time even louder.

"Miss Sadie, it's Detective Salvato. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I heard gentle commotion drawing near to the door. She parted the faded sheer curtain and said, "What can I do for you, sir?" Her sweet, grandmotherly voice was muffled through the glass pane.

I smiled and replied, "Ma'am, I'm looking for Lester Robinson. Can I speak with you for a moment?"

"Oh, lawd. What has that boy done now!" She fretted.

Miss Sadie opened the door and smiled.

“Please come in, sir. Can I get you anything?”

Miss Sadie could have been the face on the front of an old-fashioned oatmeal box. Her snowy wavy hair was pulled back into a conservative bun. This showed her placid face in its best light. She had the smoothest caramel skin that any Hollywood make-up artist could ever hope to behold. Miss Sadie had high cheek bones and deep set brown eyes. All of the subtle wrinkles and blemishes that she earned over her long life were in the right places. Her little mouth produced the widest and warmest of welcoming smiles.

Miss Sadie’s house smelled like moth balls, Vicks Vapor-Rub and old sewing yarn. The doors and floors creaked like background music as she and I walked toward the living room. The hallway walls were covered with black and white pictures of every conceivable person who had any connection to Ms. Sadie and her family. Plastic ferns and rubber flowers hovered in clay pots in every corner of every room we passed. I followed her shuffle into the small living room.

Once we found our meeting place in the living room, Miss Sadie did what most Southern folks do in showing hospitality.

“Young man, would you like a cup of tea and a piece of Seven-Up cake?”

From having solved many crimes at grandmomma’s kitchen table, I knew better than to decline a bite of anything and a cup of hot tea.

“Sure, Miss Sadie. I’m not much of a tea man but I would love some coffee, that is, if you have some brewin’.”

“Just give me a minute and I will fix you some Sanka.”

Many older Black folks referred to all instant coffee as “Sanka” in the same way that many Atlantans refer to all soft drinks as “Coke.” I didn’t really care about the brand. I just needed any hot drink to make Miss Sadie give up the details on Lester.

She smiled and turned to retreat to the kitchen. Miss Sadie’s smile reminded me of my grandmother. I sat on the wing-backed, regal blue sofa. The living room set had to be thirty years old. It was nearly perfectly preserved by the custom plastic furniture covers. The place looked like a bargain furniture store that was going out of business. I placed my pad on the woven coffee table cloths and waited for my coffee. Our footprints in the

light blue carpet made clear that Miss Sadie didn't allow many visitors to visit her living room. This was an encouraging find.

"Do you take cream, sir?" She called from the nearby stove.

"Just a shot, Ma'am."

"Now tell me young man, what has my Lester gotten himself into now?"

She walked slowly into the living room perfectly balancing my coffee and hers. The shake in her left hand made the cup and saucer rattle.

"Miss Sadie, I am investigating the disappearance of two little girls. While there is no indication that Lester did anything to them, I just need to talk to him. Do you know where I can find him?"

"Sir, if you don't know for sure that my Lester is involved, why you tryin' to talk to him?"

"Ma'am, I am just trying to find out what he knows or doesn't know about the girls. It is my understanding that Lester worked at the center where the girls would play."

"Yes. He worked there for a while."

"And while he worked there, he had contact with these girls?"

"I don't know exactly what Lester did at that place. I just know it kept him busy so he didn't have a chance to get into much trouble."

My ears were open now upon the mention of trouble.

"Ma'am, had Lester been in some trouble?"

"Lester has had his share of run-ins with the law. Half the time he don't really know what he's doin'."

When Miss Sadie started defending Lester, I knew that I needed to simply find out where he was. There was no way that I would get her to bleed his secrets.

"Ma'am, I appreciate that. I simply want to talk with him. Do you know how I can find him?"

I took another sip of the instant coffee. Miss Sadie never took her eyes off of me.

"If you had come 'round here a couple weeks ago, I would have just pointed you to his bedroom back there. When he was here he spent most of his time in his room."

She thumbed over her left shoulder toward a dark, narrow hallway. Her tone and gesture showed a little frustration and disappointment. As a good cop would, I asked if I could see his room.

Miss Sadie paused and then she said, "Sure. I guess I ain't got no use for his stuff no more."

I walked past Miss Sadie and then down the hallway to the last room on the left. She apparently drank her coffee faster than I did. Miss Sadie headed toward the kitchen.

"That's the one. The room on your left, sir." She directed me to Lester's room.

I turned to her and smiled. I put both my hands in my pockets to let her know that she wasn't needed anymore. She took the clue and left to piddle around the house. Then I opened Lester's door.

It was like opening an ancient crypt. The door hinges squealed like a toddler at his first vaccination. Clearly the door hadn't been opened in some time. The musty smell of less-than-optimal teenage hygiene filled the stale air. Lester's room looked like a typical boy's room. Clothes, shoes, CD cases, papers and sports magazines decorated the floor. The dust on the window sills let me know that metal blinds hadn't let in sunshine in months. Except for the perfectly made bed, I found nothing particularly out of place in the obvious places on the floor and on the bed. The walls were a little different story.

I stood in the center and just looked around egg shell white walls and ceiling. Lester apparently had a keen interest in skulls, snakes and devilish symbols. Posters and cheap paintings were everywhere. Celtic daggers impaling scowling skulls covered large portions of the ceiling. Pictures of vampires, dark angels and Satan himself played on the walls. A decent black light from the seventies would have brought this place to life.

I noticed a narrow closet in the far southeast corner of the room. The door had an old padlock on it. I moved closer and noticed that the old lock clung to new hardware. The new metal hinges, U-clasp and gouge marks in the adjacent wood trim let me know that the installation was recent.

The way in which the lock hardware was forced into the trim wood showed that the technician didn't know much about carpentry or locks. The flap style hardware hid the screws to prevent removal without removing the lock. Someone didn't want outsiders to find out what was inside.

My curiosity soared.

Times like these are tough when the truth hides behind a one-inch-thick, wooden door that is buried under a much thicker barricade of constitutional rights. Law enforcers ought to have a bit of discretion to sidestep every once in a while if the end is valuable enough. Instead, our crime fighters are bogged down with rules and procedures that often do little more than give the criminal a chance to get away.

In the couple of days it could take to get a warrant, Lester could surely return and remove whatever was inside the vault. Or I could bypass the whole procedural hurdle and knock the damn lock off with the butt of my gun. My hunch was telling me that whatever was in that closet was likely the key to finding Jennifer and Miriam.

My curiosity overcame me. All of my inhibitions disappeared. I could only think about one thing, getting inside that closet. I struck the lock with the butt of my gun. The loud thud filled the room. I had knocked the lock loose. I could feel my fast, shallow breathing. While this wasn't necessarily by the book, the discovery of crucial evidence would make it all worth bending the rules. The loud sound also prompted Miss Sadie's interest.

"Detective, is everything OK?" she asked. I could hear her soft steps approaching the bedroom door. The creaky floor came in handy. The lock was hanging, undone. I wasn't sure how close she was to the bedroom door. As I reached for the dangling lock, I heard the bedroom door squeak open. I quickly turned as if the closet never crossed my mind. Her innocent face left me wondering whether she suspected my violation.

"You OK, young man? I heard a loud sound and wanted to make sure you ain't hurt yourself."

"Yes ma'am. I'm fine. I was just about to come on out." The sweat was running down the side of my face and down the back of my neck. I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. The last thing that I needed was for her to catch me breaking into the closet. I knew that I had just missed a golden opportunity to get a much-needed clue. Damn.

She smiled and turned her body as if to let me know that it was time to leave the room. As I walked out of the room I noticed two magazines on Lester's side table. One was a raunchy porno mag that showed a bit of bondage and sadomasochism on the cover. I recognized it from the local gas station rack of mags for lonely guys like me. Next to it was *The Complete Book*

of Knots, an encyclopedia of every knot known to mankind. It was surely an odd combination, especially for a man with a second grade reading level.

I had to get her and me out of that bedroom.

"Ma'am, do you have any warm coffee left?"

Her smile this time was a little less friendly than when I first came into the house.

"Sure. Let's go back to the living room."

It could have been my paranoia but I heard distrust in her voice. I followed the sweet old lady to the front of the house. She took a left turn into the kitchen and I continued to my seat on the plastic covered living room couch.

I wasn't ready to go yet so I sipped my coffee really slow. Miss Sadie did the same.

"So, Miss Sadie, was Lester a pretty good boy, generally?"

Miss Sadie looked down at the floor and shook her head slowly in apparent disgust.

"I knew that my grandson wasn't gonna have a fancy life or be somebody important. But I did my best to raise an honest, god-fearing man. He just never could respect nothin'. Not even me. I just wanted to show him how to live the right way."

"Miss Sadie, sometimes we can only do so much. Kids these days have their own mind. They do what they want to do regardless of what happens next." I took another sip of the soon-to-be-cold java and let the silence prompt her to continue talking.

"I'm kinda glad he's gone. I'm way too old and plenty tired to chase a grown man. Lester's gonna have to make his way without me." She wiped her nose with a balled up hanky. I could see the tears were welling up in her eyes behind the cat-eye glasses. Miss Sadie stared away to some far invisible land as she pondered the likely grim future for her grandson. She took a deep breath, flashed a forced smile and tried to end my visit.

"What else can I do for you, young man?"

"Miss Sadie, I need to know where Lester is so I can ask him some questions."

"Well, sir, a few weeks ago Lester got a few of his things and walked out

when I told him that I wouldn't tolerate no drugs in my house. He would always have that boy with him. The two of them would smoke that stuff and stink up my house. That boy surely ain't up to no good. And my Lester ain't far behind." Her tears and worry began again.

"Ma'am, which boy are you talking about?"

"That boy who smiles all the time and walks with the palsy."

I knew exactly what Miss Sadie meant when she said "palsy." The old folks used to say that someone had the "palsy" whenever a person had a limp or slow gait. Lester's friend apparently had a defining limp.

"What's his name?"

"The boy with the palsy?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I don't know him but Lester calls him 'Billy.' That's all I know. Whenever he and Lester come here, they go back to Lester's room."

I pressed further, "Miss Sadie, where is Lester?"

She paused and then confessed, "Honestly, sir, I don't know where that boy is at. I hope he's safe and eatin' right. To tell the truth, I hope he never darkens my door again." I didn't believe her. Her voice quivered and broke.

"Yes ma'am."

Miss Sadie wiped a tear with her snot rag and cleared her throat.

"Ma'am, do you have a picture of Lester that I could look at?"

"You can take this one right here." Ms. Sadie removed the black and white photo of Lester from the oval frame that stood on the nearby end table.

"Detective, this is him. He's around. You can sometimes see him riding his bike near the park. If you find him, please tell my Lester that I love him. And if you have a few dollars, can you make sure he has something to eat?"

As pitiful and lonely as she sounded, I promised to deliver her message and to feed her grandson. I finished my coffee, thanked Miss Sadie for the same and left to find Lester.

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