

## What Others are Saying about "A Deadly Suggestion"

"Once I started, I couldn't put it down. It had a lot of interesting twists and turns that kept me on the edge of my seat for half the night. I finished the book the next day. I absolutely loved it! It's one of my favorite books now. I can't wait until she writes another!"

-- P. Koehler, Fountain Valley, CA

"I have read 'Deadly...' Oh, yes, it is deadly. I am a lover of mysteries and murders and this one really takes you to it all. It is so well written you can actually visualize the personalities, the scenarios. It is a *grand* read. I am sorry it ended. I really tried to read it slower so the book would last longer. I just could not put it down. Loved it and cannot wait for the next one!!!"

-- L. Tanons, Blaine, WA

"This book has the potential to be a bestseller & Robin has the trademark of being a bestselling author. Starting from the prologue, the book hooked me in like a fish on a line. It kept me guessing to the very end. Just when I thought I knew who the killer was, she throws in another twist. I was reading this book everywhere I went. I would certainly recommend this book to all my friends. In retrospect, it was like reading a Dan Brown novel. I have not seen that many twists and turns since "Da Vinci Code". Thank you for letting me read your novel. It was really well thought out.

-- A. Chan, Vancouver, Canada

# **A DEADLY SUGGESTION**

**R.W. Williams**

**Smashwords Edition**

**Copyright 2012 R.W. Williams**

**Smashwords Edition, License Notes**

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) and purchase your own copy.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

## **Dedication**

If anyone thinks that dedication of a book is just a perfunctory chore for the author, it really isn't. Without the support and understanding of family and friends, obviously my first book, "A Deadly Suggestion," couldn't have come about. With my starts and stops on its writing came discussions of finding an editor, finding readers to give it a proper review, and my splashing of my proposed book cover on their computer screen through the internet, just to see if they thought it carried a *come hither if you dare* message. Even the dog got into the act, poking her nose under my hand and flipping it off the keyboard, telling me it was time to go play instead of type. Now that's one smart pooch.

So with all my heartfelt love and thanks I dedicate this book to all those who said, "You're kidding," when I told them I was writing a murder mystery thriller, my family and friends who said, "I want to read it," and then gave it their stamp of approval, and to all those readers who found my writing grabbed them by the throat and didn't let go until they'd finished the book. They can now exhale!

## Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#) (The Scene)

[Chapter 2](#) (Best Friends Forever)

[Chapter 3](#) (Poor Sap)

[Chapter 4](#) (Reality Can Be Brutal)

[Chapter 5](#) (Dr Jekyll or Mr. Hyde)

[Chapter 6](#) (Same Accident, Different State)

[Chapter 7](#) (Gone Fishing)

[Chapter 8](#) (My Sister's Missing)

[Chapter 9](#) (Spin Cycle)

[Chapter 10](#) (The Link)

[Chapter 11](#) (No One Left)

[Chapter 12](#) (The Phone Calls)

[Chapter 13](#) (Bonanza)

[Chapter 14](#) (Chasing an Alias)

[Chapter 15](#) (His Phone Call)

[Chapter 16](#) (A Cold Day in Heaven)

[Chapter 17](#) (Nanoseconds to Launch)

[Chapter 18](#) (So Many Questions, Not Enough Time)

[Prologue](#)

[About the Author](#)

## Prologue

That's all! *I've had it!* Get out and take your cheating and your twisted mind with you!" From the level of extreme rage Kathryn suddenly clenched her teeth and lowered her voice to a hissing whisper. Her final words oozed ominous. He froze. If he moved, a rustling of his windbreaker might wipe out her parting comment. "Stay on this train and hell is your next stop." Besides his cheating, she knew he was attempting to do *something* terribly wrong. His questions all the time, they were dark in their intent. He was using her.

He knew. It was *over!* He remembered her rage the first time she caught him cheating. The sparkle of their early years slowly washed away. It was like a broken vase, glued back together but the cracks always showed. But this time! This time she raged at more than just his cheating. The shattering of their marriage was with such force its pieces were now nothing but small shards of dust; nothing left to glue. He turned and headed out the door taking nothing with him but his computer. To him the rest was unimportant. His only frustration was her unwillingness to feed him any further information for his research, his *groundbreaking* research! He was sure she didn't know what he was up to. As he made a beeline to his car he told himself she wasn't necessary. His work was almost complete. He could figure out the rest by himself. And if she did suddenly realize his goal, he assured himself she knew not to get in his way!

As she heard his car door slam and the engine start, she ran to the bathroom and threw up. Her head was spinning. What kind of monster had he become?



## Chapter 1 (The Scene)

The scene was all too familiar. Vehicle upside down, smoke from a smoldering but suppressed fire still visible, the coroner's vehicle on scene. It told a great deal to anyone driving by. Someone was dead.

“What do we have, Carver,” Lieutenant Trotman from the State Patrol's Crime Investigation Division asked through his window as he pulled up. He parked in the grassy median of Interstate 5. Red emergency lights and the Crime Scene Response Team were already on site. The heavy rain continued to fall off and on as it had throughout the night, and winds remained gusty. An accident like the one in front of him wasn't uncommon. A sleepy occupant or too much speed and a heavy shove from the wind on rain slicked roads, it so often lead to someone's demise. But tonight—tonight the appearance of a possible crime scene made the difference.

“We have a rollover, what looks to be a Ford Explorer, looks like one vic, and they're crisp. And we need to talk to Captain Wilkerson from Fire. We're heading for a long night. His crew is crying foul.”

Lieutenant John Trotman showed no reaction. Nothing surprised him after 33 years. The Department was his whole life. The last half of his career was spent investigating crime scenes as part of the State Patrol's Crime Investigation Division.

The detectives were called upon because Captain Wilkerson's firemen let him know they smelled a crime scene and requested further investigation. The pattern of the burn and a shaking young flight attendant's tearful description brought the rollover into question.

The only witness to the accident, she arrived to see a blazing car on its roof with the driver's side interior engulfed in flames. Now sitting in a Medic One unit, her mind was wrapped around her hysterical call to 9-1-1 for help and the interminable wait. The memory of the victim's last moments lashed at her. She still saw the woman screaming and clawing at the glass. At one-twenty in the morning few cars were on the I-5 to witness the horror she saw unfold. Her mind replayed and replayed the scene. She did not dare close her eyes. The memory of what happened was too graphic.

“Captain Wilkerson? C.I.D. I'm Detective Trotman, and this is Detective Carver.”

The fire captain was short on words. “I think this is an inside job.” Trotman looked with a frown at the Ford Explorer and then back to the captain. “The burn pattern inside the car indicates the use of an accelerant. The bad part is between us and the fire; external clues are few and far between. But if my antennae are picking up the signals I think they are, the evidence is on the inside. It's going to take a lot of ash sifting to figure this one out, but my gut tells me this needs some serious follow-up.”

When cars are ablaze in the center divider, the last concern of firefighters is preserving clues. Most single vehicle rollovers are accidental, and rescue personnel don't tiptoe around evidence in a possible crime scene when a victim or others are in danger.

Trotman was intrigued. “That means someone rolled it, hosed it down and likely lit it to hide something or kill a witness, a-- a girlfriend who knows too much or”. . . His voice trailed off as he pondered the reasons for such an act.

Wilkerson shook his head. “Well, that's a possible scenario. But if they did, they were in it when it rolled, spread the accelerant, lit the fire and then made like Houdini and got out through hot metal, not a window. The car's roll crush makes the inability to open a door or



window a sure thing. And finding even a partial window opening big enough to climb out? That's a no go.

“And at the time your witness gets here, the car is already on its roof and someone is in the front seat screaming and on fire. That's what's so weird. The car is burning in the front seat with the victim inside. Neither the engine nor the gas tank is involved, yet the victim and her side of the car are cooking. The start of the fire is strictly inside only and limited to one corner of the interior at first. But the roll leaves the car crushed enough that your witness can't get the doors open to save the victim. Then not but a minute later she can't get near the car. The inside is fully involved and the fire has worked its way outside. With the victim obviously gone by now, the witness can only call for help and wait for us.”

Carver jumped in next. “So what's your take on how someone could pull this off?”

Wilkerson chuckled through his first words. “I don't have one; just a certainty this is arson and it's resulted in a death. That's why we invited you boys to the party. CSRT will be busy for a while with this one!”

Carver knew the Crime Scene Response Team's partnership with the Crime Laboratory Division and the Criminal Investigation Division of The Washington State Patrol would keep all three agencies coordinating efforts on what on first blush had him mulling the scenario that might fit this crime.

Wilkerson continued, “Patrol handed your witness off to Medics and they have her tucked in the back of their unit. She's pretty shocky.”

The detectives knew all too well that even the most seasoned Department veteran couldn't listen to someone screaming and see them incinerate before their eyes, and then dust themselves off and go on about their business.

Carver nodded and said he'd go check on her, knowing a close-behind Trotman would soon want to start questioning. "What's her name?"

"Lucinda Neely. She works for Alaska Airlines as a stewardess and she was heading home from SeaTac when the accident happened. She lives in Bellingham. Her husband is on his way."

Stewardess! Detective Sam Carver under normal circumstances would have corrected Captain Wilkerson. With his own sister a 20-year veteran as a flight attendant, he learned long ago "stewardess" was a dirty word. But his lighthearted correction to someone else under different circumstances would have to go unspoken tonight.

Once a Washington State Trooper before his promotion, Carver looked like a tank coming at you when he approached. A leftover vestige from his college football days, his 260-pound 6'3" frame intimidated anyone who had business with him, *if* they were on the wrong side of a case. But his effect on distraught women after only a few sentences was always more like a giant teddy bear. "I'll head on over to see the witness." With that, Carver excused himself.

Pondering and oblivious to the charred victim still in the car, Trotman walked around the burned out vehicle which was still upside down and jammed against a cable in the center of the median. Then he headed over to question the witness. Lucinda Neely was a stunning brunette with shoulder length hair and a perfect manicure. She was still in her uniform but for the tennis shoes she slipped on just after landing. The trek to the crew bus was a long haul to begin with, but walking to her car in the outlying employee parking lot in her work shoes was all but impossible.

Her day had been miserable. Environmentalists surely blamed Global Warming for what they viewed as an unusual weather pattern, but pilots viewed the weather as just another typical

summer storm with heavy turbulence. The ratty weather of the last four days had harassed them all the way to Seattle. All week long pilots reported wicked west southwest headwinds in most areas of the U.S., strong winds aloft, up and downdrafts buffeting their planes to and fro. Lucinda Neely's flight was no different. The headwinds slowed their flight to a crawl. And relief wasn't found with flight level change either, which left the jet to flop about in the sky throughout much of the trip. The weather's severity forced the flight attendants to cancel the expected trips down the aisle with the drink cart and the obligatory miniscule peanut bags.

That day she was the "A" flight attendant in first class on board one of Alaska Airline's Boeing 737-700s that took off from Dallas-Fort Worth. But before they could continue on their way to SeaTac Airport in Seattle, the need for immediate medical attention for a heart attack victim up front forced an unplanned landing in Denver. A doctor on board rendered assistance and the crew utilized Med Link, a direct line to emergency physicians on the ground, but there was nothing more the passenger-physician could do. The victim didn't survive long enough for the pilots to get their plane on the ground. Yes, for Lucinda this had been a *very* long day!

In the Medic One van her statement to Trotman and Carver was brief. She struggled to speak through the obvious shock which racked her both mentally and physically. She sat on the gurney in the aid truck, her feet and legs pressed together firmly, her shoulders hunched forward with her arms crossed tightly as if chilled to the bone. She was wrapped in a blanket by the Medic to help stave off the shivers which consumed her.

After Trotman introduced himself his questions led her into the night's tragedy. Her answers painted a picture that would hold her mind in its grip for weeks to come. She thought maybe she had seen a set of taillights up ahead cut suddenly to the left. It looked like something was wrong, but through the driving rain, even with the windshield wipers on high; it was hard to

be sure what she had seen. It was quite a distance ahead. But then mere seconds later she caught up to the errant vehicle on its roof with the driver's door up against the cable barrier and the fire mostly on the driver's side at first.

Detective Carver remembered the accidents of long ago before the cable system was in place. Through the years too many one and two-car accidents had occurred with out-of-control cars propelled into oncoming traffic through the grassy median in the center of the freeway. Deadly head-on collisions or single car rollovers were the result all too often. After research proved its effectiveness, the Cable Median Safety Barrier was installed by the State to stop just such scenarios. It wasn't a perfect system, but its statewide 95 percent success rate was proof positive it was a wise decision.

Due to the unusual number of cross-over accidents that still managed to occur through the Marysville stretch, though, the cable barrier had to be doubled. Then in February of 2007 an SUV ripped through both cable systems in the stretch between Arlington and Marysville and slammed into a bus. The SUV driver died and Washington's Governor Gregoire ordered an immediate study of what the issues were and what could be done. In July of 2007 the recommendation was returned. Put in concrete barriers through that 10-mile stretch. But in victim Beth Langley's case, whether double cable systems or the eventual installation of a concrete barrier in the future, neither mattered. She was already dead.

Detective Carver felt for Lucinda as she haltingly described the accident. Her facial expression never changed, frozen in numbness now from the horror she saw. She stared at the floor of the medic unit as she spoke, her eyes locked on one spot. She rarely blinked. Her lips hardly moved as she answered each question in a barely audible voice. She was telling about the final moments of the accident when a trooper briefly stuck his head in to let the medic know her

husband had arrived and was waiting outside. They had earlier asked her who they could contact for her. She was in no shape to drive home.

Trotman pushed through the last two questions and stopped. He was confident he had enough information for now. Though her facial expression was that of a blank wall, her mind held her hostage in the last moment, that moment when it all unfolded, a moment that would continue to replay itself for weeks to come, months, maybe years. She needed emotional support now that only her husband could provide.

Trotman and Carver stepped out of the medic unit in the wee hours of the morning. Lucinda's answers had yielded the difficult-to-tell scenario. The roof was caved in heavily on the passenger side and prevented any escape or rescue by a passersby. The windows that were still in tact and not crushed were on the driver's side, jammed tightly against the Cable Median Safety Barrier. When she crossed the cables she could see someone inside. She had run over to the car hoping to help the victim, but the median cable secured the driver's door in place and trapped the woman. She heard the victim's screams and saw her hanging upside down while she banged her fists on the driver's side window, a terrifying scene that seemed to play out over minutes, when in fact it was merely seconds. Then there was silence as the woman inside stopped screaming while choking on the smoke and was finally claimed by the flames. A loud kawahump followed and the whole car was engulfed inside and out. No, Lucinda didn't see anyone running away. Yes, she could smell gas, she thought.

The accident investigation team arrived and 4:30 AM showed the early morning light. July's long summer days allowed CSRT to get well into their work before traffic got heavy. Photographs of the victim, the position of the car, skid marks, torn up grass in the center divider, it all had to be compiled before the victim could be removed and the car hauled away.



## Chapter 2 (Best Friends Forever)

As she waited for her best friend to arrive, Stacy Turner was stretched out on her couch in her pajamas. After her friend Beth's call at 1 AM, she started to watch an old movie to stay awake until her friend's arrival, but she nodded off instead. When she awoke and realized her friend was a no-show, Stacy's concern grew into fear. Beth's call put her on alert that her friend needed a place to stay and a friendly shoulder to cry on. But three hours later a quick trip of only 15 minutes produced no further phone calls and no best friend. Someone Stacy loved like a sister was missing.

The prior day Beth told Stacy her deepest secrets. She spilled forth about her poor choice of a boyfriend; his temper, his drinking, his attachment to internet porn, his Jekyll and Hyde personality. The man of two years ago was gone. He wasn't even the same man of six months ago. She told secrets she'd been holding in for months.

Stacy flashed back to Beth's thrill when she first met *Mr. Right*. Back then the two women shared their secrets as usual, but fun secrets. Neither of them groused about their men. In fact, Beth just about floated when she talked about *her* guy! He always came across as the perfect gentleman. That's why she moved in with him so quickly. She described him as her "prince." But in the last six months their two-year relationship showed more and more rough edges and Geoff exhibited a darker side. What a change! In the beginning Geoffrey Ghio dazzled Beth; by night a country & western fan complete with boots, big belt buckle and a cowboy hat when out doing the town, and by day a mechanic. A wounded veteran of the Marines, America considered him one of its war heroes.

Stacy snapped back to reality. Beth was missing! She felt anxious enough to call Geoff's apartment, like him or not. But when he answered and sounded shocked at Beth's failure to arrive at Stacy's, alarm bells sounded for both of them. She was convinced he'd done something to her friend. Geoff wanted to call the hospitals. He knew Beth when she was upset. She hightailed it to Stacy's every single time.

Stacy was sure Geoff had done something bad, and she knew the motive for Geoff's actions, the reason for Beth's disappearance. Less than twenty-four hours earlier Stacy had been a shoulder for Beth to cry on. Beth confided about her pregnancy and how terrified she was to tell Geoff. Obviously she must have told him and somehow he took care of the situation. Stacy called 9-1-1.



### Chapter 3 (Poor Sap)

The commute was grueling this morning. Max Torkleson had no idea what was up ahead, but assumed someone's "stupid attack" knotted up the I-5. Any more he hated the occasional morning drive from his home in Mount Vernon to downtown Seattle. It never failed to take over an hour, yet the weekends produced a mere 45-minute trip.

As Max's car crawled along in traffic, the radio made only short mention to commuters of the early morning fatality involving a Ford Explorer on the I-5 in Marysville. The identity of the sole victim was as yet unavailable, which was standard right after any accident.

"Poor sap. What a crappy way to go. Probably fell asleep at the wheel." Max made audible commentaries to himself about the news. Talk radio, news, things he saw, drivers that pissed him off, he had something to say about everything, with or without an audience. And if no comment spewed forth about what he saw, sensed or heard, his tape recorder was up to his mouth. Max recorded his agenda for the day or follow-up thoughts for one of his cases. He never took notes when investigating something. He taped every thought. Then his secretary/daughter typed it all up later. Barbara was his right-hand ma'am when it came to office duties, and an excellent sounding board for his ideas.

Retired after 35 years with the State Troopers and C.I.D and now a freelance investigator, Max was still addicted to the thrill. Though he was a bit of an odd duck, he really knew his stuff. He had a keen sense for thinking outside the box, *way* outside the box. Though he was often hired to consult when cases baffled the pros at C.I.D., he also testified in court in

civil litigation. It was the thrill of the hunt, though, that made him tick. He just wished he could hunt and solve and not have to spend time testifying in court.

Gads, how the traffic limped along! But soon he came upon the crash site at about mile post 203 on the I-5 in Marysville. How convenient for State Troopers. It was just a mile from their District 7 headquarters. . I-5 through that area hosted chronic congestion in peak traffic, as this poorly planned portion of the freeway bottlenecked regularly due to the freeway's even tighter choke in Everett. This morning was brutal. The burned out hulk of a Ford Explorer sat on the back of a flat bed truck and only a Washington State Department of Transportation vehicle remained with its flashing "Merge Right" sign still in place. WSDOT's Accident Response crew deployed any time a major traffic revision became necessary.

Investigators had already left, but the charred remains of the vehicle caught the eyes of the rubber neckers, most of whom, if they read the newspaper the next day, would associate the rollover with past accidents involving Ford Explorers and Firestone Tires, even though litigation had settled and Ford had recalled all involved vehicles to replace the tires.

## Chapter 4 (Reality Can Be Brutal)

Stacy's heart sank after 9-1-1. The officer they forwarded her call to told her that there wasn't really anything they could do unless Beth had specifically told her in her late night call that she had injuries from her boyfriend or her boyfriend had threatened her and she was running from him. He took Stacy's name and number just in case, along with Beth's full name.

After she dressed, a quick drive at 6 AM delivered her to the doorstep of the Marysville Police Department. She tugged at the front door and discovered the office wouldn't open until eight. Then she noticed a sign that said, "In case of fire or police emergency pick up phone." The red phone was mounted on the wall next to the station door where she stood. When she picked it up, a voice came on saying, "State the nature of your emergency."

"I need help. My friend has disappeared and an officer said there was nothing he could do for me. I need to talk to another officer."

The response held anything but what she wanted to hear. "Ma'am, we'd like to help you, but this *is* 9-1-1 and if someone else said they can't help, referring your call to another officer won't change anything. Did you call 9-1-1 earlier?"

Stacy was stunned and managed an "Uh-huh, but --"

Then the emergency operator asked if she had spoken to an officer at Marysville Police Department and did she remember his name, but she didn't remember. "Did he ask you questions about her name and her car and other pertinent information? They keep notes of what they ask you. If he said you can't really file a missing person's report as you have no indication that anything has happened to her, he still has the information you gave him."

She cringed. This couldn't be happening to her. She thanked the operator and put the phone down. As she stepped away from the phone, she leaned up against the station wall. She tried to think -- think of *something* she could do. Then as she looked to her left she saw a police car turn into the station driveway and she ran after them and yelled at them to wait.

She tried not to cry as she explained that her friend Beth was missing, that Beth's call at 1 AM was alarming because she sounded extremely upset and needed a place to stay and said she was on her way. But she never arrived. Stacy told them she had spoken to another officer and told him that she was sure Beth's ex-boyfriend had done something to her. After hearing that comment, the officers politely stated there was nothing they could do. She could wait until eight when the station's front desk opened and try talking to a desk sergeant. And besides, it had only been five hours and many people just drove around and tried to get their thoughts together after a breakup.

"What city does she live in?" Officer Willis at least asked one question.

"Arlington."

"Ma'am, you should go talk to law enforcement there. That would be the appropriate jurisdiction. It's unlikely they'll let you file a missing person's report this early. For sure we can't."

But then one of them remembered chatter on the radio earlier regarding a rollover fatality on the I-5. It was Tom Willis, the passenger officer who again spoke up. "How would your friend get to your house? Would she drive the I-5 or take surface streets?"

Stacy had made the drive many times and knew it by heart. "She'd get on the freeway and then -- Why? Why did you ask me that?"

“We’re really trying to help, ma’am. If you answer our questions instead of asking us questions we might be able to point you in the right direction. What kind of car did your friend drive?” Stacy thought it was an Explorer, and it was green, forest green, an earlier model. The officers looked at each other without speaking and decided to take her inside. They put her in an interview room and Officer Willis told her to hang tight.

“Give me a few minutes. I’ll make some calls. It’s unlikely anything has happened to your friend, but I’ll see if I can find something out for you.” He had softened toward the pursuit of her friend’s whereabouts. What Stacy didn’t realize was the officer didn’t have to place a *few* phone calls. He dialed the WSP District 7 Headquarters directly. While Officer Willis was on the call that would yield cut and dry results, his partner got Stacy some coffee and made some basic notes; time of contact, Stacy’s name, address, date of birth, etc. At last! She was getting somewhere.

Within ten minutes an unmarked Washington State Trooper vehicle pulled into the station parking lot and Detectives Carver and Trotman came in. In only a few minutes with very few questions under their belts, Stacy’s world would most certainly be torn apart, but until the detectives did their job they would remain unconvinced.

In the couple hours before this call from Marysville PD, Carver and Trotman verified the burned out hulk was registered to a George Watkins of Bellingham, not Beth Langley of Arlington. At first blush it seemed there was a possibility that the I-5 wreck did not involve Beth. Perhaps it was this George Watkins’ wife or daughter. But the other facts overridingly pointed to Beth. Registration indicated the vehicle was indeed green. It was headed the proper direction from Arlington to Marysville with a single female occupant, the accident *did* happen shortly after 1 AM, and according to the witness, the woman trapped in the car appeared to be in

her early 20s. There were also suspicions raised after a preliminary inspection of the wreckage by the Crime Scene Response Team concurred that an accelerant was sprayed in the inside of the car. The hunt was on for the how and the why. Stacy's description of a frantic friend afraid to tell a maniac boyfriend she was pregnant all made murder a possibility.

This would be a hard discussion to have with this young woman. Both Carver and Trotman loathed their responsibility to tell anyone that a person who had been a part of their life for years had sadly had their own life snuffed out so tragically. With his best poker face on, Officer Willis entered the interview room with Detective Trotman and Carver in tow. Without mentioning they were from the State Patrol, he introduced them. "Stacy, this is Detective John Trotman and this is Detective Sam Carver. I made some phone calls to see if I could turn anything up regarding your friend, and these gentlemen would like to help."

Detective Trotman smiled a half smile at Stacy and sat down while he dumped his hat and coat on the chair next to him. His mostly gray hair, wrinkled forehead and sagging jowls showed a man old enough to be her grandfather, but his eyes did not convey the softness of Carver's. Trotman's were more the eyes of a tired old bloodhound with sags and bags underneath. His belly protruded beyond the belt that held his pants at waist level. The holes in his belt were very worn and stretched, and the leather was cracked. His appearance also made her think he probably wasn't married, kind of that long-time bachelor look.

"Stacy, Officer Willis filled me in over the phone about your concerns for your friend's whereabouts and a boyfriend who might have harmed her. Your friend, Beth Langley, did – does she have family in this state, I mean somewhere she might go besides your house? You know, she *could* be safely tucked away catching up on her sleep after the lousy night she had last

night.” He was gingerly trying to see if there was a connection between the registered owner of the vehicle and her missing friend.

Stacy blasted back at him. “She would *never* have gone to Bellingham. She was too upset. She called me and said she was coming over. She was already in her car. And as much as her stepdad loves her, I know she wouldn’t feel comfortable telling him her boyfriend flipped out and she needed someplace to go. Besides, she called me from her cell phone while she was driving.”

Trotman asked the question another way. “Who in Bellingham would she go to if she changed her mind? Maybe she reconsidered and decided to put distance between her and her boyfriend?”

“No way! We’re like sisters. The day before yesterday I spent the whole day with her and she told me what was going on with her and Geoff. I know for sure Geoff’s playing dumb. I called him at 4 AM to ask where she was, after she didn’t show up, and he said, “I’m gonna call the hospitals,” like he was just an innocent boyfriend just as concerned as me. Yeah, right!” Stacy was starting to wind up again.

Carver caught Trotman’s eye and tilted his head a bit, kind of a “Let me see if I can get her spooled down a little.” It was one of those looks that long-time cronies could read and know exactly what the other meant without a word. He wanted to show Stacy a friendlier face in the room, someone with a softer demeanor, someone who probably had three daughters of his own and knew how she felt.

“Stacy, I watched my daughters in perfect friendships while they were growing up. They still have them. Those girls could practically read each other’s minds. But in real life even their closest friends sometimes have their ESP foiled. Let’s just for a moment assume your friend

drove somewhere other than your house. You mentioned Beth's stepfather. He's in Bellingham? Where is her mother?"

"Her mother died several years ago, but George loves Beth like she's his own daughter and they're very close. But, see, the kind of stuff that's going on in her life I know she'd be embarrassed to tell to him and – well, I mean he loves her enough to loan her his spare car permanently and keep paying the insurance on it, but there are just things women can't talk about to their dads."

Ugh! There was that not-wanted-but-anticipated piece of information that dashed any chance to not break her heart. "George" would no doubt be George Watkins, the owner of the forest green early model Ford Explorer that had rolled and taken Beth's life.

"Do you know her stepdad's last name so we could call him to double-check?"

"Watkins! You can call him but you're wasting your time. Beth isn't there! I *know* her stepdad. He's wonderful, but she isn't there. She wouldn't go clear to Bellingham, and if she had she'd have called me so I wouldn't worry."

Carver was quiet for a minute. He knew Trotman would leave the dirty work to him. Tears weren't something the never-married childless detective knew how to handle, and anyhow, he needed a cigarette. "I'll be right back." Trotman grabbed his hat and jacket and headed out the door. Office staff had finally shown up at the front desk and he asked that a female officer head back to the interview room where Stacy and Carver sat. It would be better with a woman nearby.

Carver hated this moment. It brought back memories, horrible memories of a long-ago tragedy in his children's lives. Sam Carver was thinking back to a time when he was a patrolman with the Washington State Patrol. He struggled with each fatality to which 9-1-1



dispatched him. In his 19 years he saw way too many grim endings to drivers or their passengers. The worst involved children who hadn't even had a chance at life, sent to the graveyard by a careless or drunk driver. He never seemed able to block those accidents out.

Sam, a widower, had watched his wife succumb to breast cancer six years earlier. His own kids were grown now, but he remembered vividly a long ago call from dispatch to a rollover when his children were still young, only to discover the van involved had his next door neighbor's three kids on board with a fellow school mate and a mother. His children and those on board the ill-fated vehicle were best of friends. It was a discussion he would have given anything to not have with his family; explaining they'd lost their best friends, only sharing the deaths and holding back the terrible details of the fire that ensued. Too bad the newspapers couldn't keep their sensationalism at bay and have some compassion for the family and friends of the victims. The children's deaths always haunted him, that and the parents' devastation over the loss and their eventual divorce, as neither could find any love left in themselves to hang onto each other. Sam watched them drift apart, something another child could never fix, a chasm so great that only God could fill it, but they had no belief left in their God. He wouldn't have done this. He wouldn't have let this happen.

Just as Carver began to talk, a woman entered the room to stand by. "Stacy, this is going to be difficult for you, I know. But there was a rollover on

I-5 this morning, a green Ford Explorer, and the driver didn't make it. Her vehicle rolled over and --"

"No. NO! NO! She couldn't have! She wouldn't have! No. Don't say this! You're lying! You're wrong!!!! You're wrong!!!!!! You're-- Oh, n-o-o-o-o! She sobbed deeply as her chest heaved with the racking pain of loss that he delivered. Carver just wanted to hold her the

way he had held his kids so long ago when he told them their best friends went to heaven. But she was across the table and the female officer was at her side immediately as Stacy fell apart. Carver left them alone for a bit to give her time to cry.

After a while her sobbing turned to silence and a blank stare. When Carver and Trotman returned she finally spoke. She asked to call Beth's stepfather. Carver asked her to wait. She still had important information for them that would help locate Beth's boyfriend. The sooner they picked him up the sooner they could provide answers to Stacy and Beth's stepfather.

She was devastated by the loss. With her best friend gone forever her numbness turned to anger. She wanted to make sure that Geoff didn't do this to anyone else. She loved Beth like a sister and now all she thought about was *making him pay*. While she gave information to Trotman, Carver sent a trooper to pick up the boyfriend for questioning. He wasn't a suspect *yet*, only a person of interest. And the more Stacy talked, the more their interest in him grew.

Stacy told the detectives everything she knew about Geoff Ghio, right down to the minutia. From the time Beth first fell for him she shared everything with Stacy; his war stories, the loss of his parents, his early release from the military, his inheritance, his new life on the West Coast. Stacy knew it all. Before Stacy broke up with her own boyfriend Carl, the two couples double dated and occasionally went on weekend trips together. But shortly after Carl and she called it quits, things also started south for Beth with Geoff. He became moody, and his whole personality and demeanor morphed.

Stacy knew where he worked, his home address and the car he drove. The car was different now than the one he had when they all hung out together. She'd seen his new Miata recently when he came looking for Beth. He didn't like it when Beth and Stacy hung out

together now. That was the other thing that changed when Beth's world started to spin out of control.

Detective Trotman asked Stacy for more details regarding why Beth had her stepfather's car.

"It had been loaned to Beth kind of permanently because her car's engine seized and her stepdad gave her his old car to drive until she could afford to repair her own. The Explorer sat for over two years without moving from George's carport, so Geoff begrudgingly gave it a tune-up. He had refused to work on her Protégé because she bought it used from a guy at her work without letting Geoff check it out first. It turned out to be a lemon. He didn't want to loan her money for a new engine because, 'She was stupid to not let him check it out first.' quote unquote.

"Her stepdad bought a new Lincoln a couple years ago and didn't need the Explorer, but getting anything more than peanuts for the Explorer at a time when that big lawsuit over the tires and the Explorer was going on, selling it was just impossible. When Beth's car died he just handed her the keys to—he called it his 'green machine.' He was the dad Beth didn't have. She drove it for about three months before . . ." Stacy's voice trailed off.

The mention of an "old car" brought forward thoughts of Ford Explorer rollovers, and Trotman and Carver wondered whether this "old" Explorer had ever had its recall repairs done, its tires changed. That was yet another question to be answered.

"So Geoff had worked on the Explorer once in the couple months she'd had it?" Trotman was just aching for more information to justify the dispatch of troopers to pick this guy up, but a three-month-old tune-up was an anemic excuse.

Stacy said, “He worked on it twice. He tuned it up once, and then on Sunday he insisted he change the oil because he didn’t want her to ‘screw up another car.’”

Trotman clarified. “So he worked on it Sunday and Monday she was off work. Do you know what she did Monday?”

“Yes. We spent the day together. I was off work too.”

“Did she drive the car other than to meet you at your place or did she pick you up and the two of you head off?”

“No. We took my car.”

“Why?”

“No reason really. My car was relatively new and I liked driving it so we just took it.”

“Did she tell you that Geoff insisted he change the oil or did you see him work on it?”

“She told me. That’s how I knew he said he didn’t want her screwing up another car.”

\*\*\*

By 8:30 AM Geoff Ghio found himself in the back seat of a WSP cruiser. A mechanic running a small shop, his one part-time worker witnessed his boss’ invitation to District 7 Headquarters. Though Ghio didn’t protest when the troopers told him he had to come with them for questioning, he still was incredulous this was happening.

Stacy obviously made good on calling the police. How could she think he had anything to do with Beth’s disappearance? He loved Beth. She just got on his nerves the night before and he said some things he shouldn’t. But he never *did* anything to her. Did they think he murdered her or something? What was going on?

\*\*\*

Though the Crime Scene Response guys confirmed an accelerant's use, the ignition source was still a mystery. Victims don't just set themselves on fire driving 60 miles an hour on the freeway. But all possibilities, no matter how ridiculous, had to be explored. Sometimes truth truly is stranger than fiction. Though an outrageous thought, could the strain of her pregnancy by a man who deep down hated her be enough to set her on a course to this kind of end? No one would want to burn to death. It made no sense. It all made no sense. An accelerant, an old Ford Explorer which hadn't been driven in a while; where did the truth lie?

\*\*\*

When Stacy's interview finished she headed to the front door of the police station at the same time Carver received a phone call. Geoff Ghio was now at the lion's den. Carver told Stacy that Ghio was at headquarters and to expect later contact by either himself or Detective Trotman.

## Chapter 5 (Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde)

On their way out, the detectives thanked the Marysville police chief for the use of the interview room. Minutes later they were back in their own facility. They looked through the one-way glass and saw Geoff scribble something, then stuff the piece of paper in his pocket. “Let’s go meet this bad boy,” Trotman quipped. Their entry didn’t evoke the slightest acknowledgement from the “American hero.”

Trotman started with an explanation. “Geoff—I can call you Geoff, can’t I?” There was no response. “I’d like to explain why we brought you in for questioning. We need as much information as you can give us regarding Beth Langley.”

That got Ghio to speak up. “Where *is* Beth? What’d Stacy accuse me of? If Beth’s got bruises then she fell or something, because *I* haven’t touched her.” Geoff was agitated and very edgy. No doubt the ride with the Gestapo shook him.

Trotman asked him to relax and just give them a few minutes of his time. Carver slipped a glass of water in front of him as Trotman continued. “I’m going to need your full name and social.” With the receipt of that information Carver immediately left the room. Of note was the fact that Geoff had to look at his Social Security card first. Most employed adults had it memorized, but Trotman was sure if he asked him why he had to look at it first, he’d produce an excuse.

Trotman poured Geoff a glass of water and handed it to him. Then he began with his questions. “Tell me about your relationship with Beth. Boyfriend-girlfriend? You guys engaged to be married? Just having a few laughs?”

“Yeah, living together.” Geoff was slouched in his chair with his upper body canted slightly to one side, the fingers on his right hand making circles on the table in front of him, his eyes staring at his hand.

“How long? I mean was this relationship going somewhere, likely to continue? Were you two engaged?”

Geoff got a weird smirk on his face. “Well, at first I thought it was leading somewhere. She was a kick in the pants and liked to go do a lot of the same things I did. She was fun to be around.” Then he got a half smile going, “Let’s just say she had my attention.”

So she had your number, so to speak.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see some change in Beth that made your relationship turn rocky? I mean was she cheating on you? Was she just not giving you as much attention as before?”

Geoff’s facial expression altered. His jaw started to tighten, his eyes dropped and he sat forward, focused on the table. He didn’t answer. He just started pressing harder with his finger on the table, moving his finger faster, like he was spelling something, but he wasn’t saying anything. “Geoff, did something happen recently that changed your relationship with Beth?”

“I don’t know. She just – she just started acting weird is all. She started keeping secrets. That and she was always out with Stacy. It was like all the sudden this long lost buddy from the past started showing up constantly and Beth was out catting about with her instead of being home on her day off. They used to just talk on the phone but then she started hanging around with that skank all the time.” Geoff was visibly irritated.

“By ‘skank’ do you mean Stacy?”

“Yeah, the skank.”

“I thought you, Beth, Stacy and her boyfriend used to hang together.”

“Yeah, we did. Then they broke up and Stacy disappeared for a while. But then the next time she called Beth everything started going wrong.”

“A minute ago you said Beth ‘started keeping secrets.’ What kind of secrets?”

“I can’t remember. It was – it was --“ then he paused.

Trotman asked again. “What kind of secrets?” Trotman enjoyed digging at the wound. “Just give me an example.”

Whatever was going on behind the eyes that were staring at the surface of the table, Trotman knew this guy had a few secrets of his own and his powder keg attitude had a match just a few inches from the fuse.

“What kind of secrets, Geoff?”

“I can’t remember. Just -- I need a cigarette.”

Trotman gave a half chuckle. “Yeah, me too, but no can do. Let’s stay on course here and then we can both go have one.” The veteran kept the discussion moving along. “Now, just sit back and think for a minute and see if you can give us an example of the types of secrets she was keeping. I mean if you knew she was keeping secrets you must have found out what they were or you wouldn’t know she had any. So just take a second. No rush. Just give us an example.”

The match had just moved a little closer to the fuse.

“Money.”

“Money?”



“Yeah, she was stashing her money and not keeping it in the account. She was hiding her money from me. It was *my* apartment and she acted like she didn’t have any money, but she always seemed to have some available when it came time to go out with that bitch!”

“By ‘bitch’ you’re referring to Stacy?”

“That *bitch!*”

Trotman moved to a new topic. “When Beth came home last night, tell me about the evening.”

The jaw clenched tighter and the jaw muscle worked faster as his agitation grew. He said nothing, just stared at the table.’

“Well?” Trotman pushed, but the silence continued for another 10 seconds.

Geoff finally answered, gritting his teeth, his lips tight as he spoke. “Nothing out of the ordinary. She got home *late*.” His emphasis on the word “late” gave the detective a solid hint at how the evening had started. “She was out with *Stacy* all day. She didn’t have dinner on when I got home, and I was just – she offered to make some spaghetti, but that’s not exactly what I’d call dinner, just some spaghetti with some Ragu crap slopped on it. I was at work all day long and she had the day off. The least she could do is come home in time to make me a decent dinner. But any time she gets around Stacy she just acts like it’s her God given right to go screw off.”

This guy was not exactly Trotman’s idea of any prince charming he’d pick for his own daughter, if he had one. “Okay. So Martha Stewart she ain’t. “How did the evening go? I mean did you two sit down and have spaghetti? Did you have a normal dinner conversation or was it less than cordial? Tell me how things went.” The question was met by silence. He tried again.

“Were you arguing or having a discussion about where she’d been all day? Glass of wine, a few laughs over dinner? How’d it go?”

Geoff was staring at the water glass now, running his finger around the rim. His level of anger increased with each question. “It was kind of quiet. I didn’t feel like saying anything too much. I just ate the *slop* she served up and had a beer.”

“How many beers did you have? One? A couple? A six-pack? I mean were you trying to calm down and the beer was helping?”

“No! I just had a couple and flipped on the TV.” Geoff’s finger started to press harder and harder on the edge of the glass as it circled the rim, and suddenly it flipped and spilled the small amount of water left in it.

Trotman reacted quickly, grabbing the glass. “Here, that’s okay. Let me take that and get you another glass. I’ll grab a couple paper towels and be right back.” He whisked the glass out of the room and handed it to his partner, who had been observing through the one-way glass, for fingerprints. “Tell the lab they have 10 minutes to lift prints and give me a make on this guy. I just grabbed the bottom of it when it spilled.”

Carver grabbed the glass by the bottom as well. “I’ll take my whip along.” With that said, Carver headed down the hall.

When Trotman re-entered the room, Geoff was leaned back in his chair and his feet were up on the table. It was a control play; arrogance, defiance, a boldness to show these dicks they didn’t scare him one bit. In his mind he hadn’t done anything wrong and they couldn’t intimidate him. He showed them how cool he could really be.

Trotman brought him a Coke this time and wiped up the table.

“Thanks. Did you put any rum in this?” Geoff was laughing now; a different man all together, a *smile* on his face.

Trotman was wondering who the hell was in the room now, Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. “No, just plain old Coke. Cocktail hour doesn’t start until five.” To watch this guy was interesting. He was on one side of the emotional spectrum and then quickly on the other.

“Let’s get back to where we were. Well, wait. How – how about you telling me a little bit about yourself. Where’d you grow up?” That must have been the magic question because it was like the director had just announced “lights-camera-action.”

“Well, I grew up in Long Island and had it pretty good. My big brother died of cancer when he was three. I never knew him. I was born a year after he died. My parents just kind of gave me everything they’d have given two kids, so I had it easy. I joined the Marines when I got out of high school and spent nine months in Iraq until”--Geoff was silent for a minute. Then he started in again, “until my parents were killed in an accident. The military sent me home on emergency leave so I could attend the funeral, and I was so screwed up after losing them both I just couldn’t function so I was discharged.”

Trotman interrupted. “Did you ever get injured in Iraq?”

“Ya right here.” Geoff tucked his chin tightly to his chest as he looked down and pulled up his shirt. “But I didn’t have to go home.”

“Wow, that’s Purple Heart stuff you’re showing me. I’m impressed. Gun fire? Shrapnel?” What showed was a six-inch long jagged scar just below the sternum and to the left a bit.

“Shrapnel. They blew up my tank.”

Trotman thought for a moment, then decided not to dig further on the injury. “Why don’t you continue about your folks dying and you being discharged.”

With that Geoff once again began to recite lines, as if in a movie. “For a while I just looked at my options. My folks had made arrangements to donate most of their money to the American Cancer Society in honor of my brother, that and the university my dad had attended. But I was left enough of a chunk that I could sit back, regroup and come up with a plan. I decided to come to the west coast and start over again.

“For a while I worked out of my van as a mechanic, going to customer’s houses or where they worked, and changing the oil or doing brake jobs, tune-ups. When I had enough of a clientele I found a little place and started working in a shop. It was better, even with having to pay rent, because I could just work steady and not have to drive to different places. I still do a little bit of that for the people who have the coin.

“Then I met Beth. I was about to ask her to marry me when everything just – everything started going sideways in our relationship. I didn’t know what was happening except things was just all of the sudden wrong. And I --“

Just then Carver entered the room and handed a file to Trotman. The information in the file set off alarm bells. Geoff Ghio wasn’t *Geoff Ghio* at all. His real name was Ray Caswell. He had priors for abuse, he had an arrest for arson but no conviction, and his story about being in the military and Iraq was all crap. At age 19 he was in the slammer for two years doing time for a robbery he committed in Washington. He had a juvenile record two pages long as well with most the charges filed in Florida.

What was with this guy? Did he really think he could just spew off a bunch of lies to the investigators and they’d never figure it out? No wonder his parents left most of their jingle to the

alma mater and the American Cancer Society. Ol' Ray was probably not exactly the worthy son they had planned on. Trotman had a bet going with himself that the rich folks Ray had been blabbering about were still alive, probably weren't rich and weren't from Long Island. With the shenanigans listed on his rap sheet, he was probably excommunicated from the likes of Mr. and Mrs. Caswell and any siblings he might have. A deeper dig would certainly turn up some more interesting dirt.

The two detectives stepped out into the hall. "Go call Stacy and see if we can come by. This is nuts. I'll keep on and let him tell me his version of life for a while longer and then we'll cut him loose and get the Paul Harvey "Rest of the Story" somewhere else.

When Trotman re-entered the room Geoff's personality had twisted again. Anger strained his voice. "Are you done with me? This is really screwing me up at work. Where is Beth anyways? If she's saying I did something, bring her in here to say it to my face. She can't be hiding behind your skirt and making up stories about me."

Trotman grabbed at that remark. "Why would she do that, Geoff?"

His answer was given through a sneer. "She's doing this just to get back at me and make you think she's the *poor* victim. Listen. I'm the victim here. Nothing would have happened if she'd not been out screwing around with that slut."

"Did something happen?" Trotman jumped on *that* remark. "Did something happen to Beth?"

"No! I was pissed, and I had been watching TV and telling her to get inside and sit down. But she was out on the balcony having a cigarette acting like she wanted to say something and I kept telling her to come in and sit down; she was screwing up my TV. She went in the bedroom for a while, and when I got up to get another beer I saw the leftover spaghetti on

the table. She hadn't done the dishes. All I asked was that I have a meal waiting for me and the apartment kept clean. I mean, crap! Is it too much to ask that she cook and clean? Shit! She was off work yesterday, for Pete's sake. What did she do all day long? Screw around and not come home until eight. Then she slaps together some spaghetti and dumps out a bag of salad on my plate, and calls it dinner!" Geoff was really tweaked.

Trotman wanted more. He wasn't sure how far he could push this guy. He hadn't given him his Miranda rights, as technically Geoff was only a "person of interest" and not under arrest. But if Trotman wanted to push it, knowing what he knew now about the lie about Geoff's background and being in Iraq and growing up in Long Island, he could spring it on him that the cat was out of the bag about his real life's story, and then put him under arrest for obstruction of justice. But if he Mirandized him, any further information might stop flowing. It was a thin tightrope to walk.

"What happened when you saw the spaghetti on the table?"

"I *pitched* it. I picked up the damn bowl and I hucked it at the wall and busted the shit out of it! Then Beth comes screaming out of the bedroom saying, 'No, Geoff, no, don't do this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!' Geoff spoke in a high pitched whiny voice that mocked Beth. "But I was so pissed at her I gave her a shove out of my way and I split. I just drove around for a while until I cooled down. Then when I got back to the apartment she was gone. All her makeup was missing from the bathroom counter, part of her clothes were gone and I just figured she had left me and when she simmered down she'd be back for the rest of her stuff or she'd try to make up. I knew she was heading for Stacy's. Beth's stepdad was about an hour away and to Stacy's house it's only about 15 minutes. They were kinda like sisters. And I *know* Beth's real sister didn't know the stuff Stacy knew about her."

Geoff was slowly unwinding again. “What’s going on? I mean you pick me up at work and embarrass me, you haul me in here and play 20 questions. I don’t understand. Has something happened to Beth?”

Trotman ignored the question and continued. “Did you follow Beth in your car at all?” He wanted to see where this freight train would take him.

“No. I told you. I drove around for a while and then went home and she was gone. I never saw her after I left.”

“What kind of car does Beth drive?”

Geoff was completely calm now. “She had a little Mazda Protégé, kind of plum colored. But its engine froze up and it was going to cost more to repair than it was worth. She didn’t have the money for a new car, so her stepdad, George, he gave her his old Ford Explorer to use. He really treats her good. Her mom is dead but her stepdad, he never turns his back on her. She has a sister, Cassey, but Cassey is kind of a mess, strung out on drugs and stuff, so Beth and she don’t spend too much time together. But Beth and George are solid.

“Has something happened to Beth?” Geoff really did sound like he didn’t know what was going on. But like his story of Iraq and his parents dying, this smacked of just another act.

Trotman figured no time like the present. “We believe Beth was killed in a rollover accident after she left the apartment last night. The car caught fire and the only witness arrived too late and couldn’t get her out. And the circumstances are suspicious.”

Geoff was visibly shaken. He stood up and tipped over his chair in the process. He started to pace and hold his head. He was grabbing at his hair, saying, “No, huh-uh! That can’t be. She wouldn’t have fallen asleep. She was upset like I was. You don’t fall asleep when you

are upset. You --” Then Geoff broke down. Trotman left the room for a few minutes to give him some time to himself.

“There’s no way Geoff had any idea she was dead until I told him, Sam. He certainly has an aberrant personality, but he definitely wasn’t at the scene of the accident. He’s a schizo type and all but he . . .”

But Carver had seen some of Ghio’s performance through the one-way glass and wasn’t so sure. “Either that or he’s one of the all-time Hollywood greats reincarnated from yesteryear. That crap he was dishing out about his childhood and parents and military all sounded totally real. If he can make us think he’s a straight shooter telling *that* story, maybe the sobbing over Beth is all an act too.”

About 15 minutes later when Trotman returned Geoff sat at the table holding the Coke, just staring at it. He was numb. Trotman decided not to ask him anything further and had a trooper drive him back to his shop.

\*\*\*

It was not quite noon. The detectives needed to discuss their next move and eat. Just a hundred yards and a brisk walk down the road Donna’s Truck Stop stood; a diner that served breakfast all day. The food was fairly good and service was fast. At this hour the diner would still be relatively quiet.

On the way, Trotman power smoked a cigarette while Carver talked about their next step with Stacy. He had a visit scheduled with her at one o’clock. She lived over on Schoultes, about five minutes away. They obviously had some questions based on Ghio’s military and criminal history; something to ponder over lunch.



Donna's was almost empty when they got there. It may have been close to noon but Trotman was hungry for the breakfast he missed, and he didn't say much once it arrived. If anyone else had been sitting nearby they would have heard the wheels of experience grind away in the senior detective's head while he ate. He did want to ask Stacy whether Beth told her anything about finding out her prince had been in stir and not in the military. Had she ever heard the name Ray Caswell mentioned by Beth or anyone else? He jotted notes periodically as he shoveled down the hash browns, occasionally dipping his toast in the runny egg yoke that was left on the plate. He knocked back his coffee to wash it all down. There was a long ways to go in this case. They were only starting to see the complicated twists and turns that were before them.

Trotman was busy contemplating their next move and eating his lunch. Sam Carver sat silent as well. While he ate his BLT he thought back to years ago when he was a patrolman. He knew full well what Stacy was going through right now and how difficult it would be for her to meet with them again today. He also thought about his wife. She died six years ago, and tomorrow would have been their anniversary.

Thoughts of losing his wife reminded him of Max Torkleson. He wondered how Max was getting along after his own wife died a couple years ago. Max Torkleson, Sam Carver and John Trotman had been a force to reckon with when it came to tough cases. This one wasn't a slam dunk either. He could feel it in his gut.

Max now worked as a freelance forensic expert to keep busy with the only thing he knew. After all, his wife's death permanently derailed his retirement plans. Back when Max retired it was at the behest of his wife. He didn't want to, but Goldie told him if they were ever going to travel they needed to do it now while they still had enough health. She slowly was losing to

congestive heart failure and wanted some fun time with him before it completely took control of her life.

She had always wanted to go on a cruise in the Caribbean, and after Max's first two weeks at home they left on the first of their many planned retirement trips. Their anniversary fell in the middle of their cruise and she told the children it was a second honeymoon. It didn't end the way it should, though. Feeling very tired, she went to bed early one night. Max noticed her breathing sounded labored during the day every time she got up to walk, and at dinner she just nibbled. She didn't say anything was wrong and he was certain she was enjoying the cruise. When he kissed her goodnight she thanked him for all the wonderful years and the second honeymoon. He just didn't suspect a third wasn't in their future. She died in the night while the ship headed back to Florida.

Carver's glazed look caught Trotman's eye.

"Sam? Sam! You on planet Earth?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Just thinking. Better hit the office before we head over to Stacy's. I have a couple things to do first."

After a couple phone calls and a discussion with Forensics, they headed over to Stacy's house. The trip was quiet and quick.

A couple minutes after one o'clock they pulled up in the driveway of a tiny two-bedroom house on a lot the size of a postage stamp, with a white picket fence and a one car garage. Not anything much to look at, but she owned it and it had a spare room should Beth have wanted to move in. They knocked on the front door several times but received no response. They wandered around back. The rains of the previous night had abated and Stacy was sitting on a concrete garden bench. She was just staring at the flowers. She surely must have heard them at

her front door. The house was very small, and she had all the windows open. The summer day had warmed up nicely. Their knock would have been quite noticeable, even in the back yard. But Stacy didn't move. She just sat on the bench.

“Stacy?” There were balled up Kleenex tissues all around her feet and a near empty box on the edge of the bench. She had obviously been crying a great deal.

Shortly after she left the interview room at Marysville Police Station, two State Patrolmen arrived at Beth's stepdad's door with the grim news. George had called Stacy. She was still numb from the conversation.

The detectives moved around front of her and Trotman crouched down to be at eye level with her. Stacy didn't say anything. Carver decided to sit on the bench with her and ease into a very difficult discussion which would allow Trotman to take over. “Stacy, we discovered information on which we need clarification, and I suspect you can help. I *know* this has been a terrible day for you and right now it's hard to think. But every moment that we let pass without being productive gives the killer, if there is one, a better chance to avoid apprehension and prosecution.”

“You let him go; didn't you!” Tears started to run down her cheeks and she dabbed at her face with a tissue that was falling apart from over use.

“That's why we're here. We have no proof *yet* that Geoff did anything to the car with the purpose of harming her; only a suspicion. But we know that he's a crud, and if we can gather enough valid evidence against him we can prosecute him and leave him to rot somewhere where he'll never experience freedom again. But if he's really a murderer, as long as he's on the street he has access to hundreds of other potential victims. And if his conscience allows him to commit this crime once, he won't stop. He'll be creative and find new ways.”

Stacy didn't say anything at first, but she did finally look at the detectives and give a half hearted nod, her eyes full of tears. Then she looked down to her lap and twisted the tissue some more and started to speak.

"Beth's stepdad called me. He's so – he was crying. He wanted to know what happened. He's coming down. We're going to have to get her stuff from Geoff's apartment. I just don't know if Geoff will let us. And we'll have to–to get her bank stuff and" -- But then Stacy stopped. The words stuck in her throat. The reality choked off her voice and the tears trickled down her face again.

Now Trotman took over. "Stacy, did Beth ever mention the name of Ray Caswell?"

"No."

"Did she ever say she had found out Geoff Ghio had an alias?"

"Huh-uh."

"Did she mention to you that his time in the Marines and Iraq didn't happen and he really spent that time in prison for robbery; that the shrapnel wound was really from being stabbed in jail?" That caught her attention!

"No, he couldn't have ever told Beth that because she'd have told me. I can't believe that. You mean he's a felon?" Stacy was now very angry.

"Yes, more than twice over. Did she say that she came across information indicating he wasn't from Long Island, his parents weren't rich, weren't dead, and didn't leave him an inheritance?"

"Oh, brother! You mean he is a con artist and liar!"

"Did she ever say she feared for her life?"

"Not really, but – she always seemed so afraid when she talked about how he was now."

“Ever see any bruises on her or scrapes, black eyes, broken bones?”

“No.”

“Did he do all the work on her car when it needed servicing?”

“Yes. He worked on all of our cars, well, not mine anymore, but we all used him. And he worked just the two times on her stepdad’s car.”

Trotman gave a nod to Carver, who was quick to get out pencil and paper to take down names. More names, more people to interview.

“When you say, ‘We all used him,’ who is ‘we’?”

“Stan and Jen, Bobbie and –“

Trotman stopped her mid-sentence. “I need full names, and I’ll need phone numbers and addresses as well. If you have that somewhere can you get it for us?”

Stacy excused herself for a minute and went inside to retrieve the information from her address book on her computer. A moment later she returned with a printout and handed it to Carver as she sat back down next to him. She pointed to each name on the page as she spoke. “I’ll give you this sheet of names, but just to tell you what you are looking at, Carl Gerber is my ex-boyfriend who I dated when Beth and Geoff would hang out with us. Jen Parberry is Carl’s sister but she’s moved to Alaska. Bobbie and Ted Reese, they’re another couple we spent time with. They also started using Geoff to do car maintenance.”

Stacy didn’t have any current information on Jen since her move to Alaska, but she was sure they could get that from Carl. Stacy really missed Carl’s sister. She was such an exciting person. Nothing scared her. She tried anything and everything; food, skydiving, working on fishing boats in Alaska. She was so--so alive.

That was the worst part of breaking up with Carl, was losing Jen's companionship. And the lack of those very qualities in Carl was probably the reason for their relationship's ultimate demise. He was such a wallflower, almost flatline. Sometimes she wanted to put her fingers on his wrist just to see if he still had a pulse. And with Carl and Jen sharing an apartment, visiting Jen after the breakup was difficult. Then Jen left for Alaska. She was never one to write letters and the only computer Jen ever used was her brother's when she lived with him in the off season after fishing.

Trotman was done with his questions but Carver thought of a few things he wanted to cover. "So you regard Geoff as a good mechanic?"

"Yeah, me and the masses. That's why we were at the fair grounds up in Lynden last year. He was part of the pit crew and did all the work on one of the demolition derby cars. He had a good reputation. So we went up to the fair for him to be part of the crew, and when that event was done we just wandered the grounds, looking at the farm animals and taking in a couple shows. They have good country and western singers, and the hypnosis show and the tractor pull, stuff like that. Oh, and the carnival. We had a really good time."

"So he was a full service mechanic; nothing he couldn't handle?"

After Stacy confirmed Geoff's reputation as a wrench turner in the pits and an all-around general mechanic, the detectives excused themselves and said they'd be in touch as the case progressed. They headed back to headquarters. They'd been up since 2:00 AM and both were dragging. They finished up some paperwork, called a few of the numbers Stacy provided, and booked more interviews for early the next day. They were frustrated with the fragmented evidence; nothing really connecting the dots. Somehow Ghio had to be involved.

The preliminary report from the Crime Scene Response Team was due any moment. Somewhere hard evidence pointed back to the man with motive. They just had to find it.

## Chapter 6 (Same Accident, Different State)

While this I-5 had accident left investigators sifting through ashes, only a few months earlier another family in another state buried one of their own after she died in a rolling inferno. Even with the similarities of the two accidents, no one initially linked the tragedies. Marysville's detectives never went looking for a similar accident. They assumed Beth Langley was a one-off. But a search right away might have revealed otherwise.

The Montana accident left a burned out car down an embankment. Though law enforcement and the family thought their daughter Kristy had fallen asleep at the wheel, their devastation was no less than the loss Beth Langley's stepfather felt in response to the same horrible death she suffered, a death which neither family could reconcile with memories of their loved one.

Kristy Allen was a 20-year-old Montanan and lived at home with her parents and younger sister Katie on a small ranch just outside of Kalispell. She attended Flathead Valley Community College and was sure her boyfriend would propose some day. She so wanted to be *Mrs.* Johnny Isaacson. Johnny and she dated for three years, two weeks and three days before the accident happened, and Kristy would recite the minutes and seconds if given the opportunity. The wedding was a given; no doubt in anyone's mind. Everyone saw how they felt about each other. And the families were thrilled with the idea. If only Johnny would just get on with it and officially pop the question so they could pick a date.

The day Kristy died she was returning home from a party where a mutual friend had been celebrating his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. Johnny, the love of Kristy's life, had to work overtime that night so



he met up with her later at the party. There was alcohol there, but when asked, Johnny said she never drank, *ever*.

When friends were interviewed by the Sheriff after she died, they also said she didn't drink anything. There weren't any drugs at the gathering, and during the time they were chatting with her at the party, she seemed alert, though no one seemed to remember her saying good-bye. It just seemed like after a while she just wasn't there. Her friends' shock was palpable over her death. There wasn't anything left of the car after it rolled down the embankment, and the fire melted everything that would melt, and incinerated everything else.

There was one thing her boyfriend had omitted in his interview with the Sheriff; a disagreement they had just before she left the party. He found her out back with some of the other girls who gabbed with each other while they shared a cigarette. This wasn't the country girl he contemplated marrying. His disappointment was quietly made clear when she tried to kiss him. He repeated the old cliché' that he didn't want to lick the ashtray when she tried to kiss him. She was terribly hurt, not so much by Johnny's comment as the fact she had disappointed him. After that she left the party.

He never brought up the incident after her death when it was his turn to be interviewed. Either he didn't want her parents to find out he saw her smoking or he felt guilty about hurting her feelings which caused her to leave. Maybe she cried while she drove and didn't see the curve in the road through her tears. Maybe it was his fault. Maybe if he just hadn't called her out for just being one of the girls he'd still have her.

The area of highway where Kristy died was curvy and the hillside fell away into the abyss periodically as the road progressed along. It was unfortunate that her "sleepiness" hit at a point with no room for error. If only she hadn't rolled down the embankment, she very possibly

would have survived the accident. If only she hadn't gone over the edge. If only Johnny hadn't upset her. If only he'd been driving. If only . . .

## Chapter 7 (Gone Fishing)

A barge full of ore behind the world's smallest tugboat would show more progress than the pace at which the Beth Langley case moved along. The detectives met individually with everyone listed on Stacy's printout of addresses and phone numbers, friends who had been close to Geoff and Beth before things went wrong, the same friends who had used Geoff as a mechanic. None of Beth's friends yielded helpful information, all still in shock over her death. They all agreed that the sunshine girl of the past hadn't seemed as happy for the last several months. They also agreed that Geoff was more distant and withdrawn. He just *wasn't* himself. But he never told any of them what was wrong. He just kept everything in. His usual upbeat personality was nowhere to be found lately. His sullenness pushed them away.

Detective Carver really needed to talk to Jen Parberry, Carl's sister, Stacy's ex, but she was still out of state. She was working as a cook on a fish processing boat in Alaska and wouldn't return from sea for another couple weeks. Saying good-bye to her brother Carl, she headed up the Al-Can Highway in her Outback. She wanted a vehicle up there when she got back from sea.

In the first discussion over the phone with detectives, Carl disclosed that his sister liked Alaska and thought when the fishing season was over she would probably stay permanently. Before she left she stuffed all her belongings in boxes and stacked them in her bedroom. Carl was supposed to ship them when she got back on land after fishing season.

Jen Parberry worked the same vessel for the last three years. The captain liked her cooking and so did the men. A belly full of good grub made for a happy focused crew less prone to accidents, so she was invited back each season.

When the detectives contacted Carl about a sit-down interview, he became a bit stressed. He didn't want to be involved in Beth's case. Yes, he'd be happy to help them get a hold of his sister Jen, but could they just leave him alone? He knew they were intent on having a talk with him, but he so wanted this all to go away. Otherwise it would require him to have contact with Stacy if the case reached the courthouse, and she was the last woman he wanted to be around. But the case couldn't possibly go away, and Carver scheduled the interview for that evening at five-thirty. Carl decided to meet the detectives at the Marysville District 7 WSP headquarters for the talk. If he didn't, the neighbors would think he was in trouble with the law. Never had been, never would be, but little old ladies with nothing better to do would peek out their windows, see a squad car and assume the worst. Then a tale would be spread straight out of a fiction novel. In no time at all a whole apartment building would be keeping an eye on Carl. No, it was better to have the interview at headquarters.

At the appointed hour Carl showed up for his interview. While Detective Carver handled other business, Trotman took Carl to an interview room and asked for preliminary information. The conversation disclosed that Carl was Stacy's ex-boyfriend and Jen Parberry's half-brother rather than brother, and that he hadn't heard from his sister since she backed out of the driveway to head north. He also commented that the lack of communication didn't surprise him. She answered to no one and felt no obligation to check in with him even to tell him she was all right. She found that function the equivalent of paperwork shuffling.

He knew what vessel she would be on and expected a call from her when the *Sea Tantrum* settled up with the crew and she was back on dry land. Jen always called at the end of a trip to bring him up to speed on her gallivanting. She was such an adventurer, so much so that even though Carl felt a bit intimidated by her need to do anything and everything, things he would never dream of doing, he could hardly wait for her to return from whatever excitement she created for herself. Any rise in heart rate that Carl ever perceived was from listening to her stories, that and reading World War II history.

As Trotman asked questions of him about his sister, his relationship with Beth and his knowledge of Geoff Ghio, it became apparent Carl was a different duck. In the eyes of most women he'd be considered a looker; dark hair, strong facial features, and a 6'4" frame that was filled out like a lumberjack, features he came by naturally. He didn't spend hours a week in the gym. But he was quiet also. His demeanor was that of a guy who kept to himself; a bookworm. In fact, he'd brought a World War II book along for something to do, just in case he had to wait for the detective.

Carl's fascination with World War II history and his terrific memory would impress even someone without the same interest. He could tell dates, facts, and statistics, anything you wanted to know about the war in the Pacific. When his grandfather was alive he heard lots of stories growing up, and when the old man died he left Carl his medals and a book about the ship he'd served on. The USS Cache was an oiler charged with refueling the South Pacific fleet during the war. With their tanks half full, a Japanese torpedo found the Cache and blew a hole in the port side. The outcome was two dead crew members and the terrified panic of every man on board. A quick thinking captain ordered the transfer of all fuel from the port tanks into the half empty starboard tanks, which caused the ship to list heavily to its good side and raise the jagged gaping

hole out of the water on the ship's starboard side. After two weeks longer at sea and three knots tops, the ship limped into port in Hawaii for repairs. Within weeks the ship and crew returned to sea to refuel the fleet.

Carl didn't have the same need to tear around partying and doing sports or other activities the way his friends and sister did. Where others loved to play golf or keep up with baseball teams, Carl kept his brain processing WWII history. His grandfather was long since gone, but reading about the war was exciting and was a way to keep his gramp's memory alive.

As for Jen, his half-sister, Carl and Jen may have been step-siblings but they were step-siblings with a kindred spirit. At 10 when Carl's father died, his stepmother and grandfather continued to raise him with Jen. As for Carl's mother, he never had the chance to truly know her. His dad left her early in Carl's life. She was an alcoholic, and when Carl was four the courts decided he was better off with his dad. After the divorce, his mom just disappeared from the picture and never tried to see him.

When his dad remarried, Carl took right to Dixie, his new stepmother. Jen was just an added bonus, a little sister.

Carl's answers to Trotman's questions made it apparent an interview with Jen was critical. He handed Carl a business card and instructed him to have her call the detective as soon as possible.

Trotman also found it strikingly odd that a woman would take on a 2200-mile road trip all by herself, especially through long stretches of no man's land. "Your sister was traveling with someone else; right? I mean she didn't just take off alone; did she?"

Carl lightly smiled. “Like I told you, she is one big ball of adventure; afraid of nothing and nobody. She works on a processor with a bunch of rough and tumble guys. She can handle herself. I’ve never known her to be timid about anything she did.”

Trotman dove into the meat of what Carl had to offer regarding Beth, Geoff and anything he knew about their relationship.

“Carl, when you and Stacy broke up, were Beth and Geoff getting along?”

“Yeah – no -- well, sorta.” Carl’s answer danced around the question.

“Well, is it ‘yeah,’ ‘no,’ or ‘sorta?’ Your answer is kind of all over the board there.”

“Depended on the phase of the moon. One minute they’d be lovey dovey and the next he’d be ragging on her about something.”

“Was it always that way? I mean had their relationship always been turbulent or had there been smoother times?”

Carl thought for a minute. “It was pretty smooth the first year or so. It was pretty solid I thought. They started playing house not too long after they began dating. I guess after that first year we all figured they were a permanent arrangement.”

“You guys all went places together; movies, camping, out of town for the weekend?”

“Yeah, we did. I wasn’t big on camping but I made a trip once with everybody.” Carl was starting to relax a bit and give better answers. He kind of rocked the chair back on its back legs, the toes of his shoes barely touching the floor, his fingers interlaced across his chest.

“Yeah. We went most everywhere together. The first summer they were together we all rented a boat out of Anacortes for a week and vacationed in the San Juan Islands. Took the blender along and drank marguerites all week. They did some fishing, hiking, and I did a lot of reading. We just kinda let down our hair and relaxed for a solid seven days.”

“So their lovey doviness was still in tact.”

“Yeah.”

Detective Carver entered the room with a glass of water for Carl, while Trotman continued the questioning. “When did you start noticing things were not quite running as smoothly as before?”

Carl had to think about that. “Seemed like we’d all been somewhere together and a few weeks later the cracks were starting to show.” Carl sat forward. He placed his elbows on the table with his hands clasped, and thought for a moment. “Hmmm. I think it was just after we went to the fair together. Geoff was working the pits at the demolition derby. Jen, Stacy, me and Beth sat in the stands. Oh, and Bobbie and Ted Reese, they were with us, too.”

“What all did you do after the car thing was over and he was done with the pit?”

Carl gave a rundown on their escapades at the fair. “We listened to a country and western band and toured the barns.” He paused and then continued, “And me, Ted and Bobbie watched Stacy, Geoff, Beth, and Jen make total fools of themselves.”

“How so?”

“There was a hypnosis show there and he was able to make them do all kinds of stupid stuff. Geoff went under about the first sentence the hypnotist said. You know the kind of junk that happens.”

“Tell me about it. What happens? I’ve never seen a show with hypnosis.”

“It’s kind of hard to explain to someone, but volunteers from the audience go up on stage, about a dozen or so, and they sit in chairs, and poof! They’re all hypnotized by the guy. Then he tells them things like, ‘You’re Elvis at a concert and you sing ‘Nothin’ But A Hound Dog,’ you know, crap like that. And the guy the hypnotist is talking to holds his hands up like he’s got a



guitar, and rocks and rolls, sings like Elvis. It's a hoot to watch because the guy really thinks he's Elvis.

“He has them all do something. Like he had all the guys stand up and told them they were ballerinas from Russia and he interviewed them through a guy he had appointed to be a Russian interpreter, and they all spoke Russian. Yeah, right! Now, *that* brought the house down because none of them spoke Russian.

“Then the hypnotist gives each one of them a different posthypnotic suggestion right before he wakes all but one of them up. They head back to their seats in the bleachers and watch the rest of the show while he finishes making the last one do funny stuff. He tells the last guy something like, “When you hear the word ‘Golf’ you’re going to jump up, pat yourself on the back and scream, ‘Gee, I’m a great cook.’” Then he brings him out of the hypnosis and sends that guy back to his seat in the audience. The hypnotist then starts making announcements about their next show time and thanking their sponsors. Well, he had told Beth that her trigger word was three-thirty. And he announced the next show time and said it would be three-thirty, and all a’ sudden Beth, who is now back in the bleachers again with us and no longer under hypnosis, jumps up and screams “Kiss me, Baby!” and lays a lip lock on Geoff and then realizes what she’s done and starts to laugh and covering her face ‘cause everyone was laughing.

“And then this hypnotist said something else, talking about their new sponsor, Verizon, and the word “Verizon” was a trigger for something he’d suggested to Jen, and Jen launches from the bleachers and yells, “How come no one will kiss me? Do I have cooties or something?” That was just too funny! We were laughing so hard we about wet our pants. I couldn’t believe it. I was wishing I’d had a video camera, and right then the hypnotist said something about them selling the DVDs for twenty bucks, and that the post-hypnotic suggestion lasted up to a week, so

if we wanted to be a really mean friend we could buy the disk and replay it and make our friends who had been on stage jump up and be stupid again.”

“Did you buy a DVD and torment Jen and Beth with it?”

“No, I was running short on cash and I couldn’t convince anyone else to pitch in, so the idea kind of died for want of coin.”

You and Stacy were dating at the time; weren’t you?” Trotman rubbed on a sore spot with Carl.

“Yes, but it wasn’t maybe two months later and we went our separate ways.”

“Any particular reason? Was it an ugly split, a ‘let’s-be-buddies-forever’ kind of a thing?”

Carl just looked down and scratched his head, twisting the corner of his mouth. His facial expression was one of stress. “Do we have to go into this? I am just not wanting to talk about it. Let’s just say she committed a bit of a transgression and I just didn’t feel like being with her anymore.”

“Do you still see Geoff?” Trotman couldn’t win for losing. It seemed this whole area made Carl edgy.

“Oh, come on! I know why you are asking this and, I mean, if you think I know anything about Beth’s accident, I don’t. She must have fallen asleep. Geoff was mean to her but he wasn’t mean enough to hurt her or kill her. He just couldn’t keep his frickin’ mouth shut. He just had to keep grinding on her about every little thing she did, even if she didn’t do anything. She spends a year being his everything and then six months being the bane of his existence. Nobody could figure out what was going on in his head. It was like he was doing drugs or something.”

Trotman jumped on that. “Drugs? What kind of drugs?”

“No. No, I don’t mean he really was. I just mean he was acting bizarre. Sometimes he made me just want to punch him out when he’d treat her like that.”

“Did you ever?”

Carl blurted his answer. “No! I just wanted to. Okay?”

“Did Beth ever mention to you the name ‘Ray Caswell’ or that Geoff had another name?”

“No, but I heard him called ‘Ray’ once.”

Trotman’s ears perked up. Carl knew something; maybe he knew Geoff was not quite who he claimed to be.

“But Beth, she never said anything about that. But I remember being at Geoff’s work picking up my car one day and someone walked up to him and said, ‘Hey, Ray!’ Geoff looked like he was going to jump out of his skin. He grabbed the guy by the arm and dragged him into the office and shut the door. When he came out I said, ‘Ray?’ and he just said it was his middle name and he hated it, and that guy was always jerking him around calling him Ray ‘cause he knew it irritated him.”

Carver had just entered the room to be there in case a “good cop – bad cop” scenario need to play out, when Trotman asked him to get Carl another glass of water. “By the way, Carl, this is Detective Carver. He’s going to join us when he gets back. Though Carl said he was fine, Carver grabbed his glass and left the room. When he came back he had a can of Mr. Pibb for Carl just to give him a change of pace. This was a routine. Interview, give the person being questioned a small glass of water, then get him something else. But the glass always made its way to the lab in the intervening moments between Carver’s exit and his return to the

interrogation room. Fingerprints revealed many things, not only about suspects but witnesses as well.

“Did Geoff ever say anything to you about his military service or the lack thereof?”

“Huh-uh. Well, yeah – no. Just that he’d been in the Marines in Iraq and caught some shrapnel.”

“Did you believe him? Did you think he’d done time over there?”

“The truth?”

Carver and Trotman glanced at each other. That response sounded like they were going to hear some good stuff.

“No!” Carl’s answer was given with sarcastic jag. “My best friend was over there, and there was just something that wasn’t adding up. The things Geoff talked about didn’t match what my friend would tell me. And according to Geoff, he was there on one of the tanks that went into Bagdad when Saddam Hussein’s statue was torn down. So was my friend. And sometimes my friend and I would talk about the war, and he would tell me all about the tanks and the things they could do and their weak points and the gimmicks and bells and whistles they had on them, but if you tried to talk to Geoff about the tanks he’d kind of dance it.

“I started asking him questions one day and instead of answering about a tank he yanked up his shirt and showed a big nasty scar that he had and said it was from shrapnel. But he always dodged any focused discussion about the tanks.”

“Did he ever mention doing time rather than being in the Marines? Did he ever fess up to the scar being caused by his being stabbed inside prison with a shiv?”

Carl’s eyes opened wide. “You gotta be shittin’ me! No way! I mean, that makes more sense than him being in the military. There was just something about his war stories that made

you wonder. He definitely wasn't on any tank in Iraq. But I just figured he was a gas bag but harmless. Maybe he thought he should have been there and didn't want anyone to think he was a coward. His war stuff was just always suspect. I love WWII history. I kind of focus on the war in the Pacific, but I've read a lot of books on the war in Europe as well and read a lot about the tanks used during that war. So when my friend would tell me about the modern tanks, it was really interesting with what I had read about the tanks from World War II.

"I guess that's what pissed me off about the way he started treating Beth. He was no prize, even if he was a hell of a mechanic. He just seemed like a gas bag sometimes – a lot of times."

"What did you think about Beth?"

"If she hadn't been involved with him I'd have asked her out. She was really nice, didn't have a mean bone in her body. She was just the kind of person you'd like to spend the day with and she was just as pretty as she was nice. She'd smile and light up the room. Sometimes Jen and Stacy would be having a good time gabbing, and Beth and I would just sit and talk, nothing about Stacy or Geoff, but just books she'd read or movies, stuff like that.

"But the last couple months when we were around them, you could see it in her face that he'd either just said something rotten or she was – I don't know, she just seemed almost afraid of it turning into a bad night; like she was expecting – I don't know. It just wasn't the same and you could sure see the fissures growing."

"Did Beth or Stacy know how you felt? I mean how you felt about Beth and wanting to date her?"

"No, I wouldn't have said something like that to Stacy. I would never be mean like that. I mean I knew Stacy and I were probably not going to be together much longer. Opposites may

attract but we were too opposite. I like quiet time and she always had to be on the go doing something, going out or parties or doing something. I think that's why Stacy and my sister got along so well."

"How about Beth?"

"She wasn't as much of a partier."

Carver jumped in. "No. I think he's asking if you had mentioned to Beth how you felt about her, that you were interested in her, not if she was out whooping it up with the other girls."

"Oh." Carl slowly shook his head. "No. I told my sister once that it was too bad Beth was with Geoff. And I know she sensed what I really meant. But it's not like she'd tell anyone. You could tell her *anything* and you might as well have locked the secret up in Fort Knox."

Trotman ended the interview at that point. He thanked Carl for coming in and giving them everything he knew, and they told him to expect a call if they needed anything further.

"Oh, and remember to have Jen get in touch with me," Trotman added. "I gave you my card, and if you think of anything that you believe might even have a remote possibility of being important, please call me."

Carver escorted Carl to his car and thanked him again for his help. He reminded him to have Jen call, and then returned to the conference room. Trotman said three words; "Motive number two." It was apparent to both detectives that Geoff, aka Ray, had two reasons to get rid of Beth. She was pregnant *and* she had another potential suitor in the wings, an adversary who knew Geoff was a gas bag and might tell Beth.

## Chapter 8 (My Sister's Missing)

Over a month and a half had passed since Beth's accident. Carl had not heard from his sister Jen in over two months. Her contract as a cook on the vessel was for six weeks and it was well past time for the boat's arrival back at the dock. After she should have been back on terra firma, he tried calling her on her cell phone repeatedly, but now it was disconnected. Detective Carver had checked back with him several times, and the last time Carl told him her cell phone was unable to receive calls. He'd heard that recording before when friends hadn't paid their bill. He was starting to panic. Carver suggested that perhaps the Coast Guard might help Carl locate the vessel on which Jen had been a cook. Perhaps if they could find where the vessel was docked they could have the *Sea Tantrum*'s captain call Carl. Maybe crew on one of the local fishing boats knew of a way to contact the vessel, if the Coast Guard couldn't help.

When help from the Coast Guard turned up nothing, he headed to the fishing docks in Everett where boats had returned after the season. Talking to one of the captains, he was able to get a phone number that lead to the harbor master in the bay where the *Sea Tantrum* berthed, and the harbormaster tracked down the vessel and gave the skipper a message to call.

It was 10 at night before Carl's phone rang, the first moment the captain found time to contact him.

After introducing himself as Jake Spanaway, captain of the *Sea Tantrum*, he asked Carl how he could help him. Carl was excited; almost elated that he was actually talking to someone who could tell him his sister was safe.

“Jake, God, I’m so glad you called me. Jen Parberry is my sister and I haven’t heard from her in a couple months. I just need to find out if she got an apartment up there after fishing season, like she thought she would, or maybe is she staying on board? I just want to know she is okay.”

Jake was silent, perplexed by Carl’s inquiry about Jen’s whereabouts. Before he could get his thoughts together Carl threw in one more disconcerting sentence.

“Her cell phone said something about, ‘This number is not able to receive calls at this time,’ like she hasn’t paid the bill.”

Jake was matter-of-fact. “Carl, Jen never showed up. Shocked the hell outta me. Hard worker, great cook, dependable. But I couldn’t wait any longer. I hired someone off the docks to help cook and we left. You have to leave on time or you have a crew and a whole lot of customers mad at you if you ain’t out there to take their fish. I wasn’t surprised when the other crewmember didn’t show, but Jen? Her missing the boat just blew me away.”

Carl was breathless. His head spun and fear gnawed at his whole body. “Jake, my sister took off from here a little more than two weeks before she had to be on that boat!”

Spanaway heard alarm bells in his head. “Shit. Carl, we’ve been in port for a couple weeks now. Let me do some checking here to see if maybe she got here late and another boat picked her up as a cook. Could be, you know. There’s a lot of dock swapping that goes on; people missing boats, picked up as crew on other boats. Other people who have never been out fishing, just hanging around the fishing boats hoping some boat’s crew is short a member. Lots of people end up on boats that way. She missed my boat; she could easily have been scooped up on another.

“She doesn’t have email?”



“No. Well, yeah. She and I shared an apartment and she always used my computer. I have an AOL account and just gave her a screen name.

“You know, maybe you’re right. I’ll check her email and see if she’s been checking it from somewhere else, maybe a friend’s computer. Maybe she did get picked up by another boat, but she should still be back. It just seems like she’d have called. She always has in the past. The only difference is this time she thought when she got off the boat she’d get an apartment up there because she likes Alaska so much. She packed all her stuff in boxes before she left so I could ship it to her when she found a place.”

Spanaway felt anxious himself. “Well, Carl, I’ll do some detective work up here and have her call you when I find her. Keep me posted on what you find out down there. This is really bugging me. If she did get picked up, I’d have expected her to contact me on marine radio just to apologize. But maybe she’s too embarrassed. Never know with these women.” Jake left the conversation giving Carl his cell phone and house number. He promised to call as soon as he had something to report.

Still scared, but now hopeful he would find activity in her AOL account, Carl dove into the computer. That surely would ease his fears. Then he discovered her AOL screen name was password protected. He couldn’t get in. “Crap!” He tried everything, social security, date of birth, dog’s name, his name, her name. He completely ran out of ideas. His fist hit the table hard! “Shit!”

A moment later he was up walking toward what had been her bedroom. He didn’t know what he was looking for; inspiration perhaps, a mind jog, a memory trigger, a hint. There were stacks of boxes with large letters on every, one describing the content of each. “Clothes, linens, books, photos, reading light, rabbit and pillows, pots and pans, stereo . . . Just then he stopped

and backed up. The box, the box with the stuffed rabbit! She'd had that thing since she was about five. It was her favorite memento from childhood, now almost threadbare. Her mom rented the movie *Star Wars* and Jen was fascinated with Yoda, the ancient and revered Jedi Master. It took her no time at all to name her bunny.

“Yoda. It's Yoda! That's it!” His declaration was almost a shout. It was a eureka moment for Carl. He quickly sat in front of his computer again. As soon as he typed in “Yoda” the familiar “You've Got Mail” sounded. He clicked on her mailbox. But as the list opened he saw hundreds of emails dating back to the night before she left for Alaska, all unanswered. Now the fear was overwhelming. He was about to be sick.

\* \* \*

Trotman slept hard until the phone rang. He answered, but he wasn't anywhere near functional; the mental fog heavy. He was accustomed to midnight call-outs to crime scenes, but that didn't mean he was awake when he answered. “Trotman.”

Carl tried to keep his composure. “My sister. My sister never arrived in Alaska. I just talked to the skipper of her boat, and he said he had to leave without her because she was late. He's been in port for a couple weeks now and she never did contact him, not to say she was safe, sorry, on another boat, nothing. He's going to check with other boats, but she's gone!” Carl couldn't hold it together. He started to sob. “I have—I have to find her but I don't know how.”

Trotman sat on the edge of the bed, his mind still muddy as he struggled to think who this was. “Your sister. I need to know who you are so I can get on the same page with you.” He was still not on the same page with the caller.

“It's Carl. Carl Berger. My sister is Jen Parberry. You've been wanting to talk to her about Beth's accident.”

That woke Trotman up completely. “Where can I meet you?”

“Anywhere. I just need help. Anything!”

Trotman grabbed something to write with. “I’ll just meet you at your apartment. Give me an address.” It was almost midnight. Trotman wanted to file a Missing Persons report ASAP.

## Chapter 9 (Spin Cycle)

California Highway Patrol's hands were full. At 10:30 PM the Riverside Freeway dealt a horrible blow to a high school dance team. On their way to the team captain's home for a sleepover after they picked up the new plebes, something went terribly wrong. The plebes were the newest members of the squad selected at tryouts two weeks before. This was initiation night. Three vehicles in all contained the entire squad, and mothers of three of the girls were the chauffeurs.

All had started out well. The girls laughed and chattered, some talked on their cell phones to girls in the other vans. The vehicles had just entered the freeway for a short two-exit jaunt onto the boulevard that would take them to their destination. But they never made it off the freeway. Whatever happened, the first van, the largest of the three which carried the most passengers, swerved to the left as if to miss something, and then lost control and rolled at high speed. Flames engulfed the van, and the team members in the two remaining vehicles were hysterical and now parked at the side of the freeway, their drivers yelling at them to stay inside, not to leave their seats. Vehicles behind them stopped and men ran with fire extinguishers with brave intent but not enough firepower. Sirens blared as emergency calls hit the 9-1-1 lines, and chaos overwhelmed all efforts by civilians to save anyone in the first van.

Fire trucks arrived and fire rescue members quickly doused the flames, but they were under no false impression about the rescue of anyone inside. The two girls who were ejected were barely alive. Helicopters stood by to transport them to the hospital. Once the helicopters

were off the ground, firefighters stood by in case they were needed for anything else before their next chore; to remove those who had died; the driver and eight of the teenagers.

When the CHP arrived they found the list of victims went far beyond those in the rollover. A bus was dispatched from the local transit district at the behest of medics on the scene. It arrived to shelter the remaining team members and the two drivers from the other vans. They were the dazed, the mentally paralyzed. And as the night progressed many more would succumb to the horror.

For the occupants of the other two vans, hysteria faded as shock sucked their emotions from their bodies. Barbara Brower, the driver of the second vehicle, was the first one to step outside the bus for questioning. Officer Dustin Detweiler, a 15-year veteran with the force, had the grim duty of interviewing witnesses.

After Barbara gave her name and address Officer Detweiler asked her to give him what information she could. He told her that anything at all would be helpful in their investigation and that he also realized the emotional pain she and her wards were feeling.

Did she know the other driver? Had they had anything to drink? To each of the questions she answered "No." When asked how many girls were on board, the officer cringed inside when she said 10 plus Jill who was driving. Were the girls noisy in the back of her van? The answer was obvious. The officer knew it was a night of revelry and excitement when the girls would stay up all night, but he had to ask. But then he asked if she saw anything before the accident that she thought might explain what happened.

Her eyes were fixed off in the distance. She wasn't looking at anything. She was watching a movie in her mind. Barbara looked for words and then slowly gave him the first detail but it made no sense. "I saw -- a flash. The van was dark inside, just like all the cars

around us. But then there was a flash and the van swerved radically and started to roll. It was so fast. Just a flash and then it swerved and rolled and rolled and rolled again. Something came out of the back. When it stopped it was on its side and flames were everywhere. I was watching it and trying to get over and stopped, but we had to pass it before we could stop. The other minivan full of girls got pulled over closer to the accident. They were behind us. We – we couldn't do anything. Cars were stopping and a couple of men ran up with fire extinguishers but” – Then she couldn't speak. The tears came rushing again and she buried her face in her hands and sobbed as the visions in her head overwhelmed what composure she had gathered.

Officer Detweiller let her get back on the bus and he sought answers from the other driver, but that questioning yielded nothing more. In fact, she had seen even less, as she was last in the line of vehicles full of girls. She did say they were out picking up new dance team members and they all met up at a local grocery store. They made the new girls stand over by the deli and do a quick dance routine that they learned for the tryouts. From there they all jumped on the freeway for what should have been a two-mile trip. They were on their way to the team captain's house for a sleepover, but no sooner got on the freeway than tragedy struck. They had travelled but barely a mile.

Officer Detweiler helped her back onboard and then asked if there was anyone, any of the young ladies who felt they'd seen something that they'd like to tell him. The girls all held each other, some stared at the back of the bus seats, others leaned their head over on their seatmate's shoulder. A few sat with their parents who held them tightly, parents who knew of the accident from hysterical cell phone calls they received from their daughters. The parents found their way alongside the freeway to the accident site. But they were parents at a total loss as to how they could comfort their child.

Before the accident Kerrie Jefferson, captain of the dance team, sat in the front seat of the smaller team van next to Barbara, the driver of vehicle number two. “I – I saw something – and – I heard something.” The officer asked her to come outside of the bus. It was important to not contaminate the witness pool, if there were any witnesses to draw from. In a traumatic situation like this, it becomes hard for people to discern what they saw from what they heard someone else say. It was important that other potential witnesses couldn’t hear the statements of others.

Officer Detweiler asked for her name and phone number, and then asked what she wanted to tell him.

“I was on the cell phone with Chelsea, whose mom was driving the van, and I was telling her to tell her mom to get off at the next exit and go east. Her mom had been to my house once before, but I just wanted to remind her. And I could hear Chelsea telling her mom, and her mom saying something about, ‘I know. You don’t need to worry.’ And Chelsea said she was trying to get some music playing over the van’s speakers but her batteries were almost dead. The girls in the van were *really* loud and telling her to hurry up. She told me to wait a minute. She had to get out her adapter so she could plug into the cigarette lighter, and she put down the cell phone for a second.

“I could hear Jill, her mom, asking her to put the lighter in the ashtray so it didn’t get lost. She said ‘Okay’ and then there was a loud noise, a bang, and I saw a flash and I heard everybody screaming and –and then the van was rolling and everybody in our car started screaming –and then there was--the phone was--“

“Where did you see the flash, Kerrie?” For a moment she didn’t answer. She couldn’t. And the officer was holding his own emotions in check only with the thinnest thread of control. His daughter was only 16 and had just made the dance team at her own high school, and he knew

– his mind ached privately as he couldn't help but hear – no -- feel in his own soul John Bradford's quote, "There but for the grace of God go I." Keeping busy getting information from witnesses was all that kept him from losing his own composure.

Kerrie began to speak again. "There was an orange flash, a ball of fire. It was up front. When the van first swerved you could see it up by the driver. But then when the van rolled over a couple of times it was everywhere. But it was inside at first, not outside. Not under the hood. It was like something had exploded inside and started it burning. And it rolled and the back came open and I saw – I -- I saw them. I don't know who. But they were thrown out when the van rolled." The officer asked her a few more questions and then let her get back in the bus.

The freeway was closed and emergency equipment was everywhere. Girls in the other two vans had called their parents, and though they couldn't get on the freeway, fathers and mothers parked on surface streets and hiked up the embankments to find their children. Chaos ruled. Parents wanted to take their girls home, and other parents found out that their own children had perished. Some fathers boarded the bus looking for their daughters or their wife. Jill's husband stood holding onto Troy, his 14-year-old son, both sobbing as the destroyed van stood in the distance, a charred skeleton, testimony to their loss. Wife and daughter, mother and sister both gone now, two people would forever be missed in their home.

Media were everywhere. Television trucks parked on the side streets and the TV crews made it onto the freeway as well and attempted to interview patrolmen and rescue workers. Had an officer not blocked the door barring their access to the bus, reporters would have interviewed the girls and van drivers. Helicopters overhead broadcast pictures of the scene below, with stations updating the breaking news every few minutes. And NBC, CBS, ABC and FOX, all the big boys, aired the tragedy on their affiliate stations giving it national attention. They intended to



get as much mileage as they could out of this story. Not a Columbine, but it was definitely an attention getter. They aired pictures of the palpable grief and showed footage from *experts*, armchair quarterbacks guessing the cause of the accident amidst footage of rescue workers loading the only two survivors onto gurneys and into waiting helicopters. The scene was horrific.

Officer Detweiler headed to the two men who had approached the vehicle with fire extinguishers. One was driving a semi when he saw the accident. The other was in a motor home.

Clyde Benetar was a trucker with almost 30 years' experience. A 5'8" 50-year-old with an impressive paunch that hung over his belt, he was bald on the crown of his head and his hair had thinned up front. Dressed in loose dirty Carhartts and work boots, his sleeveless T-shirt was stretched around his stomach like a glove and showed that one of his last meals used catsup. His lower arms showed heavy tattooing so extensive that the artwork looked like colorful sleeves, starting at his shoulders and ending just as abruptly at his wrists. His double chin partially hid another tattoo on his neck, stretched and misshapen by the thick layer of fat which concealed parts of the picture in its folds. But there was one tattoo that stood alone and said who he truly was. On his shoulder it read "Only God Can Kill Me." A silver crucifix hung around his neck and gave validation to his belief.

A hardcore trucker, Benetar was a bit rough but a good witness. Of the two would-be heroes, Officer Detweiler chose to start with him first. Long-time truckers often made great witnesses. Because they sat high in their semi, they had a view far better than the average driver. For the most part they were more observant as well. A semi can't stop on a dime.

Benetar was finishing a cigarette when the officer approached. Detweiler started by introducing himself and then asked the usual preliminaries. Then the meat of the questioning began. “Mr. Benetar, tell me about the first thing you saw just before the accident.”

Clyde exhaled his last drag of the cigarette, flicked the butt to the ground and crushed it under the toes of his boot. “The road, light traffic, everybody doin’ about 70, good spacing.”

“What happened next?”

“There was that stretch van and a couple minivans ahead of me in the right lane, one big one and two minis. I saw ‘em get on the freeway, but they was staying over in the right lane going a little slower than traffic. In fact, just as I pulled out to go around ‘em things went crazy.”

“How so,” Detweiler asked.

“There was some kind of flash, an orange flash in the big front van. And then it swerved really sharp to the left and rolled. And that orange flash become flames everywhere inside. It rolled once, and as it come up for the second roll the back popped open and I saw people being thrown, pitched from the van.”

“How many?”

Benetar turned his head slightly to the right and tipped it a little, the right side of his mouth and cheek scrunched up a bit as if he couldn’t quite be positive for sure. “I think I saw just them two girls. That’s all we found, but then again that’s all we was lookin’ for.” Benetar lit another cigarette. The stress of the night played on him.

Detweiler made notes and then continued with his questions. “Do you remember seeing anything just before the van swerved; deer, dogs, maybe a tire blow out, something that would cause the driver to veer off?”

“No, nothin’. Just a flash, a swerve and a roll. Them people was good as dead the minute the van made its first circle. No way no one was going to make it out alive.”

What did you do when you saw the van flip?”

“I stopped moving to the left and corrected back to the lane I was in just before the accident. And them other two littler vans, they was pulling over too, but they was past the accident. I got over just a little behind and kind of parallel to the fire and me and some other guy had extinguishers and was running to the van trying to do something for them people inside. That back end there, it had sprung open, like I said, and we was spraying those extinguishers inside trying to stop the fire, but there wasn’t no hope. So I told him, ‘A couple of them people flew out over here somewhere,’ and we headed to the embankment. We found the first girl and he stayed with her, and I found the second.”

“Were either of them alive when you found them?”

Clyde exhaled smoke through his nose and shrugged. “Well, I don’t know about the one that *other* guy stayed with, but the one I was with was alive and she was kinda makin’ noise, but she was busted up bad. She had legs and arms goin’ in directions God never made ‘em to go.”

Detweiler felt his stomach roll. He had seen the girl the trucker described. Clyde’s description of her condition was right on. He was a really good witness. His speech lacked polish but everything he said rang with truth. A high time road warrior, one could be sure that he’d seen all kinds of accidents.

“Did you try to administer any first aid to her?” Detweiler asked.

As Clyde nodded his head, his left hand grasped the crucifix that hung from a chain around his neck. “I just said a prayer for her. For the way she was it was the only help I was good at. I wouldn’t have known where to start with real medical. The kind of first aid kit I got is

for rappin' gauze around a big slice on a hand or arm, a splint for a broken finger or somethin'. I couldn't of figured out where to start or what to do. It was all bad. Besides, then other drivers was getting there and people was comin' with flashlights and people come up who could really do somethin', so I just got up and headed back to my rig. I didn't exactly get it pulled over to the side of the road when I stopped." Clyde paused for a moment and then asked, "Is them girls gonna make it? At least one of 'em?"

Detweiler thought for a moment. "I don't know. But it's a good sign when someone is airlifted to the hospital. It means there's a chance they can be saved. It means surgeons and hospital staffs are on alert waiting for the victims, ready to do whatever it takes to give them a crack at pulling through. Besides, you administered the best medicine the minute you found them."

Officer Detweiler thanked Clyde and said someone would contact him soon. He asked him to stick around for a while in case there was a need to ask him anything else. It wasn't like Clyde could leave. Emergency vehicles had him blocked in all directions and the freeway was completely closed.

People who witnessed the accident were milling around, but Earl, the man with the other fire extinguisher, was back in his motor home tending to his wife.

Earl and Betsy Segal had been traveling just behind and to the left of the trucker when the accident happened. When the semi pulled slowly out to the left to pass the vans, Earl let off the accelerator to let the trucker in ahead of him, and temporarily lost view of the vans. But when the semi yanked back to the right, Earl saw the accident still in motion.

Earl and his wife were traveling in a mansion on wheels, a \$700,000 motor home. It had the shape of a Greyhound bus but the fancy painted mural on the sides told passersby it was

anything but. Every luxury afforded the finest homes could be found onboard, short of a gas fireplace and a hot tub. And that was merely because they didn't elect to have those two items.

Earl was sitting at his dinette table when Officer Detweiler approached. He opened the door and stepped outside. The patrolman asked if he could interview Earl and his wife, but Earl quickly informed him that Betsy hadn't witnessed anything, as she was in bed and slept through the accident itself. She only came up front after Earl slammed on the brakes aggressively and bolted out the door with an extinguisher. With that clarification, the officer was then invited inside to sit at the table.

Earl introduced Betsy, his wife. She had Parkinson's and her shakiness showed clearly. The stress of the horrible scene made her tremors very noticeable. In fact, it scared Earl, as she was never quite this bad in the past. As the night wore on, the patrolman was witness to the rippling effect the accident would cause in the lives of not only a school and community, but also Betsy and Earl's lives as well.

The officer asked Earl's full name, date of birth, social security number, phone and address. The address given was their son's, as they chose to sell their home and almost everything they didn't need or that didn't fit in their new digs. When it came to folks who wanted to tour Canada in motor homes and trucks with campers, they had better have an official U.S. address other than the vehicle in which they traveled. That's where their son's address came into play. He also handled the few bills they had, and allowed them to use his address for travel purposes, registration of their motor home, etc.

With the preliminary information logged, the tough questions started. "Mr. Segal, tell me what you first saw when the accident happened."

Earl thought for a moment. “You know, I have to say that the very first moment I didn’t really see. We’d been driving half the day, stopped in Gorman for dinner and then continued south. I really wanted to drive straight on through and eat while I drove, but Betsy really needed a break, so we stopped at a – Earl thought for a moment – “Shoot. Lots of them have closed.” Just then Betsy chimed in.

“Sizzler’s.”

”Yeah, Sizzler’s. It gave Betsy a chance to stretch her legs. I just didn’t feel much like eating. We had reservations at a park in Lake Elsinore. I think it’s called Lake Elsinore County Park or City Park. I wanted to get there sooner rather than later because finding the camping space and parking this monster is a challenge. In truth, we probably should have stopped about an hour before the accident, but we’re supposed to meet my daughter and her husband there for a get together. They’re bringing their tent and our grandkids.

I was very tired. I’d missed the 210 Freeway and that forced us through LA still on the I-5. Then I caught the 91 and missed the 15. It was just a whole chain of events that shouldn’t have happened. I didn’t even realize I’d missed my transition until I started looking at the exit signs and figured out I was past my turn. If I’d gone the right way I never would have seen this.”

Detweiler nodded. “Just tell me the best you can what you saw in front of you.”

“In reality, what I saw was the semi wanting to pass some vans and his turn signal on.” Earl pondered a moment, his chin resting on his fist, his elbow on the dinette table. “And I slowed some and flashed my lights off and then on to tell him he could move over. He started to and I wasn’t paying attention to the vehicles in front of him much, except I was aware they were going slower than me or the big rig and I could tell the truck wanted to go around them. I would have done the same thing after him, I’m sure.

Detweiler encouraged him to continue. “Then what happened?”

Earl became quiet as he fought for continued composure in his voice. Betsy grabbed his hand to give him support.

Earl started to speak again. “The semi started to pull out and I lost sight of the vans that had been in front of him, and then he suddenly jerked back into the other lane. I saw taillights spinning and I could see the van rolling and it – it rolled several times. And then I was trying to get stopped just like the semi. Traffic was light but I still was focused on getting stopped safely. I could see a few vehicles behind me and I was watching for cars, to make sure I didn’t end up as part of the mayhem.

“I barely set the brake before I grabbed the fire extinguisher and took off running. And there was another guy with an extinguisher that showed up right before I did. It might have been the trucker. But, man, that van was crushed and an inferno. The back had flung open when it rolled and we were hitting the inside with the little bit that we had, but it was way too late.

“The other guy barked, ‘Come on!’ And he started heading to the embankment. He said he saw people fly out of the back. I didn’t see that part of it either. I didn’t see anybody come out.”

“Detweiler interrupted. “Did he say how many he saw?”

“I’m not sure. You know, I *think* I heard him say “a couple.” We found one and I stayed with her and called 9-1-1. I asked them to send everything they had. And the girls from the other vans started coming and they were screaming and crying. I just remember needing light, and just then a man came running up with a substantial flashlight and I could see this gal was really in terrible shape. A woman said she was a nurse and got down there with the girl.

Someone else had a big bag with stuff and got down there to help. And then the medics were there. It seemed like it was forever, but I don't think it was more than five or ten minutes."

"Did you go find the other man who had helped you?"

"No. I just was standing there. I think shock was setting in. We have seven grandchildren and five of them are girls. That girl I stayed with looked about the same age as Emma, our 16-year-old granddaughter. I was just kind of paralyzed, overwhelmed with what I was surrounded by. It was like the aftermath of a fire I'd been in back in the early days of 'Nam. And then I remember thinking, 'My, God. Betsy!' And I headed back to her. I didn't want her out in the midst of everything. When this was first unfolding, out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of her coming up front when I was bolting down the steps with the extinguisher. I think hitting the brakes hard and people yelling and all the chaos woke her and I knew she'd be terrified." Earl was now holding his wife's hand, looking at her. Her tremors were terrible.

Officer Detweiler thanked Earl and told him to expect a call if they needed further information, and he asked Earl to remain parked for a while in case anyone else needed to talk with him.

Just before the officer stepped out of their motor home, Betsy asked him if the girls they found on the edge of the freeway would live.

"I hope so." With that he went on to meet with emergency personnel.

He located the fire marshal within a few minutes. "Captain, have your guys found anything unusual, something out of the ordinary?" He wondered if the firemen had commented about the fire that engulfed the inside of the van just before the vehicle put itself on the spin cycle. But Captain Spears offered up nothing that tied in with witness statements.



Detweiler was well aware of the problems with the large capacity passenger vans. He had visions of lawyers rubbing their hands together and saliva dripping from the corner of their mouths as they thought of landing a portion of this case. The sharks always circled.

Many lawsuits were launched over the years due to the erratic behavior of the extended capacity van when fully loaded. They could seat up to 15 people in some of them, but they weren't as sturdy as a school bus. They were just cargo vans that the manufacturers had been stretched and outfitted with seats to accommodate a growing market for larger capacity passenger vehicles, smaller than a bus, larger than a mini-van. But buses were designed differently and reinforced for side impacts and rollovers, and they had reinforcement to resist roof crush. Their center of gravity was lower.

The closer to capacity the stretch van was filled with people, the more likely it was to have a rollover-type accident. More people inside raised the center of gravity and made the long vans top heavy.

In January of 2003, Dr. Jeffrey Runge of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration appeared before Automotive News World Congress and presented startling numbers of the rollover and death rates from the stretch vans used for passenger transportation. According to Dr. Runge, only 3 percent of all vehicle crashes involved these vans, but the passenger vans accounted for one third of all vehicle occupant fatalities. Because of the catastrophic fatality numbers involving school children, college students, swim teams and church goers, many universities and colleges were divesting themselves of the 15-seaters and buying smaller transport vehicles. If they had four of the monsters, they'd replace them with five of the smaller, safer versions. A look at the statistics removed all doubt that replacing the vans was appropriate.

Across the country lawmakers passed legislation prohibiting school districts from transporting Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in 15-seat vans. Some universities banned using the vans to full capacity, and limited the passenger count to 10. Others limited the roads on which they could travel to those not exceeding 35 miles per hour. With all the media coverage and inter-district briefings that school administrators received about these vans, how did this one school let the use of this potential death trap slip by them?

Records of the past revealed so many accidents involving students and churches. In 2002 in Birmingham, Alabama, there was a similar accident with a similar result. A tire delaminated and a 15-seater rolled. It was full of cheerleaders who were members of Christian Cheerleaders of America.

May of 2001 Wichita Falls, Texas saw a driver with 12 women passengers roll in an elongated van. It killed the driver and three of the women, and severely injured the others. They were all from the First Assembly of God Church. .

In September of 2001 in Marianna, Florida drivers watched in horror as a van holding 10 Florida Baptist College students lost control and rolled. Three were ejected and died at the scene, and the rest were severely injured.

In 2000 a van rolled over on the way to a meet. The Prairie View A&M University track team lost four members, while seven others were seriously injured.

This type of accident repeated itself too many times. Many people on an outing in one of these death traps suddenly found themselves detoured into a trip in a runaway centrifuge. Every time it meted out horrific injuries or death. But this accident was the worst to which Officer Detweiler had responded. What was the truth in this instance? Did a tire come apart? Was the

driver blinded by an electrical flash and lose control? Did a high center of gravity contribute to the roll? Was the linchpin something they'd ever find in this disaster?

Investigators would pore over every aspect of this accident throughout the night, follow up on evidence for weeks to come, and all the while the legal vulchers would circle.

Detweiler's own mind was reeling. He couldn't help but feel the coming days for the high school would be empty. He could feel the ache of squad members for their missing friends and the numbness of students as they sat in classroom chairs but couldn't focus on studies. To smile, to feel anything but the surrealness of losing their friends so tragically would be only an ethereal haze.

It wasn't just their school that would struggle. Dance teams and students at other schools would be enveloped by the tragedy. Those who were lost were not just competitors, but also young people of like mind and talent. Other dance teams would grieve as if many of their own had been taken from them. The loss would act like a flesh eating disease; moving voraciously along destroying everything it touched.

Seeing the media enmeshing themselves in every square foot of the scene sickened Detweiler. TV station cameras rolled from all angles, including from helicopters above. Reporters interviewed anyone who would let them stick a microphone in their face.

Newspaper reporters were no better with their tape recorders, as they caught every snippet of commentary made by officials, witnesses or self-professed experts. They wrote their stories without exercise of any compassion for the victims' families or friends. They never left out a single horrifying detail. And if they didn't find enough to roll a reader's stomach, they embellished by saying, "And *if* the van had made another revolution it *might have* gone into oncoming traffic and many more people *could have* died." It was the "if-then" factor, something

journalists now bandied about like a time-honored tradition. Sensationalism was a ticket to the big time.

Detweiler regarded the most repulsive to be the belly crawlers, the pouncing lawyers wearing Prada, the big ticket guys who only handled cases that scored the big bucks for them. By daylight the edges of the freeway would be crawling with camera toting investigators from the big firms, like ants on an anthill, firms speculating that they might just get a portion of the litigious pie. The sharks religiously included everyone in their lawsuit. Anyone with deep pockets or shallow would be on the list. No evidence of a faulty vehicle was meaningless to the attorneys. GM knew it would appear as the number one defendant, and then belly crawlers would build a case to include the others later. Just one deep pocket, that's all they needed.

In fact, by morning GM's legal team would already be amassed, reviewing the facts of the accident.

Detweiler's partner walked up, clipboard with notes in hand, and shared what he had discovered, much of it similar to Detweiler's own findings. Just before the accident the two survivors were in the farthest back seat, unbuckled. They were leaned over the next seat up when the accident happened. As the vehicle rolled, its back doors flung open and ejected them. The other girls and the driver were not so fortunate. Had they survived the trauma of smashed bones and internal injuries, they could not be rescued from the inferno. The roof had crushed in on them and trapped them in the fire. But at least two were still breathing, they still had a strand of life to cling to, and still had the prayers of all who knew them and loved them. Even the truck driver had called on God to help and *He* had not taken them *yet*. And if good news came into the picture at all, the girls' injuries, though life threatening, were not compounded by burns.

However, with severe internal injuries, broken bones and fractured skulls their lives were tied to this earth only by a whisper.

For the parents of these two survivors, the night had yet to completely unfold. Even with the best doctors and medical technology, without divine intervention the two girls had little chance of making it through the night. And then there would be survival for more days, and if they did, the question of total recovery would be ever-looming. And the final question for the families beyond each girl's survival would be the most uncertain; would they ever be the same?

## Chapter 10 (The Link)

Sam Carver usually watched the late night news, but tonight he needed some levity. He searched for Jay Leno. For some reason he was just feeling down. No, not just down. He was frustrated, bothered by the lack of progress on the Beth Langley case. Many cases were cut and dry. But on this case they slogged. Every hunch pulled them in circles. Every lead produced mush rather than hard evidence.

As Carver looked for The Tonight Show, he landed on a news channel and saw a bird's eye view from a news helicopter of what looked like a serious accident. The freeway was closed. "No! I'm not going to get sucked into the news." He was going to laugh with Leno for a minute before going to bed. But as he hunted for Leno he saw a double-chinned truck driver being interviewed by a reporter at what looked like the same scene shown by the other channel. The sentence Carver heard the truck driver say froze his finger on the TV controller.

"... a flash and then it veered to the left and when it rolled you could see them flames everywhere inside, and I slammed on my brakes, and another man and me was using fire extinguishers trying to get out the fire but it was no use."

"Thank you." The reporter closed out the interview. "Again, that was an eyewitness to the accident who says he saw a flash inside just before the vehicle rolled. We'll be updating you as we have further information. This is KBLM News live on the 91 Freeway. Tom and Vicky, back to you."

Carver couldn't get the phrase out of his head, "flash and then it veered." He flipped the channel again to see if there was any further coverage on this accident. The channel surf scored him more information. An officer on the scene was giving brief details.

"...rolled and caught fire with, it is believed, eleven people on board."

The reporter's questions were rapid fire. "Is it true the victims may be from a high school pep squad?"

"I can't give out that information at this time."

"Can you give us the status of the survivors, how many there were and the type of injuries you are seeing?"

"We have unofficial numbers currently, but it is believed that nine are dead and two are in critical condition and have been taken to Riverside Community Hospital by helicopter."

"Can you tell us who the survivors are?"

"No positive ID has been established on any of the occupants, and until family members are notified the names cannot be released."

"One more question, Officer. Is there any indication what might have caused this accident? A blown tire maybe?" The reporter stuffed the mic back in the officer's face so aggressively that the officer pulled back to avoid being struck in the mouth.

"No—no. At this point nothing has been ruled out. All we know is witnesses reported a flash and that it rolled, and it will take investigators time to put the puzzle together and come up with solid answers."

"Thank you, Officer Collins." The reporter did his closeout summary.

“Again, rescue workers and investigators will have this freeway closed for hours, and they certainly have their work cut out for them. As we get more information we’ll be giving you updates. Live in Riverside, California, this is KVCR News. Back to you, Chet.”

King 5 News took over. “Again, that was our Riverside affiliate station KVCR with coverage on this horrific accident.”

It was 11:17 PM. Trotman would be asleep, but this was too important to wait until morning. It made no sense that it could be linked, but the flash description and the roll, the parallel was startling. Carver dialed his cell phone, sure his partner would be comatose by this time of night. Within three rings, there was a voice at the other end. “John, Sam. Sorry to wake you up but you need to turn on the TV. There’s been an accident in Riverside, California and it is the spitting image of” –

“I’m not asleep. I’m not even home.” Trotman said. “I got a call from Carl Gerber on the Langley case. His sister never made it to the boat in Alaska. She’s been missing in action for two months and no one has seen her. I guess the Captain of the boat she was supposed to be on called Carl back.”

Carver now felt worse than he did when he was hunting for Jay Leno. “How is he?” He couldn’t help but ask. He was the more sympathetic of the two detectives.

Messed up is an understatement.” Trotman said, “I’m heading over to Carl’s to get the ball rolling on a missing persons report. It’s two months late but you never can tell. If she’s as adventurous as Carl said she is, she could be just fine and hanging out with some surfer in Maui.”

“It’s possible, I guess.” Carver wasn’t so sure about his partner’s optimism but wanted to at least give the appearance of being hopeful.



Trotman pondered the Riverside accident before he responded. “You better make a call to Riverside and have them send whatever information they have. It’s a long shot. I can’t imagine how Ghio could monkey with a vehicle clear down there and kill someone but –“

“John, it isn’t just someone, Carver barked. It’s a whole pep squad. Eight of them are dead, plus a driver, and two are critical.”

As hard as he tried, Trotman couldn’t see the connection. “What axe would Ghio have to grind with a bunch of high school girls a thousand miles away?”

Carver wasn’t stumped by that question. “Maybe the same axe he had to grind with Jen Parberry. None.”

“Get Sheree rolling on cell phone records.” Trotman gave his partner his marching orders. “See if there are any calls to or from California. Oh, and tell Riverside to expedite the details to us. I want to rule out the connection early if there’s nothing to it. I’ll call you as soon as I have a game plan for finding Parberry. Maybe she *was* the star witness we needed after all.”

“Oh, and Max Torkleson, check and see if he’s available. If he is, get it cleared with the powers that be. We need a link, some method that Ghio could have used, and I’m plum out of ideas. We need the bloodhound.”

Carver concurred. “I’ll get him on the horn first thing in the morning.” Then one more thought came pedaling forward. “I was thinking. Wonder what we’d turn up with a database search for all accidents that were fires and/or rollovers here in the western states. Could be a link. If these two turn out to be connected with a thousand miles between them, Ghio may not have stopped at just two.”

Trotman concurred. “Yeah. Let’s check it out. “If Jen Parberry is dead, he may not have a problem with just one woman. It may be with any woman.”



## Chapter 11 (No One Left)

The Riverside accident had the California Highway Patrol investigators kicked into overdrive. Repeatedly eyewitnesses reported seeing a flash inside and *then* a rollover, not the other way around. With incineration of the vehicle, they struggled to find any indication of what caused the accident. The toasted tires lead nowhere. They'd need the sales receipt for the purchase. The driver's husband might know where to find it.

A bent rim might indicate a possible blowout caused the driver to lose control, but the rims were symmetrical. Seats, dash, door panels--all had melted in the blaze. They were sure the fire started in the front of the cabin as there was less damage further back. That's where the two ejected survivors had been. The exterior gave indication that the fire had been hotter and burned longer on the inside and up front than it burned outside. This case would be time consuming and tedious.

First thing in the morning Detective Carver phoned Riverside and alerted investigators that there might be more to the story than a blown tire or a tired driver. He asked them to send whatever information they had, and he in return guaranteed them the same courtesy from Washington's end. Joining forces could produce unexpected results.

Within hours the WSP's Crime Investigation Division received an email with a copy of the accident report and witness statements attached. Sheree opened two emails from the California investigators and found comprehensive pictures attached. The photos showed the destroyed vehicle and accident scene. Carver, Trotman and Sheree now had more material to

work with. And documents from Washington were now in the hands of California's investigators as well. The morning was busy at both ends of the west coast.

While the Marysville accident investigators were busy at their end, the morning also found two California Highway Patrol investigators in Riverside at the Barrington home. They needed to question the husband of Jill Barrington, the driver of the doomed van full of girls.

Jill and Paul Barrington were married 19 years, with two children, Chelsea and Troy. Troy was 14, tall for his age, and destined to play basketball in high school. 17-year-old Chelsea was one of the best on the high school's dance team.

Jill was actively involved in her daughter's competitions, and always volunteered to drive the girls to team events. In fact, the large van she was driving was a gift from her husband. She loved running the kids and their friends around to practice and competitions, particularly the dance team. It gave her a chance to watch her son and his team members at basketball matches and her daughter's dance team make it to state championships the year before.

The family van was one of three vehicles greatly appreciated by the coach when at any given time 20 or more team members needed to be shuttled hither and yond. Parents who donated their time and vehicles were heroes to the coaches and kids.

When the detectives arrived at the Barrington home it was teeming with relatives who shared the loss of Jill and Chelsea and the burden of making funeral plans. It was just too much for Paul to think about; now he and his son had only each other.

The detectives were led to the kitchen table and Paul Barrington came in with his sister Terri to join them. Barrington appeared to almost fall into the chair as he sat down. His exhaustion from his loss nearly bled from every pore.

Detective David Witherspoon had been assigned this case, and it was his job to tackle with speed an accident now of national interest, its cause called into question. Timely information would be critical.

“Mr. Barrington, we understand how terribly difficult it is for you to deal with our questions. We’ll keep them as brief as possible and then get on our way. However, we need answers in order to keep our investigation rolling, and as much as we regret interrupting you, the answers you give may head off another such tragedy.

We received a call from the Washington State Patrol regarding a smaller version of this accident, and if there is any link at all we need to get this information in their hands as well as our own, and we just can’t wait several days for the answers.

Paul nodded but didn’t look at them.

“How long had you owned the van your wife was driving?”

Silent for a moment Paul finally spoke. “About two years.”

“Do you know when the tires were last replaced?”

Paul thought for a minute. “Last ye- – No. Last year I replaced the tires on my car. About two years ago, right after I bought it.”

“Do you remember where you purchased them?”

“Sears.”

The phone rang and someone handed it to Paul. It was his mother calling from the east coast. He broke down and sobbed. The detectives excused themselves into another room. Then Paul’s sister approached them and asked if there wasn’t some way they could wait until after the funeral to ask questions. She expressed her concerns for Paul and Troy, her nephew. Her grief over losing Chelsea and Jill was just as great but she needed to be strong for Paul. There’d be

much to do before the funeral and he wouldn't be able to manage any of it on his own. And there would be other funerals to attend as well. Paul and Troy knew so many of the girls.

“Please, just give him enough time to bury my sister-in-law and my niece.”

Witherspoon nodded with understanding. “As much as we hate doing this, because of the nature of the accident, there is certain information we need at this moment. We'll keep it as brief as possible. Is he available again?”

She said she'd check and then walked away.

When Paul was off the phone she directed them back to the kitchen again and Paul was hunched in a kitchen chair. He felt dead inside, as dead as his wife and daughter.

“Mr. Barrington, we just have a few minutes of questions and then we'll leave you alone.

Had the van been worked on recently? Any mechanical items that needed fixing?”

Paul made a sound. It sounded like he said something, but the detective couldn't make it out.

“I'm sorry. Did you have work done on the van regularly, or maybe in the last month?”

Paul spoke louder. “Monday.”

“Monday, and the accident was Tuesday. Who did you use? Do you have a receipt or a name at least?”

“It was the speakers. I thought they'd gone bad because they were cutting in and out, and I wanted to have it fixed for my wife because she spent so much time running the kids around.

That and the cigarette lighter.”

“Did your wife smoke?”

“No. My daughter liked to plug a power adapter for her iPod player into the lighter jack so she didn't run down her batteries in her iPod when she was in the van. Her mom – her mom

didn't like her music, so headsets and an iPod made life a little more bearable. But if the team members were in the van and Jill okayed it, Chelsea could put the iPod adapter thingy in the lighter jack, and it let her iPod take over the speakers in the van and she could play her music for everybody."

"I don't understand. Can you explain that a little for me?" Witherspoon may have had a teenager but this wasn't an item of discussion he'd ever encountered with his daughter and wife.

"The van was old enough that all it had was a radio and cassette deck. The kids all have iPods now and don't bother buying tapes. But with an iPod all they had to do was buy the lighter jack adapter, and -- I'm not sure how it worked, but it made it so the iPod she had would play over the radio and the van speakers."

"I just had the lighter fixed because my daughter used her iPod so much, and plugging it into the lighter jack would recharge it and she could use the headsets to listen to it while my wife listened to the radio or if Jill okayed it Chelsea could play her iPod music over the speakers. She just had to tune the radio to a certain channel or something. And since this guy said he knew how to fix it, I paid him a couple extra bucks to fix the lighter when he fixed the speakers."

Witherspoon realized Paul had misunderstood the original question, though the information was helpful. "What about repairs other than just a radio and lighter, like the engine or transmission, brakes, something like that?"

"No, not recently. Just the speakers and the lighter. We had an electrical problem and I never figured it out. But my neighbor has his brother living with him right now and he said he could trace it out and fix it. So I let him do it and I gave him \$60 for the work."

This information wasn't what the detective was originally after but he'd take it anyhow. Maybe that was the flash. "Do you remember your neighbor's brother's name?"

“His given name I have no clue. My neighbor just called him Spike. Sounded like something stupid out of a ‘60s movie.”

“Can you give me your neighbor’s name and address?”

Paul shook his head. “His name is Calvin something and he’s two doors down to the left of this house on the other side of the street.” As Paul finished answering the question, his sister entered the kitchen with Pastor Simmons. The pastor was from Faith Community Church where the Barrington family had attended, and Paul could no longer answer questions. It was time the detectives excused themselves and allow Paul time to share his grief with his pastor.

Witherspoon and his partner wandered down a couple houses and crossed the street. The houses didn’t exactly line up one across from the other so “two down” was nebulous at best. At the first house they went to, a woman opened her screen and pointed to the left. Calvin lived one more over.

Before they walked up to the next house they placed a call to headquarters and provided an address to staff. Back came Calvin’s full name, the owner of the house where the work on the van was done. The information they received back listed Calvin Brinks as the owner, no other names. A quick background check revealed Calvin had spent some time in jail for theft and misdemeanor assault, but nothing too rambunctious. There was a car in the driveway which gave them hope they’d find Spike at home, but it was Calvin who met them at the door.

“Yes?”

Witherspoon showed his badge and identified himself and his partner. “We’re looking for Spike.”

“He’s not here right now.” Calvin looked a bit shaken by their appearance. “Is something wrong?”



“We’d like to talk to him. When was the last time you saw him?”

Calvin stepped out on the porch and closed the front door behind him. “Last night when we were watching the news.” He reached in his pants pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “We were watching the stuff on an accident and when they said something about a pep squad, he got upset because he wondered if it was the girl that was on dance team across the street. Now seeing so many people arrive – well, I am worried that it was her. He will be very upset.” He continued to dig in his pants pockets looking for his lighter.

Witherspoon confirmed his observation. “Yes, they were involved in an accident. Both Mrs. Barrington and the daughter passed away.

“Was Spike close to the daughter?”

Calvin had an effeminate manner about him and his speech exhibited a slight lisp as he spoke to the detectives. “Well, the family is really nice, and if he’d see any of them outside washing cars or doing yard work he’d go over and talk to the kids or their parents. I know he did say he thought the daughter was really pretty . . . Do either of you have a light?”

Detective Braddock, Witherspoon’s partner, reached in his pocket and pulled out a lighter. Calvin lit his cigarette and thanked him.

“I never saw her pay him much attention. I mean there was quite a difference in age.” He took a heavy drag on the cigarette. “I can’t believe they’re both--“

Witherspoon kept pushing forward. “What’s your brother’s name?”

“Spike.”

“I mean his given name, Mr. Brinks. I understand he’s your brother?”

“Yes. It’s Jessie.”

“Same last name? Brinks?”

“Yeah.”

“How long has he lived here with you?”

Calvin took another heavy drag on his cigarette and thought a minute. “About eight months.”

Is it a permanent arrangement?”

“Yeah, for the time being. Nothing’s set in stone but” --

“Does he have a cell phone number?”

Calvin retrieved his cell phone from his belt and pulled up the number. He held out the screen of the phone to Witherspoon, but Braddock took it from him and copied the number.

“Do you know his date of birth?”

“Yes.”

Witherspoon waited for the date but it wasn’t forthcoming.

Calvin dropped his half finished cigarette butt on the porch and ground it out with his shoe. “Can you tell me what he’s done?” “What did he do?”

The detective ignored his query. “What’s his date of birth?”

“Uh, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1981. What’s happened? What’d he do?” Calvin’s anxiety was palpable. He looked quite anxious. “He couldn’t have violated his parole. He’s always been here and never does anything wrong.”

Braddock jumped in. “He’s on parole?”

“Well, yeah. I thought that’s why you were here.”

Witherspoon downplayed Calvin’s missive. “We’d just like to ask him a few questions is all. Will you have him call us when he gets home?”

“Yeah. I just wish I knew what --“

“Here’s my card. Is that his Mustang in the driveway?”

“No. He’s putting in a new stereo system for a lady at my work.”

Braddock stepped away from the porch and circled the car. “When is she picking it up?”

“I don’t know. Spike is waiting for a connector or something. I drove it home Friday night so he could work on it and I gave Katie my car for the weekend while hers was being worked on. It just has taken longer than Spike expected for the part to come in, so I walk over to Katie’s house in the morning and we ride to work together. It’s turned into a kind of a screwed up mess. I just want to make sure he’s working and making a little pocket money, but now I don’t have a car, Katie has my car, and her car is just sitting for want of a little part.”

Witherspoon asked another question. “Does Spike have a car?”

“No, just a bike. He doesn’t have a real job and it’s kind of hard to get one with a felony. But the auto parts store isn’t far from here, and if he needs to go somewhere further away he can ride his bike to the bus stop.

Witherspoon asked Braddock if he had anything further he wanted to ask, and thanked Calvin for the information. They noted the car’s make and license plate number as they left.

By the time they reached the end of the block, Braddock was viewing the vehicle’s computer screen which showed the list of priors and parole status on Jessie “Spike” Brinks. He also searched the name and address of the registered owner of the ’68 Mustang sitting in Calvin’s driveway. Spike’s record came back and he fell heavily into the *bad boy* category; in and out of juvenile, liked to play with matches, robbery; a full rap sheet that was interesting reading.

The car was registered to a Katie Johnson of 3515 Bennett Street, not far from where it sat. They wanted to pay her a visit as well after they got more details on “Spike.”

Braddock and Witherspoon returned to headquarters. They pored over everything they had. The record from Sears had been picked up by one of their officers from the local store. Nothing noteworthy on the tires. They were manufactured only a year before their sale to the Barringtons. The detectives were aware of a recent study which concluded that from the day of manufacture, tire rubber began to deteriorate. An undercover investigation had found tires as old as a dozen years from the date of manufacture, sitting on tire store shelves. At high speeds the rubber could delaminate from the tire and cause rollovers. But that obviously wasn't an issue here.

Their review of all the information they garnered through their investigation and the Washington State records brought them to the conclusion that there was no relationship between the Marysville and Riverside tragedies. The perceived links were only the bright flash and the rollover. But they couldn't fault the Washington State detectives for their concerns. It never hurt to explore the possibility, but the link didn't appear to exist. However, in an effort to cover all their bases, Witherspoon and Braddock agreed they'd better get a cell phone history on their "person of interest" as well. Maybe there was an accomplice. Maybe they'd find out that Spike and Geoff knew each other in some way and decided to see who could outdo the other. They would check with the Marysville Smokeys to see if they'd pulled the cell phone activity on their own P.O.I. as well.

## Chapter 12 (The Phone Calls)

Marysville Detectives Trotman and Carver had been busy. Actually Detective Sheree Williams had been busy and the fruits of her labors were now in their hands. She didn't need direction from anyone to search the cell phone records of potential suspects. It was one of the first things she went after when she learned there was a possible second accident. She now had cell phone records on Spike as well, thanks to the California detectives, along with the full background check.

Today was a day to digest everything they had; Carver with the Riverside documents and Trotman with the Marysville Langley file. When they'd both finished their respective file review they swapped records and started reviewing again. All the while Sheree continued to bring in more information.

Hours passed as they sifted through everything. Carver was the first to start commenting on similarities of Ghio and Spike. Both had prior arson charges. Riverside's alleged perpetrator lit a doghouse on fire with the dog in it in the not too distant past. He also had several severe domestic dispute charges as well. What kind of jerk was he! He hated dogs and women. The victims almost always refused to testify and the charges repeatedly were dropped, but for the last one in which the victim was beaten into unconsciousness and left blind in one eye.

Ghio aka Caswell hadn't been quite so bold in his youth. He just dumped lighter fluid on someone's basket of laundry at a Laundromat and pitched a match. He also was picked up for burning a cross in someone's lawn and a swastika elsewhere. His adult charges were far more severe, including robbery, and attempted kidnapping, a charge that was later dropped. Both

men's prior interest in fire would make sense if they really had somehow ignited these vehicles. Tying them together, that scenario would be unlikely. Ghio also had domestic dispute charges as well. Trotman hated that reality of life; women who were beaten repeatedly and then returned for more beatings from their partners. That was another item that should be added to the similarities list. The victims were all women and the possible perps both had prior domestic charges.

When he read Spike's history, the other thing that he noted as an attention grabber was the juvenile charges for mini bomb building; blowing up a school locker, a girl's book bag. Whether he could do something as dramatic as a timed explosion in a van full of dance team members would be another story. Those fiery "pranks" were all when he was a teenager.

Both detectives were blurry eyed. They needed a break.

"When's Max coming in?" Trotman wanted an extra pair of eyes to peruse the files. Max was *the* man who could make sense of the nonsensical, the man who thought *way* outside the box when it came to solving crimes.

Carver poured himself another cup of coffee. "He was going by the impound yard first for a look at the car. I thought he'd be in here by now." However, Max was Max, and since retirement from the department and the death of his wife, his return to work as an independent expert found him marching to a different timepiece, though his skill made everyone forgive that small transgression.

Trotman no sooner asked his whereabouts than Max popped his head through the door. "Hey, be right back. Need coffee." With that Max headed down the hall to the break room and returned with his cup filled. He also snagged a stale donut he found on the counter. Within

minutes Max was well entrenched in file boxes of both accidents where he found reams of paper, stacks of pictures, history of suspects, etc.

Trotman considered Max's lack of comment post-viewing of the vehicle odd.

"Max, you make it to the impound yard?"

"Huh-uh. Got delayed by an attorney's phone call and didn't make it there yet." Then as he started to dig through the materials he hummed a few bars of the theme music from "Jaws." Attorneys were the one part of his job he didn't like.

Trotman was waiting for his other compatriot, Sheree Williams, to come back with the rest of the cell phone records, but she still wasn't finished with the review. Not only a computer techy kind of gal and an internet research wizard, she also sported a keen eye for the minutest anomalies in the records she pored over; questionable phone numbers, calling patterns, anything that might tie these two crimes together.

After hitting it hard all morning, Carver and Trotman needed lunch. Their motto was never miss an opportunity to eat or use the bathroom, because some days didn't afford time for either. That rule was already violated once today. They met at the office at six AM. They wanted to be ready to brainstorm with Max, but they had too much material to review before he arrived, so breakfast was out of the question.

Thin and willowy, Max wasn't known for taking lunch when he was on a case, so they excused themselves and headed down the street to Donna's for a quick meal. Hopefully Max would find their food break would afford him enough time to get up to speed. Sheree would take care of anything he needed in the interim. Max and she were much alike in some ways. When she dug into a case she just couldn't find time to eat either. It was almost like looking at a female version of the old boy.

Detective Sheree Williams was a petite 29-year-old half Black, half Asian woman living her dream. Growing up she was an avid reader of murder novels, positively voracious for the most sinister who-dun-its. Her goal was to figure out the culprit before it was disclosed in the book. With each story, she wrote a note to herself when she thought she'd figured out the villain, and asked her mother to put it in her wallet until the book revealed the killer. It always delighted her parents to see her so excited about reading. The fact that she guessed correctly so many times in advance of the last chapter caused them to nickname her Dick Tracy.

But then one spring day the unthinkable, the unimaginable happened. It was only supposed to be lived through the books she read, never her own personal real life. It just couldn't happen to her family. But it did. It made no sense. The birds still chattered in the trees, cars still drove down the street, the grass still grew, but her brother was gone. Damien was killed in a drive-by shooting and his killers were never caught. That random act took more than just her brother. Sheree never looked at another murder novel. It hurt too much to think that her own brother's murder could not be solved.

As time passed her parents' efforts to console her went unrewarded. How could they lift her spirits when they couldn't console themselves over losing their youngest child. Damien was only 12! He was just standing in front of the house. How could anybody think a 12-year-old boy with a basketball in his hands should be shot?

Then on one particularly hard day for her, the second anniversary of his death, her father said, "You'll just have to become a detective so this never happens to anyone else, Sheree. Turn your grief into a useful tool in your life. That's the only way you're ever going to have some peace, is to make sure no one else suffers the way we do. The 'why' and the 'who.' It's going to



always eat at us. But you're good. Look at how you figured out those books you used to read. Use it, honey! Use that gift!"

Just like the youngster who goes to medical school because her mom died of cancer, Sheree decided that moment to go into law enforcement. Her focus became laser sharp. Her brother's unsolved murder would be the last murder without closure.

When she finally made the A team in years to come, she turned out to be one hell of a detective. She didn't need a lot of direction. She was a natural, consistently showing great initiative. Trotman always felt the likeliness of case closure improved when she was assigned to work with them.

Sheree and Max hit it off right from the get-go. The two were in discussion about something she noted when Trotman and Carver got back from lunch.

"One phone call received by each suspect was from the same number, Max. I don't have any indication on the cell phone record as to who the caller was except for 'Shelton, WA.' Qwest supplied me with the origination; Washington Corrections Center. Both these bad boys received a call from a phone at the facility two days before the respective *accidents*."

"I thought if someone there knew the suspects, perhaps simultaneous incarceration was the key. A bit of further checking confirms that they both were at Shelton Prison at the same time. I've arranged for their files to be sent to us. I also booked a tentative appointment with the warden for Friday, if we get the files before then.

Max cogitated a bit, emphasis on the first three letters of the word. Sheree could hear the cogs turning.

“Do you know the size of the prison population? It’s possible they were in the facility at the same time, but it’s like being in high school with a thousand other students. You don’t know even a quarter of them.”

Sheree pulled the prison up on her laptop. “Here it is. Looks like 1200.” She turned her computer around so Max could flip through the info.

He read part of the description for the facility. “400-acres . . . Hmm. Oh, oh. It’s a processing facility. Listen to this. ‘Close-custody facility with the primary responsibility to process, test, and classify all adult male felons sentenced to prison in Washington State.’”

Sheree had a sinking feeling when Max read that. “That could make our odds even worse for our two perps meeting up at the prison.”

“Looks like they take everybody,” Max said, “but the capital punishment cruds. 650 staff members. That’s less than a two-to-one ratio. No wonder it’s so expensive to maintain prisoners. Okay. The numbers at the prison and the fact it’s a processing facility doesn’t completely rule out contact. But it does make the odds less in our favor. Sounds like they evaluate these guys as they come through, and then ship them to an appropriate facility rather quickly. See if you can find out from the warden how long the average stay is for a prisoner, if there is such an average.”

“I’m on it.” Sheree was off to make a call to the prison for more information.

Max knew she wouldn’t stop with just that phone call. Sheree was a real proactive thinker and Max *liked* that. Her ability to extrapolate possibilities and see where they led without receiving “next step” instruction garnered Max’s admiration. When Trotman requested a search for similar accidents in other states, he knew to expect more than just the fruits of that hunt. Sheree was like a pit bull in a dog fight. With jaws locked on an assignment, she would

not let go until she garnered the last drop of information available. That's what he liked about her. And in fact, when Trotman made the request for out-of-state rollovers, Sheree informed him the search was already half finished.

Max reviewed the photos of the accident scene and read the file, but he really wanted to go out to the I-5 at the point of disaster and recreate it in his own mind. He also felt it a must to view the burned out vehicle at the impound yard. Though the Crime Scene Response Team had put together a detailed file, he still felt on-the-scene comprehension would benefit him in ascertaining what really happened.

While Carver accompanied him to the point of roll and then took him back to the impound yard at District 7, Trotman remained at headquarters and kept going over the other information. His list of similarities between the suspects of the Riverside and Marysville cases were getting long. Domestic violence, arson as a juvenile, robbery and Washington Corrections Center. And now Sheree with a phone call to both of these clowns from the same phone number just days before each accident. What was the possibility of just a coincidence?

Max spent about a half hour with Carver at the scene of the rollover and made remarks into his tape recorder as he viewed the area, noting the few indications that remained visible through the newly growing field grass.

The Cable Median Safety Barrier did not require replacement and still showed charring on the posts and cables involved in arresting the momentum of Beth's vehicle. Carver marveled at Max's techniques for viewing the accident. At one point Max had him stand on the side of the cables where the witness would have been seeing the horror unfold. Max then stepped to the other side where the car originally came to rest on its roof. He bent over as far as he could in order to simulate what a victim would see if they were hanging upside down looking through the

cables at a person standing on the other side. Then as Max remained in the bent over position, Carver was then instructed to crouch so Max could look through the cables at his head, just to see the other picture Beth might have seen in her last moments. Most comical was Max as he talked into his tape recorder while still bent in half, head hanging, his wispy thinning hair falling away from his head. Carver knew what Max was up to. As for passers by, it had to have set their brains in motion wondering what the *hell* he was doing.

Max was also aware that in January of 2006 the Washington State Department of Transportation had issued a study done on the success of their efforts to reduce fatalities on the state routes and urban arterials. In fact, he had been asked to testify as an expert during the study. Over the last 10 years the State had widened highway shoulders, improved and straightened curves, installed rumble strips, improved medians and installed median barriers. The work wasn't complete. However, the results to help keep drivers on one or the other side of the highway were notable.

Over a five-year period from 1999 through 2004, the Washington State Patrol had received reports of 171 collisions involving vehicles leaving the road and hitting cable median barriers on I-5 in Marysville. Thirteen vehicles involved in collisions crossed the median into opposing lanes of traffic. Marysville's cable barrier was catching 92.4 percent of errant vehicles that hit the barrier, not quite the 95 percent average on highway segments using median barrier cabling elsewhere in the state.

This 2.6 percent lag in performance of cable barriers on the I-5 in Marysville raised public concerns over the increasing number of crashes and the large number of crossover collisions. WSDOT studied the phenomenon. The irony of it all is that Beth Langley was kept from rolling into oncoming traffic, but it was also likely that the cables, in doing their task, had

trapped her in an inferno from which she potentially could have escaped had her driver's door not been held shut by the cables against which it came to rest. And the newest report in July of 2007 called for concrete barriers for which the state would have to find \$27 million in funding. Soon that 10-mile stretch would have concrete barriers. But in Beth's case, too little, too late.

Max next wanted to make a trip to the State Patrol Impound Yard. The vehicle was in the far corner still covered with a tarp. Max perused every inch of the Explorer, top to bottom, fore and aft. For the vehicle to come to rest on its roof with the driver's door against the cable barrier on the freeway, it had to spin around backwards. The crush marks showed the car first veered to the left and rolled over on the passenger's side, compressing that side of the roof nearly to the passenger door handle. There was very little buckling evident on the driver's side, which indicated the car had not made a full revolution. It had only made a one eighty up onto its roof and a one eighty which turned the front end around to face the opposite direction. The driver door tight against the barrier cable truly was the tragedy of the whole thing. Had Beth's car not spun around backwards, the two and a half foot tall steel cables would not have barricaded her inside the burning wreckage.

The fact it was a Ford Explorer of 1998 vintage also left questions that had to be answered. It was the Firestone Tires of the 2001 and earlier era that lawyers considered the cause of most Explorer rollovers. In any given year there could be as many as 10,000 rollover deaths just in general, and depending on what article you read, numbers of deaths in Ford's Explorer with Firestone tires could be as high as 200, with 700 survivable injuries tacked on. Had Beth's stepfather had the tires replaced when the recall came out? And if he didn't, had he replaced the tires with Firestones just due to wear and tear? And what air pressure did he run them at? Was it Ford's recommended 26 psi which later lawyers proposed caused increased heat

in the tire and brought about the separation of the steel belts and the driver's loss of control, or did he run them at a higher psi? And had he checked the tires when he handed over the keys to Beth? Did Geoff Ghio check the tire pressure when *he* did the oil change and tune-up on the car the day Beth brought it home?

Sheree would be busy. Max was using her research skills as well. He was sure that forensics did an analysis of the tires and could tell what brand they were. He'd need her to pull that information and have her check with Beth's father-in-law for any receipt he might have for the tires, if he ever changed them.

When Max and Carver returned, Sheree was given another research assignment. Pull up complete schematics of the Explorer right down to the nuts and bolts of the vehicle. If this was a murder, they'd have to show how it was done. If they couldn't figure it out they might as well all go home.

## Chapter 13 (Bonanza)

Riverside detectives provided all their information to the Smokeys in Marysville. They also scanned the Ghio/Caswell documents that Sheree sent their way, but they just couldn't tie the Marysville incident together with their rollover. Frankly, they hadn't put too much effort into it either. They were happy to cooperate with their brothers in Washington, but without a credible link between the two cases, they felt the Smokeys were chasing their tails. The Riverside case was entirely different; a 15-seat van known for rollovers, loaded with girls from a local high school who were loud and distracting to a driver.

Though the premise that this could be a murder intrigued them, Riverside detectives couldn't quite see they had a case against Spike, though they were doing their job and digging through the evidence found at their end. They definitely had a suspect if this case was linked to the Marysville case. But their case followed a pattern of rollover *accidents* involving students at other schools and universities. The sudden flash inside that resulted in fire was the only difference.

Spike's background and the fact he'd worked on the van the day before piqued their interest in him as well. If a clean connection could be made, he was a viable suspect. With a solid case they would make an arrest as long as the suspect was responsible for the deaths. But was he?

Then Detective Witherspoon's phone rang and the whole complexion of the case changed. Detective Sheree Williams was on the line. "I have the link between the two cases. It doesn't give us all the answers but it sure says we are headed in the right direction."

Witherspoon perked up with that news. "Give it to me."

Sheree poured it out. "On the day before each accident for which we suspect these clowns, each perp received a phone call from the same phone number. It wasn't long. The cell phone companies logged each call as less than a minute. Each time the next day an accident would take place."

"Who's the caller?"

"That's the hole. It's a phone number registered to the Washington Corrections Center. We don't know who used the phone yet, but I set up an appointment to visit the Center on Friday. It gets better, though. Both perps were in the correction center at approximately the same time."

Witherspoon saw a field trip for himself and his partner. He was just about to spring a request for an invitation when Sheree continued on.

"We're scheduled to meet with the warden at Shelton at 10 AM. Any chance you boys would like to join the crew? I doubt I'll be there, but Trotman and Carver will, and I'm pretty certain Max will be heading up the meeting. He's our outside hire. Used to work for us but retired. That only lasted a little while and he became an independent investigator. I guess he's the best of the best, and the guys invited him to the party." Sheree privately hoped to be invited along on the prison trip, but with Max now a part of the show it was unlikely. She so admired his sleuth skills - she just wanted to watch a pro in action. She also knew that as soon as Max, Carver and Trotman were headed back from the corrections center they'd be on the phone right away filling her in and giving her new research to tackle. "So what do you think? Feel like a trip north?"



Witherspoon was eager to take the trip, now that there appeared to be some common thread between the two rollovers. The Riverside detectives didn't have to be asked twice after Sheree shared what the Washington team had gleaned after reviewing both cases side by side. "Yes, you bet. I assume Shelton is Washington Corrections?" The question made sense. Why would he know the nickname of a Washington prison?"

"Oh, geez. Yes." Sheree clarified. "WCC has an aka of Shelton Prison because of where it's located." After a little further discussion and a quick "See you Friday," the Riverside detectives book their flight. They also pored over the records Marysville provided, this time with more than a glancing interest.

## Chapter 14 (Chasing an Alias)

Friday morning Trotman popped in to check his desk just before Max and he headed for Washington Corrections Center. When Max arrived at headquarters he found the detective at his desk with a file open, looking at red pencil markings around what now consisted of three fire/rollover accidents. Montana was Sheree's newest addition. On the front of the file was a Post-It note, "Called Montana law enforcement. Waiting for callback. Last serviced – mech. name, etc. Will call if sig. S.W."

On their way out the door they swung by Sheree's desk to leave her a list of requested follow-up. Trotman scribbled a note on her writing pad and positioned it so it would be the first thing she would see when she arrived. Just then he spied a note she had made, "Call Washington Fair Grounds office – hypno show name – entertainer. Ghio – yes. Spike? Montana Mechanic?"

"What's that all about," he mumbled. He knew he should never question any move she made but he didn't see the tie-in. Still, every action Sheree undertook led to further comprehension of the case. He was baffled, though, as the Langley case had mentioned the fair and seeing such entertainment, and Ghio was a participant. He left her desk with his forehead a bit furrowed as he chewed on the reasoning behind such a call.

The trip down to the corrections center was uneventful. A twenty-minute drive and a ferry ride on the Edmonds Ferry dumped them on the Olympic Peninsula at the Kingston Terminal. That left them with another hour drive to Shelton.

The whole way Detective Trotman was quietly chuckling inside. Max hadn't changed at all from all the years Detective Trotman had spent working with him when he was still with the

department. Well, only a bit in that Max had a small tape recorder he spoke to constantly now, whereas in days gone by he used to carry a shorthand pad on which he scribbled his ideas and agenda.

The entertainment value of just riding with Max was worth a paid admission. He could have a theory discussion with Trotman and suddenly grab the tape recorder and dictate a drib or drab of follow-up for any case he was involved in, not just this one. At one point as he pontificated on what he called “Sheree’s magnificent sleuthing skills,” he suddenly in mid-sentence dictated a paragraph-worth of thought. What amazed Trotman was his ability to then pick up where he left off in his discussion with the detective. Ah, to be a fly on the wall of Max’s apartment. To overhear a Max to Max conversation might be comical.

Trotman wondered if Max thought the same thing about him; never married, his whole life the job, no family; just absorbed in the ills of society. He was sure Max found that quirk just as bizarre.

Upon arrival at the Shelton facility after security clearance, Trotman and Max were escorted to a waiting room until Warden Sweinhardt was available. A few minutes after they sat down in a nearby conference room, detectives from California Highway Patrol walked in, introduced themselves and then each headed for a chair. But before they could get planted the warden came out of his office and greeted them.

“Gentlemen!” Gunter Sweinhardt had been involved in the system all of his working career, though his early years were as a prison guard in a German gulag. Working through the ranks, moving to the States and getting the education he needed in criminal justice landed him his present position. Just sixty-ish with silver fox grey hair, his speech, mannerisms, and forthright demeanor made certain all communication by the warden would be succinct. He was

no nonsense, articulate, and knew every aspect of the prison's functions, right down to how many stitches the medical staff had put in inmates over the last month.

“Just so I know my cast of characters here and where you are from --”

“Let me bring you up to speed quickly.” Detective Trotman jumped in to get the meeting moving. “These are Detectives Dustin Witherspoon and Austin Tremaine from California Highway Patrol. This is Max Torkleson, a retired WSP detective and forensics expert. He was called in to help us out. I'm Detective John Trotman. Both Max and I are from the Washington State Patrol. Max will take the lead on our visit.”

Max started with a narrative request. “Just so we are all oriented to the function of this facility, give us a couple minute verbal tour of the place.

Warden Sweinhardt said he'd give it his best effort. “I guess I'll start with kind of a bring-you-up-to-speed approach since two of you are from out of state. Washington Correctional Center, WCC, is also known as Shelton Prison. As you realized when you tried to find us, we're in a somewhat isolated area. I think one of our inmates gave the best description by referring to it as “out in puke weeds.” We're outside of the small town of Shelton. By small, I think the last number I heard was about 9200 people. It was a logging town in its heyday.

“The State built the facility in the mid 1960s. It was to be the answer to the needs of the Washington State prison system. The purpose of its design was a reception center to all felons who entered the prison system or transitioned from one prison to another. The only felons not invited to visit are the death sentence variety, not that it can't happen but it is less likely.”

Max asked for clarification. “No death sentence guys, but do you have lifers here or is this strictly transitional housing?”

“Yes, we can have lifers here but they are the non-threat variety. Maybe they’re in permanently, but too old to be harmful and not likely to fare well at a high security facility.

“When felons are sentenced, they first hit the WCC Reception Center for evaluation. They’re then classified and housed until a permanent bed comes available at another prison or penitentiary in the state. They’re sometimes sent out of state if the Washington beds are full.

When appropriate, some felons can serve their full term at WCC. Shelton’s prison is a medium security facility. It has a training facility located in one of the wings. In that wing felons are assigned living units and placed in work, education and/or vocation programs. The work programs are based around the operation of the facility. Those in the work/training program are kept busy. Inmates and staff need to be fed. The kitchen is a big operation. The facility requires regular maintenance. Laundry is never ending. Hair has to be cut, paperwork kept up, and the bathrooms swabbed out. There is something for everybody in the training unit, from the most unskilled right on up to trained mechanics, electricians, carpenters.

And if hearing gray haired men tell of spending most of their lives in and out of prison gives someone a needed reality check, they have a chance to better themselves. The educational program can get them through their GED and other types of educational training; reading, spelling, math. We try to bring them to a functional level so they can operate out in society when they are released.”

Witherspoon spoke up. “Well, what do you do with the jerks? I mean, not everyone is going to cooperate with a school or work plan. Or did I miss something. Does the court system only send you people willing to cooperate?”

The warden smiled. “No such luck. There’s another section to Shelton’s Corrections Center, the IMU or Intensive Management Unit. It’s one of four in the Washington State

Department of Corrections. That's where we house the most difficult-to-manage offenders; the problem children and malcontents. And that wing provides intervention and education programs as well. But it's more put together for behavior management/modification and takes the spunk out of the less-than-desirable low lifes we get through here. The IMU program is designed to assist the offender with his inappropriate behavior patterns."

Max thanked the warden for the overview and then changed gears. "We're all here because of an unusual situation involving two distinctly separate cases with no possible link to each other, but for one. Two items caught our eye and have us scratching our heads. Both suspects at one time were felons housed here, which wouldn't be unusual. But just days before two separate rollover accidents in which women were killed, both men received a phone call from this facility from the same phone number. This isn't just two women dying. In fact, it's a total of ten. There are two survivors of the California accident, but their recoveries are anyone's guess, and if they do survive, for at least one of them their mental capacity will likely be limited due to massive head injuries."

Warden Sweinhardt reached for some files he earlier brought into the room, and flipped them around so the visitors could take a gander. "These are the two inmates your assistant contacted me about. She indicated you would be interested in the possibility of them knowing each other, having regular contact. I reviewed both files but I just can't see where it would be possible. I've made you a copy of each file to take with you when you leave. Upon review you'll see where the lack of contact is played out. Geoff Ghio was here under the name of Ray Caswell in 2003. He started out in our Intensive Management Unit. He received some anger management training while he was living in IMU. According to his file he was a real pain in the

rear when he arrived. Typical of anyone who ends up in IMU, he thought he was the alpha dog rather than the guards, so a little attitude adjustment was in order.

“Caswell saw the facility shrink for a while, entered Anger Management, got a handle on his pissy attitude after five months, and was transferred to our training center wing before this Jessie Brinks ever hit Shelton. I guess his handle was ‘Spike.’ Brinks also spent several months in the IM unit, but that was *after* Caswell was transferred to Training. So Caswell was in a different wing altogether and never would have had contact with Brinks the whole time Brinks was in IMU. And he didn’t get out of there until after Caswell was discharged.”

Max was pondering something while he looked at Caswell’s file. He’d written something on a piece of paper and turned it to the warden. “Do you recognize this number, this phone number? I know this is a big facility and this phone could be located anywhere, but does it ring any bells? I mean both suspects received a call from this line.”

The warden looked at it and then looked off to his left and down as if searching his brain for the location to which the number was assigned. “I don’t recognize it but I can grab a phone roster from my office. I’ll be right back.” In a moment he returned with roster in hand. Max and Trotman briefly discussed something they saw in the file while the warden perused the list of numbers. “Transportation. It’s the Transportation Department’s number.”

Detective Witherspoon asked the next question. “Any idea why someone in Transportation might call these guys?”

The warden had no answers. “It sure doesn’t make any sense. There wouldn’t be reason for contact between Transportation and these guys after release.”

Witherspoon continued. “Would it be likely anyone else in the facility other than the Transportation folks would use this phone to make calls?”

The warden shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I suppose maybe we have an officer or two who might call their wives from that phone. Not all phones lead to outside lines. Administration has outside access, the medical facility, transportation and the kitchen. If an officer needs to make a call we don't have any regulation that limits where he can call from."

That comment puzzled Max. "Long distance calls wouldn't be questioned?"

"Not really, at least certainly not from that phone. Transportation is often calling out of area to get numbers on arriving inmates, who has to be at what facility when, etc. The kitchen might be questionable if we saw long distance out of there to more than just a few numbers. Ordering would be all they'd do and we have regular suppliers with standing orders.

Max changed gears. "You mentioned anger management classes for Caswell. Did Brinks take them as well?"

"The file says he did. We have anger management classes and then there is a facility psychiatrist who will work with prisoners if they don't respond to the anger management classes. Looks like they both had sessions with the psychiatrist. And one of them worked on his GED. That was Caswell. But he worked on that in the Education and Training Center. Brinks was a lot slower at getting the big picture, but in each case both turned into model prisoners and were transferred to the Training Center eventually."

"What kind of training did they receive?"

The warden asked for his files back and started flipping pages. "Caswell took training in vehicle maintenance in our Transport Maintenance Department. They keep up the van pool. In fact, you know, I remember this guy. Head of maintenance was raving about this guy saying he was really good at turning a wrench. Transportation latched onto him, and they were not happy campers when his time was up. He had a fetish for fast cars and knew everything there was to



know about race car engines, so his stories about being in the race track pits made him pretty popular with some of the inmates. Some of the maintenance staff members out in our transport maintenance shop were into that sort of thing as well, so he was pretty well received out there, once he got his head on straight.

He also was supposedly really good with diesel engines. We had a particular transport van that had nothing but problems, and by the time he was done with it you never heard any further grousing from the drivers.

Max asked about Spike's training. "What about Spike, aka Jessie Brinks? Where did he do his training?"

The warden flipped through the other file. "You know, Brinks took training in the maintenance department as well. But he wasn't a wrench jock. He had a background in stereo installation and wiring, I think. I read that somewhere in this file. Some of our vehicle communications radios were giving us trouble, and I think I read – I'm trying to remember. I think I heard or read he'd figured out the problems and was responsible for the radios not giving us any further problems. I know he got to work out there, but it doesn't say anything but that he had received training there during his time in our facility. He came to us with a skill. No problems, no special notes. That's the rub with a lot of these guys. They have plenty of skills and no reason to get into trouble, but they end up here anyhow. And a lot of the skilled guys are hotheads when we get them.

We have a pretty good program here for our authority challenged inmates and we usually can turn them so they can come back into the main prison population. I very very rarely hear of one of the toughies getting re-transferred back into IMU after being released from there to our training center. If that happens, we eventually find another bed elsewhere for them because

aside from being a receiving/transfer facility, we're a medium/minimum security risk facility as well. If there's any kind of risk that someone will turn into a permanent safety issue we dump him on the big boys."

Trotman spoke up. "Max, do you mind if I cut in here for a moment? Warden, does the file indicate anything about an altercation between Caswell and another inmate, anything about a shiv being used to stab Caswell?"

The warden raised his eyebrows as he looked down at the file and flipped through couple pages. "Oh, that's right. I remember this. Caswell had already been transferred out of IMU. He was mainstreamed back into the general prison population, and there was this little guy who would never *think* of making a ruckus or challenging another inmate. But for whatever reason he had taken a screwdriver out of the Transportation Maintenance Department. He'd been working out there at the same time as Caswell. Caswell was kind of a golden boy out there. This little guy walked over to Caswell while he was eating dinner one night and started mouthing off. Caswell flipped his tray at the guy, stood up and this Bozano – let's see -- Clayton Bozano sticks him and then gives it a tear the other direction. Bozano ended up in the IMU until we could ship him out to a higher security prison and Caswell got a trip to the hospital for five days."

Detective Witherspoon spoke up. "Looks like we have at least one more commonality between the two suspects; phone calls from the same number, both had served time here and both were working out in Transport Maintenance."

Max confirmed Witherspoon's observation. "I'd like to get a list of your maintenance people during the time these guys were here."

Just as the warden said he'd make arrangements for that information, Trotman's cell phone rang and it was Detective Williams on the line. He asked for a short break while he took

the call. The warden told everyone where the men's room was and went back to his office for a few minutes.

Sheree had a new name for them. Flathead County Sheriff Lance Moncrieff had called back with information on the Montana car that rolled down a steep embankment with a young woman in it a couple months earlier. "The victim's parents say Brad Boykin worked on the car a day or two before the accident. They're still looking for the receipt to narrow down the exact date. I have his social here and will run it. The guy lives in Kalispell in Flathead County. The girl that died in the car wreck lived with her folks just outside of Kalispell.

"The Sheriff referred to Boykin as a problem child and drifter. He'd gone to the local high school, worked in his dad's car repair/car stereo shop, didn't graduate, left town one day, and came back two years later looking for a job with his old man. Nobody knew where he'd been and he didn't talk about it either. His dad gave him another chance and had him doing light engine maintenance and stereo and speaker installations in cars, but Boykin had only been there a couple months when the accident happened. I asked the Sheriff if Boykin had a record, but he couldn't find any. I emphasized I need a set of prints off this guy and to use whatever means necessary. Maybe Mr. Boykin is in the system under an alias.

"Oh, and Carver just called. He thinks they found Jen Parberry's car. There was a single car accident on the Al-Can Highway, someplace called Steamboat Mountain, about 55 miles north of Fort Nelson. I was looking on a map and it's up in northern BC a few hundred miles. Sam filled a Canadian Mounty in and he's going to get us a detailed report ASAP. I guess because of the condition of the occupants' remains and the car, they are assuming it happened quite a while back. A guy was changing a flat and spotted the burned out hulk down the embankment. He wandered down to just look at it, not expecting to see anything but a burned

out car, but then realized he was looking at what was left of a couple corpses as well. No ID on the bodies yet but the car's license plate belongs to Jen. Sam was heading over to Carl Gerber's to fill him in on the possibility and see if he knows who her dentist was and who the other person might have been."

Trotman responded that Jen's brother Carl wasn't going to do well when Sam told him the news.

Sheree continued. "If I remember right, you told me the captain on the *Sea Tantrum* had said there was another crewmember that didn't show, but in that guy's case he wasn't surprised. I asked Carver to get the captain's phone numbers. We're going to have to do some checking on behalf of the other victim, but perhaps he can give us a name and maybe an employment application for the guy that didn't show, and it would tell us who his next of kin is."

While Trotman finished his discussion with Detective Williams and gave her another research request, he slid a note over to the warden. "Brad Boykin. Prisoner here?" Then he told Sheree they'd be back about 5 PM and hung up.

The Warden took the note to his secretary and then returned, suggesting they take the facility tour that Sheree had previously set up. He wanted to show them the wing in which both Geoff Ghio/Ray Caswell and "Spike" had been housed.

During the tour of the prison, the warden had his assistant check the possibility of yet another suspect, the Montana mechanic, having been housed at WCC. Max wanted to see the IM unit first and have a discussion scheduled with the shrink who dealt with the two prisoners. Was he involved in the anger management class or was his involvement with the men on a different level? And did he remember these particular characters; anything that stood out about them that made him think they'd do this type of crime? The meeting he wanted would have to happen on

another day, but an IMU tour was doable. As it was at the far end of the facility, they headed to Transportation first.

As they walked, the warden gave a running description of that department.

“Transportation is split into two divisions; Maintenance and Scheduling/Receiving.

Scheduling/Receiving is off limits to all prisoners except those working in clerical, and even at that, their exposure to the area is extremely limited. Transport is another matter, with prisoners working with the tools, being trained, and interacting with the facility mechanics on a steady basis. There are guards observing all prisoners involved in maintenance of vehicles. The goal of involving prisoners in vehicle repair is to help prepare them for an outside job, give them a skill to fall back on, and stretch the prison budget by using token paid workers.”

When they arrived at Transportation, Max asked to see the location of the telephones which had outside lines. “How about authorization to use the phones? Can just anybody make a call; guards, workers, people from outside the department? Prisoners, can they use them?”

Warden Sweinhardt launched into a scenario of possibilities. “Four of the telephones are connected to the outside by hitting nine first to make a local call, and eight for long distance. It’s extremely common for Transportation to make long distance calls. All day long they are in contact with different institutions or county jails for transport of prisoners to or from Shelton.

“Occasionally employees outside the department make calls on unofficial business. You know, somebody might pop through to use the phone because they’re at this end of the facility and they have to make the call right then. Sometimes our transport vans get stuck in road work traffic and arrive back here quite late. We certainly let the guards or drivers call home when they arrive. The truth is, personal matters do come up during business hours so the phones are available for use but not abuse. They can’t make calls just to chip their teeth with friends.

As far as cell phones, almost all of our employees have them. However, short of my office staff, those cell phones are in each employee's locker. Cell phone use while on duty is verboten. It's a distraction that could be a danger to personnel."

The warden paused waiting for another question but Max reasked a part of his original question. "And how about the prisoners using these phones?"

"As for prisoners? Never. They have to use designated phones just for the prisoners. And prisoners are never left alone in the room where the Transport phones are.

Max turned his back to the group and made a taped memo to get the employee roster from Maintenance and Transportation during the time Caswell and Brinks were involved in that department. Those records were critical. Perhaps someone in that department made the calls or knew who did.

Next the group headed to the Intensive Management Unit where both prisoners were housed at one time. The warden was correct in his assessment of possible contact between the two prisoners. There was no mingling of the pain-in-the-ass variety and the rest of the population. By the time Brinks showed up in IMU, Caswell had already been moved to the training wing, evaluated, and placed in Maintenance. The group's future interview with the psychiatrist and related employees would give them a better understanding of the unit's function, but a quick glance showed cells and a secure area with a couple offices.

In the training wing the warden continued his tour guide monologue. "Prisoners who come to Shelton Prison to await a permanent bed elsewhere generally remain here about six weeks and then ship out. Vocational/education evaluations are done on prisoners who serve their entire sentence here or are expected to remain for an extended period of time before final placement. The evals are based on their interest and prior work experience. Hopefully we can

offer training in something that they like, but there has to be an available space in that particular training program. They *can* get on a waiting list. It's a waste of our time and theirs if we put them somewhere they hate, but as often as not, the ones who express no interest in anything end up doing janitorial or kitchen work."

Max led the topic back to Transportation. "Ray Caswell, if he hadn't had a skill in automotive, would you have put him out there for training?"

"No. We have to have something to work with because Transportation is a hopping department. If they have at least some basic knowledge we will assign them there. The other inmate that worked on electronics must have told the evaluator he had some knowledge in that area. Otherwise they wouldn't have let him touch anything in that area.

"That's about the extent of the tour. You guys must be getting hungry. Why don't we head back to the conference room and make a lunch plan." The warden didn't have to ask twice. It was well past the noon hour. As they walked back, they asked a few more questions about the facility layout and purpose, and brainstormed briefly on what the purpose of the calls to the former inmates were meant to do. If they could figure out that answer it might lead them to who made the calls.

At the conference room they found the warden's secretary had rustled up some sandwiches and coke from the prison kitchen. While they ate, Max continued with his questioning. They were well into the afternoon and would soon have to head out. Using the remaining time was critical.

Max took a bite of his sandwich and then pitched out a compound question to keep the warden talking while he ate. "Who assigned the prisoners from IMU to a specific field of training once they were downgraded from IMU? Did the shrink sometimes make a

recommendation based on their personality? I mean obviously in IMU they are there because they have the *bad boy* syndrome. The anger management program must be pretty damned successful to be able to sling these clowns back into the general prison population.” Max was trying to figure out how both of these perps had ended up in the Maintenance Department working on vans. But before an answer could be given the warden’s presence was requested by his assistant for a few moments.

When he returned he apologized for the interruption. “By the way, my assistant finished the search for a Brad Boykin ever being at Shelton and it’s a no go. Unless he was here under another name this guy has never darkened our doors.”

Max made another taped memo and then reasked his question about assignment of former IMU *guests* to a specific field of training again. “Was it all the Training Department’s evaluation that determined their final assignment, or in the case of IMU prisoners, did the prison psychiatrist have any pull? Seems to me if you had a guy you’d finally swung around to being manageable, all of that would be out the door if you placed him on latrine duty when he wanted to go to maintenance.”

“No. Dr. Seger only created our anger management program but someone else ran it. He handled the one-on-one sessions and follow-ups which he had with each prisoner weekly while in IMU. If Anger Management had pitched an inmate to him, then he would see them two to four times a week, depending on how uncooperative the pin head was. But once he finished his work with them and got them back into the regular Anger Management classes, his involvement with them was done for the most part, except for a weekly follow-up for a while.



“And then if they were downgraded from IMU to Training, his involvement with where they were headed ended. He would check up on them and see how they were progressing periodically, but for the most part, he was out of the picture.”

Max queried the warden further. “How long has Dr. Seger been here at Shelton? You said he created the Anger Management program and did follow-up weekly with prisoners in the program.”

The warden had to think a moment. “Boy. Back in 2000 he came on board – 2001. There was a case involving a James Curtis here at Shelton, and accusations that the sensory deprivation used on IMU prisoners caused them to develop SHU Syndrome. About 2002 that was all coming to trial and the Department of Corrections determined that no matter what the outcome, we needed to come up with a different program than the one we were using.

“Dr. Seger had a great deal of experience in the IMU area for prisoners at another prison which was in Quebec. And I have to say that his results are impressive. Generally – and I mean *generally* – prisoners who willingly go into the program are able to be downgraded to Training or moved on to other facilities without recidivism here at Shelton. There’s always the occasional prisoner who just can’t be controlled, but on the whole” --

Max made a comment into his recorder and then asked for clarification on SHU.

“Is this similar to what Eric Rudolph has complained about in letters to a newspaper in Colorado Springs, saying something about 23 hours a day in a seven by twelve cubical and that the prison in Colorado does it to make him mentally ill by making his surrounds environmentally and socially devoid of all stimuli?” Max recited that description as if he had memorized it from a newspaper clipping. “I think he’s supposedly in a SuperMax facility in the Rockies somewhere. But I remember reading a little bit about his complaints.”

The warden agreed that it was similar. “And it’s not exclusive to Shelton either. Dr. Seger had been working in a Quebec prison system because prisoners had been killing themselves after being placed in similar conditions. But in Quebec the prisoner suicide rate was higher than it was in the rest of the Canadian prison system. That province brought him in to figure out what was causing the higher rates of suicide in Quebec’s facilities. That’s why he was there. In the Quebec situation, prisoners were killing themselves, and in our situation they were becoming so stressed they were striking out at guards.”

Detective Witherspoon and his partner needed the acronym defined. “Are you saying Shoe, like S-H-O-E Syndrome?”

“Sorry. SHU Syndrome is Sensory Housing Unit Syndrome. Some psychiatrist down at Berkeley agreed to testify regarding the *syndrome*. Off the record I think it’s a bunch of nonsense, but on the record I never said that. I believe I read a similar article to the one you read on Eric Rudolph complaining about how he’s being treated.

“In the case involving our facility and a prisoner named James Curtis, Curtis was more than just difficult. While in IMU he got into trouble for assault while being extracted from his cell. Unfortunately, it put him under the Three Strikes and you’re a lifer law, if he was convicted. The law’s official name is Persistent Offenders Status and most states have something like it.

“The psychiatrist was going to testify SHU was caused by the way prisoners were handled in IMU; small cells, no outside contact, etc., and that in turn it caused him to strike out at corrections officers. There were other allegations regarding treatment and conditions, etc., but basically when this all was coming to a head, the Department of Corrections made a decision that our program needed to be reworked, and Dr. Seger was offering a new program and could fill the

bill. His program had been extremely successful in Quebec's prisons and had reduced the suicide rate to a level on par with the rest of the prison system in other provinces."

With the end of the SHU description, Max tilted his head down to peer over his glasses at the other members of the team and said he'd like to hear from the others, but everyone was out of steam and didn't have anything else to ask. "We'd like to request that a future meeting be set up with both the Anger Management program staff and with Dr. Seger. Oh, and I need the roster of a printout of the transport staff during both Caswell and Brinks' stints in the repair shop."

With that the detectives all headed back to Marysville for a discussion regarding Max's query of the warden and his thoughts about what he had seen. With any luck they'd not have to wait too long for the ferry.

\*\*\*

Sheree had stayed at the office until six, and then headed home to her condo just a few miles from District 7 Headquarters. She was mulling over in her head something that was eating on her. The fingerprints that the Montana sheriff had forwarded to her came back to a Johnny Isaacson, not Brad Boykin, the mechanic. But Johnny Isaacson, *Johnny* – what was it about that name? She knew it was related somehow to the Langley case.

When she got home and climbed out of her car, she grabbed the file she'd been working on at headquarters and headed upstairs to her apartment. As she rounded the corner into her kitchen she saw a glow on the stove. She missed a step when she finished cooking her eggs. "Oh oh." A deliberate woman, nothing out of place in her house, her car, or her desk at work, it wasn't like her to miss something like that. But she so immersed herself in the Beth Langley case, it distracted her from basics she would usually never miss.

Tonight she was tired and hungry, but didn't feel like cooking a real meal. "Johnny Isaacson." That name was chewing on her. The bread was too dry to make a sandwich but she needed to eat. She threw a couple pieces of bread in the toaster. Peanut butter melting into warm toast was always tasty and filling. While she waited for the toast to pop up, she hit the messages button on her phone. Nothing too interesting. Just a computer voice reminder from her doctor's office saying she had an appointment at ten the next morning.

With a glass of iced tea in front of her and her meal now finished, she flipped open the file and started poring over it again. Her tortoise shell cat was now curled up next to her. As she stroked her fur she kept flipping the file pages. Johnny Isaacson was somewhere in that file, and if not, then he was in one of the other related files. But he was part of the puzzle. While she scoured the pages she awaited a call from Detective Trotman.

\*\*\*

Missing a ferry by only minutes, by the time they got back into town it was a little before eight, about three hours later than they had planned. Sheree was obviously at home. Trotman found a note on his desk saying she had completed her follow-up on the fingerprints sent over by the Flathead Sheriff in Montana. The note ended with "Call me."

He headed back into the conference room where Max had landed, along with the two Riverside detectives. They'd taken a small detour and picked up a Little Caesar's Pizza on the way in. After calling Carver he asked to delay any discussion on the case for five or ten minutes to allow for Detective Carver's arrival.

When Trotman picked up a pizza slice his cell phone rang, Sheree on the other end.

"Boy, two seconds more and I'd have had luke warm pizza in my mouth and I'd be unwilling to talk to you." Trotman was hungry and wanted to at least have a bite before he

called her, but she couldn't wait. She figured out why Johnny Isaacson's name rang a bell. What she had to say was important and she knew the whole crew would be debriefing after the long day. Then Trotman pushed the speakerphone button on his cell phone to include the others. "Go ahead, Sheree. You talk while I chew."

"The Montana fingerprints came in. I ran them and they came back to a Johnny Isaacson. Small time criminal that got his hand slapped and a trip to Shelton for his efforts. I'll call tomorrow and find out if he ended up in IMU or not. The Sheriff also got me a cell phone number for Brad Boykin, the Kalispell mechanic, so I'll get a hold of his carrier tomorrow for a list of received calls in the last three months.

"The other thing is, on the way home I kept thinking I remembered the name Johnny Isaacson from somewhere, but I was drawing a blank. Then I realized why I knew the name. Look in the Montana case file and see if you see Johnny Isaacson listed. If I'm not mistaken, I think he's the boyfriend of the Montana victim."

That statement got everyone's attention. As Max retrieved the files from Sheree's desk, he spotted Detective Carver heading into the conference room. Max returned and flipped through the Montana file. In a moment he found the witness statements from people who saw the victim just before the accident.

Max was excited. "Johnny Isaacson. You're right! He's the distraught boyfriend. Why would he want to kill her? He said he'd seen her out back smoking a cigarette with her girlfriends and told her he didn't like licking an ashtray when she tried to kiss him, but that's not exactly cause for murder."

Sheree was about to shine. "No, it's not. And instinct tells me that is *not* the Johnny Isaacson who spent time in prison. I'm betting Boykin seems to have decided that as long as he

was being arrested for burglary, he'd let Johnny's name get sullied. I'm also betting there was a little bit of jealousy involved. He left town suddenly a couple years ago. And though I need to have the Sheriff do some checking, what if Boykin was a wannabe suitor and when he found out the girl had no interest in him and had started dating Isaacson, he took off out of town, got himself into trouble, and bestowed a little payback in the way of using Isaacson's name when he got popped for burglary?"

Max liked her style. "That's not a far stretch at all. Ask the Sheriff to see what grade he dropped out of and compare class schedules with the girl and her boyfriend. There was possibly some contact between the two men in gym class, if nothing else, and there was probably some interaction between her and Boykin in the classroom."

Sheree really wanted to get some face-to-face time with the family of Kristie and with her boyfriend, Johnny. "Any chance I can book a flight for Tuesday and interview Isaacson myself and the victim's family? I checked. Horizon Airlines has a direct flight out of SeaTac. And I'd like to take Max along if it doesn't mess up what you boys have planned."

Max jumped in. "You don't need me along, Sheree. You'll do just fine. Latch onto the Sheriff and you'll get a chauffer out of the deal. Kalispell is a pretty neat town. Get him to take you out to the accident site before you do any questioning of the victim's family or boyfriend. It would be nice to snoop around Boykin and see if he gets nervous. That's the one thing about these other two possible perps. They act like they really aren't involved. They're either great actors or we're all climbing up the wrong rock."

"Uh, I think the phrase is barking up the wrong tree, Max, but I got the picture." Sheree said she'd get a hold of Sheriff Moncrieff in the morning and have him notify the family of her need to visit with them.

After she hung up, Max headed for the whiteboard, tape recorder on the roll. “Looks like three murders now, all with different suspects.” He drew columns on the board with the names of each alleged murderer at the top, and stopped only to make a quick check that his recorder was on. “In the Washington accident we have Caswell/Ghio, we have victims Beth Langley and maybe --probably Jennifer Parberry. We have a Jeckyl/Hyde boyfriend with the skills of a super-mechanic and a twisted sense of a girlfriend’s domestic responsibilities. Oh, and he was extremely upset when he found out his girlfriend was dead, though all fingers point to him.

“Montana gives us Brad Boykin, alias Johnny Isaacson, high school dropout, worked as a mechanic in his dad’s shop, and possibly uses the victim’s boyfriend’s name when he gets tagged for burglary. We have a victim Kristy Allen whose only crime potentially is shunning Boykin. And we have his other quasi victim, Johnny Isaacson, the victim’s boyfriend, who now has his name in the system and is without his future bride.”

Max continued. “Lastly we have the California case, ‘Spike’ Brinks, a very strange sort of character, familiar with stereo systems and wiring in autos, worked on the family van of the two victims from across the street, out on parole and living with his brother. And he was upset when he realized the neighbor girl had been killed.

“Now the ringers. No one has bolted and run. They’re all just continuing on as if they aren’t worried about being involved in a murder. With the new information Sheree has uncovered, there is a strong possibility that Boykin, using the name of Johnny Isaacson, spent time in WCC. We’ll know tomorrow if Boykin was in the IMU Anger program and then transferred to the Training wing. Tomorrow Sheree will let us know whether Boykin received a call from Shelton just before the ‘accident.’

“So our priorities are, one, find out whether Boykin’s stay overlaps with either of the other two suspects. Two, we need the list of corrections officers and training staff that were on duty during the days each prisoner was receiving retraining. If Sheree can verify Boykin was there, I’ll have her get the employee roster for that period as well. We’ll see if there is any correlation there. Three, we need to interview Dr. Seger and the Anger Management staff as soon as possible. Four, get Boykin’s class schedule along with the victim and her boyfriend’s; look for some correlation there. There’s a link here somewhere. It’s too similar to say it’s only a fluke. If Boykin can be tied into this saga, then the key is definitely inside the prison, but getting to how it’s all done is going to be a bear. And if this is triggered by a stay in the IMU, the Anger Management program or a guard, we need to move quickly. Our assumption, though without proof, is that however this was planned out, it’s been successful *at least* three times, and if we’ve only found three, there may be far more. How far back we don’t know. But there may be more in the works and we may find ourselves behind the eight ball and unable to stop the next hit.”

“Oh, and I’ll have Sheree get a list of everyone who has been in Shelton in the IMU section, completed Anger Management, was downgraded, retrained and released from prison. If there’s a link we need to start finding these guys.”

Trotman was taking notes. Sheree would be diving in first thing tomorrow morning. When she was up to her neck in a big case she’d come in early; “couldn’t sleep” usually being her excuse. She wasn’t one to stand around the office cooler talking about kids and health items. She could generate more productive work than any other detective. She was a research hound, so a few notes left on her desk would start her morning, but they’d only give her a starting point. She was a free thinker and didn’t need a lot of direction, and by noon she’d have a landslide of information which would bury them long enough for her to go to Montana and return.



It was a quarter to 10 at night and the Riverside guys took off for a motel they booked not too far away. They had an early flight home in the morning. Of course, Sheree would copy them on all information the State Patrol detectives turned up.

Max was wandering toward the door, tape recorder in hand, dictating his findings and *to do* list on the way to his car. It had been a long long day, and this case was as clear as mud with a few sprigs of skunk cabbage poking through the surface.

Trotman cleaned up the pizza box and coke cans while Carver gave him the lowdown on Carl Gerber's reaction to his sister's death.

"Not a nice day for Carl Gerber, I'm afraid. He was so upset he was vomiting. I hated to leave him alone, but then a neighbor came over because she heard him sobbing through the walls, and she was with him when I left. I can't imagine having to tell his step-mom that her daughter is gone. He just kept saying, 'Dixie will never understand. Why didn't I call her sooner when I first realized Jen was missing?'"

"Who's Dixie?"

"Jen's mom, Carl's stepmother."

Trotman had seen it before. The type of death Jen suffered had a disturbing effect on survivors. "Did he know who was in the car with her?"

"Huh-uh. She never mentioned any potential passengers. She could have picked up a hitchhiker along the way. Not a smart idea, but it happens every day.

Trotman asked Carver to refresh his memory. "I know I went over it with him when we filed the missing persons report, but it's been a long day. Did he know where she planned to sleep each night, whether she was going to try to do the trip in a record amount of time or—"

Carver spit out the update. “Carl said that she had discussed the trip, that she knew it was 2200 miles, and that she was taking along her tent and sleeping bag, some nights planning on hitting a campground with a shower, and some nights just planning on back seating it.

“Oh, and I did hear back from the Canadian Mounties. Though we don’t have positive ID yet, they are sure a man was driving at the time of the accident. I did get the phone number of the *Sea Tantrum*’s captain, Jake Spanaway. I’m going to call him tomorrow and get some follow-up.

“Everything go well down at Shelton?”

“Yeah.” Trotman spit out a teaser. “Lots of new territory to cover, lots of unexpected information. But Max is on it. I’ll fill you in tomorrow when I can think straight. Like I said, it’s been a long day.”

Carver said he’d start coffee and would look forward to the update.

## Chapter 15 (The Phone Calls)

“I told you not to call me! I’m not going to give you any more information.” Her voice was venom filled.

But the caller persisted. “Look. I don’t want anything big. I just want –“

“No, *you* look! You’ve got an apartment with a pretty little thing stashed inside. We have no need to stay in touch. I was your third marriage and should have been the charm, but I obviously wasn’t. If your relationship with me was so important, you should have given it a bit more serious thought. I know what you want and I’ll die before I give you one more scrap of information. Ask your little tart for the information, as if she’d know.”

She was so irate she slammed the phone down, but the caller hit the redial button. When she answered again he said, “Don’t hang up. I just want to ask you a couple questions about certain aspects I’m seeing. I am wondering what response to expect if --”

“No. You are obsessed with something you should never have gotten into. You’re sick, and I don’t want to know where you are taking this, and if you ask questions I’ll know. *Don’t* ask me! You got what you wanted and I owe you nothing! I’m not going to help you out. I should never have encouraged you to learn how. I thought you’d use it in a positive way. It has its place and can be helpful and useful, but your pursuit is sick. It’s just too bad I didn’t see it soon enough.” The last thing he heard was dial tone. This time she wouldn’t answer if he called back.

“Shit.”

\*\*\*

In another part of town other phone calls were being made. Early Monday morning Sheree had already made arrangements with Cingular to forward the phone records for Boykin. She booked a meeting with Dr. Seger and his assistants at WCC's IMU wing. That was scheduled for Friday. The warden had reiterated to his assistant the need for employee records during the stints of each of the suspects, including now suspect Boykin, aka Johnny Isaacson. Though Boykin hadn't turned up on the inmate database, Isaacson should. She needed the information right away to prepare for the next day's trip to Kalispell.

At 9:30 AM she was spinning. A call to Horizon Airlines for her Tuesday ticket became a complication. Kalispell wasn't exactly a thriving metropolis with flights every half hour to and from its airport. The first plane out of Seattle wasn't until ten thirty-five in the morning and the arrival would find her fluttering to earth at two o'clock in the afternoon, not exactly a convenient flight when a full day's work needed to be done. She realized the best she could do was catch the Monday night flight at five after five and get in at eight-twenty that evening a few hours later. At least she'd be there early enough to get a late bite and park herself at the hotel. This being the case, she then called Sheriff Moncrieff to update him on her planned arrival and that her pickup location was no longer the airport. He could find her at the Super Eight on First Avenue. Arriving the night before did have its advantages. The next day would afford plenty of site review time. Witness interviews would be methodical rather than rushed. She would not need to worry about maybe missing some key information. With the Sheriff's assurance she'd have transportation and all interviews lined up for the following day, she was sure she could catch the 6:25 PM flight home and be back on Seattle terra firma by 8 PM.

The morning was moving quickly and at ten-fifteen she received the information on employees. The warden also called. He sounded distressed when he called, and was

uncomfortable giving her the news regarding Boykin. Yes, there was a Johnny Isaacson held there. Yes, he was in IMU, a particularly difficult prisoner, and yes, after anger management he was given a clean bill of health and transferred to the Training wing, out in the maintenance and repair division, to be exact. She thanked the warden and asked him if she could extend the time allotted for the interviews with Dr. Seger and his staff to encompass the full day on Friday. She was sure the new information would create need for more in-depth discussion with them.

Following her discussion with the warden, she started perusing the cell phone records for any calls received by Boykin from the Shelton Prison number. After that she finished up the requested research and organized it all on Trotman's desk by 1:30 PM. It would certainly keep him and the others busy while she was in Montana. A few minutes later with her keys in hand she bolted from headquarters for a quick trip home to grab some basics, feed the cat and make a bee line to SeaTac Airport.

The TSA lines were long, and passing through the metal detectors was the usual joyless experience. But once she was through the line, she found herself an hour early for her flight. She parked herself in the C concourse at SeaTac and waited for her flight to be called. Her review of the Montana file was fifty percent complete when they started boarding. On board she made notes of things she wanted to see first thing in the morning. She prepared her questions for each witness and a timeline of when she felt she had to finish the last interview before hitting the Sheriff up for a ride back to the airport. She reviewed her day's list to make sure she hadn't missed anything. That's when she saw the doctor's appointment she'd missed at ten in the morning. Ugh!

## Chapter 16 (A Cold Day in Heaven)

As she stepped out onto the tarmac of Glacier Park *International* Airport, the evening air was more than just a little brisk, especially for this time of year. An early fall had set in with lower-than-usual temperatures. She found her clothing inadequate for the crispness. Underdressed, a wait at the curb for the hotel van would chill her to the bone. As she headed past the bronze statue of two soaring eagles, utter relief took over when she heard Sheriff Moncrieff's voice.

“Detective Williams?”

There he was striding toward her. In his early 40s wearing a plaid shirt, boots and jeans, he fit the kind of sheriff she figured she'd find in a place like this. Just before she left, Max had told her what to expect; country air, small town, and simpler life.

“Sheriff Moncrieff? Hello! Sheree Williams. Nice to meet you. You've been a huge help in our investigation.”

“Thanks. The car's over this way.” The Sheriff grabbed her bag and spoke as they walked to the car.

“At first when you contacted me I thought you'd been sucking up a little too much Starbuck's. It seemed such a huge stretch that someone here could be tied to your case and the disaster in California. I mean –“

Sheree smiled. “Yeah, I know. We didn't plan to look elsewhere just based on the Washington accident. But two months into our investigation Detective Carver was flipping through the channels one night and stumbled right into breaking news on the California accident.

What a tragedy. You know the news networks. Rollover, fire, a high school dance team killed, an accident like that had all the major networks salivating and giving it national coverage.

“Witness interviews on the news caught Carver’s ear. The description was eerily similar to our witnesses. First there was a flash and then the vehicle swerved and rolled.

“But it was the cell phone records that gave us the first hint. What were the odds of each mechanic receiving a call from WCC the day before each accident? And they’d both served time there. Then to find they’d been in the same training program at WCC, that was too coincidental.”

“Did they know each other?”

“Actually, no. But with that much information in hand I started a search for similar rollovers in other states. Your victim came up in the search.”

The Sheriff popped the trunk and loaded Sheree’s bag, then opened her car door. She was impressed by how much of a gentleman he was. She couldn’t think of a time a fellow officer had treated her as anything but one of the guys.

Before arriving at the motel Moncrieff asked if he could buy her a burger. It was already eight-thirty and he still hadn’t eaten. On the way to Nickel Charlie’s the Sheriff continued his query.

“Did Boykin spend time there? That would explain his disappearance from Kalispell for a while and no one knowing where he’d been.”

During the drive Sheree filled him in on the name they’d found Boykin had used when he was arrested. She shared her theory of him as a jilted or jealous would-be suitor for Kristie, the victim in the Montana case.

Moncrieff winced when she said he gave Johnny Isaacson's name when he was arrested. "I know Johnny. Nicest kid you'd ever want to know. Then there's Boykin; a crud of an excuse for a human being. In and out of trouble, back stabbing, lying, avoided by most of the local young people. Sounds like Boykin wanted to get back at him for something."

After they got to the restaurant they ordered and chatted on a personal level for a bit, but while they ate neither said much. Sheree was tired and hungry and the Sheriff was just hungry. A huge country size meal, she struggled to eat just the burger. The Sheriff ate her fries, ordered a piece of pie and coffee to top it off. He was a tall sturdy man with a hardy appetite.

On the way to her hotel the discussion turned to local surroundings, his job and the crime rate in Kalispell.

At 10 when he dropped her off, she suggested 8 AM as a good start time and bid him goodnight.

Her 6 AM wakeup call from the motel switchboard came much too soon. A hot shower and a bad cup of hotel room coffee made the blood start pumping. In much warmer clothes than those in which she'd arrived, an 8 AM tap on the door indicated her chauffer was there.

"I hope you've eaten, Sheriff, because I'm not much for breakfast and I'd like to get rolling."

"Yes, ma'am, a couple hours ago. But I'm betting by about ten you'll wish you had. The temperature is going to stay in the high thirties today, which is unusual for this time of year. I brought along one of my wife's heavy jackets and some gloves for you. You'll need it out at the accident site."



The drive wasn't that far out of town. Highway 2 was on the way to Marion, a very small community. The party Kristie and Johnny had attended was held just on the cusp of Marion at a small ranch.

When the Sheriff stopped the car they were on a portion of the highway that had a severe drop-off. Sheree got out of the car and took pictures of the highway, the drop-off and the Sheriff standing next to the edge with his arm pointing down at an angle that matched the slope's angle. Max had told her a few of his techniques for getting good pictures of accident scenes. Obviously just aiming the camera down the hill wouldn't show the viewer how steep it really was.

"Sheriff, were there any skid marks from the vehicle, indicating she was awake when she started over the edge and was trying to brake?"

"Yes, I have photos back at the office I can email to you. Whatever happened happened fast. She definitely was awake at the time she went over the edge. She crossed both lanes of travel before she went down the hill. She was coming this direction from Marion."

"Did she smoke? I mean, could she have been lighting a cigarette when the accident happened?"

The Sheriff did a half nod. "There was one gal I interviewed a few days after the accident and she said that Kristie didn't 'usually' smoke – that's how she put it, 'usually,' but that a group of the girls had been outside and one of them had a menthol cigarette and said it gave her a buzz, so they all tried it."

"Sheriff, I never smoked, but a menthol cigarette buzz? Was there any possibility they were smoking something a little more potent? That would make an accident like this more understandable."

“I don’t think so. I interviewed an awful lot of young people who had been at the party, and there was never a hint of drugs. And I did talk to one other gal who had been in the group of young women trying the menthol cigarette, and she said the same thing. It gave her a buzz. If none of them smoked, it is possible to get a heavy hit of nicotine, I guess, and think you’ve gotten a buzz.”

“It’s nine fifteen now.” Sheree wanted to keep on schedule. “If we’re going to stay on time, we’d better get rolling and start tearing through witnesses.” .

Back at the Flathead Sheriff Station the coffee was hot and the cup warmed Sheree’s hands. The Sheriff’s assistant sent out for sandwiches so when noon arrived he could get her fed but keep her rolling. He knew she was one of those types that just kept on working and didn’t break for meals. Her slim figure indicated that much.

Moncrieff’s assistant entered the conference room. “Detective Williams, Kristie’s boyfriend is here.” Then she led him into the room. Johnny Isaacson, a handsome young man, had sandy blonde hair. A little over six feet, he filled out his frame with the muscles of youth.”

“Johnny – is it okay if I call you Johnny?” Sheree knew how tough this would be for him.

Johnny nodded. Knowing why he was here, his eyes were full of sadness. Having lost his fiancé he just tried to make it through each day. To heal from this kind of thing was such a slow go, and her questions weren’t going to help the process.

“Johnny, I know Sheriff Moncrieff has told you why I’m here, so I’ll just get started. If you need a break at any time, just let me know.

“You and Kristie were engaged to be married; is that right?”

Johnny shook his head no.

Sheree needed him to answer out loud. “Johnny, I know it’s hard for you, but I want to record what you say, if that’s okay, because I’m from Seattle and I need to take your information back with me for my fellow detectives. Anything you say might be the key to what we think happened to our victims. There is a possibility that Kristie didn’t *just* have an accident.

“How long had you and Kristie been dating?”

“A couple years.”

“Had you set a date for a wedding?”

“No.” Johnny paused. “I hadn’t asked her yet, but we both knew we’d get married. I was just waiting until she finished school before I asked her officially. She had a promise ring from me. She was so nice, so fun to be around. Our folks knew we’d do the deed at some point.”

“Do the deed?”

“Get married. Kristie and I talked about it often. I just hadn’t officially asked.”

“What kind of stuff did you two like to do together?”

“Go camping with our horses; you know. Saddle bags, sleeping bags, fly fishing rods, mess kits and matches. We never took anything fancy. Lots of times we’d take along goofy things like a couple cans of Spaghetti-Os, or soup, something simple for dinner. At dusk we’d bat fish until almost dark. She loved to catch fish too, and in the mornings we’d get up early and catch some trout for breakfast. Then about noon we’d head back.”

“Bat fish?” Sheree thought she’d heard him wrong, but then she saw the Sheriff smile and figured she was in for a country education. “Okay, I’ll bite. What is bat fishing?”

Johnny smiled too. “You know, fishing for bats. Kristie was really good at it. That’s what made her fun. I think all my friends were so jealous that I could go out and do guy things with my girlfriend, like shooting and stuff like that.”

Sheree looked puzzled. “I just gotta know. How do you bat fish?”

“You just get out the old fly rod and start casting when it’s about dusk and keep whipping the line back and forth. And then all of the sudden it takes off up in the air. And they fight good too! First time it happened I was just practicing my casting with a bunch of my friends and we couldn’t believe it when it happened.”

“Okay. I just have to ask. How do you get a bat off the hook?” Now the Sheriff grinned.

“With my welding gloves. Once I figured out that it wasn’t a fluke, we’d all get together at dusk at the lake and do a catch and release; you know barbless hooks. Then Kristie saw us doing it once and she wanted to try. That was it. She was hooked. So we’d take the horses and go camp and bat fish at night, and then in the morning we’d catch trout for breakfast. She was great.”

Sheree smiled. “Okay. Sheriff, I think I’ve found a sport I’d like to try.” Everyone chuckled.

“Anyhow, Johnny, I guess I’d better get on with the reason I’m here. The night of the party you and Kristie arrived separately; is that right?”

“Yeah. I had to work and so she drove herself to the party and I showed up about eight. We hung out together for most of the night, but one of the girls asked her to come outside. I was drinking a beer with my friends. Sometimes the girls will get to giggling and stuff and hanging out.”

“What happened next?”

Johnny looked down in his lap. “They’d been outside for a while and I liked being with Kristie, so I stuck my head out the door to see what they were all up to. I could hear them being really goofy, and one of the girls was really being stupid sounding. When I looked out the screen door, Kristie had a cigarette in her hand and was taking a puff, and it just blew me away. I’d never seen her do that before. It really disappointed me. It made me mad, but more it disappointed me.”

“Did you comment to her then?”

“Not then. But when she saw me she handed the cigarette to one of the other girls and she came in the house again. She was just saying Chrissy had said that the menthol cigarettes gave a buzz when you inhaled, so she thought she’d try it. I didn’t say anything to her about it, but about 10 minutes later I think she sensed I was upset and she tried to kiss me but” – then he stopped talking.

Sheree knew the next few minutes were going to be very difficult. “Johnny, what happened when she tried to kiss you?”

His eyes welled up and when he spoke his voice started to break up. “I pulled away from her and – I wish I hadn’t said it. She’d be alive if I hadn’t said it.”

“What did you say, Johnny?”

“No thanks. I don’t like licking the ashtray.’ And if *only* I hadn’t said that.” Then he buried his head in his hands. After a moment he started talking again. “I hurt her so bad. I never had ever hurt her like that before. And she grabbed her purse and took off for her car. I went after her but she left and” –

Then the tears started to flow. The devastation was so palpable. Sheree excused herself from the room for a few minutes to give him time to gather his composure. When she came back with a glass of water for him, Johnny was silent.

“Johnny, do you know someone named Brad Boykin?”

He looked puzzled. “Yeah. Why?”

“Tell me about him.” This would be new information for Sheree.

“We went to school together for a while. He dropped out. For a while he was working in his dad’s repair shop, I think. It was a mechanic and stereo shop. We took our cars to his dad’s to be worked on. I think the last time Kristie’s car went in Brad was there. He’s a jerk. If I had had anything to say about it I wouldn’t have let her take it there with him back there working again. But her dad was paying the bill and he’s really good friend’s with Brad’s dad. I mean his dad is really nice and I think he’s really embarrassed by how his kid turned out. But he’s just trying to be a good dad and give him a second chance.”

“Why do you say he’s a jerk?”

Johnny cringed. “Back in about the 11<sup>th</sup> grade he was in my gym class and also one of Kristie’s classes. He just kept bugging her, asking her out. He knew we were together but he just kept doing it; taping notes to her school locker in big letters so people could read them. “

“What did they say?”

“That he loved her, that he wanted to go out with her. Everybody knew we were dating and they’d tell me about the notes.”

“So you two guys weren’t exactly buddies, two guys wanting the same girl.”

“No. And she didn’t want anything to do with him. She kept telling him to leave her alone.” Johnny’s voice started to show his anger. “Then one day he walked up to me in gym

class and said he was going to boink Kristie for me since I wasn't man enough to do it myself, so I kicked his ass in front of the coach and everybody. The coach heard what he said so he didn't take any action against me for starting the fight. But Boykin got harassed constantly after that by the guys in class asking him how he expected to boink any girl when he couldn't even hold his own in a fight. Seems like not long after that he dropped out of school."

"Do you know whether it was him or his dad worked on Kristie's car?"

"No, I don't know. Why? How come you came here to Montana? Sheriff Moncrieff said it was about a van that rolled over in Washington."

Sheree had reached the end of her questions. The whole process was really taking its toll on him and she felt he deserved an abridged answer. "Well, there was more than one accident, and we're just following up on similarities. They all have different circumstances and mechanics and they're in three different states and there was possibly a fourth accident in Canada. There was something similar to this one on the Alcan Highway. It doesn't seem like there is much relationship between any of the accidents, but a few things we have come across gives us need to follow up on behalf of the families.

"I think that's all I have for you. I know Kristie's mother should be here soon, so I'll let you go. Thanks so much for coming in. It's hard for you to believe right now, but time *will* make it at least more bearable. My brother was killed in a drive-by shooting when I was 16. They never caught the guy that shot him."

With that Johnny thanked her and he and Moncrieff walked out together. When the Sheriff returned, it was with sandwich in hand and he laughingly ordered her to eat before the other witnesses arrived.

With each witness came forth a beautifully painted picture of a young woman adored by all. Her sister still reeled from losing her, her mother and father still wanted to believe she had fallen asleep. It was the only coping mechanism they had.

And then there was Johnny Isaacson who found life almost impossible without his soul mate. But now came the last interview, one that could prove revealing. Brad Boykin was next.

When Boykin walked in, Sheree could see immediately he had a big chip on his shoulder and he liked making sure you got a good dose of it. “Detective, meet Brad Boykin.” Moncrieff’s voice indicated less than a desire to be around the delinquent. Unlike with the other witnesses, this intro was all business.

Sheree took one look at him and knew he’d been in the slammer. She always felt time in the pen etched itself in a man’s demeanor and could be read as if he had a tattoo on his forehead that said, “ex-con.” The way he came schlepping in made his attitude all too apparent. He wouldn’t look her in the eye and he had the unfortunate genetic gift from his father of extremely early hair thinning, a matter that she was sure made him angry.

“Brad, I’m Detective Williams. I have a few questions I’d like to ask you about an accident that occurred a few months ago. It involved a young lady named Kristie Allen. Did you know her?”

“HMMMMM. Let me think.” The sarcasm he exuded in those words would set the tone for the meeting.

“Well, did you know her?” Sheree persisted with an all business tone.

“Yeah, I think I did. What of it?”

“Where do you know her from?” Sheree geared up for a cat and mouse dialogue.

“I think she was in one of my classes.”



“How about Johnny Isaacson?” She found herself wanting to get a dig in at this guy right off the bat to show him his cockiness would get him nowhere. She could play hardball as well. “That name ring any bells? Didn’t you go to school with him as well and have a fist fight with him over Kristie?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I had lots of fist fights and I may have fought him, but I don’t remember it at all.”

“Did you ever have a crush on Kristie; ever want to take her out on a date?”

“I didn’t have a crush on her. I asked her out once and she said no, she was ‘spoken for,’ like she was all locked up in a chastity belt, like whoever she was seeing was way better than me.”

“Is that a hint of jealousy I hear against her then boyfriend?” The Sheriff was right. Boykin was a crud.

“I wasn’t jealous of anyone. One pussy is as good as another. Put a sack over their head and their crotches all look the same and serve the same function.”

Whoa! Sheree was seething. Delightful character. No wonder Kristie couldn’t stand him and Johnny kicked his butt. “You do know who Johnny Isaacson is; don’t you.”

“Look, I told ya. Maybe he was in a class I was in, but I don’t know any Johnny Isaacson personally.”

“That’s odd. I have a set of fingerprints that match yours and they tell me you served time in Washington Corrections Center under the name of Johnny Isaacson. How is it you picked that name to give the cops? Just sheer coincidence?”

Boykin slouched in his chair. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never served time in any pen. Run my name.”

“I did. And your prints. And your prints don’t lie about your presence in prison.

“Did you work on Kristie Allen’s car the day before she died?”

“I wouldn’t know. The cars come in, I work on them, I fill out the paperwork, and my old man finishes it, puts the bill on it and gives it to the customer.”

“When Kristie arrived to pick up her car did you say hello to her?”

“No.”

“So you did see her when she arrived.”

“Yes – no! I don’t think so. Like I said, put a sack over their head –“

“Why did you use Johnny Isaacson’s name when you were arrested?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, lady. Never been arrested.”

“Well, I have your wrap sheet and it says under your name alone you’ve had a few run-ins with the Sheriff or one of his deputies. And I just know that your Washington probation officer is looking for you, whether as Johnny Isaacson or Brad Boykin. Maybe I’ll just tip her off that I found the guy that was released from Shelton Prison, the guy attached to *this* set of fingerprints, and give her your address.

“So do you want to tell me why you used Johnny Isaacson’s name?”

“Okay, okay. I just didn’t want to have my old man find out about me being in the slammer. He’d shit a brick if he knew. I just pulled a name out of thin air and it just happened to be that one. It was one I could remember easily so I just –“

“I’ll bet. Did you kill Kristie Allen?”

“What? What the fuck! She died in that car all by herself. I didn’t have anything to do with it. She’s just a stupid bimbo that fell asleep.”

“Really! So you’re saying you didn’t do anything to her car that would cause it to catch fire which would make her panic and swerve, rolling down an embankment?”

“Nope, had nothing to do with her being a stupid crotch.”

“Well, Mr. Boykin, I certainly want to thank you for an ever-so-entertaining interview. I’m certainly hoping your lack of respect for women keeps you from ever landing a wife and breeding. No one should be exposed to your vitriolic personality or description of what you believe is the sole purpose of women. Good day, Mr. Boykin. Now, get out!”

“Whoa! This ain’t your station, your town or your state. You can’t tell me to get out.”

The six foot four sheriff stood and looked down at Boykin with a look that would have melted steel. “Get out.” Moncrieff’s deep voice sounded like an iron fist slamming a table.

“Just get out.” Boykin sidled to the door and shuffled down the hall to the exit.

Sheree was dead silent. Then she said it. “He killed her. I can’t put it all together yet, but every one of these mechanics in the different states all hated women, just hated them. Every one of their personalities is the same.

And now I’m going to let you in on our latest discovery. That little creep has one other item in common with the other two mechanics. He also got a call from the prison just the day before the work on the car. What I’m not sure of is if specific women known to all of these guys are the intended targets, or if another woman could bring in her vehicle for repairs and just as readily been the victim. The other two knew their victims, at least the drivers. But their access to the cars was different in that situation. In this case Boykin received the call and there is no way the call could have been made to coincide with Kristie bringing in her car. That is, unless, the caller on the other end knew her as well, knew she was bringing it in, and then called this guy. This one is the biggest puzzle.’

The Sheriff looked at his watch and raised his eyebrows. “Sheree, it’s going to be tough to link this case to the other two, however, I have a feeling you’re going to do it. But now I better get you to the airport. We’re kind of getting down to the wire timewise.” And with that Sheree was off to catch her flight. But Montana would see her at least one more time. As the plane took off she silently made a comment to herself as she looked out the window. “Vacation, here I come.” This place was too beautiful to be wasted on a criminal investigation.

## Chapter 17 (Nanoseconds to Launch)

Montana had been a marathon day but Sheree was in early as usual. By ten she convinced Carver and Trotman that Montana was related. They discussed Friday's upcoming visit to WCC again, and areas to cover. Max should have been there by now, but they had to move on without him.

A half hour later the guys headed in different directions and Sheree's cell phone rang. "Detective Williams speaking."

"Sheree, this is Barbara, Max's daughter. Dad kept your number on the front of a file I was typing notes for." There was a pause. Sheree knew something was terribly wrong. Then Barbara blurted out, "We're at Everett General Hospital." Barbara cried as she spoke. "I arrived at his condo this morning and just assumed he was out already. After I typed up his dictation I headed into the bathroom. He was lying on the floor. He's had" – Barbara could hardly talk through the tears – he's had a stroke, a massive stroke and" –

"Oh, Barbara, hon. Just hang on. Let me get a hold of the guys. I know they'll show up. Are there any calls I can make for you or anything I can do?"

"No. I just wanted you to know because I know this case is so" –

Sheree's head was spinning. Max was such an incredible man. How could this happen to him! She told Barbara to keep her posted. She'd get the boys on their way and say a prayer.

By the time they arrived at the hospital doctors were talking to Barbara about the prognosis. A meaningful recovery was unlikely. She was stunned. She couldn't bear the thought of losing her father. It had only been a few years since her mother had died.

Detective Trotman had known Barbara since she was a little girl. She knew many of the detectives, including Carver in later years. Trotman couldn't help but grab onto her and hold her. She was sobbing, mentioning something about the case and a file, but the detective shushed her and told her to not think about that. Her father was the only thing that mattered now. But by eight that night the flicker of hope was extinguished and only prayers were left to be said. Max was gone.

\*\*\*

The week was a blur. It was Monday and the funeral would ultimately be set for ten on Saturday. But Friday still had to happen. The interviews had to take place, and now there was no Max. Sheree *did* need his files if there was any hope of pulling this all together. She wanted to make up an outline for Trotman of where he should go with his questioning. She just had this feeling, this gut feeling about what was going on at the prison. Yet her common sense told her to quit being ridiculous. It was impossible. Maybe Max's notes would show her she wasn't so far off base.

Sheree called Barbara, and then with Trotman in tow they all met at Max's condo. Max's files were imperative. Barbara handed everything to Trotman and said, "Dad was doing some research on the criminal mind and the power of suggestion. I know he was onto something. He seemed so 'ah-hah'-ish in his last bit of dictation. I typed for him for a long time and he always got that sound in his voice when he suddenly figured out how a crime was committed. He just never put it in his notes until an arrest was made; kind of an epilogue."

When she and Trotman returned to headquarters, Sheree pored over Max's notes. He had pulled the important pieces of information to the fore with a yellow marker. The last page consisted of notes from the prison visit.

Trotman poked his head in. “Find anything? Anything to work with?”

Sheree nodded. “Maybe. Some of the stuff he circled is odd, and some is down the same track my mind is chugging. Know where you want to go with the questioning on Friday? If not, I thought I’d give you a few of my own thoughts in an outline.”

Trotman had a smirk on his face as he leaned up against the door sill and bit into an apple. “Don’t need any ideas.”

“Uh, come again?” Sheree looked at him over the top of her reading glasses.

“Max regarded you as a golden girl. You’re going to do the questioning. He’s gone. He thought in a way none of us could understand, yet his imagination was so wild that he didn’t discount anything as a possibility. That’s why he was able to solve the most far out cases through his career. When I had lunch with Max just before he died, he was telling me how impressed he was with your skills and self-direction. He said you were leading us, we weren’t leading you. We gave you a list of things we needed and you handed us back all of what we requested, plus stuff that never crossed our minds, and it was all pertinent. He also said he didn’t understand why we’d called him in on the case when we had you, and that you had made it so easy for him to jump right in.

So honey, whether you like it or not, you got an endorsement from above that you can’t make go away. You’re the lead dog tomorrow and if I think of anything while we’re there that might be helpful, I’ll pass you a note.”

Sheree was stunned. “You’ll think I’m crazy. You’ll lose all confidence in me.”

Trotman laugh. “Never happen, Sheree. Never happen.” With that he headed down the hallway to Carver’s office.

She placed a call to the warden. If she had to be “lead dog” she needed employee files of Dr. Seger and the Anger Management people. She still didn’t have the employee work records of guards and trainers on duty during each suspect’s incarceration. Somewhere there had to be some correlation, some overlap, some exposure to probably only one person by all three of these clowns.

By midday the warden’s assistant pulled together the records. The few documents that couldn’t be emailed were faxed. Sheree had her work cut out for her and only a bit more than a dozen hours left to get organized, if she expected to get any sleep at all. She repeatedly thought about something Max had circled early on in his file, an item in an interview with Carl Gerber, Jen Parberry’s half-brother. He was talking about why they went to the Northwest Washington Fair and how they spent the day. At the hypnosis show three of them embarrassed themselves by volunteering as hypnosis guinea pigs.

She pondered witness order; the anger management people first or Dr. Seger. She also compared the records of guards and training people with the incarcerations of the three prisoners. That was fruitful.

One piece of information yielded the name of Corrections Officer Paul E. Wornock. A 54-year-old Caucasian, it looked like he’d been passed over a dozen times for promotion. He had two disciplinary actions taken against him; one for sexual harassment of the women Corrections Officers and one for an inappropriate comment to a group of male COs about a female nurse. Unfortunately for Wornock, one of the COs was married to the nurse.

Judging the record of his comments, he was definitely a tits and ass man with little respect for women. The warden sent him to Dr. Seger for an evaluation of his behavior, but there didn’t appear to be a report from Seger. That needed some follow-up. With the last nine



years spent assigned to Transport, his work schedule gave him direct repeated contact on a regular basis with each of the three inmates in question.

Of the two Anger Management crew, there wasn't any consistency. A staff change only two months ago afforded no contact between any of the three suspects and these two men. Maybe starting with the Anger Management guys would give her some good information about the program and Dr. Seger's involvement in their program.

As Sheree started in on the next employee's records Carver wandered in and parked in a chair.

"What're you finding of interest?"

"One corrections officer with consistent contact with our suspects. I'm just starting in on Dr. Seger's records."

His resume' topped his record file. "Seger, Ralph R., M.D., Ph.D in psychiatry from the University of British Columbia. He later passed his boards in psychiatry in Washington State. Interesting. Born and raised a Washingtonian, he completed his medical education in B.C, and resided there for 10 years. Worked the medical/psychiatric block of Archambault Institution, Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines, Quebec." Sheree butchered the name. "I'll bet that's not how it's pronounced.

"Resident of Washington the last four years. Excellent references. Headed up a program for pain-in-the-ass prisoners. Excellent evaluations."

Carver stood up and stretched. "Sounds like you'll be ready. Not to worry, Sheree. You'll make Max proud. Then he added, "I better get out of here. I'm afraid I see a grocery store in my immediate future. You should go home and get some rest, too." With that he was out the door.

Sheree nodded. "G'night." Her thoughts turned back to the file. Quebec. It will be a trick to get his employment records from there. Married to Kathryn K. Kinsington. KKK. Not funny. She thought to herself, "I must be getting punchy." What kind of woman would it take to marry a man who worked day after day in the depths of the darkest souls on the face of the earth? Could he ever see brightness in life or did he feel a depression that never went away?

It was so late. With laptop in hand she headed home. Sleep was illusive, though, once she climbed into bed. She couldn't stop thinking about some things Max had noted in his file. "Would it work? Could someone do that?"

## Chapter 18 (So Many Questions, Not Enough Time)

Friday morning found Detectives Trotman and Williams on the freeway at 6 AM. Before them lie a couple hour journey to Washington Corrections Center in Shelton. No time to stop for a Starbucks. Coffee would have to wait until they hit the ferry. For the hour they were starting their journey, traffic was very bad and catching their intended ferry would be tight. Sheree was dead silent.

“Awfully quiet on that side of the car,” Trotman quipped.

Sheree wasn't saying much. She was still mulling over some things she had come across in Max's files.

“Anything you want to bounce off me?” Trotman could hear the wheels grinding in her head.

Sheree thought for a minute. “You know, I reviewed the files the warden sent yesterday. The Anger Management people are new and weren't involved during the incarceration times of the three suspects. But I want to interview them first just to see how the Anger Management Program is run, total hours each IMU prisoner goes through, what percentage of recidivism they experience and what records they keep. We can interview them together to save time, because they weren't involved with any of our suspects. I just want an understanding of how involved they view Dr. Seger in their work.”

“Did you find anything of interest?” Trotman interrupted her.

“Yeah. Two days before Kristy Allen's death, Brad Boykin received a call on his cell phone from the same number at the prison as the other two suspects.” Sheree had been so

focused on diving into Max's file when Trotman delivered it, she had forgotten to enlighten him. "I called the Riverside detectives and filled them in. Witherspoon couldn't get cleared to fly up. I told him we'd take good care of his interests and get him our findings ASAP.

Oh, and one of the two girls thrown from the vehicle has finally improved enough that doctors allowed her to be briefly interviewed. The other girl will live but she's a veggie.

"Ugh." No matter how seasoned an officer is, that news still takes them aback. "What did Witherspoon find out?"

"Well, the girl's ability to speak was halting, but the gist of the story is that the dance team wanted some music on and – let's see – this is Brandy Pershing, by the way. Katrina is the one that is not going to recover mentally. Brandy said the Barrington van only had a radio. So Chelsea Barrington, who was sitting alongside her mom who was driving, plugged an iPod adapter into the cigarette lighter jack to make the iPod take over the vehicle's speakers. She said there was a big flash but she doesn't remember anything else, just the flash. And she said what we already knew. She and Katrina had been on their knees in the back leaning over the back seat talking with the girls who were sitting on the seat they were leaning on. Everyone was laughing and talking loud telling Brandy to 'hurry up with the sounds.' Sounds like everybody else was belted in and the two survivors weren't sitting normally in their seat at all and that's why they were thrown clear.

This is such a tragedy for both these girls. Katrina, the vegetable, has a twin sister who is just destroyed over this, hasn't returned to school, won't go out with her friends, and is almost catatonic. She and her sister were like Mutt and Jeff. Witherspoon said the parents are Russian immigrants and came here for a better life for their girls and that they were really close. The twins did everything together, but this school year was the first time ever they'd made different

choices on how to spend their time. Katrina stuck with dance team and the other got a job. Probably a good thing or they'd both have been in the accident together."

Trotman asked about the girl who would recover. "What about the other girl that they interviewed? What's her background?"

Sheree continued on. "Witherspoon said Chelsea was in a tough situation to begin with. She had been living with her grandparents for months. Her father and mother were both reservists, and ended up being activated and deployed to the Middle East within months of each other. Brandy's grandparents had stepped forward and taken charge of Brandy when her mother finally shipped out. She's their only grandchild. I guess she was really a good kid, never gave them a moment's grief after her parents left. Can you imagine shipping out for the war zone and finding out your daughter's injuries are just as extensive as in a war zone? God! You aren't even on the same continent to be able to get to her in a hurry."

Trotman was seasoned. "No, I can't imagine it, but I don't have any kids. It'd be pretty rotten, I'm sure." He wasn't very warm and fuzzy when it came to family discussions. But Sheree knew how these families felt; the surrealness of losing a child to brain damage, it would never go away. Some might say, "Well, at least she's still alive," but Sheree knew differently. Katrina was dead. It didn't matter whether she was still breathing. Her mind was dead. It wasn't any different than how Sheree felt about losing her brother. He was gone. She could look at his pictures, his smiling face still existed, but he was gone. Murdered just like Katrina's mind was murdered.

Sheree was silent, so Trotman directed her away from the girls' injuries. "Have you found out anything of value regarding the prison?"

He'd opened a new area for her to discuss. "How about a very *special* corrections officer by the name of Paul Wornock. Kind of has an attitude about women. Got into trouble twice for his behavior towards them or things he said about women he works with, then got sent to Dr. Seger for an evaluation. I couldn't find anything in Wornock's file to indicate Seger found he had a problem; no recommendations, no note in his file. It's like he had no comment about Wornock's behavior. Maybe it was a good ol' boy pass on the part of Seger."

By the time they pulled up to the toll booth, the ferry was being loaded but at least there still was room. A Jumbo Mark II-class vessel, the *MV Puyallup* and her sister ships, the *MV Tacoma* and *MV Wenatchee*, were built by the Todd Shipyards in Seattle in the late 1990s. Even at 460 feet, a 90-foot beam and a capacity of 200 cars and 2500 passengers, the car decks filled to the brim almost every trip. Ferries were seldom late so the detectives would arrive at the prison right on time, maybe a touch early.

The coffee on the ferry left something to be desired, and breakfast was so-so enough that Trotman didn't finish his meal. Sheree stuck with a banana and two cups of coffee, a boost she needed after a bad night's sleep.

As the ferry made its way from Edmonds to the Kingston Ferry dock, the detectives took the stairs to the upper deck for some fresh air, watching an identical ferry pass by going the opposite direction right at the midway point of the trip. They could hear the captain announcing a pod of Orca whales on the port side, and Sheree delighted in watching kids scurry to see the Killer Whales as they came into view. Trotman pointed out another ferry in the distance, smaller in size, traveling to one of the myriad of islands in Washington State's Puget Sound. The largest ferry system in the U.S. with its 28 vessels, Trotman and Sheree were just two of the 28 million people and 11 million vehicles using the system this year.

A mile from the dock, the announcement blared instructing passengers to return to their vehicles, so the detectives headed back to their car. As the ferry docked, Sheree's coffee had kicked in and now the second cup shoved her head into overdrive. "I think we need to get the Department of Corrections involved. DOC isn't going to be happy if one of their prisons hits the front page of the Seattle Times without them knowing about a problem beforehand. And I think I know how this crime was committed."

"You do? Do I feel an arrest coming on?"

"Well, not today, but" – Sheree started to nod her head. "It's going to happen."

"Care to fill me in?"

"When you first told me about Max, you said he could solve cases because he thought way outside the box. In fact, it was so far out that if you'd known what he was thinking before it sprang from his mouth you'd have told him to put that dumb idea back in his pocket. You also said you learned to trust his instincts after a while. I'm going to ask you to trust mine. I know I haven't proven myself yet, but when I read Max's file I realized we'd both been chewing on the same possibility. You said I was going to be the lead dog today, and you may not like where I finally go but I'm going to take you there. And I can't explain my ideas right now because I'm still wrangling with them, but I think I'm right. Either that or I'll embarrass myself horribly and you'll make me wear a dunce cap and sandwich board that says "Ditz" for the rest of my life.

Trotman chuckled. "Hmmm. That would be interesting."

Nothing much else was said on the trip to Shelton. Their hopes of an early arrival were dashed by repeated road work zones with human stop signs. Warden Sweinhardt was waiting in the conference room when they arrived. "Hello! Hello! Have a good trip down?"

Trotman nodded. "Let's just say we made it. I'd like you to meet Detective Sheree Williams. I know you two have talked on the phone. She's going to lead the discussion today. As you are aware, Max Torkleson passed away Monday. Sheree has been involved in this case since day one, laying a great deal of the groundwork for us. Max used her research abilities to assist him as well."

The warden nodded his head and sighed. "Yes. I'm very sorry for your loss. I was shocked when Sheree told me." There was a bit of silence and then he asked, "Well, shall we get started? Anybody need coffee? Water?"

Sheree sat down and opened her file. "I'd like to have both of the Anger Management instructors brought in together. Let's start with them. Then we'll talk to Dr. Seger, and then Corrections Officer Wornock. And I'd prefer that each be instructed to not tell the others they are being interviewed, nor discuss the interview with anyone other than you in this facility. I want good clean statements without fear of what the other guy might have said. If they don't know someone else has been interviewed, then they are more likely to speak freely."

"The warden understood. "I'll just send my assistant to get them. We'll avoid giving them an opportunity to mention anything to the other two."

Ten minutes later two gentlemen arrived, Stan Petersen and Jerome White. The warden asked them to take a seat at the table and poured them each some coffee while he started the introductions. "Stan, Jerome. Detectives Williams and Trotman from the Washington State Troopers Crime Investigation Division. These folks would like you to describe the Anger Management Program, how it's handled, etc. They have specific questions, though, so just let Detective Williams get the ball rolling."



Jerome White, 29, a large black man who looked like he'd done a fair amount of body building, had a degree in criminology. The prison had hired him just over three months ago. Before that he worked at a youth facility handling anger management issues there as well. His easy manner would most likely make any hard ass prisoner soften at least a bit, that and White's intimidating muscles.

Stan Goldman, the other employee, was 42, had a degree in sociology and had decided New York City was getting too dangerous. He left after 9-11, worked in two facilities handling a similar program for youth, and got on with the State in his present position about four months ago. Sheree wondered what precipitated the replacement of both instructors at about the same time. She dug in.

"I understand that both of you are relatively new to the prison and may not know the origin of the program or why it was instituted, but can you tell me how it is administered?"

Stan Goldman spoke up first. "Well, actually I think Jerome will agree with me that we both are *very* familiar with the program's origin. Dr. Seger was brought in to set up the program because they had problems with prisoners in the IMU repeatedly getting into trouble, dishing out trouble, and not getting to a level of control that would allow them to be mainstreamed with the general population. That also meant they couldn't receive training for a job.

"There was a case involving a Curtis James or James Curtis, I can't recall the name order, but he was put in a *three strikes* situation while he was in IMU here, after he assaulted an officer. And a lawsuit was filed on behalf of the prisoner alleging the conditions in the IMU, the treatment of prisoners, was such that it made prisoners suffer mental difficulties which made them not responsible for their violence once they started to suffer from the condition."

Sheree needed clarification. “Are you referring to the SHU Syndrome, the Security Housing Unit Syndrome?”

“Yes.”

Sheree pushed on. “How does the program work? Do you meet in a classroom with a group of men or is it a one-on-one situation? Is everybody in IMU required to attend or only those who want to? Jerome, can you tackle those questions?”

“Yes, ma’am.” His answer made Sheree have a momentary flash of her long lost brother answering his parents or grandmother. Nana was a heavy duty believer in the Bible and discipline. “Yes, ma’am” and “no, sir” were the only responses that should ever come out of a child’s mouth, no matter how old they were. Sheree suspected Jerome’s upbringing, like hers, was strong on faith and core values, and if his mama didn’t teach him that his grandmother surely did. He sported a cross on a chain around his neck.

“We have daily classes for two hours a day. We start off with each participant describing situations they’d been in where they got angry and how they handled it, and then the consequences, the outcomes of their responses. That gives us a launch pad for having our ‘students’ discuss each incident and how it should be handled. Not every IMU prisoner attends class. Some are just lifers, for all intents and purposes, guys who have been in and out of the system for years or who will be. They have no intention of using our help. They think that it’s all sissy stuff and that the guys attending the classes are pussies. Oh, um. Sorry, ma’am.”

Sheree chuckled. “That’s okay. I’m not a wilting flower.

“Do any of them ever start the classes and then drop out?” And if so, what happens to them?”

“Some do, but it really is something a lot of guys get involved in just to get out of their cell. Anything is better than just sitting in that cell all day long and not seeing anyone. So whether they believe in it or not, they’ll do anything for a little freedom. And once they’re in the program, often the ones that joined in just for some out-of-cell time find it does help them. We have a good rate of downgrades; guys assigned to IMU who get reclassified because of their improvement in attitude. They end up in the mainstream population.”

“Where does Dr. Seger fit into the picture?”

Jerome spoke up. “Dr. Seger developed the program. He often observes our classes, and if a student is particularly hardnosed and appears to be there just killing time, taking a break from his cell, Dr. Seger may start some one-on-one counseling. Now, I don’t know what he says to these guys, but it is amazing. After quite a few sessions, we get these guys back in our program, and they are probably the most successful at modifying good behavior.

Anger management is one of the biggest problems for many prisoners. Sometimes they’re behind bars just because they couldn’t control their actions and ended up assaulting someone, a girlfriend, wife. They act out instead of reasoning it out. So to say that all criminals are thieves or rapists is not true. Way too many of these guys are ordinary citizens who wouldn’t take a penny from you, but they can’t control their anger and it lands them in prison.”

“Does Dr. Seger ever use hypnosis in his treatment of these guys?”

“Well, if he does, neither he nor the prisoners have ever mentioned it. The guards are in the room while he’s treating them. Seems like they would talk about it, but I’ve never heard anything like that. And he certainly would have told us or noted it in the progress chart. That’s the chart we receive with the recommendation that the prisoner be reinstated in the Anger Management Program that we run.”

“Would hypnosis beneficial?” Sheree was fishing to see how familiar the men were with the treatment and whether they’d suddenly get nervous, as if they knew more than they were saying. But the question didn’t evoke any untoward response from Jerome.

“It’s like everything else. You have to want to do something in order for it to be effective. It’s like quitting smoking or biting your nails or overeating. Hypnosis works fine *if* you want to change a behavior. But if you are trying to quit because your wife is nagging you and you really would just rather keep right on smoking, the results are going to be lackluster at best.”

At this point Sheree felt she had as much as they could offer and instructed them to not discuss the interview with anyone other than the warden. That meant absolutely anyone. Then Sheree remembered one other topic she wanted to cover. “One last question. Do you know why the two openings you guys filled came available? Why did both your predecessors leave at about the same time?” Stan and Jerome looked at each other and then back her, shaking their heads. “Just some hearsay from one of the prison guards the day I came onboard.”

“What kind of hearsay, Jerome?”

“That there was some big blowup between Dr. Seger and them about how they were running the program contrary to the way he had set it up. But that’s all I ever heard. When I looked at the files and the program manual, it was all pretty consistent with the way I’d been trained, and I couldn’t find anything to indicate they were doing anything different than we were doing. I mean none of the students said, ‘Hey, you’re not doing it right. The other guys did it thus and so.’”

She thanked them both and reiterated that they remain silent about the interview. As they left she made a note about interviewing the two prior Anger Management Staff. What was it that

had made them leave? If there was a rift that had developed between Seger and the two of them over their discovery of what he was up to, the warden wasn't likely to know. Seger would have made sure the official record didn't expose his secret. Bribery? Blackmail? Something had happened that made them leave quietly.

After the warden returned from escorting Carl and Jerome out of the room he wanted direction. "Who do you want next; Officer Wornock or Dr. Seger?"

Sheree thought a moment. "I was going to do Seger first but in light of the last interview I want Wornock. Same deal. No one is to know we are questioning him except you." The warden sent his assistant to get Corrections Officer Wornock, and while they waited for the interviewee, the warden attended to matters in his office and returned when Wornock arrived.

Trotman questioned her idea. "Sheree, what are you thinking? You said you knew how the murders went down, how it was all done." He shouldn't have asked. He'd promised she was lead dog.

"I do. Monday I had a telephone discussion with the hypnotist that works the same fair every year, the one that Beth Langley and her group saw. Goldman is right. You have to *want* to do something in order for hypnosis to be effective.

"But how does that affect this case, Sheree? These two guys said no hypnosis is involved."

Sheree looked over the top of her glasses and got a half grin. "That *they* know of. Just play along with me on this next interview. Nod when you hear pure bull coming out of my mouth. I need your support on this to make what I say to this guy credible. He has to *believe* that Seger has already been questioned and has tipped his hand."

"Uh, what hand?"

Just then the door opened and Sheree couldn't give him the information he was asking for. He'd just have to pretend he knew.

The warden's assistant left Wornock in their care and let Warden Sweinhardt know his presence was needed.

"Sheree started the introductions. Officer Wornock. Detective Trotman to my left and I'm Detective Williams, WSP C.I.D. Nice to meet you."

Wornock seemed a bit nervous. "What am I here for?"

"We need to wait for the warden, but relax. It doesn't involve anything you've done. There was an accident involving one of the prior Shelton prisoners and we have a few questions about procedures around here. Water?"

Just then the warden came in. "I assume you've introduced yourselves. Sorry to keep you waiting. Feel free to start."

Sheree went through the preliminaries with Officer Wornock; date of birth, social security number, years with the prison, education, marital status, kids. Then she hit the important stuff.

"You've been here for a good many years; back before the Curtis James case became an issue."

"It's James Curtis, Ma'am. He was supposedly a member of the Aryan Family in prison and allegedly led a brutal assault against James Wilkenson, a black prisoner, including carving the initials "A.F." into Wilkenson's back."

"Nice. Were you ever involved with the IMU prisoners?"

Wornock relaxed and sat back, getting comfortable in his chair. "Yeah, for about four years. Then I transferred to Training and was assigned to prisoner observation in Transportation

and Maintenance. That was about two and a half years ago, right around the time the James Curtis case was getting close to trial.”

“So did you have contact with the anger management training crew or Dr. Seger?”

Now Wornock smiled slightly. “Oh, yeah. He came on board just before the Curtis case headed to court finally, and he built the Anger Management training as it exists today. I used to watch the prisoners while he was counseling them.”

“What about the anger management instructors? I know Jerome White and Carl Goldberg are the instructors now. But did you ever observe the prior instructors?”

“I think a couple times. But I had enough time here I could have other guards handle that and I watched the cons that Dr. Seger was treating.”

“You mean you were in the room with them while he worked with them, and you heard everything that was said during that time?”

“Yeah.”

Now Sheree started setting a smoke screen to get the guard to open up. “Dr. Seger told us that he used hypnosis on the prisoners. Did you ever observe that?” Just then the warden looked concerned, but Trotman caught his attention and lightly shook his head, hoping the warden wouldn’t say anything.

“I remember watching him hypnotize them to quit smoking if they wanted. He even helped me quit.”

“Did he hypnotize you?”

“Yeah.” Wornock started to squirm a bit. A nerve had been hit for some reason.

“You seem a little uncomfortable. Is there something that –“

“You said you’ve talked to Seger already and he told you about the hypnosis?”

“Yes.” Sheree was making her point with Trotman, and the warden didn’t try to interrupt. Even he was unaware of the hypnosis.

“Is something wrong, Officer Wornock?” Sheree was poking at him.

He squirmed a bit more. “No, I guess not. I just remember him saying not to mention it. He helped me quit smoking with hypnosis, and every single prisoner that came out of his one-on-one program was a successful transfer to the main prison population. I never did understand why it couldn’t be talked about. It was pretty amazing. I guess he changed his mind, if he told you.”

“He didn’t seem to have any concerns at all when we were discussing it.” Sheree quickly moved to another topic to get his mind off the questions about hypnosis.

“I know you moved to Transportation and Maintenance. Did you see any of his hypnosis success stories end up in there?”

“Just one, because remember. I was there when he first started the program, saw him handling prisoners, and then I moved to Transpo and only saw the prisoners he treated when they arrived there.”

“Who took your place observing prisoners when Dr. Seger was treating them?”

“Shoot. I dunno. Terpstra I know did for a while. But I’m not sure if he continued doing that or is doing something else. Could be a number of COs.”

“Did Terpstra smoke when you worked with him?”

“Boy. Yeah. I think so. I remember taking cigarette breaks with him for a while. Whether he does now or not, I don’t know. Maybe he got lucky and Dr. Seger helped him out, too.”

“Maybe. Ever see Dr. Seger use the phones in Maintenance for outside calls?” Sheree had the warden all ears by now.



“Him and a dozen other people. There were only certain phones that you could make outside or long distance calls on, and guys would call their wives or girlfriends, and Transpo scheduling would call long distance to make transport arrangements for certain prisoners.”

Wornock started to question the reason he was being interviewed. “Who’s the prisoner that had the accident?”

Sheree wasn’t expecting the question and her head was scrambling whether to name one of the three suspects or just pull a name out of the blue. She finally decided to take a chance and watch Wornock’s reaction. “Ray Caswell.”

Wornock was taking a drink of water when she said Caswell’s name. He set the glass down, half dropping it and getting water on the table from the splash. “Oh.”

“Do you remember Caswell?”

“Uh, yeah. Good mechanic. I – I think I need a break. Are we almost done?”

Sheree reluctantly said they were finished, but that he absolutely was not to communicate with anyone except the warden regarding the interview. He would be hindering a state investigation if he divulged the contents of the interview.

The warden reiterated Sheree’s comments and reminded the officer he would be subject to severe reprimand if any portion of the interview was discussed with anyone, even those who had already been in the conference room answering questions.

At that point Wornock left and the warden’s assistant headed for Dr. Seger’s office to escort him to the conference room. By now they were all eager to see where Sheree would take her questioning.

The assistant soon returned alone. Dr. Seger was in conference with a prisoner, according to the note on his door. “It says he’ll be available again at one thirty.”

Trotman looked at the warden. “Long counseling session. Are they always that long?”

The warden excused himself and said he would do some checking. But when he returned fifteen minutes later his frustration was clearly palpable. “I just checked with IMU and there are no prisoners missing from their cells except one who is currently in the exercise yard. All prisoners are accounted for. Come with me.”

The walk was rapid as the warden and detectives headed down the long corridor and into the IMU wing to Dr. Seger’s office. The door was locked and a note was attached to the door as the assistant had said. “With patient. Available at one thirty.”

“Warden Sweinhardt was showing his irritation when he knocked on Dr. Seger’s door. “Dr. Seger? Dr. Seger!” But there was no answer. If he was in there with a prisoner he’d also have a corrections officer inside, but there was no sound of talking coming from behind the door, no sound of someone walking to the door or turning the handle or responding to the warden’s knocking or calling out. Dr. Seger wasn’t there.

The warden turned and walked to the security station to ask if anyone had seen Dr. Seger, but before he got there sudden chaos seemed to erupt. A loud buzzer started sounding in the hallways and corrections officers were running and someone was yelling, “Cut him down! Cut him down! Shit! Call for help!”

Warden Sweinhardt took off running in the direction of the ruckus, the detectives close behind. Upon their arrival it was apparent a suicide had occurred. Carl Goldberg came running and when he saw the deceased prisoner he spoke out in shock. “Oh, my God! Al Franklin.”

The warden asked if Goldberg was aware of the prisoner’s status; was he in the Anger Management program with them or was Dr. Seger working with him or was he just a problem child that had refused any programs.

Carl responded. “Dr. Seger was working with him. In fact, he worked with him this morning.”

When the body was removed Sheree asked if she could enter the cell and see if there was any indication as to why the prisoner would do this to himself. Within moments she found a note. “‘Why does he seek the beast within me, when ‘tis the beast I seek so desperately not to set free?’ Not your typical suicide note.” She handed it to the warden and continued looking.

Then under the mattress her hand struck on what felt like a spiral bound notebook, like students would use. When she pulled it out and flipped to a page, her eyes locked on graphic details of how a murder would be committed. She was now sure of her theory. “I think this has something to do with what happened.”

Just then the warden’s cell phone rang and his assistant told him that Dr. Seger was in his office wanting to discuss something. Everyone looked at each other. Sheree was the first to say she wouldn’t miss this for the world. “Warden, I know these two items are needed to further investigate the suicide, but do you mind if I use them as props for our next interview?”

The warden nodded, “Please do. This could turn out to be more interesting than a Steven Spielberg thriller.”

When they arrived back at the warden’s office, Dr. Seger said he needed to discuss a prisoner that he feared might commit suicide and should be placed on suicide watch. Sheree jumped in before the warden could respond. “Dr. Seger, I’m Detective Williams, and this is Detective Trotman. We were looking for you at your office. The warden’s assistant said you didn’t respond when she knocked and that you had a note on your door that you’d be available again at one thirty.”

Dr. Seger responded contemptuously. “Excuse me, but I’m here to talk to the warden about a prisoner.”

But the warden interjected. “Dr. Seger, I informed you yesterday that you would be summoned to a meeting this morning with State representatives when they arrived, to discuss the Anger Management Department.

“Warden, you said State reps.” Seger was sparring.

“They are! Warden Sweinhardt was in no mood to play games. “They’re Washington State Troopers with the Crime Investigation Division. You have a note on your door stating that you are with a patient, but we found you weren’t even in the building.”

Dr. Seger gave a small nervous laugh. “Oh! The note. That was from yesterday. I must not have taken it down. Sorry for the confusion. I ran into town for a minute to drop something off at a friend’s on my lunch hour.” The good doctor was acting as though he’d been caught with his pants down in a public place.

Sheree jumped back into the hunt. “Really! Did you meet with Al Franklin this morning in a counseling session?” Here. Have a seat. Why don’t we all have a seat.“

Seger started to spin his tale. “Yes. A real piece of work. Uncooperative as hell. I’m discouraged with his progress. He’s so angry, so depressed, so very depressed. He swings back and forth between rage and hopelessness. He’s not going to be someone we can move back into the Anger Management program any time soon, and I doubt he’ll be downgraded to the mainstream population. He really doesn’t want to do anything to improve his situation. A big chip on his shoulder, and the depression – in fact, that’s why I came to talk to Warden Sweinhardt, to tell him that Al Franklin needed to be watched.”

Sheree was feeling like a cat ready to pounce. “Yeah, we think so, too. We were just having a discussion with him. He likes to write poetry. Know anything about this? ‘Why does he seek the beast within me, when ‘tis the beast I seek so desperately not to set free?’” Sheree could see the hair on his arms raise atop the goosebumps. But Seger played the game.

“Hmmm. That *is* interesting. Rather a deep meaning, I’m sure. I don’t know what he meant by that. May I keep it? I’ll ask him next week when I see him again.”

Sheree just smiled and handed the note to Trotman. ‘Yeah, I guess old Al really likes to write. He writes whole books. Really dark books on how he’d commit a murder and who he’d murder, if he was outside. This thing reads like a Freddie Kruger horror film. He said you asked him to write it. Now why would you have him do this kind of writing exercise?’

“He told you that?” Dr. Seger’s forehead was beading with perspiration, yet the conference room wasn’t warm. “When did he tell you that?”

“Yesterday when we interviewed him.” Sheree was toying with the good doctor now. “We’ve interviewed a lot of people. Next we’re going to interview Officer Terpstra. Isn’t he the one who attends your sessions with the prisoners?”

“Yes. But –“

“Have you ever used hypnosis in your sessions? I’ve done quite a bit of research on the topic. It can be used to really do great things for patients. I attended a hypnosis show at the fair once where a dozen people would be hypnotized on stage to do anything suggested to them, unless it was against their belief system. That was hysterical. And recently I read an article about a guy in Italy who Italian police believe was walking up to checkout stands in supermarkets and hypnotizing the checkers and making them give the contents of their cash drawer to him. They had surveillance footage of him in action. He must have given them some

kind of hypnotic suggestion that he was the manager and they should turn over the money.

Interesting usage of a skill.

“Did you use hypnosis on your patients?”

“Hypnosis? No, it’s not something I use. I studied its use in university, but I’ve never been trained to actually use it.” Trotman got up and left the room. Sheree knew his style and that he’d have something up his sleeve that would only enhance the interview. Moments later he returned as Sheree got personal with the doc.

“Are you married, Dr. Seger?”

“Yes and no. I’m separated from my wife and” –

“What’s her name?”

“What?”

“What’s your wife’s name, full name?”

“Why do you need that?”

Just then the warden spoke up. It’s okay. Just give them her name.”

“Kathryn K. Kensington.”

“What does she do for a living?”

“She’s--a therapist. Can I ask what this has to do with the interview?”

The warden was intrigued with where Sheree had been taking the questioning all morning. And now this interview was a ruse, suicide victims coming back to life and being interviewed only the day before, etc., but the doctor didn’t have a clue. Sheree changed the subject and asked Dr. Seger for his training and background, prior employment, and how he ended up working at Shelton Prison.

“I didn’t start out heading for medical school. I studied computer sciences, interned as a computer programmer, wrote software for a while. I wanted to go to med school but it was such a long haul, I just didn’t think I could manage the expense and focus it would take, but then the field I was working in just started feeling mundane and something anybody could do, so I changed course.”

Sheree picked up on the software information. “What kind of software did you write?”

“Anything and everything I was asked to.”

She probed further. “Any claim to fame, anything that’s on the market right now?”

“A couple. The biggest one was scheduling software for medical offices.”

“How did that work?”

“Pretty simple really. Years ago the front office would call patients one at a time and remind them of their next day appointment. It was time consuming and expensive when you think of how much staff was paid and what they could be doing with their time, if they didn’t have to call each patient for every fifteen-minute appointment scheduled throughout the day. So I wrote a basic program that would dial the patient, based on the database of patient info entered in the scheduling software. Prior to it dialing all the patients, the nurse would go into the program, hit the queue command and she would recite the names of each patient along with their appointment time. The program had a prerecorded paragraph already in place. The computer dialed each patient, inserted their name and the appointment time in the prerecorded paragraph. When it dialed each patient it would play the recording with the appropriate patient name and time. So it would sound something like ‘This message is for . . . Joe Dokes. . . . You have an appointment tomorrow at . . . 4:30 PM . . . with Dr. Seger. It would state there was a

cancellation fee if 24-hour notice wasn't given, and the address and phone number of the medical office.”

Sheree pushed. “Ah. I know exactly what you are talking about. I just got one of these appointment reminders earlier this week, and I still forgot the appointment. Sorry for the interruption. It's just interesting knowing who the originator of the program is. Go ahead.”

Seger continued. “It would take a nurse fifteen minutes at the most to record necessary names, and at a predetermined time the computer would automatically dial. It could be set for any time of the day. The computer would just continue to make calls until it finished the list. Anyone who didn't answer or didn't have a recorder that answered would show up on the screen as a contact failure. Later a receptionist might try at the end of the day to personally make the call.”

A light bulb in Sheree's head lit. “What's the name of the software?”

“I don't know what it's called now or even if it's sold. It was one of the first ones on the market. The company I worked for was bought out by Intuit, but that was long after I worked there. And anything I developed remained the property of my employer.”

“Tell us about your medical training and where you went after your internship.”

“Can I ask where this is all going?” Seger was exhibiting irritation now.

Like a spider weaving a web, Sheree told him a tall tale. “One of the prisoners released from here about two years ago recently had an accident, and his family said he had been doing fine after release from Shelton. He was a *'changed man.'* But they said shortly before the accident he started to rage about anything and everything and seemed extremely aggressive behind the wheel.



“In a background check his incarceration here came to the fore, and further checking indicated he’d been in IMU and involved in Anger Management. You were here at the time so we’re just doing a check on everyone and anyone who had contact with him. I won’t be divulging the name, as right now it isn’t important. We’re presently just checking up on procedures more than anything else, and that requires us to ask staff how they would interact with prisoners throughout the day, etc.

“So let’s get back to your medical training and employment history post school, Dr. Seger. We’ll finish much sooner if you readily answer the questions.”

Seger took a deep breath in a way that exhibited his irritation, but then answered the question. “Okay. As you know, psychiatry requires training both as an M.D. and in psychology. I trained in the U.S. as an M.D., but received my Ph.D. in psychiatry from the University of British Columbia. Then I was hired at Archambault Institution, Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines, Quebec.”

Sheree smiled a half smile. “I wondered how that was pronounced. Why Quebec?”

“There was a high rate of suicides in the Quebec prisons, far higher than anywhere else in the penal system of Canada. Because of the number of suicides, attempted suicides and self-mutilation, Correctional Service of Canada commissioned a study in order to understand the phenomenon of suicides in the Quebec penitentiaries. The study came up with recommendations to have better interventions and reduce the number of incidents.

“If you looked at the Canadian penitentiary suicide numbers on the whole, the ratio was about 90 per 100,000 prisoners. But in the Quebec pens the rate was far higher at 138 per 100,000 prisoners. Pretty scary numbers.”

“So you were called in to review the systems in place and prepare a program that would remedy or at least reduce the numbers to the Canadian penitentiary norm; is that correct?”

“Yes, that and --”

Before Dr. Seger got the entire answer out of his mouth, the Warden’s office door opened and his assistant came. In using a voice all could hear she announced, “There has been an incident in IMU and prisoner Al Franklin tried to commit suicide. The guards intervened, but he’s now in the medical ward waiting transport to the hospital and is demanding your presence, Warden. He says he needs to tell you something and he won’t tell anyone else. He says you need to know what’s going on in your own prison because he’s not the only one being tampered with???”

The warden was a gem, got the hint and jumped up saying he didn’t know how long he would be, but perhaps the interview should be suspended until he could return.

Dr. Seger’s face blanched. “Can—can the interview be continued another day? I’m not feeling well at all and would really like to go home. I can come back on Monday, but right now I don’t feel like I can continue with the interview.

The warden quickly glanced at the two detectives and Sheree came right in on cue. “Absolutely. Say Monday at 9:00 AM? I’ll bring donuts.” The tilt of her head, the smirky smile with the “donut” comment made everyone laugh except Seger. All agreed and Seger headed out of the conference room and straight to the parking lot, skipping his office. If he’d gone back there he’d probably have heard the hubbub about the *successful* suicide, but he was beating feet heading out as quickly as he could move. His face was heavily beaded with sweat now, and he certainly was in a panic.

“Warden, do you have a pass key to his office?” Sheree was sure with as much heat as they’d put on the doctor, that he’d almost surely be a no-show for donut hour on Monday.

“You bet. Let’s go.”

With that query they were off down the corridor. The warden had his assistant call ahead to have Officer Terpstra, who was next on the interview list, come immediately to the warden’s office and not be allowed to take or make phone calls. Maintenance was waiting for them when they arrived at Seger’s office.

“Go ahead and unlock it.” The warden had taken control. He knew where the investigation was going. He’d indicated so when he gave instructions to his assistant to sequester Terpstra.

When they entered the office things were in disarray. The captain’s chair sat sideways instead of pushed under the desk. On the floor were pencils, the desk mat and a few papers, as if someone had picked something up in a hurry and accidentally pulled everything off in the rush. The second drawer of the file cabinet was left open, and the files partially upended. There was no computer in sight. Sheree was sure he’d sanitized his filing system, but they’d need to know what had been removed, what was in that drawer.

The warden made another call to have both Jerome White and Carl Goldberg, the Anger Management instructors, brought to Dr. Seger’s office immediately. He also asked his assistant to ask have guards escort Terpstra to the warden’s office instead of letting him get there on his own. He commanded a continued lockdown of all cells, meaning no one in IMU would be given shower time or exercise time until things were sorted out.

“Should we send someone to bring Seger back here?” The warden was all over this situation, wanting to make things move rapidly. His assistance to the detectives was exemplary.

Sheree said, “No. Not yet, not until we know what’s missing and can solidify our case. It’s obvious, though, that the disarray of this office occurred *before* his arrival at the interview, not after. He couldn’t have come here when he left the conference room. The question is did he do this or did someone else help him out?”

Trotman interjected. “I’m betting that good old Wornock passed the word on about the area of questioning before lunch. Dr. Seger got spooked and grabbed anything that might give us a clue if we searched his office. The note about being available again at one thirty was written today as a stall in case he was late returning, not yesterday, and Al Franklin’s suicide was in direct relation to activities of Seger. Seger didn’t know what today’s interview was all about at first. Franklin was giving him trouble, not going along with the program, and so he took care of the problem.”

Sheree picked up her cell phone and called Detective Carver. “Sam, I need a background check and address for a Kathryn K. Kensington. She’s possibly in the Shelton area.” An undercover car was dispatched to Dr. Seger’s residence to watch for him and report his comings and goings, if any.

Jerome White and Carl Goldberg had been standing in the hall and when Sheree finished her instructions to Carver she invited them into the office. “We have some concerns here. Did Dr. Seger have a computer?”

It was Carl who answered. “Yeah. He has a laptop, but I think he takes it home with him at night.” The detectives both looked at the warden. They were all now sure that Seger had removed the items *before* his interview had started.

“This file drawer was open when we entered. Can you tell by looking at the files what this drawer contained, being careful not to disturb the angle of the files which are upended a bit?”

Both Jerome and Carl neared the cabinet, Carl holding the disturbed files in place while Jerome pawed through the names on the files. “These are files on some of the prisoners he’s seen.”

“Does it look like anything is missing? Do you have a list of people he might have been working with?”

Jerome nodded and said he’d go print it out. “Anyone we’d refer to him we’d put on a referral list with our reasons. Carl continued to carefully finger through the files. When Jerome returned, he apologized for the length of the list. He said he had forgotten to shorten the date parameters. He offered to draw a line where the current men in counseling started, as a great deal of the list was obsolete as it dealt with prior prisoners who had since moved on to either a new facility or been released on parole. With a pen he carefully drew a line and wrote, “current treatment recipients,” drawing an arrow pointing down at the balance of the list.

Sheree’s cell phone rang but she handed it to Trotman and he headed out the door to handle the call that was most likely from Detective Carver. She realized that an accidental printing of more than she asked for was key to something that she sensed was a time bomb waiting to go off.

Trotman returned and brought everyone up to speed. We have an address, phone number and an interesting piece of information. Kathryn K. Kensington, Dr. Seger’s wife, is a hypnotherapist by trade. The unmarked vehicle is on site at Dr. Seger’s place, but there isn’t any activity in or around the house.”

Sheree was scanning the list of current prisoners in treatment, but none were familiar. Then she scanned up the list. “Oh, my God. Ray Caswell, good old Spike and Brad Boykin, aka Johnny. Those are the ones *we* know. What about the rest of these?” She quickly picked up her cell phone and had officers sent to arrest Dr. Seger.

“Can we get access to the cells of” – Sheree stopped her question short and looked at Jerome’s list – “Who on this list is the most difficult, the darkest in attitude, that is currently receiving treatment from Dr. Seger?”

Carl Goldberg perused the list. “Peter Kobberstad.”

“Can we get him sent to the showers or the exercise yard or another holding cell?” The warden picked up his cell phone and made arrangements, instructing guards not to disturb the contents of his cell at all. Then they were off down the IMU corridor to the cellblock that held the prisoner. By the time they arrived, guards had escorted inmate Kobberstad to another area out of range of the detectives’ discussion. Trotman was fielding a phone call from Detective Carver and finished it with a request that the undercover car be repositioned at Kathryn K. Kensington’s residence. He felt there was a possibility Seger would head there to shut her up.

Sheree entered the cell and looked around. Six feet by six feet didn’t leave room for many creature comforts. She didn’t find anything as she picked up the mattress and looked under the cot. But under the cot there was something of interest; loose stuffing on the floor. It looked like the batting from inside a mattress.

“Help me turn this.”

Trotman stood the mattress on its side and Sheree started to examine the edges and underside.

“Well, well, looky here.” She pulled a spiral bound notebook out of the open edge of the mattress. The contents were grim. “Why do I get the feeling this is almost like recruiting terrorists?”

She enlisted the warden. “Check all the other IMU cells for notebooks. You can bet this has something to do with determining likely candidates. We need to get to Seger’s wife. It’s almost five and she may be getting home, if she isn’t there already. Warden, please seal Seger’s office.

“Jerome, Carl, keep this to yourselves. Your speculation to others could hurt our investigation.

“Warden, will you talk to Terpstra and find out if he’d ever been hypnotized by Seger to help him stop smoking?”

The warden said he’d take care of everything. “I do need to call Department of Corrections. They have to be notified regarding any criminal investigation involving one of their facilities and I’ve actually let it go a bit long.”

Trotman responded. “Sheree and I discussed letting the D.O.C. in on our investigation, but until right now we didn’t feel we had enough to offer them. But go ahead and call them.” With that Sheree and Trotman departed and left the warden to run his prison.

When they got to the car Trotman got behind the wheel and asked Sheree to fill him in on the way to Kathryn Kensington’s place. He hadn’t liked wearing a mushroom costume and being kept in the dark, though the intrigue of how she was handling the case had him pretty amazed.

He drove; she made a few notes and then started talking. “I told you I spoke with the hypnotist who put on the show that the Langley victim had seen. Max had circled that sentence

in Carl Gerber's interview where he described Beth, Geoff Ghio/Caswell and Jen Parberry being a part of the show. I read the file, and everything else Max highlighted made sense, same type of stuff I'd think important. But I kept going back to that hypnosis thing. Why would Max find that at all important?

"But then I got to thinking about it. We have three accidents in three different states with three separate felons involved, all having served stints in the same prison in the IMU wing, all at different times with no interaction. How could anyone dream up a murder scheme that could cause three different individuals to commit murder in a way that was difficult to discover, none of them knowing each other, yet all able to cause a murder while the victim was driving? Why would vehicles catch on fire, and two of the vehicles show the fire starting inside first? The rolling was just incidental to what was happening on the inside. Any driver would see the flash, become disoriented and could easily veer off to the side and roll their vehicle. We don't know about the Montana case because nobody saw it happen so we don't know if there was a flash."

Trotman's phone rang. Carver was on the phone. "We know how the Beth Langley murder was carried out.

"Give it to me."

Carver spoke rapidly. "Ghio removed the plastic windshield washer fluid tank and replaced it with a metal container which he filled with gasoline. He rerouted the lines that spray fluid on the windshield for the wipers to wash the window. He attached one end to the canister he'd filled with gasoline. He drilled a hole into the air vent and connected a striker like you'd find on a cigarette lighter. It was raining on and off that night. The minute it rained enough to make her turn on her windshield wipers she was dead. He set it up so when the wipers turned on



they caused the spraying of gas at the driver and as the wiper swiped across the window it also rotated the striker which sparked and ignited the gasoline.”

“Jesus! Did forensics have any theories about Jen Parberry’s murder?” Trotman was now of the opinion they had the makings of a solid case against Ghio, but how would they link Seger?

Carver said that forensics had *theories* but that was about it so far. But he’d call just as soon as he had something solid to report on the other cases.

When Trotman hung up he said, “You won’t believe it.” Then he repeated what Carver had just relayed to him.

Sheree’s brain was now in overdrive. She knew how the murders were accomplished.

Trotman asked her to continue with the hypnotist and what she had to say.

Sheree started in. “When the hypnotist spoke with me I talked specifically about the fact that hypnosis couldn’t be used to make someone do something against their will. He confirmed that. When I asked about someone who already had a very criminal mind, a very brutal mind, he said all bets were off. If they already had the mental ability to dream up something and were likely to carry out such a crime in real life, hypnosis with a post hypnotic suggestion could be the driving factor to cause the completion of the task.

“Max also circled the dates of the calls. They all occurred on the second Tuesday of the month. Now our accidents are not chronologically one after the other three months in a row, but that only means we likely haven’t uncovered the other accidents yet or Seger didn’t have a prisoner in the ready mode at present.

Trotman's phone range. "Hey, it's Carver again. The undercover car's on site at the Kensington residence. She doesn't appear to be home. Seger is not at his place. He's most likely fled."

Trotman quipped. "Yeah, so sick he had to go home. Must be feeling a hell of a lot better. Wish you were down here. This case is a step beyond creepy. I'll be in touch in a bit."

When they pulled up to the Kensington residence she had arrived only minutes before. With a knock on the door, Kathryn Kensington answered. Sheree introduced herself and Trotman, showed her credentials and asked to come in. Kathryn led them to the living room.

"Is anyone else here with you?" Sheree looked around and saw a workstation where a laptop sat. Kathryn was about to look at her email.

"No. I'm alone. Is this about my soon-to-be ex?"

"If you are referring to Dr. Seger, yes. If you know anything we should be aware of before we ask questions, anything that would mitigate your involvement in –"

Sheree's question put the woman in the position of ratting out her husband without knowing what he had done, and it made Kathryn believe she might be implicated.

Kathryn was shaken. "He's been using hypnosis the wrong way, I'm sure. His questions, his – just everything. I didn't know that he'd use it this way when I taught him."

"Sheree played along as if she knew about everything. "So far, Ms. Kensington, there are at least nine confirmed fatalities, and we fear there are quite possibly more from his tactics. How did he involve you?"

"I'm not involved except early in our marriage when we were living in Quebec and he was working at Archambault Institution, I was studying hypnosis for use in mental health issues. He had never used hypnosis in his practice and didn't know how to use it, though the principles

were covered when he was in school. So while I was taking classes furthering my education, I taught him what I was learning, just kind of for fun.

“At first it *was* fun, and I really thought he’d pursue education in the field so he could incorporate it in his practice. But he didn’t. He used it once at a party and got a couple volunteers so he could show off. That wasn’t my idea. I really didn’t want to be part of a freak show.

“But then he started saying things like, “What if you have a patient who is a multiple murderer? Could you give him suggestions to commit crimes?” I fibbed, saying “No,” because he was scaring me now. His questions were just not at all in the area that either I or any other reputable hypnotherapist thought he should be thinking.

“It finally got to the point that I refused to answer any of his questions and I told him he needed to get help. He was really sounding like a psychopath.”

Sheree posed another series of questions. “Did the failure of your marriage have anything to do with the hypnosis disagreement?” Just as she finished her question the computer butt in, saying, “You’ve Got Mail.”

Kathryn continued. “Yes. That and a lot more. My ex has a little honey stashed in an apartment not too far from here. Really convenient for an adulterer. He’s had her for –“

“Do you know the address?” Trotman was out of his seat with cell phone in hand.

“Uh, yeah. I found her by following him, and I saw him with her one day after we’d separated. She looks like she’s about 18. I need to check my computer. I wrote it down.”

Kathryn pulled up her address book. “1415 Piedmont Way, number 12.”

Trotman dialed his phone. “Carver, get the Mason County Sheriff’s Office on the horn. Have them send a car to 1415 Piedmont Way, number 12, and arrest and hold anyone on the premises. Don’t let anyone enter or leave before we get there.”

“Was your husband a programmer at one time?” Sheree was moving quickly now. They needed to leave.

“Yes. He was.”

“Any idea what type of software?”

“It’s the one good thing he left me with. It’s scheduling software for patients so I don’t have to contact each one individually to remind them of their appointment.”

“Does anyone other than you use your computer?”

Kathryn’s answered. “*NO!*”

The detectives needed to leave. “Will you be around for the rest of the evening?”

“No. In fact, I’m running late. I have to finish up dictating the times and client names. I can do it any time, but the software is set to call at 7 PM and I won’t be here. I have a date tonight, first one since we split. It’s been too long. I have a hole in my stomach about the size of a golf ball from worrying about my ex. It’s time to move on.”

Sheree wrote as she asked Kathryn for her cell phone number and directions to the girlfriend’s apartment. “We don’t expect to have to call you immediately, so go have a good time.”

The detectives headed out the door at a stepped up pace and made a bee line to Seger’s second home, his girlfriend’s apartment. “Sheree, any bets on his being there?”

“Don’t know. But I’m betting the computer and files are there.”

When they pulled up there wasn't a Sheriff's car yet, typical of a county the size of Mason and a rural expanse of large proportions. When they arrived at the apartment they parked a few doors away and came back close in to the building wall. Their approach was with caution, guns drawn. Suddenly they heard a siren, and wished it hadn't come into earshot just at that moment. Trotman advanced alongside the front screen door of Number Twelve. The entry door was partially open. Sheree was behind him. They could hear Seger rapidly say a name and "six-thirty," another name and "six-thirty."

Trotman shouted, "Washington State Patrol," and yanked on the screen door but it was latched. Without waiting he kicked at the screening. As it tore away he reached through and unlocked the door. He could see Seger glancing at him and quickly typing. Before Trotman could get through the door Seger hit the enter key and quickly turned off the computer. Sheree had her gun on him as Trotman sprinted across the room to throw Seger on the floor.

The deputy sheriffs came too and started searching the other rooms.

"Where are the files? We know what you've been doing. Where are they?"

"I don't know what you are talking about. Do you always break into someone's apartment for no reason?" Seger grinned like the Cheshire cat. "I didn't know emailing a friend was a crime."

"Don't play stupid, Seger. Where are the files?" Trotman was visibly pissed.

"No can tell you. Don't have any. You're shooting blanks, Detective. You have nothing on me and you won't."

Sheree glared at him. "That's where I think you are in for a rude awakening. If I'm right, we have a final launch about to take place and a horde of these homicides in the works."

“That sent the doctor into hysterical laughter. “I can’t wait to see your computer guys scratching their heads. You’ll never find what you’re looking for.”

Sheree wanted to shoot him. “Shut up. Take him in and book him for obstruction of justice for starters. We’ll give you a lineup of other charges tomorrow. And *don’t* let him near a telephone. He can call an attorney when we say he can. The phone is the key to what he’s doing.”

Trotman glared at Seger as the deputies escorted him out of the apartment. “What now? He doesn’t have to schedule anyone with a phone call for the kind of clients he works with. Yet he was obviously doing something with the software when we arrived. ”

Sheree sat down at the computer. “I’ll see what I can find, but I’m betting we need someone from forensics to crack the program. I’m sure he’s just set up a launch. But how?” Exploration of the directory yielded nothing.

Trotman asked Sheree to clarify. “What would the software have to do with this?”

She explained. “Well, when we arrived we could hear him talking to someone or to the computer. He was using the scheduling software, I’m sure. He kept saying ‘six-thirty’ for everyone he scheduled. That’s the other thing I learned from the hypnotist I spoke with. The posthypnotic suggestion can be given to a person while they are hypnotized and a word can be the trigger. So when they wake up, they can be fully aware of the day, and the hypnotist can say a trigger word up to a week later and cause the person to perform the suggestion. He’ll only do a suggestion if it’s something he wants to do. Remember Carl Gerber describing the hypnosis show? He said that one of the girls jumped up after her hypnosis was over, and when the hypnotist used a particular word, she shouted something that she would never have said had it not been for the suggestion made while she was hypnotized. And she would only do it if she had

wanted to be a willing participant, so she couldn't be forced to make a fool of herself. She had to be receptive and be a willing guinea pig.

“Seger very carefully selected his guinea pigs. They had to have the desire, the mental makeup to *want* to actually murder someone. His repeated sessions with them through hypnosis set them up for a posthypnotic suggestion.

Trotman was lost. “How would he know what suggestions they would be susceptible to?”

Sheree had it nailed. “He had them write in their notebooks how they would kill someone using skills they already had. He probably told them it would be cathartic and help them with their anger. His reasoning to them would be something like, ‘It’s well known that if you write out your deepest, darkest thoughts, you won’t carry them out. Once I can read what your thoughts are I can help you with your anger.’ They wrote it and he read it and knew exactly which direction to push them while under hypnosis. Repeatedly he’d put them under and work on them using their own ideas.”

“That string of names we heard him reciting and the words “six-thirty” were a launch in mass. I’m sure of it. I just don’t know how big the fleet is.”

Sheree was stumped. Really very computer savvy, her frustration showed as her search lead nowhere on Seger’s computer. “There’s no scheduling software in here. Nothing. I’ve searched everything. Not here. We can have forensics take the computer back to the lab and see if the hard drive has been cleaned of software, but it’s not showing up in the trash bin so if it’s been erased, the bin has been emptied. Nothing that they can’t resurrect, but not without the lab.”

Sheree was quiet. Then she cringed. “Oh, my God.” It was a crazy thought, but she had nothing else to work with. “Let me look at the emails he sent. He said he was emailing a friend when we arrived.” Her search was feverish. Seger had multiple accounts and screen names. She might not be able to get into them.

She couldn’t proffer any other ideas. It had to be there. How could he do it otherwise? They’d *heard* him queuing up the names!

Her brain was stretched as she tried to think the way a twisted mind would think. Just then she looked up and something caught her eye. On the wall was a calendar. “Jesus. Trotman!” He looked in the direction she faced. “Today is the second Tuesday of the month. It’s the day the ex-inmates received their calls from Transportation. Crap!”

Then she found something. “Got it!” She opened Seger’s MSN email account. There it was. The first email in the list, the last one Seger sent.

“The reference line reads ‘D-Day.’ It has an attachment.”

Trotman read the email address. “7Kensington7@aol.com. It’s to Kathryn.

“Let’s go.” They bolted and told the deputies to secure the location.

“That’s it. He’s probably piggybacking on his ex-wife’s software. If he was a programmer I’m betting he set her software up and built it to accommodate his crazy ideas. I can see why he never thought he’d get caught.”

As they arrived at the car, Trotman called Detective Carver back and had him send a forensics team to Seger’s apartment and remove anything they found, including the computer.

Trotman slid in behind the wheel and hit the lights and siren as he sped toward the Kensington house. They might not be too late. As they arrived, Kathryn’s date had just pulled into the driveway. Trotman killed the siren and bolted from the car hardly a second after he



turned off the key. Sheree headed for the door and didn't wait to be invited in. "Washington State Patrol." She grabbed the door handle and let them both in.

Kathryn was shocked. Her date stood out on the lawn stunned. The earlier interview with the detectives delayed her a bit from queuing up her clients in her scheduling software, but she had just finished the task.

Sheree barked an order. "Don't move. Don't touch your computer. Have you dictated your patients' schedules yet? I mean in the calling software?"

Kathryn was shaking. "Yes, I just finished. It's set up to do its calling at 7 PM. when most patients are home. It will start the calling at seven."

Sheree warned her. "Don't let it start calling, whatever you do. If you do you will launch a massive murder scheme. We believe when you ex installed your scheduling software he altered the source code to allow for a little bit of creativity. He's sent you an email with an appended wave file that lists former inmates' names and phone numbers. The email doesn't have to be opened. It attaches to your software the minute it arrives. It will automatically integrate itself into what you have already set up. He dictated the inmates' names and "six-thirty" as the appointment hour, but it's actually a trigger word to activate a posthypnotic suggestion in newly released prisoners he has worked with."

Kathryn's grandfather clock started to chime and she suddenly blurted out, "Oh, my God! It's seven and the computer will start dialing by itself."

There was no time. Sheree hit the off button and shut down the computer. But after a moment the computer started to turn on by itself. She hit the *off* button again only to have the same thing happen. She looked confused.

Kathryn blurted out loudly in almost a shrill panicked voice, “You can’t *make* it turn off when it has to do the scheduling task. If the computer is turned off it will turn on by itself and do the calls to patients. Then it will turn itself off again unless I tell it otherwise, like if I want to use it. It can call patients in the background while I’m working on other things.”

Frantic, Sheree hit the off button and pulled the power cord from the computer along with the rest of the cords. With no power the danger would be over. The screen was blank. But it was like HAL, the runaway computer in *2001 – A Space Odyssey*. It would not let itself be shut down.

Sheree thought quickly. “I’ve disconnected the power and the router. It’s running off the battery but if the router is disconnected it can’t dial; right? It should be okay.”

But it wasn’t. Kathryn pointed out that what Sheree thought was a router was only her backup drive. “That’s just my second drive. I use Norton’s Ghost software and it backs up automatically.”

Sheree hit the off button again and flipped over the computer to take a stab at removing the battery pack, but she couldn’t get the battery to pop out. “Where *is* your router? If we can disable it we’re home free.” She was hitting the off button every few seconds now as they planned the demise of “HAL.”

Kathryn looked lost. “I don’t know what you mean when you say ‘router.’”

Sheree glanced around the room as a realization put her into panic mode. The computer was new enough that it had Wi-Fi and didn’t need to be physically connected to a cable router or a telephone line. It could be wireless. “How do you send emails? Do you use Comcast? Clearwire? DirecTV satellite? A telephone line? What allows it to dial or send files?” Kathryn

suddenly understood and stood in shock. It's not here. My next door neighbor and I share a Comcast connection. The wireless hookup is in his apartment.

They were out of time. Sheree suddenly raised the computer above her head and slammed it to the floor. All its lights went out. . .

There was dead silence. No one said anything, just looked at each other. In the stillness of the room you could hear the humming of the refrigerator in the kitchen. They all stood looking at the laptop on the floor. She had never allowed it enough time to finish booting before she hurtled it to the ground. It hadn't finished – It hadn't been able to launch.

But for the refrigerator's sound and now the neighbor's dog barking, there was no other noise. Sheree and Trotman stared at each other. Kathryn buried her face in her hands. All realized that a mass murder had been stopped.

## Epilogue

All in all it would take months to unravel the truth about Dr. Seger and all the crimes he had masterminded using others to feed his sickness. In all, 16 names were listed in the piggyback file that appended itself to Kathryn Kensington's scheduling software. Had Seger not been caught, there could have been another wave. All the planned murders were clever beyond imagination, with each prisoner drawing on his own expertise to commit a crime, each subconsciously a willing participant. Not all prisoners in IMU had been affected by Dr. Seger's brazen imagination. Those were the ones who didn't have it in them to commit such crimes. But those who had true evilness inside had all written in spiral notebooks just exactly how they'd cleverly murder using their training; cooking, mechanical skills, electronics, it didn't matter. Their skill could be used as long as they had a deep-seated murderous hatred of a particular type of person.

All the victims had been women except for the man riding along with Jen Parberry up the Alcan Highway. Women! A loathing that most likely Seger had as well, but he chose to carry out the murders vicariously through his prison patients.

Law Enforcement probably would never know the total number of crimes that had been committed one at a time, triggered by each one of Seger's calls from Transportation and Maintenance. But his plans at an attempted mass launch from his ex-wife's computer had literally been smashed. Authorities were sure one prisoner had stood up against Seger and he'd paid the price. "Why does he seek the beast within me when 'tis the beast I seek so desperately not to set free." Seger had used the prisoner's depression and suicidal thoughts against him.

Seeger's unknowing accomplices were many. There were prisoners in IMU who were too difficult for the Anger Management team. There were guards who had been hypnotized under the auspices of quitting smoking, but given a repeated hypnotic suggestion to forget anything they saw or heard during sessions with Dr. Seeger. And then there was an ex-wife who came within seconds of helping him do the very thing she had feared; all innocent of knowing a crime was in the works, but accomplices in every respect.

As for Sheree, Max knew all along what a sterling performer she would become, given the chance. Though Trotman and Carver thought Max was the only one who could solve this type of crime, Sheree was a diamond in the rough, and they had their new Max. Their old war horse was gone now, but he left knowing that Trotman and Carver were in good hands.

As Sheree wandered into her office late the next day, she saw roses on her desk with a card from Carver and Trotman. She felt wonderful about the outcome of the case. So good, she thought maybe she should ask for a transfer to Cold Cases. She remembered a brother long ago who had been killed in a drive-by shooting, and a case that was never solved.

---

## About the Author

R.W. Williams spent 25 years of her adult life as a court reporter and 15 more as a television broadcast captioner. In her time in both professions she lived the emotional roller coaster of a professional immersed in the sadness delivered through the legal system and TV news. It is this life experience that makes the pages of her book a heart pumping thriller. Watch for her upcoming books at <http://readrwilliams.com>

### **Connect With Me**

My blog: <http://readrwilliams.com/blog.html>

<https://www.facebook.com/readrwilliams#>

---