

Welcome

Welcome

Introduction

Foreword

Disclaimer

Copyright

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

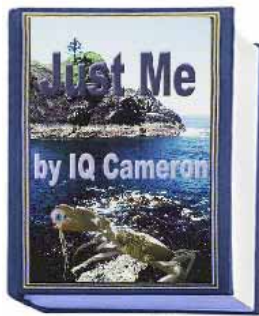
CHAPTER 5

Read the Conclusion!

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Just Me

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(Version: V8.0C)

(A novel by)

I Q Cameron

Introduction

Thank you for choosing to read this free novel portion from www.killernovels.com

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As a writer, I make every effort to make available novels of the highest quality, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy this free portion so much that you will purchase the remaining portion of the novel from www.killernovels.com for a small fee. Please remember that by doing so you will receive a fantastic novel conclusion, while also helping me to be able to continue this writing venture.

Just Me is the thrilling and baffling sequel to the stunning murder story, *Fair Game*, and like its predecessor, it is loaded with thrills, suspense and multiple murders, a neat Christian message and an amazing, yet twisted outcome. If you enjoy murder stories with suspense and surprises, you'll really enjoy the warped and spiteful motives of this callous killer. Moreover, if you're looking for a simple example of God's desire to deal mercifully with us all, this may help.

Someone is on the rampage again in the town of Greenrock. (If I may, please consider reading *Fair Game* before you read *this* novel, as it will set the groundwork for this shocking thriller.) An emotionless killer is stalking and dispensing with victims at an alarming rate, shattering the peaceful way of life of the beachside town. Surely no one deserves what is happening here...

One year on since Detectives Tony Fisher and Dorothy Shank gunned down a young cop for the murders of numerous models, bodies are accumulating again. Worst of all, this killer, just like the previous one, leaves no clues. And there seems to be no real thread to connect all the victims.

Just Me is a challenging suspense-thriller with a gripping plot and more than one particularly satisfying twist. Not only does it give you, the reader, the pleasure of trying to figure out the murderer's identity and motive, but it also gives some small and simple examples of what it truly means to be a Christian, 'warts and all'.

Only the very astute will guess what's happening here, and one has to wonder, who in the story will survive... Will anyone be saved? Will anyone find peace? And just what will be exposed??? Take the plunge and see if you can work it all out before it's too late.

The murderer is on the move... Let your mind be moving too!

Guaranteed satisfaction! Guaranteed detective-skill fun! And guaranteed twists!

Now, please enjoy!

Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that

properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and 'just too good' to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...☺) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ's intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without

shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don't ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as 'have faith' or 'simply believe', which are meaningless to the one who doesn't understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as 'going too far', than to indulge in the usual '*too valiant and too true*' hero figures. Life is real, and when there is action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My 'baddies' are bad, and my 'heroes and heroines' are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing 'real' characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God's love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don't fail you too greatly... ☺

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CHAPTER 1

It was like coming out of a dream.

Rich moonlight bathed the ocean so that it sparkled, as though diamonds had been strewn across black velvet as far as the eye could see. The night was crisply cool, invigorating and so clear that it was difficult to tell where the blazing stars ended, and the sleeping, shimmering crystal sea began.

And yet in Stephanie Stanley's mind there was heaviness, a drug-induced daze that made it difficult to focus properly on the magnificent panorama before her.

She was elevated, somewhere well above the gentle washing of the waves. So bright was the moonlight that far below she could easily see the small, frothing crests of an endless parade of whitecaps marching on to destruction upon the clean, white sands of the coast. It was a splendid sight, looking down from above with a cool, refreshing breeze in her face, and to her lazy, bewildered mind, perhaps a glimpse of something heavenly.

Heavenly?

No, that wasn't right. Because there was something else too – something that oppressed her weary mind. *Too much alcohol*, she mused. *That must be it*. She struggled for clarity as tiny snippets of the day returned.

Andrew Mallaby's boat. Yes. That was it.

She had started the day on Andrew's boat. He had invited her to go sailing on one of her rare days off. Being anchor for the local news may not have been 'the big-time', but it was important nonetheless, and demanding on a person's time.

Stephanie was well known now as the pretty face of Channel 8 news, and it was not a

position she was going to let anyone take from her. Hence, the amazingly handsome Andrew had been forced to wait all week before Stephanie had agreed to venture out to sea with him. She had refused to risk going out on a workday.

And what a day it had been.

Sun, sand and sailboats, not to mention the hunk who had taken her to sea and back. No – that didn't do him justice. He had taken her to *Heaven* and back! *But what had happened after that?* She strained her mind as her memory of the day became suddenly blurry. *Wine...* Yes, she remembered sipping wine with Andrew in the cool of the afternoon. It had been the perfect end to a wonderful, exciting day.

But after that, *then what...*?

Stephanie shivered, but not in reaction to the cool breeze fanning her unresponsive body.

Her mind flashed back several years, and with intense dread she thought of another young man, Al Dwyer, and a similar haziness she had felt after accepting a glass of wine from him late one evening. The next day she had woken with a headache, memory loss and haziness, and considerable pain lower down. A date-rape drug had left her vulnerable to *that slimebag's* every whim – *all night – of that she had no doubt*, even though she had no memory of the event.

The drowsiness she felt now was eerily similar.

Al Dwyer. Yes. *Him*. She had never forgiven him, or in truth, herself.

Why had she never gone to the police? Oh yes... *that's why*. Such negative publicity would certainly have scuttled the career of the up-and-coming anchor girl of Channel 8. *That was why*. It had been a simple *career* decision. But in truth it had never been simple. She had lost sleep on many a night since, angry that she had never made Al face the consequences of such a despicable act.

But this was not Al, was it? She searched her mind, desperate for detail.

No.

She had not seen Al Dwyer for over a year. He had skulked away not long after raping her, and would never dare show his face now. Could it be possible that Andrew had committed the same hideous act then? *Surely not!* She felt dreamy just at the thought of him. *No. Not him!* Not likely. So tall, with thick, dark hair and dark eyes to match, French and full of muscle – they both knew she was totally his. *Totally*. Besides, he had been the perfect gentleman, suave and considerate and totally tempting.

No, Andrew didn't *need* drugs.

A sudden tug at the back of her collar reminded Stephanie that she had not ventured to the breezy hilltop alone.

Someone had helped her each step of the way. *But who?* She turned slowly in an effort to view the person's face, but her vision was blurred, and her ability to concentrate had been stolen away. It was a heavy, oppressive weight that threatened to send her spiraling into the tempting peacefulness of sleep, and one that even her keen interest in identifying her escort could not overcome.

"Come on, Stephanie," the person's voice coaxed. Another tug at her collar forced the blonde newsreader to stumble along a little further. *"Just a little more. Nearly there. You're doing very well. Keep going."*

Stephanie caught a foot upon a stone protruding from the rough track, and tumbled forward as though drunk. She groaned because of the pain caused to one knee as her pale blue slacks slid on the hard ground. But as quickly as the pain pinched at her knee, it was gone. Her head spun with vivid and wild bright lights spinning so fast as to create dazzling patterns. Then slowly the pyrotechnics display ebbed away – along with all strength.

"Just a little more, Stephanie," insisted the voice. *"That's my girl."*

That voice, mused the reporter. It sounded ordinary enough, and yet odd at the same time. It seemed to echo in her tormented, confused mind. She spun her head as she was helped along, stumbling all the while, but even up close she could not concentrate enough to identify her guide.

And where were they anyway? Wasn't this dangerous when you are drunk?

When finally the person pulling at her collar and sleeve allowed the young newsreader to slump to the grass, Stephanie glanced about her, deeply dazed and disoriented.

They were on a hill, to be sure, and by the ocean. But where exactly, Stephanie could not be certain. And then, in the only truly lucid moment she possessed for what seemed like hours, she realized that even without the drowsiness caused by whatever drug was in her system, she probably would not be able to identify the person or the place at night.

In the absence of further urging from the troublesome voice and hands that had been forcing her along, Stephanie immediately began to sleep.



"Smile for me, Stephanie. You're on!"

The voice was insistent.

"The cameras are on you, Stephanie! Give us your best smile!"

Instinct snapped the young anchor from a heavy stupor, much more the cause of her panicked response than even the dreadful smelling odor that filled her nostrils.

Her escort – *the one* who had led her to the cool, grassy elevated position ceased waving a

small vial of smelling salts beneath the young woman's nostrils, then stepped back just far enough to film her.

Stephanie instinctively preened her perfect, long, fair tresses, fearful of being caught at less than at her dazzling best. Instantly her pupils, dilated during sleep, filled with piercing, white light. The brilliant radiance of the camera-light lasted several seconds, but its effect was blinding and lingering.

Stephanie could hear the person shuffling with the camera, its blinding light diving about until it could be extinguished by hurrying fingers groping at the device in the dark. Despite the residual impression that was temporarily burned into her retinas even after the light went out, the moonlight was so intense that the newsgirl could still make out what was happening. The camera's owner was clearly desperate to quench the light, and several mumbled curses told her that the camera-light was very much unwanted and unexpected.

Somehow though, despite the light's dazzling effect and her own drowsiness, the young woman managed to gush forth a pearly smile of sorts as the film was being taken. And during that time she looked youthful and almost playful.

"*Stupid camera!*" came a terse, mumbled complaint from the silhouetted figure. Then, more calmly, a congratulatory reply. "Well done, Stephanie. That's my *good little news-girl*."

Was that *appreciation* she detected, or was it *sarcasm*? Stephanie could not be sure. Her mind spun, as did her entire world. And now everywhere she looked the center of her vision contained the burnt image of a bright light, effectively causing a dark black-hole-like blind spot. She listened for the voice once more, struggling to gain a better view of her guide and her surroundings.

"Why...? Why am I... here?" she whined.

Stephanie felt disappointed as she realized that there were in fact, no news cameras – but only the one small personal recorder that had just filmed her – and temporarily blinded her. And worse, she feared, it had not been one of her better moments to be filmed.

"You're here for your big audition," came the casual reply. "Don't you remember?"

No, she didn't remember.

Unable to properly see the one who accompanied her, Stephanie listened intently, but could not identify the owner of the voice. Neither could she remember anything about *an audition*. Still, the mere prospect of such a thing struck a very real chord with her. She dared not admit for a moment that she could not recall such an important appointment.

"Do I...? Do I *know*... *you*?" She asked. "I think I'm drunk. You... You didn't... drug... *drug me*, did you?" Her head lolled, and she threatened to drift off into unconsciousness again,

but another whiff of the vile scent in her nostrils caused her to shake her head vigorously.

“No, you just might have drank too much. That’s all. But I knew you’d just *have* to be here for *this* story,” came the encouraging reply. “Stay with me, Stephanie. You don’t want to miss this next part.”

The person, who was now little more than a dark, fuzzy shadow in her stunned vision, drew near.

“This is the part where you get to be a *real* star.”

“W-what? Who are you? Why did you bring me... here? A star? *Really?*”

A hint of a smile showed both her eagerness, and the fact that she was very much mentally stupefied.

“Since you seem to be a little bit – out of it,” came the explanation, “I’ll be brief. You’re always so...”

The person paused, searching for the right word.

“So... *happy.*”

Now that was sarcasm, decided Stephanie. The cryptic explanation continued.

“You always come on television looking *so good, Stephanie*. The lovely, little blonde newsgirl. Smiling your way through another *boring* roundup of another day’s *boring* news – given to us by the *boring* little bimchette, Stephanie Stanley.”

And that was just plain nasty. Funny how your senses work, but your eyes don’t, Stephanie mused. But her reactions were far from functional too.

“*What...?*” She barely reacted.

“So be quiet and listen, and we’ll change all that,” came the terse command.

Stephanie did so dutifully, shocked into submission.

“Every *day* you come on TV and grin your way through another boring news bulletin, with your big, brown eyes, your clean, white teeth and your perfect hair – and *somehow* you manage to act like you *actually* care – or like *we should*. But you’re a *fake*, Stephanie.”

The tone was definitely cold, and yet not entirely bitter.

“Well, here’s a tip, girl. Everyone *knows* you’re faking it.”

Stephanie nodded and shrugged, so dazed that she was actually prepared to give an honest response.

“I know...” she began, but was immediately cut off as her escort’s summation continued. The voice sounded critical, and yet strangely friendly, as though offering something better.

“Now, we all know there’s *no news* in Greenrock, and we all know that *you* are just put on our televisions to give the male half of the population something *nice to look at*. You’ve got *no*

brains, and *less* personality. But that's okay. We're not going to condemn you for that, *Steph*. Instead, we're going to give you a *better role* – a much more... *honest role*. Something you really... *deserve*. Something you'll be *great* at! Something to *die for!*"

The newsgirl gave a weak, albeit genuine smile.

"That sounds... nice... I think."

"Doesn't it!" came the quick reply, and again it was difficult to tell if there was sarcasm in the tone. As the response continued, however, doubt began to erode. "The truth is you're a *boring, little bimette*... You're so young I'm not even sure you rate as a *bimbo*, so I'll call you a *bimette*. I hope that's okay."

It took time for Stephanie's affected mind to digest the snide comments, but eventually she looked hurt.

"Oh, don't take it to heart," encouraged the voice, sounding suddenly friendly. "Up until now you might have been a mindless little distraction, but I think we can remedy that. Would you like that? Would you like to be something... *better?*"

She nodded, looking genuinely sad. Then her eyes looked blank.

"*Yes*," she admitted.

Heavily drug-influenced, the promise of a better role appealed greatly, though it was hard for her to imagine anything with more prestige than anchoring the local news. Not in Greenrock, anyway.

"You're only there because you've got a pretty face! You know that, don't you?"

The dazed young woman had never doubted it. Still, the words hurt, and the person seemed to be repeating the hurtful taunt, over and over until it sunk in. Moreover, changing constantly from aggressive to friendly was adding to Stephanie's confusion.

"You... you *said that already*," she complained.

Stephanie's debilitated eyes opened wide, but still she could not make out her accuser's features. Having been blinded by the light, even up so close all she could see was a large, dark, inky circle that obscured all but the very edges of her vision. It was of little consequence. Her escort's next words were all that mattered.

"So now we're going to film you, and then you're going to take a little swim. Then we'll see if *that* helps. What do you say?"

Stephanie moved back slightly on the damp, dewy grass, almost blind and very dazed, and suddenly anxious.

Had she heard the word *swim*?

If so, then maybe this really *was worse* than her time with Al Dwyer – not that she had ever

been able to remember even a moment with him. Still, she had imagined the sordid affair a thousand times, and it had always cut her deeply. But no matter what she had thought of *him*, the threat of falling to the water from her current position atop the picturesque hill suddenly seemed far worse.

“*No... Don’t... No*, I don’t want to go... in the water,” she droned, unsure if she had understood, and barely able to speak.

Curse the alcohol - or drugs – or whatever it was, she thought.

“Careful, my girl. Careful,” came a casual reply. There was no consideration for her well-being in the words, but only a factual warning. “You don’t want to fall. It’s a long way down to the rocks if you fall in the wrong place. I’d never be able to get to you, and I don’t want to lose my *star*. We don’t want *that*, do we?”

The warning struck home to Stephanie as her mind spun and passed in and out of focus.

No, she didn’t want to fall. She swayed, unable to recall exactly what the person had just said, or moreover, *implied*.

“Now, stay still, Stephanie. I just need to make an adjustment,” the artificially friendly voice announced.

As the person kneeled beside the dazed young woman, Stephanie’s eyes finally managed to partially focus. Her escort wore gloves like those of a surgeon, or a cleaner. She could not be sure. And some kind of mask too. Perhaps *that* was why she had found it difficult to discern the person’s identity.

Must be going to apply makeup for the shot, she mused. *Must not want it on the hands...*

Stephanie willingly complied as the person reached for each of her hands in turn, examining them and even gently stroking them. The touch of Latex felt cold in the moonlight, and yet it was strangely pleasant too.

Gentle, she dreamed, swaying precariously. *Just like Andrew Mallaby’s hands earlier that day...*

She gave token resistance as her hands continued to be stroked, and then slowly coaxed behind her, and only when she heard the crisp snapping sound of a plastic zip-tie clasp her wrists tightly together did she attempt to protest. And courtesy of the drug that had numbed her senses, even *that effort* was unconvincing. The absence of her ability to use her hands did little more than annoy her.

“W-why did you... do that?” she droned.

“Trust me,” came the soft reply. “It’s just props. You use props, don’t you? It’ll help. Just trust me. We’re going to make you a *big news star*, Stephanie. You’re going to play the part of

the helpless victim. How do you feel about that?"

"Mmm... I dunno." It was a slip from her usual effort to maintain what she believed to be proper English, and even her dull tone matched her nominal effort. "Please... untie me."

"Good Girl," coaxed her escort, ignoring the request. "Now, just *one more thing*."

Stephanie sat with her legs together, folded in close in an attempt not to topple. Stupefied as she was, there was still a sense of danger that warned her not to fall. With her vision still somewhat impaired from the camera-light and with her head swimming, instinct and fear told her that she might fall from her elevated position at any moment. With her hands now secured behind her, she could do little to steady herself, and so she was relieved when the stranger shuffled her backwards just a little until she rested against a large rock that jutted skyward from the cold earth.

"Thank you..." she groaned. "Do we really have to... have to do this?"

"You're very welcome. The pleasure's all mine."

"Why... are we... here?" She looked about, more confused than ever.

"We're going to film you, Stephanie," came the explanation. "Don't you remember? You like being filmed, *don't you*." It was not a question.

"Oh, you've... heard of me?" She had completely forgotten the earlier criticisms, and much of their conversation.

"Oh, *everyone* knows you, Steph? Can I call you Steph?"

"No. My name is..." She had to think for a moment, but when she did reply, her tone was rather curt. "*Stephanie*."

"Well, I'm going to film you, *Stephanie*."

The person didn't seem put off by what, in Stephanie's mind, was an uncharacteristically harsh response from her. And in that moment, it didn't matter either way. After all, she was *Stephanie Stanley, the Channel 8 news anchor*. She wasn't simply *Steph*. People had to know that.

From a pocket in the person's coat came a large plastic packet and a roll of tape. The camera was placed carefully on another nearby rock, aimed, then set running, recording without the aid of artificial light. Then a long strip of cloth-backed tape was torn from the roll.

"Wait!" insisted Stephanie, her voice slurring at the hurried word. Then she slowed and seemed more reasonable once more. "Are you sure *that's* going to work – in the dark, I mean?"

"Oh, yes, Steph, it'll work. Don't you worry about that. That camera is made specially to take film even in almost no light at all. Don't you worry your pretty little head. We won't miss a single second of you."

“Oh... *good, then...*”

“In time I’m going to make you famous. Totally famous. *World famous!* You’ll like that,” came the promise.

Stephanie smiled a lustrous, pearly display in the moonlight. Her entire face lit up in what was the rather girlish, *adorable* display for which she was renowned. She watched with mute, albeit bewildered satisfaction as the tiny camera displayed a small red light at its front to show that it was recording.

“You *sure* you don’t need the light on?” she asked again.

“Don’t you worry about that,” assured the voice again. “Just relax. I promise you, that little camera will record in near-total darkness. It won’t miss a single move you make. I promise.”

“Okay,” she conceded, her pretty face looking worried, then trusting.

“Oh, you’d *really* appreciate this if you ever got to see it on the news, Steph. Or *read it*, for that matter.”

“What...?” Her drugged mind was too slow by far. “But I *like*... reading the news.”

“But you’re going to *be the news*, Steph.”

This time the voice was flat and factual, and *still* abbreviating her name. The person moved close, collecting the clear plastic packet and the length of tape in a smooth, swift motion. As the face leaned close to the disorientated newsgirl, the voice became softer once more, lulling, soothing, *tempting*.

“*Trust me, Stephanie.* I’m going to make you a *star beyond your wildest dreams.* You *do* trust me, don’t you?”

“Yes,” came the equally whispered, and completely trusting response.

“*Shh, then.* Be still. Just close your eyes for a moment. Then I *promise* I’ll make you a star.”

Stephanie closed her eyes willingly, and was still smiling, hoping and trusting when without apparent haste the person at her side slipped the clear plastic bag over her head. The length of tape was then wrapped firmly around her neck, pulling tight so as to seal plastic on skin. The movements were deft and measured, and done even before the dazed anchor began to speak out in protest.

Being on camera shouldn’t be like this... thought Stephanie, still quite oblivious to what had just been done to her. For the first time she began to make a serious attempt to free her wrists from the plastic zip-tie.

“*You won’t be able to see me properly...*” she demanded, her voice muffled within the bag.

“*You won’t be able to see... Oh no...*”

Oh... Nooooo!

When Stephanie looked up again, the first traces of real fear were registering on her face, and in the bright moonlight she could see that the person had retrieved the camera, and was indeed filming her response up close, albeit still without the aid of lighting.

The plastic bag sucked to her face like shrink-wrap, causing her to look like an animated mannequin each time she gasped wildly for breath. Adrenalin surged through her veins, finally giving her mind the clarity she needed to fully appreciate her situation.

Sadly, though, clarity came far too late...

Stephanie threw herself down, away from the rock that supported her back, writhing and tossing as she gulped huge breaths, sucking the clear plastic against her face, and then blowing it away like a balloon, over and over again. She called out in protest from behind the transparent veil, and her face appeared wild with terror in the brilliant moonlight. And rather than help her, her escort merely moved to stand over her, striving always to gain the best angle, and to keep the gasping, writhing woman within the screen of the camera.

The struggling anchor made shrill, muffled cries, tossing about on the damp ground. Drugged but suddenly frantic, she tore the skin on her wrists trying to extricate them, but the zip-tie proved equal to its cruel task, and refused to allow her to be free. And Stephanie's tortured mind, suddenly torn from its drug-induced dream, managed to return to sanity just in time to condemn her, alerting her of her awful fate.

"Don't fight it, Stephanie," coaxed her escort, firm and insistent. *"Don't fight it. This is one of the most merciful ways you can die. Don't fight it, Girl. Just relax and let it take you. Shh. Shh, now."*

The young woman cried out again, and continued to writhe for a time, sucking the clear plastic in hard against her face until it molded to every petit contour, then expanding it again so that it resembled some kind of pregnant alien wrapped about her face, over and over. Her tormentor moved closer still, intent on capturing every movement the condemned young woman made, and especially her terror.

Then came the repeated coaxing.

"Don't fight it. Please, Stephanie." The voice was insistent. *"Just let it take you, Steph. It's merciful. Trust me! Just go with it!"*

And then suddenly there came a definite change in Stephanie's behavior.

In the space of just a few breaths, with carbon dioxide taking the place of much needed oxygen in her lungs, her movements suddenly slowed. It was as though she had been instructed to surrender, and dutifully, she began to obey.

“*That’s better... See...*” coaxed her unfeeling onlooker.

“*Shh, Stephanie. Shh. You’ve been a bad, pretentious girl. It’s time for you to pay now, but I’ve chosen a nice, easy way for you to die. So, shh now. And I promise I’ll make you a star. I promise. You’re going to be in the news, Steph. Shh now. You’ll be famous. That’s it. Shh.*”

All the while the camera captured every dwindling gasp and movement the young newsreader made.

“I’m going to make you a star, Steph – a *real star*.”

Stephanie’s mind began to fade, and just for a moment she thought it really *was* merciful – just as her executioner had promised it would be. There came wonderful patterns, colored designs, swirling and beautiful, and there was peaceful silence too. And then the world slowed some more, just like it had done when she had first been drugged. It was easy and relaxed, and seemed to be calling her into the restful darkness that enveloped her tormented mind and body.

Her breathing slowed, and she settled easily into death.

The clear plastic bag barely moved toward the end, as the last few weak breaths marked the onset of the girl’s departure. The camera remained fixed on her, then zoomed in on the attractive face that had filled so many television screens. Stephanie died with her eyes open, almost flat on her back, with her legs twisted just a little. Her petit mouth sagged open, and she looked shocked, as though perhaps she was still straining for another precious breath.

But she wasn’t.

Her killer continued to hover for some time, happy to record the girl’s passing, and her obvious state of death. And even after filming was done, there was no immediate effort made to move Stephanie’s lifeless body. She was left still, with the bag firmly taped about her motionless neck, her shocked face staring up at the brilliant moon. Only when three more minutes had passed, ensuring that Stephanie would not be making any surprise return performances, was she moved.

There came a brief check for a pulse, then a satisfied sigh.

Having been strategically placed close to the entrance of her final resting place, it was a simple matter of rolling the young woman over twice, and all immediate evidence of her existence was removed. Stephanie fell gracefully through a slender gap between large basalt boulders, then vertically down twenty meters to where gulping, tossing waves and more menacing black boulders waited to greet her.

There in the cold blackness of Deep Heart Cave, a pitiless rock cracked the newsreader’s pretty head wide open so that her blood sprayed about within the veil of containing plastic. Her body thudded hard, several broken bones allowing her lifeless limbs to mold willingly to the

hard, uneven surface upon which she had fallen.

The plastic packet, having served so efficiently in taking the young woman's life, was also successful in containing her broken skull, though a line of small perforations created where shattered bone and hardened rock had met, finally allowed the girl's blood to mingle with the washing of the ever-present waves.

Had the roof of the cave not been so high, no doubt the hollow hill in which Deep Heart lurked would have made an awesome blow-hole at times, but since the waves were too small to force water to such great heights, the dark cavern formed something that resembled a huge washing machine instead.

Relentlessly, changing pitch and action with the tides, the waves pushed and pulled, twisted and churned, scouring the surfaces of the basalt monsters within the cavern. And moreover, they dragged along with them any articles that may have somehow entered the cave from above.

Stephanie Stanley's body was eagerly swallowed up by the intruding waves, then dragged back and forth across the rocks, quickly and efficiently tearing at clothing, skin and flesh until she became caught between two jealous boulders that refused to let their precious trophy go free.

And only the plethora of small crabs and fish within the waters of the huge cavern were witness to the darkened show.

And they adored the feast.

CHAPTER 2

Patricia Horner gazed down at the pale face of the dead youth before her, her lips pursed tight in distaste. She had covered him from his toes to his bruised mid-section with a clean, white sheet, but was apparently hesitant to cover his face.

The young man was a mere nineteen years of age, just ten years her junior. His stomach was flat and muscular, as was his chest, traits that went with his age. But now his rippling abdominal muscles were sunken, and his fit, bulging pectorals were marked by a stark V of stitching where his chest had been opened for inspection.

He was also battered, scraped and torn about as the result of considerable trauma, and his handsome face also bore the scratches of recent injuries. His throat had been torn open, and remained gaping and ugly. And while those in the morgue had cleaned the young man's numerous headwounds to ease the burden on the boy's father during identification, there was no hiding the fact that his last moments of life had been horrific.

The ME shook her head, staring intently at his ashen, lifeless face.

“What a waste,” she whispered. “In a different lifetime I might have dated you. Too much speed and not enough brains... *Idiot.*”

Her mental musings were interrupted seconds later by the entry of two suited detectives into her sterile, macabre domain. Pattie never bothered to cease contemplating her latest ‘patient’, but only glanced over her shoulder long enough to identify the man and woman. She shook her head once more to show the detectives her distaste.

“Stupid,” she said aloud, twisting up one corner of her mouth. “They speed. They die. But they never learn.”

“Some of them never get old enough to learn,” came the down-to-earth response from the man.

“Tony. Dot,” Pattie offered, glancing up again only briefly.

Detectives Tony Fisher and Dorothy Shank came and stood together on the opposite side of the cold, stainless steel table from the medical examiner. Like her, they stared down, contemplating the loss of young life, and the mess the young man had made of himself.

Tony was approaching fifty, married with two young sons and a teenage daughter. A slight weight problem that had haunted him since turning forty was showing signs of being reluctantly subjugated, though not entirely. Though balding and graying, and basically not the most attractive man to pop into Pattie’s mind, there was a faithful, dependable side to him that greatly appealed to her. He was reasonably witty, and certainly displayed an acute mind, traits that also endeared the aging detective to the young ME.

Granted, she suspected that Tony might be slightly prone to jumping to conclusions, but despite that, he was the most honorable cop she knew. And most of all he was still happy with his wife, while so many other marriages in the local force had fallen by the way. Pattie had always admired him, though never romantically, and she rarely showed it.

All that gooey emotional display just wasn’t in her nature. But she admired him, just the same.

Dorothy Shank, on the other hand, had never married. Perhaps ten years Tony’s junior, with long, dark brown hair and captivating brown eyes to match, she was really quite attractive. Dorothy carried no weight problem, unlike her older partner, but like him, she was sharp and occasionally witty.

Strangely though, unlike Tony, Pattie had never been able to consider Dorothy a friend. The two had never become close, though their respective work roles had brought them to work together often. In truth, Pattie had never doubted that Dorothy was secretly, silently in love with

the plain, aging, Tony.

With such respect for Tony, Pattie could not help but notice that he looked a little more tired than usual of late, and found herself wondering if the detectives had been up working half the night. Dorothy showed no sign of tiredness, so the theory didn't really hold water, but whatever the case, Tony was certainly looking jaded. In any case, she forgot all about Tony's fatigued look as they began to speak again.

"Well, it's been a real picnic upstairs," droned Tony. "Hope you've had a better start to the day than we have."

"Hardly," responded Pattie dryly. "Have you seen this kid?" She pulled a face to emphasize her disdain. "Any news on the others?"

"No change," replied Dorothy. "Stable. That's all the doctors will say."

"Fools," shot back the ME, rolling her eyes. "I can't even get a *date* in this town, and boys like this are killing themselves, drunk at the wheel. *Stupid*, is what it is. *Unnecessary* and stupid."

She studied the female detective's face for a reaction, wondering whether Dorothy was also feeling the loneliness of no man in her life. And to her surprise, Dorothy's eyes danced about the scene momentarily, showing definite discomfort.

Oh well, mused Pattie, *at least I'm not alone in my loneliness*.

"Yeah, well," noted Tony sadly. "We've just spent time with the families of these kids. No winners here. This one dead, six in the hospital, three of them serious. One family is already talking about suing another. One dad's threatening physical harm. Dead kids, injured kids. *Everyone's* happy."

"They were all happy enough to drink and drive last night," droned Dorothy.

"Brain dead," insisted Pattie. "I know *this one was* – because just earlier I had his brain in a tray on my bench."

It was quite true, and Dorothy screwed up her face when the M.E. gave a casual sideways glance to indicate the very tray. And while the comment almost gave some comical relief to an otherwise somber ritual, Dorothy could not help but react to the cold remoteness of her medical colleague.

"See, I just gotta say it," Dorothy noted. "I hope when I die they just... never find me. *That* I don't mind. What I *do* mind is the thought of being carved up on *your* table, Pattie. That's just plain *sick*. Dead or alive, I'd like my brain to stay right inside my head – and all the other stuff where it belongs too. Do me a favor and hide me if you ever find me dead, will you, Tony?"

He did not reply, but the ME could not resist.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Pattie prodded. “I could do your makeup for you, comb your hair. I think you’d make a pretty good looking corpse, Dot.”

To her surprise the comment bothered Dorothy Shank just a little, who was unsure whether Pattie was making light of her sentiment, or perhaps saying something much more callous. Pattie could be cutting and cold, and never bat an eyelid, and it wasn’t so much the words, but the way they were said.

Hornet by name and Hornet by nature – that’s what everyone who knew her said.

Either way, it was certainly nothing less than the typical insensitive kind of remark that Pattie Hornet was renowned for – along with her tone. Regardless of the intent, it could not help but prove testing to Dorothy, who had already been feeling somewhat tense of late. Not to be beaten, the detective shot back her own opinion.

“Oh, *a great one*,” she insisted. “I just don’t want the carving knife used on me. *That’s all*.”

There was just enough emphasis on the last two words to show that she did not appreciate the comment from her scientific colleague. Pattie was oblivious.

“You wouldn’t feel it,” she noted, staring at the jagged pattern she had stitched on the young man before her. “He didn’t.”

“Yeah,” said Tony, “Well, let’s just hope it never happens. Can we talk about the boy?”

He knew of his partner’s irritation of late, and did not wish to have his two colleagues at odds over something so trifling. It had been a difficult enough morning, dealing with distraught parents and devastated young friends and victims. No point in letting a small grassfire catch on in the lab if he could douse it before it became unnecessarily heated.

Pattie was *always* on for a spat of late, indeed even more than usual – and that was saying something. Dorothy, who was normally much calmer and more amicable, had oddly become too similar to Pattie for comfort in recent weeks, though she continually denied any problem at home.

It was time to lead the conversation elsewhere.

“So what’s in his system?” Tony asked, continuing to derail any potential clash. “See if you can surprise us.”

“He was an idiot. No drugs, no brains. Just alcohol, and plenty of it,” came the curt reply.

Pattie moved on, apparently blissfully unaware that her earlier comment had irritated the female detective. For the most part she was abrupt and to the point, and often sharp with those she dealt with, regardless of relationships.

Hornet by name, hornet by nature, Tony mused.

“Ha,” he quipped, his weak attempt at humor barely managing to break through his tired

veneer. “See, look at that: you *did* surprise me. What’ll you put on his death certificate? Death by stupidity?”

“Do you think I could?” Pattie shot back without hesitating. She gave a half-hearted grunt to acknowledge Tony’s droll reply. “They never covered that one at med school, but I’d be willing to give it a shot.”

“Yeah,” Dorothy said drolly. “*That* should help placate all those families upstairs.”

Pattie didn’t even pick up on her sarcasm, but actually sounded like she might write it as the cause of death.

“Yeah, I’m sure they’d all be totally shocked,” she retorted. “And you’re right. I may as well put that. This clown had enough alcohol in his system to stun a horse – or kill a man.”

“Quite,” Tony agreed.

“Other than that, tox was clean,” she continued. “He took a hit to the chest from the car’s steering wheel, and one to the head from the tree, plus a lot of other, lesser ones. Either one of those two could have killed him, but the slash to his throat from going through the windshield caused him to bleed out before his other injuries could finish the job. If you don’t count moronic stupidity, there’s nothing suspicious.”

Direct and to-the-point. Always the way of the hornet, thought Tony.

“Thanks Pattie,” he said, and he sighed.

Pattie pulled the white sheet up over the young man’s face. In days gone by she might not have bothered, not being one to believe that the dead any longer needed the dignity of being covered, even when naked. But Pattie remembered how visibly upset Tony had become the previous year when a series of young models had been murdered, and how he had clearly felt more at ease when their bodies had been covered.

It made no sense to the hard-nosed ME, but she liked Tony, and for him she would do it. Besides, she had poked, prodded and carved the young man’s lifeless body, and there seemed no more point in leaving him there for passersby to see.

Pattie handed Tony a file containing her detailed findings.

“That’s all I’ve got for you guys,” she announced. “I’ll give you the complete version when I’m done. The rest is up to you. Enjoy.”

“Gee, thanks,” Tony droned. “You always get the best jobs and leave the hard stuff to us.”

“Tony,” Pattie corrected, “my job is gruesome and mundane. Don’t envy me.” She thought for a moment, then admitted coldly and factually, “It’s *me* who envies *you*.”

“Oh, how’s that?” queried the bemused detective, genuinely surprised. Indeed, her comment clearly made him appear more interested and awake than she had seen him since he had

entered her lab.

“Oh, admit it,” she complained, cold and hard as always. “This is just a case of gross stupidity and drunkenness. Sometimes I think that’s *all we ever see* in here. *You two* are the ones with the interesting job. You get to go out and investigate anything even slightly suspicious. But not me. You just bring me the broken pieces. Sometimes I wish I had your job. We could swap if you like.”

Hah, they won’t go for that, she mused, almost smirking at the thought.

“No we can’t,” argued Dorothy, still just slightly annoyed, and still trying to discern just how much venom should be read into the *you’d make a good looking corpse* comment. “And besides, if there ever *is a real crime*, we need you to tell us how it was done. How can you say that’s boring? I mean, all this air-conditioning, nice clean surroundings... *Brains in trays*...”

She sounded patronizing, and yet not so much that she could be accused of anything.

“*Stow it, Dot*,” Pattie shot back, cold and forceful. She twisted up her face, refusing to agree, and chose rather to swoop on part of the female detective’s comment. “By *real crime*, I suppose you mean like when all those girls were murdered last year?”

It was a subject Dorothy Shank would rather not have gone into with the ME, knowing Pattie’s views, and certainly she had not meant to insinuate it. She was taken back again by Pattie’s directness, and felt herself wince and tense up. But the door was open now, and she *had* to reply. Pattie would never allow her to withdraw without responding.

“Well, no I wasn’t even thinking about that, actually. But since you raise it, you gotta admit,” said Dorothy, choosing her words carefully, “Brad Holloway’s little murder spree gave us *all* something to keep our jobs... *interesting*, shall we say. For a while at least.”

“Yeah,” agreed Pattie. Then came the twist of the knife. “*If* it was him.”

There it was, thought Dorothy. *Pattie could never let it go*.

“You *still* don’t think it was Officer Holloway?”

Tony could not help but ask, even though he had heard Pattie’s views before. He looked as though he was too tired to worry about conflicting opinions on the matter, and perhaps more interested in engaging the ME than going back to face distraught parents.

“You *know* I don’t,” stated Pattie simply and defiantly. “That boy wasn’t smart enough to do all that. Besides, I examined *every one* of those girls. All *pretty girls* in the prime of their lives – and *never once* a hint of sexual activity at the times of the murders. Brad Holloway was a young man – *also* in the prime of his life. How could he have murdered *all those girls* and never touched a *single one* of them? It sure goes beyond *my* powers of logic.”

She looked squarely at Tony as she then added an apology, clearly directing it to him, if not

his female partner.

“Sorry, I know you had your evidence, but you *know* I’ve never thought it was him.”

“But *he did* have sex – with at least *two* of them,” countered Tony. “Have you forgotten the police woman, Ingrid Short, and the young Diamond girl? We just couldn’t prove the others, but there were questions about them.”

He could still remember their names.

Their faces too...

“I haven’t forgotten, Tony,” argued Pattie, refusing to give ground. “*You* forget – *I* carved them up – right there on that table. I just think Holloway lacked a certain... *killing* quality. You also forget – *I met him* – numerous times. He just didn’t strike me as the killer type.”

“Oh, the killer type,” mocked Dorothy. There was a certain harshness in her tone now. “Who *does* strike you as the killer type, Pattie?”

Pattie stopped, the brakes temporarily applied to her runaway train.

That smarted, she thought.

It was a question that sounded very much like a challenge, and one that Pattie would like to have argued with the female detective. But for the sake of Tony Fisher, the ME decided to let it alone. Pattie took time for a long breath, then shrugged off the question.

“How did we get on to this?” she asked. “My point is that I’ve come to find my job somewhat... *boring*.” She looked about again, as if someone might be listening. “I don’t *want* people to die, you know, but you must admit that the presence of a serial killer in our town *did* liven things up – for a little while, at least.”

Dorothy rolled her eyes, but Tony nodded.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he admitted quietly. “It *did* make things... *interesting* for a while.” He grunted, adding with humor, “But we can’t wish for a serial killer every single week, can we, Pattie? Even if it does help us pass the time.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Detectives,” Pattie clarified. “I just *love* Greenrock. I can’t imagine living anywhere else. This town is my *oyster*, if you know what I mean, and I hope it *never changes*. It’s just... well, sometimes – like when I see a young hunk like this on my slab – looking like *this* – I’d like a change of jobs. That’s all.”

“It’s alright,” consoled Tony, well aware that despite Pattie’s sometimes-sharp way of saying what she thought, she both admired and was fond of him. “No need to explain. Small towns and high-stress jobs, Pattie. I think we all feel it sometimes.”

He felt easier, hoping that the fire might have gone out between his two female colleagues. Then his mind wandered, his glazed eyes showing easily as much discontent as he was seeing in

the ME. Still thinking about the events of the past, he added a weary observation.

“They almost took that case out of our hands last year, Pattie. The Feds were just hours away. Did you know that?”

“No,” she admitted. “I never heard that. That’d be right. The only bit of excitement in years and they wanted to give it to the Feds, I suppose?”

“It was close. They next morning they were due here, and they would have taken over.” He shook his head, looking distant and contemplative over the matter. “No, Pattie. It wasn’t exciting – it was just plain *nasty*. *Real* nasty. All those dead... *girls*. It... *affected* me, you know? Messed with my head, I hate to admit.”

“*That* I knew,” Pattie interrupted. “Anyone could see *that*.”

And oh, so sensitive as always, thought Dorothy.

At the time she had been concerned she might lose her valued partner. Tony had been deeply moved by the murders of so many young females – something he had tried to explain to her that affected him because of his Christian faith. But in reality, she didn’t fully understand his logic.

Tony wasn’t ruffled or embarrassed by Pattie’s insensitive, almost abrasive recollection.

“I know,” he admitted unashamedly, confident enough in himself to admit that it had all hurt him terribly at the time. “All that waste. Women – *you are all* God’s most amazing creations and all that...”

He grinned and looked at each woman in turn, baiting them.

Even Pattie smiled.

“You old smoothie,” she droned.

In reality, though, while using his explanation to compliment his colleagues, and to lighten the conversation, it really had been much of the cause of his dilemma at the time, and had never ceased to remain just beneath his amicable exterior. Of course, his problems at the time went much deeper than that, but Dorothy and Pattie both knew there was truth to his joke.

“Still, you all know what I mean,” Pattie pressed the matter. “For just a little while, we were certainly... *stretched*. There was definitely something about it.”

“Oh, this is sick,” countered Dorothy, and she slipped back to looking less than happy. She would hear nothing of it. “A lot of innocent women had their throats cut. It was a lot of things, but it sure has hell wasn’t... *exciting*. Not the word I’d use. It was horrible, and we were lucky to catch the break we did. If we hadn’t stopped Brad Holloway when we did, who knows how many more women he might have killed?”

The final comment was in direct opposition to Pattie Horner’s argumentative views, and

clearly meant to challenge her. Just for effect, the female detective added another biting fact.

“And I’m just *glad* that when he died, the young women around him *stopped* dying.”

“You treat that as though it’s proof,” countered Pattie sharply, her fire rekindling, refusing to surrender.

“It is,” assured Dorothy flatly.

She didn’t like her professionalism being questioned, least of all when the result last year had been so decisive. She raised her head just slightly, so as to gaze down her nose at the ME.

“*That’s* how I know he was guilty. *That*, and the fact that we found the murder weapons and some of the victims’ hair under his house, his DNA in Juanita Diamond’s car, and he was threatening that lawyer woman when we caught him.”

“Touché,” nodded Pattie, clearly still disagreeing, and yet happy that Dorothy felt strongly enough to make her point so forcefully. Her next comment showed just how little she cared about being argued with. “Her name is Cheryl, by the way – Cheryl Coldstone. The *lawyer*, I mean.”

“I know the damn lawyer’s name!” spat Dorothy. “I ought to. I face her in court often enough.”

It was evident that the ME did not take offense nearly as easily as the female detective.

Fair enough, Pattie mused. After all, she *was* calling into question the two detectives’ professionalism. For Tony’s sake she would let the matter go, despite how strongly she felt that they were wrong – that they had *always* been wrong about Brad Holloway. But something in her tenacious personality could not allow it to pass without a parting shot.

“But they were still some *very pretty girls*...”

A *humph* was all the reply she got from Dorothy, while a small smile parted Tony’s lips. He knew very well that Pattie would have the last word – after all, *that* was her nature. Besides, he also knew that the ME enjoyed riling people. That too, was very much part of her nature. Still, it was definitely time for a change of subject.

“Exciting or not,” Tony speculated, “I’ve got a teenage daughter – and a rebellious one at that. The last thing I want to see is a repeat of last year.” He pinched the bridge of his nose as though suddenly suffering from a headache. “Keep the serial murderers away, I say.”

Pattie noticed again just how weary he looked, and could not help but comment.

“Did you wet the bed this morning, Tony? Not sleeping?”

He simply smirked, but could not hide the glassy look in his eyes. In the absence of a return quip, Pattie pressed a little harder.

“I thought you looked a little tired when you came in here. Problems?” To anyone familiar

with the acidic-tongued ME, it marked a definite break from her usual sharp, matter-of-fact manner, and showed her underlying respect for the older man.

Tony looked about as though someone might hear, then alternated his glances between the eyes of both his colleagues.

“Trouble at home,” he acknowledged honestly. “You could say things are... a *little* strained... or maybe *a lot*. My daughter acts like I come from another planet. And my wife...” He frowned. “Well, let’s just say I’m getting on *great* with my two boys.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” said Pattie honestly. “I mean, I’m *glad* you’re getting on well with your boys. What I mean is, I’m sorry you’re having trouble with your wife... and daughter.” She paused, then started again. “*Don’t* tell me this. I always thought you were the *one exception to the rule* about marriages around here.”

She was visibly moved. “Just how bad is it between you two?”

“*Pattie!*” Again Dorothy was irked by the ME’s forwardness.

Tony held up a restraining hand to show his partner that he didn’t mind being asked. He pursed his lips, then sighed.

“Bad enough. I dunno.” A long pause, then, “I think if I don’t find an answer soon, I might lose Cathy.” Another pause, and then the deepest truth, “And I sure don’t want that.”

“No. You sure *don’t!*” insisted Pattie.

Now she looked concerned. It was clearly something Pattie was not happy about. To see her uninteresting, balding, average looking hero fall from her lofty pedestal of marital success was more than she could bear. She searched for words, something rarely seen in the sharp ME.

“Nor do I. I mean, nor do *we*. Damn, Tony. Just how bad *is* this?”

He shrugged.

“Bad enough.” Something in his look and tone made Pattie’s heart sink.

“You wouldn’t leave, would you?” Pattie didn’t even know why she asked. It simply slipped out before she could stop it.

“No, it’s not that bad,” he answered, trying to laugh it off. Then he shrugged again. “Oh, I dunno. I just... *don’t know*. I can’t lie. To be honest... All I know is, I don’t want to lose my... family. I love my kids – and my wife – you know.”

“Everyone *knows that*, Tony,” asserted Pattie.

She watched Dorothy Shank to gauge her reaction to Tony’s revelation, and could see a certain level of shock and uneasiness in the female detective’s face. Either it was news to his partner, or Dorothy didn’t approve of Tony telling Pattie about it. Maybe it was a *partner thing*, the ME mused. She didn’t care. All she cared about at that moment was Tony’s marriage and his

state of mind.

“Shouldn’t we leave this?” Dorothy badgered.

Pattie ignored her.

“*Wow, Tony,*” she groaned. “Way to just drop a bomb on us. If there’s anything we can do...? Well, you can’t leave. That’s for sure.”

Tony nodded, and sensing the arrival of someone else in the room, he remained silent. The hushed secrecy of the moment was lost a few seconds later as their boss shuffled in behind the two detectives.

Chief Aiden Caldwell somehow remained in charge of the Greenrock Police Precinct despite the fact that he was overweight and had been ready for retirement for some years. It was assumed by most that the old man hadn’t retired simply because he *couldn’t* retire – and not because of money, but because he craved the sense of power too much. For now, he was a big figure in a small town, and that pleased him. Still, the years were weighing on his aging, robust frame, and it was evident that he would not be able to hold off the inevitable forever.

“What have you all got on the dead boy?” he demanded gruffly. In one hand the old man held a thin folder. “I’ve got maniac parents upstairs all trying to take each other apart, and they’ve already involved their lawyers. I’d like to squash this party before it gets started. That, or put ’em all in a room and let ’em slug it out. Well, what have we got?”

With that question, all hope of quizzing Tony further about his home life was lost to the anxious ME.



Pattie Hornet took her eyes off Chief Aiden Caldwell just long enough to read a document that was thrust before her by her lab assistant, Andrea Abbot.

Andrea was older than Pattie by several years, mature, and very much aware of the ME’s potentially sharp tongue. With intelligent green eyes, and sporting petit glasses, short, dark hair and a lab coat that made her look the part of the competent assistant that she was, Andrea did not say a word, choosing not to interrupt while her superiors completed their deliberations. With the required signature secured, the tall woman returned to her duties.

“Oh well,” snorted the old chief, pulling back the white sheet from over the face of the dead youth. “These kids get fast cars and booze. Sooner or later it’s gotta happen. It’s tragic, but it’s just stupidity. Nothing more.”

“I think we all agree on that,” noted Pattie Hornet, equally as cold in her appraisal of the situation, despite the lifeless, ashen, bruised face before her. “Now the families can fight over

whose kid was dumber than the other.”

Even Caldwell drew a breath at the sharpness of her comment, though in reality he agreed.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “but if it’s okay with you, I might not mention that sentiment to the parents.” Then he turned to his detectives.

“You two get this mess sorted out. Just check that there was nothing suspicious, and let the families battle it out in court. Our job is done.”

Tony nodded, his mind very much elsewhere. He was forced to concentrate a little harder a moment later as the chief added another request to their list of tasks. Opening the folder he toted, Caldwell showed Tony and Dorothy some papers and a photograph of a rather attractive young woman with long, flowing blonde hair and wide, brown eyes.

“Recognize her?” he asked.

“Yeah,” replied Dorothy. “Sandra Something-or-other. No, Stephanie. Channel 8 news. What about her?”

“She’s missing,” grated the old man. “*That’s* what. Her bosses have been all over me all day. They say *she’s the face of the evening news* – as if that’s supposed to make her more important than anyone else.”

Those present could read his dissatisfaction as he recited the Channel 8 people, verbatim.

“It’s either irate parents or manipulative TV executives today,” he growled. “She’s disappeared off the face of the planet, apparently. They’ve checked at her home, and with her workmates. No one knows where she is. They’re having a real hernia about it.”

He handed the file to Tony Fisher, who continued to study the photo of the rather attractive face staring back at him for several long seconds.

“There’s her address and some other details they gave us,” grumbled Caldwell. “These people are going to keep on harassing me until we find her, so go and *make sure* there’s nothing suspicious about it, you two. Make sure she’s not dead on her livingroom floor, or run off with some outa-town boyfriend.”

Tony thought suddenly of his own daughter, and a torrent of oppressive thoughts flooded back to him at the prospect of another missing, or worse – *dead* blonde. The very sight of such an attractive young woman – *with such fair hair* – and now missing made his blood chill.

As though he had read the detective’s thoughts, the old boss added dryly, “Heaven help us all if there’s another maniac going after women in Greenrock.”

Tony nodded, his face falling as the chief echoed his own thoughts perfectly. He forced himself to reply, just to satisfy his boss, and to ensure that Caldwell would leave.

“We’ll get right on it, Chief,” he said.

“Do that,” badgered the old man. “This department won’t survive something like that twice. Oh, and Tony?”

“Yeah, Chief?”

“These people are putting crap all over me on this. And *that stuff* flows downhill – if you get my drift.”

Tony nodded, the coarseness of the old man’s point causing him to smile.

With that, thankfully, Caldwell turned and left.



Dorothy Shank waited patiently as she watched Tony Fisher slip through the doorway and into the corridor beyond. Patricia Horner watched too, then flicked her eyes to Dorothy, unable to miss the fact that the detective had clearly waited until her partner had left before she would speak.

“So what was it you wanted to ask me?” invited Pattie.

Dorothy took one last look about the sterile mortuary, making sure that the ever-busy Andrea Abbot was not about to interrupt, or worse, *overhear*. When it was clear that the two women could speak openly, the detective took on a nervous, troubled look.

“I need your help,” she confessed. She stared intently into the ME’s eyes, riveting her, demanding her confidence. “I don’t know who else to turn to. And if you *do* help me, it *has* to stay strictly between us. Agreed?”

“Okay. Yeah, I guess,” agreed Pattie, amazed that Dorothy would include her in anything as important as *this* issue clearly was. “So what is it?”

Dorothy Shank took a long, deep breath, and then began to speak.

CHAPTER 3

Sydney Hill sat before a particularly large, ornate mirror suspended above her bedside dresser. She groomed and preened, pulling a brush in repeated cycles through her long, pale golden hair. Nowadays her face looked equally as pale as her flowing tresses, and moreover, there was no trace of happiness evident in the deepening lines and heavy makeup.

She was a once-glistening jewel, now jaded and uninspiring. Once the prize and pride of her husband, now she felt hollow and worthless, despite the opulence in which she lived. The luster had long gone from her sunken eyes – and her life.

Her sad eyes glistened, as though she might be about to weep, but she knew by now that there was little benefit in crying, and even less in doing it in front of her businessman husband, Bob. Inheritor of her mother's glorious assets, Sydney had always seen it as her duty and right to pass on her once ravishing natural beauty to her daughter, as though she had acted as some kind of temporary custodian of her family's exquisite looks. And so she had.

But Cassandra Hill was gone now. She was so sadly gone.

No. She had been taken.

It had been cruel and heartless, an act which Sydney knew she would never forget or forgive. It was not even as though she could try to find some kind of comfort in the thought that her lovely daughter had been killed accidentally.

No. It was not like that. Cassandra had been *stolen! Murdered!* It hurt to even think the word. And it hurt immeasurably more to recall the day when she and Bob had come home to find their precious, glorious daughter killed so brutally on the porch.

That filthy policeman! Animal! He had killed so many. Why?

And *why* did he have to take her precious Cassie? Cassandra had been her legacy to the world – the carrier of the family's wonderful tradition of beautiful women. Her *only* daughter... A young man from the paper had even photographed Cassie as a model. But that was just before she had... *died.*

No. She didn't *die.* She had been *murdered.*

Cut down in this very house. Left for her parents to find.

But Bob had refused to leave the mansion.

Refused! Why, Bob?

Why couldn't they leave? *Because it was their home, and nothing would ever force him out,* he had said. But she knew better. There was money to be made in Greenrock, and Bob was the wealthiest developer on the coast.

That's why he could not leave... would not leave!

Oh, the heartache. The terrible loss.

Sydney knew that each day spent in that house was driving her closer to a breakdown. She had slid *so* far down the slippery slope of depression that she could no longer remember when she felt even a trace of happiness. And *that stain* on the porch... They had tried to remove it – even hired professionals to do the job. And Bob said it was gone. But Sydney knew better.

That heartache would never be removed. Some stains would remain forever.

There was no freedom anymore. No happiness. No hope. In truth, there had been no hint of joy for Sydney Hill for a full year now.

“You gonna sit in front of that mirror doin’ that all day?” Bob grunted.

He used to be so kind, she thought. Bob had changed too...

It wasn’t that she had anything better to do; the maid had already done it all. It was that Sydney’s forlorn figure constantly reminded Bob that he had deserted her; living with her, and yet doing nothing to help her deal with life’s greatest tragedy. The woman was in her mid fifties, but she looked so much older now.

Since then, anyway...

He felt bitter. *As if anything he could say could help her. Or him.*

In the absence of a reply, Bob stood behind her, staring into her reflection, his eyes challenging and hard. For her part, Sydney returned his gaze, then went back to concentrating on her hair, and continued stroking it with the brush.

“Oh, *come on* woman,” he demanded, his tone still rather harsh. “What are you gonna do? Sit there *all day*?”

Still no reply. Then Bob noticed the glass on her dresser, with just a hint of color in the bottom.

“And you’ve been drinkin’ again too,” he growled.

It reeked of accusation, since it was common knowledge that she had retreated into the bottle since Cassandra’s death. Again she did not reply.

“*Damn*, woman,” he snarled. “Gettin’ drunk every day ain’t gonna help.”

He stared, waiting, desperate for a glimpse of the former queen he had married, a glimmer of hope. *Anything*. But there was nothing. Sydney had lost all reason to live.

In truth, they were equally lost.

“Well, not me,” he grumbled, his tone mixing accusation and condemnation. “You can sit here and wallow in your wine glass, Honey, but I’ve got work to do. I’m goin’ into town to sign off on that deal with Bruce Morgan.”

He hesitated, still secretly hoping.

I miss her too, but come on – give me something. Anything!

“You go build your condos, my love,” she finally replied.

It was a strange mix. Unlike him, she did not condemn, but neither could she pretend to be able to carry on with life as it once was. His business deals might change the Greenrock landscape – or the *world* for all she cared, but she could no longer be part of them. Her life had ceased to be what it once was the day she came home to a blood bath on the porch.

She could still remember the bloody footprints where Bob had picked up Cassie – *poor Cassie* – and carried her from the place where she had been slain.

Murdered. Taken...

“And you’ll stay here?” he said.

He waited again, still hoping for any small sign of hope. But there was nothing. Finally, after another half minute, he moved to the bedroom bar and poured himself a long, straight bourbon.

“You’re not going to drink and then drive, are you, Dear?” she asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “Don’t do that. If you lose your license...”

“I *won’t* lose my license,” he snapped, cutting her off.

“It’s just... I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to you, Bob, Dear,” she explained. It was the truth.

“Well, I’ve gotta take somethin’,” he grumbled. “Cause *you* sure ain’t helpin’.”

He took a long swallow. Then another.

“Please, Bob,” she pleaded, the first tears beginning to slip down her cheeks. “It’s just I’m having trouble... thinking about...”

“*Don’t say it, woman!*” he snapped back, desperate not to hear his daughter’s name in that sad, forlorn tone one more time. “Don’t say it. Just *don’t!*”

Another swallow. Then another. And then to refill the glass.

“*Damn it, Syd,*” he protested, mixing his tone between a reprimand and a supplication. “I *know* how it feels. Why do *you think* I work so hard? *I know* we don’t need the money. It’s not *that*. I do it to... take my mind off... *it...*” He couldn’t bring himself to say her name. “But we can’t go on... *mourning* every day. You gotta snap out of it.” A pause while he thought, then, “Please, come with me. Let’s go into town together. We haven’t done that for *so long*.”

“No,” she replied, unable to free herself. “No, thank you. I’ll just stay here and...”

“And wallow,” he snapped, cutting her off flatly, and pronouncing judgment at the same time. Another swallow, and then his tone was mean again. “Well, *you* can stay, but *I’m* going into town to have lunch, and then to do some serious business.”

With that he downed the remainder of the bourbon in his glass, then turned away and fell sprawling on the carpet.



Tony Fisher moved to stand close to Dorothy Shank, and the pair gazed through a doorway for some time at the pitiful sight of Sydney Hill slumped in a lounge chair in the next room.

The woman could barely stop crying long enough to speak, and when she did, her responses were short and barely understandable. She was defeated, heartbroken and totally lost.

Paramedics were preparing to escort her to the hospital, since it was evident that she could not be left alone.

Pattie Horner crouched a while longer over Bob Hill, who was still sprawled where he had first fallen, too heavy for his devastated wife to move. The fact that Bob was dead had been established some time earlier by Sydney Hill and others. Now remained the formality of checking whether his death was suspicious or not. When Pattie stood again to face the two detectives, her expression was blank and unmoved.

“Suspicious?” asked Tony.

“Hardly,” replied the ME flatly. “I won’t know for sure until I examine him, but at first glance it has all the hallmarks of a regular old heart attack. Probably just too much wine and caviar. Ask me again tomorrow.”

Tony nodded, then shot another glance in Sydney Hill’s direction.

“Always hard on the family. But this time it’s especially hard.”

“You could say that,” agreed Pattie, in a rare show of consideration. “I spoke to Missus Hill several times after that business with her daughter last year. We actually get on pretty well. I don’t think she has a lot of friends.”

Don’t unpurse, lips, Tony told himself. *Birds of a feather...*

By some miracle Pattie never picked up on the hint of a smile that threatened to crack Tony’s blank façade. He gave a *hmm* of agreement.

“Seems like money *can’t* buy you everything,” Pattie continued, oblivious to his thoughts.

Phew, thought Tony. Finally he could allow the irrepressible smile to turn up the edges of his lips.

“Yeah,” he agreed, thankful that his ME had not caught on to what he was really thinking. *Pattie would be a good one to diagnose a person with few or no friends,* he thought. “Sure looks that way.”

“First the daughter, now the husband. The woman’s got to be a mess,” Pattie added. She thought for a moment, then asked in an incredulous tone, “*What the hell* are they still doing living in the same house a year later? *I told her* she’d be better off out of here.”

“I dunno,” ventured Dorothy. “But I suspect old Bob was a bit hard to move.”

“Hmph.” Pattie shook her head as if to say it was a crazy situation. “Too busy building resorts and condos. He said in the paper that he was going to change the *whole Greenrock coast into something completely new*. Did you know that? *Old fool*. Like *any of that* mattered. And in the meantime, he’s too blind to see that his wife was going quietly crazy, living in the same house where her daughter was carved up. *That’s intelligent.*”

"I dunno about what Bob was doing," admitted Dorothy. "But you're right about moving. First Cassie Hill gets her throat cut – in this very house – and now Bob drops dead on the bedroom floor. Sydney'll be lucky if she doesn't end up in an institution. Maybe you should go and check on her."

"Yeah," agreed Tony with a sigh. "Maybe that's not such a bad idea. The paramedics look like they're having trouble moving her. We don't want *another* body. Besides, getting out of here might help keep her out of an institution."

"Living here after her only daughter was carved up like a Christmas turkey," persisted Pattie. "I'd say she already *was* in an institution. Wouldn't you?"

"Hmm," replied Dorothy. Perhaps not quite how she might have worded it, but still, she had to agree.

As the two detectives watched Pattie walk in the direction of Sydney Hill, Dorothy could not help but ponder how alike the two women were. The wealthy woman and the cold ME were poles apart in both lifestyle and years, and yet both were lonely, and both were removed from society in very real ways.

And then something else crossed the female detective's mind. Watching the pitiful sight of Sydney Hill crying over her dead husband, Dorothy could not help but blame it all on the events of a year prior.

Cassie Hill's murder had cost her parents dearly. Bob's dead body seemed to lie in silent testimony to the fact. Sydney's tears punctuated it. It was a depressing thought.

"Brad Holloway's legacy lives on," she mused dejectedly.

Tony made a doubtful face, his mind flashing to the missing newsgirl, Stephanie Stanley.

Another attractive young woman – missing. Would they find her dead too? Was Pattie right? Had the killer really been Brad Holloway? A hail of small doubts hammered on his mind, and on a conscience that was fast becoming a niggling burden. He commented without stopping to think of the consequences.

"Yeah. But seeing this house again, and knowing that the newsgirl is missing – I just hope it *really was* Holloway."

He regretted not having kept the thought to himself the very moment it was out. His words revealed his lurking feelings and fears, and he could not withdraw them. His partner reacted to his reservation instantly, and could not resist responding to it.

"Don't tell me Pattie's got *even you* starting to doubt it was Brad Holloway, Tony?" she prodded, clearly unhappy to think that he was wavering. "Listen, Partner. We *did not* shoot the wrong man for killing all those women. Dammit, Tony – he as-good-as admitted to it!"

Tony nodded, then sighed, ruing his slip.

“Sorry, it’s just having a missing *blonde* woman isn’t sitting real good with me. Let it go, Dot.”

“Well, you forget – *I* was at all those crime scenes too,” she insisted, badgering and challenging him. “And I still have nightmares about what that maniac did – and about how he *forced us* into a showdown. That cop *did* do it, Tony – no matter what Miss *I-should-stick-to-ME-work*, Pattie Hornet says.”

“It’s not just Pattie,” he admitted honestly. “It’s just... coming *here* again. And *another* missing woman. I dunno, Dot. Don’t you *ever* wonder if maybe, just *maybe*, we got it wrong? Finding the murder weapons under his cabin like that – it was just a bit *convenient*, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t,” she insisted flatly. “And I don’t think we got it wrong, either. When Brad Holloway died, the killings stopped. That’s *all* that matters. That’s all *I need* to know. And you’re starting to sound like that squawking parrot over there.”

She pointed to where Pattie Hornet was now hovering over the distraught Sydney Hill.

“No, I’m not,” Tony assured her. “I’m not *that* bad. It’s just that I’ve had lots of time to think. I’m with you. I think Holloway had all we needed to convict. He had motive and opportunity – not to mention we found the crossbow and knife at his cabin.”

“*And he’d had relations with at least two of the victims! And we found the last vic’s hair with the bow! And we found a mask with blood spatter from more than one vic on it!*” Dorothy looked intense as she whispered forcefully, making her point without drawing attention. “*And he forced us into gun play!*”

“I know that,” agreed Tony. Regardless of his admission, however, he still looked somewhat doubtful. “It’s just that I can’t help but agree with our abrupt ME about certain things. Despite the violence, those killings *did have* a slight... *feminine* touch to them. That’s all.”

“Listen, Tony,” whispered Dorothy, cautious to maintain a unified front with her partner, no matter how strongly she disagreed with him. “Poison – *that’s* feminine. Hiring a hit man – *that’s* feminine. Maybe even shooting someone in the back with a handgun. *Maybe!* But hunting prey in the woods with *a crossbow*, then *slitting their throats* like they were a deer or a pig – that’s *definitely male*. Sorry, but that’s criminal psychology 101, Tony. A *woman* didn’t kill those girls. A *man* did! *Bradley Holloway did!*”

Tony drew a long breath, then sighed, allowing them both time to relax.

“Saying it *harder or louder* won’t make it right,” he said, showing that he would not be forced to dispel his doubts, no matter how strongly his partner argued with him.

“Oh, *come on*, Tony...”

“Listen, Dot. I’m not saying we got it wrong. I’m just saying I have my fears. And a little bit of it is that we’ve now got a missing blonde reporter. So I guess we’d better hope Stephanie Stanley shows up *real soon*.”

“Yeah, well,” challenged Dorothy, seeing an opportunity to end the standoff. “Let’s make a deal, then. If Stephanie Stanley *does show up* alive and well, will you then agree that we got the right man last year for all those murders?”

“Can’t promise that,” he said, as diplomatically as he could.

Dorothy nodded, coming off the boil. The subject riled her more than she cared to admit, and she regretted it. Over the past year there had been bitterness with some officers after the shooting of a colleague, and subtle, callous comments had been whispered in hallways. Dorothy felt hurt. But even *she* had to wonder if her offence was not more the result of disagreeing with Pattie Hornet, than guilt over shooting a cop.

“Come on,” coerced Tony, changing the focus completely. “We need to have a look around. We’d better make it look like we at least *checked around*, just in case someone actually *did* do old Bob in.”

“Rather than taking the ME’s word for it, you mean?” Dorothy shot back dryly.

“Touché,” he conceded.

It was enough to derail Dorothy’s defensive attack. She cooled almost instantly, realizing that she was somewhat over-zealous in her defense. The strain of the past year had weighed on her in more ways than she cared to admit.

“Okay, let’s have a look then,” she agreed. “I suppose, there’s nothing like a few cadavers to liven proceedings up a bit.”

She spoke the words offhandedly, trying to sound casual. But it was too late – she had already reacted, and far too strongly. Still, she maintained the pointless ruse, and instead turned the spotlight on the very person who had raised the doubts in Tony’s mind in the first place.

“But I don’t think we need to investigate much here. We can leave *that* to Pattie. She makes a pretty good detective.”

“Ouch,” replied Tony. “I’ll bet our ME’s ears are burning.”

He smiled, and was glad when Dorothy did the same.



Tony took a long sip of coffee, cupping the mug in one hand as he gazed through a small wisp of steam to his partner in the seat opposite. He felt tired to the bone, and looked every bit as

bad as he felt.

“Still not sleeping?” Dorothy asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Nope,” he said. Then he shrugged – there was little to gain by keeping such an obvious secret. “Me and Cathy are still... not seeing eye to eye on a lot of things. We barely talk now. I just... don’t know what to do anymore.”

She nodded, looking thoughtful, and Tony knew she was about to venture somewhere he would rather she did not go.

“If you don’t mind me saying,” she began. “You’ve been a little cold to me lately. Sorry, but you have.” She reached out one hand and gently touched the back of his as she spoke the words.

It was not as bad as he expected, but still he decided to douse it. He withdrew his hand.

“Please, Dot,” he pleaded. “I’m okay. *Okay?*”

Now it was her turn to sigh.

“So you won’t even tell me what’s going on in your head?” she complained. “We’re partners, Tony.”

“What do you want me to say?” he asked, trying to head off a deep-and-meaningful he desperately didn’t want to face.

“Oh, come on,” she chided. “You *know* what I mean. You tell the ME more than you tell me – and she’s about as warm as a dead fish in an ice pool.”

He shrugged again, and tried once more to take solace from his beloved coffee.

“Like I said, what do you want me to say? I *do tell you*, Dot. You know I do. But you and I are... just too close. You gotta just let me sort this out.”

“We’re *too close?*” She looked hurt. “We’ve been partners a long time. Come on, Tony. You and I have seen all the... *nasty stuff* together, and we know all each other’s secrets, and you think we’re *too close* for you to tell me what’s happening?”

“Sorry,” he said. He looked so beaten that she drew a breath and desisted.

“Okay,” she finally conceded. “But at least tell me what’s happening before you tell *anyone else*. Can you at least do that?”

He nodded, but said nothing. It was clear that a moment’s peace was all he wanted. A lonely, distant awkwardness ensued, and then, unable to bear the uneasy silence, Dorothy turned her attention back to their work.

“Okay,” she said. “I won’t ruin your cup of Molly’s coffee. So, do you think we should be helping Ed and Mike with their robbery thing?”

“Oh, I’d just *love* to be doing that,” he replied with thinly veiled cynicism. In his drained

state, it was abundantly clear that he had no desire to take on anything he didn't need to. "Only if they ask us to."

It was so unlike him, Dorothy thought. Then she thought about her comment a few seconds earlier. No, they didn't really know ALL each other's secrets. If they did, Tony might not be pleased at all.

And then it struck her – he was *so distant now*. The past year had changed him. His marital troubles had changed him too. Nothing was the same anymore. The thought struck her with force, chilling her so much that even Molly's precious cup could not derail the icy blast.

Tony was so distant... If she was not so certain, *he could be responsible for that Channel 8 girl's disappearance?* Disappearing as often as he did, not sleeping at nights... If she wasn't so sure, even *he could be a serial killer...*

But then, *she had her own dark secrets...*



"You look like crap," Pattie said.

"Thanks," he quipped. "That's very touching."

"I mean it," she insisted. "You going to let me give you something to help you sleep, or are you just going to keep on showing up here looking like a zombie, Tony?"

He nodded in surrender, but it was only a half-hearted acquiescence.

"What can you tell me about our patient?" he asked.

On the table before them was Bob Hill, not looking his best. His chest and mid-section lay wide open, with various organs having been removed, checked and weighed. A large flap of skin and tissue had been folded back to rest over one shoulder and part of his face, and he looked decidedly empty.

"Not sure Bob would have approved of this," Tony noted, making light of the businessman's exposed state. Both the smell of open flesh and the sight of it were almost too much for him, having just eaten as he had, and he found that a little levity helped him deal with the unpleasantness.

"I'm sure he wouldn't," agreed the ME. "He was an overweight, overindulged, over-alcoholized, wealthy slob speeding his way to an early grave. And now he's nearly there. If it wasn't his heart, it would have been a stroke eventually, or his liver, or something else. Had to happen. Bob just sped it up, that's all."

"That's your medical verdict, Doctor?" Tony asked.

"It's my opinion and my conclusion," she retorted. "My finding is going to be myocardial

infarction. The man lived like a pig. *A lazy pig.*”

“He had a lot to bear,” Tony noted in the man’s defense.

“Touché,” she acknowledged.

He watched with morbid curiosity as Pattie poked something red and ugly, and he was amazed at how distant and unmoved she was by the open chasm of her patient’s gaping, empty chest and abdomen.

“You happen to know how Sydney’s doing?” he asked, keen for *any* distraction.

“Yeah,” Pattie replied flippantly. She dropped something Tony didn’t recognize on a scale. “She’s a head case, but she’ll be okay. When I talked to her the other night, she told me the first thing she’s going to do is get out of that house. Get away from Cassie... You know.”

“I know,” he nodded. “Bravo for her.”

“I’ll say,” Pattie shot back. “Should have ditched this overfed slob a year ago – when he *first refused* to let her leave. I mean, her only kid was butchered on the porch. You’d think the man would have let her go, wouldn’t you?”

“Yep,” Tony agreed. “But Cassie was *his* daughter too. Maybe he just found it easier to deal with by staying. I dunno.”

“No,” she countered, refusing as usual to yield. “He was just in it for the money. Typical Bob. Syd told me so. He was going to change the whole of Greenrock – just for the almighty dollar. She says *that’s* why he stayed in that house. Too much money invested. He’d spent a fortune on that place, and he wasn’t going to leave for anything – *or anyone*. Not even when his wife begged him. I’ve got no sympathy for him. She might be a bit of an airhead, but she seems like a decent enough person to me. I just hope she can get away and be happy now.”

Tony shook his head, amazed as much by Pattie’s total indifference to Bob’s open mid-section, as by her insensitive appraisal of his motive for staying on in the home his daughter had been murdered in. And all this, it seemed, from a short conversation with Sydney Hill.

Still, he knew from experience that there was no point in arguing with Pattie Hornet, and he decided instead to make a subtle, sarcastic joke.

“Sydney’s lucky to have someone like you in her corner,” he said, and he waited for the rebuke.

“You bet she is,” Pattie shot back, but no reprimand was forthcoming.

In her usual style, the antisocial ME either did not catch on to his mockery, or did not think it warranted a reply. In reality, Tony suspected, Pattie considered his statement a true assessment of the situation.

At that moment Pattie’s assistant, Andrea Abbot approached the horizontal, wide-open form

of Bob Hill. A pair of plastic glasses shielded her eyes from the risk of splatter, and her lab coat bore the evidence of having assisted in the earlier dissection of the body. Blood spots and small traces of what Tony knew had to be human matter spotted her clean, white coat, and it all seemed out of place on such an attractive woman.

Gazing down at the various smears of blood and tissue, Tony quipped cautiously, "My, my. You *do* look... *lovely* today, Miss Abbot."

Andrea grinned, glancing down in recognition of the stains.

"Well, I do try to look my best, Detective Fisher," she aptly replied.

Though it was harmless banter, Tony could not miss how Pattie Hornet instantly shot stern glances at both of them, as if to chide them for fraternizing, though *that* was clearly not the case. Despite the innocence of the comments, she snapped at her underling.

"Haven't you got something you can do?" she demanded.

"Not really," Andrea answered, unfazed by the over-reaction. Andrea had never had eyes for the married, balding Tony Fisher, and she never would. He was just a nice man who liked to joke with her, and she would not be bullied into ignoring him. Not even by her boss.

Pattie sent her an icy glare, then went back to pointing into Bob Hill's partially empty cavity, as if Tony might find something interesting there. He barely looked.

"Liver had substantial sclerosis too," she explained. "Like I said, if his heart didn't get him, *something* would have. It was only ever a question of time. Looks open and shut to me, but we took all the usual tests just the same. I'll personally prepare the bloods for the lab to see if there was anything in his system – *besides cholesterol and booze*, that is."

"Oh, I already did that," remarked Andrea offhandedly, as though it should have been expected.

"*You did what?*" demanded Pattie tersely. She looked instantly annoyed.

"You were busy, so I labeled and bagged them," Andrea explained matter-of-fact. "I knew if they were left too long it could affect the results, so I got them ready. I walked them down earlier. Figured you'd be happy to have them gone."

Pattie *did* mind. She maintained an icy stare, and Andrea looked somewhat surprised by the reaction, but equally prepared to ignore her supervisor's displeasure. She was used to Pattie's sharp tongue and over-reactions, and she refused to be moved.

"As long as the chain of evidence isn't broken," Andrea protested, "there's no harm done. If there really *was* something in the blood, sometimes it pays to get it to the lab before the chemicals break down..."

"*I know how it works!*" snapped Pattie. "It's just that *I'm* signing off on Mister Hill's death,

and I don't want some hot-shot lawyer coming up to me in court and asking whether it was *me* who bagged the evidence. You understand, Andrea?"

Andrea glared back defiantly, refusing to be intimidated over something that would have been normal practice on any other day. Instead, she fired a biting quip of her own, refusing to surrender to intimidation.

"Oh, very sorry. I thought some of your *best friends* were lawyers."

Her comment turned the subject around in a moment, and Tony had to admire the woman's nerve.

"Oh, and *just what* do you mean by that?" There was ice in Pattie's tone.

"Oh, nothing. I just..."

"If you're trying to imply something about my friendship with the Coldstones, *don't*. I just happen to like them, that's all. They're good people." Pattie shot the words like bullets, though they had little effect on her brazen assistant.

"They're lawyers for the defense – the very people we get hauled over the coals by, every time we go into court to give evidence," Andrea countered. "They're the enemy. But you seem to get on alright with them. So I suppose I'm just a bit surprised you'd be too worried about a lawyer taking you apart on the stand..."

"They're *professionals* – *just like us*," Pattie snapped back vehemently. "Just doing their job – just like *we do*. And it just so happens they do it very well. Better than *some*, I might venture. And what happens in court, happens *in court*. But my time off the job is *my own*. And there's no need for any of us to take things personally. I happen to admire them for their dedication. And *you* shouldn't go being critical of what you don't understand, thank you very much."

"Okay," conceded Andrea, aware that she had no right to criticize her boss for her choice of friends, but nonetheless refusing to back down. In any event, she refused to be intimidated over the matter that had triggered their small spat in the first place. "But I still don't know what you're worried about – with the blood thing. In any case, it's not like it's the *first time* I've done the bloods for you."

"I just don't like being... *compromised*," Pattie qualified. "*Or criticized*. Mind your place, if you don't mind."

With her displeasure made known, the fire went out in her eyes as quickly as it had ignited. She glanced down, then up again.

"Just leave the bloods to me unless I tell you. Okay?"

"Okay," Andrea agreed. "No big deal."

Tony wanted to tell Andrea that Cheryl Coldstone had changed significantly since she had asked Christ into her life the previous year – and indeed, that he had the privilege of leading her to the savior. But he couldn't help but feel this might not be the best time to share such a revelation with her.

The assistant looked annoyed, and turned away to find a task that didn't involve being in close proximity to her boss. Deep down, though, she had to acknowledge that the ME was right. No matter how much care they took with autopsies and evidence, *lawyers always had a way* of discrediting them in court.

Well, to be fair, Andrea reconsidered, Cheryl Coldstone had been much fairer and much less nasty since that awful murder spree the previous year.

CHAPTER 4

Officer Jillian Jackson looked cautiously about, her right hand resting in a nervous state of readiness on the butt of her service automatic. She had never seen a dead body on the job before, let alone a particularly bloody one, and one which was clearly the result of murder. She thought back to basic training, pondering what to do next.

Things had seemed so much safer and easier when she'd been forced to visit the morgue to have the opportunity to see a body.

"Called for backup," she whispered aloud, trying to fend off the natural apprehension that came with being the first officer on the scene. "Secured the scene... Don't touch anything... Remember – *never* touch anything!"

That rule was planted firmly in her mind. She looked about, always afraid that whoever had attacked the man on the ground might come back to attack her too. But the warehouse was quiet.

Deathly quiet.

"Man, I hate this," Jill mused, always whispering aloud in an effort to defuse her own fear. "How come the rookie had to find this? Why couldn't I be out handing out tickets? This is gross."

She stared down at the victim for confirmation.

Yep, still gross.

And then she found something strange.

Vincent Bourke lay sprawled on the cold concrete. His arms and legs had the look of a man who had fallen while running, splayed out wildly, but from the large pool of blood about his body

it was clear that his final moments had been spent doing anything but running.

He looked pale, his eyes half closed and staring at nothing. The blood about his body was still wet, indicating that he had been attacked recently, but Officer Jackson had no way of knowing just how long ago. All she felt certain of was that he was well and truly dead.

Very dead.

But it was strange. *Yes, very strange*, she mused.

Suddenly the young rookie realized that despite the obvious implications of such a bloody body at the old abandoned steel works, there was a certain excitement to it. The last thing Jill had expected as she dressed for work that morning was to find a body – let alone a *murder* victim.

Murder. Wow.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you committed suicide?” she asked him, trying to make light of the situation. “Nope. I suppose the half-dozen holes in your chest would make that kind of hard.”

Vincent Bourke did not answer. Nor did Jill expect him to.

Jill Jackson flinched when she first heard the rapid approach of a car. She stood erect and moved to the open door of the warehouse to gain a better view of the speeding vehicle, then groaned aloud as she recognized both it and its driver. She waited while the lone driver appraised the situation, then retrieved a case from the rear of the car.

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” Jill said nervously as the first arrival viewed the scene. The nervousness in the young cop was easy to see, and the truth was that she was far from happy to see this newest arrival – but at least it meant *another human presence*. She asked hopefully, “Where’s the cavalry?”

Pattie Hornet snorted, but did not bother to answer as she strode briskly inside the warehouse, then looked about.

“Did you touch anything?” she demanded curtly.

“Not a thing,” assured Jill. “Not even the body.”

Pattie’s eyes flashed from the bloody form of the victim to the cop several times, a look of distaste quickly beginning to dawn. “Yeah, but you *did* think to check that he was *actually dead* – didn’t you?”

Jill Jackson swallowed, her fear abundantly evident. “I didn’t want...”

“Stupid girl,” snapped Pattie.

She knew instantly that Vinney Bourke was dead, but that was no reason to let this rookie off the hook. She didn’t wait for an explanation, but slipped on gloves and shoe protectors and quickly moved to the man’s side.

“I’m sorry,” gushed the young cop. “I just...”

“You just keep watch – *outside*,” snapped Pattie. “And don’t let anyone else in here unless they have a badge on. Can you do *that* right?”

Jill gasped a long breath, feeling both hurt and foolish.

How could she have overlooked such a basic thing as checking for a pulse? Then an awful thought struck her. *What if the man was actually still alive?* It was too much to contemplate. That would mean that she had left him lying in a pool of his own blood for a quarter of an hour while she waited for backup. She had been *so* excited – and he had looked *so* dead... *Oh, no...*

Surely he was dead!

Jill moved back to the open doorway of the warehouse as she had been so tersely directed to do, and her eyes turned back to watch as Pattie Hornet checked the man’s vitals. When the ME made no movement to show that any haste was warranted, the young cop breathed a long sigh of relief, cupping her face in her hands.

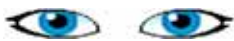
How could she have done that? It was so stupid!

A brief glance from Pattie confirmed what Jill had already concluded; the man was indeed, dead. But the icy stare also caused the young officer to divert her gaze once more. She felt inept and hopeless. *What would her superiors say? For that matter, did the abrupt ME even have the right to dictate orders or to ridicule her like that?* Either way, Jill had little doubt that the acid-tongued Patricia Hornet would waste no time in letting her superiors know of her blunder.

“Girl, you’re so *stupid!*” she cursed herself quietly.

With teary eyes she stared up the narrow sealed road, still damp with morning dew, to where a wailing siren and flashing red and blue lights heralded the approach of the very superiors who she feared would berate her.

Jill turned and strode outside once more, leaving Pattie to do her work, and preparing herself to face the music.



“What have we got?” asked Tony, still studying the fallen figure of Vincent Bourke.

“Vinney Bourke,” came the hoarse reply. “Looks like Vinney finally got his come-up-in’s.”

Detective Ed Brand moved from staring at the bloody body on the floor to where Tony had positioned himself, safely away from the immediate scene. Ed was five years Tony’s junior, with a healthy head of curly, sandy hair and a rugged face. Not only did he have more hair, but he was taller too, and didn’t need to battle to keep his weight down like his senior colleague, something which Tony envied the slightly younger man. Ed was a good cop, though, Tony knew, and he

was happy to see him in charge of the scene.

“Yeah, well, had to happen sometime when you get into as much trouble as Vinney,” agreed Tony. “Twenty-five knife wounds to the back and no weapon on the scene, but we’ll still rule it as suicide. Sounds good enough for Vinney to me. Who called it in?”

“Couple of kids out riding their bikes,” Ed answered, nodding to where two young boys were busy speaking with another suited detective. “They got a bit more than they expected, coming on to a disused site like this.”

“So did Vinney,” noted Tony.

“Yeah, but Vinney probably *deserved it*,” came the dry reply, and both men made a face that said it had to happen eventually.

“No *probably* about it,” Tony mused. “Live by the gun, die by it. So, what do you make of it, Ed?”

“Drug deal gone wrong,” replied Ed simply. “We found a small amount of white power on the ground over there – probably where a bag got dropped.” He pointed with a pen to where a numbered, inverted plastic ‘V’ marked the place. “Maybe cocaine. Lab’ll tell us soon enough. But with Vinney, I think it’s a given.”

“I agree,” Tony nodded. “I’m surprised someone didn’t feed him some of his own stuff a long time ago.”

“Jill Jackson was the first cop on scene,” Ed went on. “Then the ME. Then me and Mike.”

“I’d like to talk with Pattie, if you don’t mind,” explained Tony, both men well aware that he outranked his friend, even though that the case was already firmly in Ed’s hands. “After that, it’s all yours. I’ve got enough on my plate.”

“No sweat,” replied Ed. He glanced down at the town’s most infamous drug dealer, then added cynically, “Meanwhile, I’ll try to keep an open mind as to why this might have happened to Vinney.”

“You do that.”

Tony smiled, almost as certain as his colleague as to the reason why Vincent Bourke might have met his death. Still, he trusted Ed, and Mike too, for that matter. There seemed little reason to insult his colleagues by butting in where he wasn’t needed. Instead, he moved to where Pattie Hornet was standing, clearly having done her job and now preparing to leave the crime scene.

“Morning, Pattie.”

“Tony,” she replied grumpily, turning to face him square on. She held her bag before her, very much ready to leave, and she looked more than a little frustrated.

“What have you got for me?” Tony asked.

“One dumb cop,” she shot back, and with that thought, any intention of answering his question was immediately derailed. Her face was stern and her tone sharp as she launched into a stinging, albeit hushed attack on the young rookie, Jillian Jackson.

“*Can you believe it, Tony? That silly girl didn’t even stop to check the vic was actually dead! What the hell’s the matter with a girl like that? She saw the blood and immediately assumed he was dead! She’s got no brains! Didn’t even check the man’s vitals. You should have seen the look on her face when I asked her if she had checked for a pulse...*”

“I’ll see that she’s dealt with appropriately,” Tony promised, doing his best to placate his valued, albeit prickly colleague.

“*Stupid girl!*” insisted Pattie, determined to make her point. “You make *sure you do*, Tony. She could have left the vic to die. Young fool!”

“The body, Pattie,” insisted Tony, diplomatic, but forceful enough to draw her away from her tirade. “Vinney? What have you got for me on Vinney?”

Pattie had the final word, so to speak, although silently. She maintained her gaze upon the nervous, young cop for a full two seconds before finally meeting Tony’s gaze once more. Then she shook her head as though trying to ward off an annoying mosquito.

“Best I can tell, he died of six stab wounds to the upper abdominal area, directed up into his chest. No doubt lacerated his heart or lungs, or both. He bled out and died pretty quick, right where he fell. I’ll be able to tell you more later, of course. But for now, I’d say you’re looking for a long, narrow-bladed knife and a mean killer.”

She glanced again at the young, blonde cop, unable to forget her contempt.

“Time of death?” asked Tony. Again Pattie was forced to tear her eyes off Jillian Jackson as she continued to show her disdain.

“Three hours, maybe four. Liver temp is a bit off due to the exposed condition of the body and the cold morning air.”

Tony nodded and waited until their eyes met.

“So, what you’re telling me is that Officer Jackson didn’t have anything to do with Vinney Bourke’s death?”

Pattie’s eyes narrowed to form thin slits through which her annoyance could be better projected.

“You and I both know that’s not the point, Tony,” she insisted sharply.

“I know. I know,” he acknowledged, “but I’m asking you for a favor this time, Pattie. *Please*. She’s just young. Can you just keep it between us, and let *me* deal with her? *Please?*”

“She’s incompetent...” Pattie’s bitter tirade died prematurely as she saw the tenderness in

Tony Fisher's face. He was tired again, looking drawn and close to despair.

"Please, Pattie," he insisted. "You could harm her career. For me, please..."

"Tony, are you okay?" Her tense gaze and concern cut right to the heart of what, to Pattie at least, was a much more pressing question.

Tony sighed long and loud, his eyes flitting about to make sure no one could hear him.

"I'm fine," he lied.

"No, you're not," she insisted. A moment of silence passed between them, as all the wind was purged from her sails. When she spoke again, Pattie was caring and concerned, a different person from the vehement attacker of a minute earlier.

"Okay," she said. "For *you*, I won't say anything. I'll just let it go." Then to the far more pressing issue. "You having more trouble at home?"

"Yeah," he said honestly, nodding.

But it was clear he would not be drawn any further. Instead, he tried to explain his position with regard to the young cop, despite Pattie's assurance that she would not make an official complaint. Tony nodded toward Jillian Jackson.

"I've got a wayward, teenage daughter, Pattie. And sometimes they just need a break, you know."

"I already told you I'd drop it," she reminded him. "And I will. But I'm more worried about you. You look like you haven't slept all night."

"Pretty close," he admitted.

"Come and see me in the lab," she coaxed. "I'll give you something. *Okay?*"

"I don't want anything..."

He gave it up, then nodded. It would be easier to agree than to argue. Besides, Pattie would never know what he took and what he didn't. Nor would she know where *his head* had been that night, and he knew *that* was for the best.

"Where's that partner of yours?" Pattie asked accusingly. "Why isn't she here helping you?"

"Oh, Dot's just late," he explained, trying to douse another potential fire before it got started. "Called me and said she was sick. She'll be here soon enough. Besides, I'm not taking this one. I'm gonna let Ed and Mike handle it. I've got a much cushier job to look into."

"Good for you," Pattie encouraged, and she looked genuinely relieved, though now she seemed to be pouting over the fact that Dorothy Shank was not with her partner when he looked so desperately tired. She repeated her invitation for good measure.

"Tony, come see me. Please. I'll give you something."

He nodded.

“I will, Pattie. I will.”

True to form, and promise or not, Pattie still found it impossible to leave the scene without restating her distaste for the actions of the young rookie.

“You know, Tony – I’m no legal expert, but I’m fairly sure that leaving a victim – *any victim* – to die without checking his vitals, is some form of violation of his rights. Don’t you agree?” she badgered. She paused, then added for effect, “I think his lawyers would have loved that one.”

It was her way of assuring him that despite her vehemence, she would honor her promise to let the matter go.

Tony simply nodded again, then tried to make light of it.

“Well, you might be right. Paul and Cheryl Coldstone have almost *always* managed to get this little slimebag off, but somehow I don’t think *even they* could have helped Vinney much by the time Officer Jackson found him.”

Pattie nodded, and for the first time, a hint of a smile softened the features of her business-like face.

“You come see me, you hear?”

“I promise,” he said.



Investigating a missing person certainly seemed to be the easier task.

After arriving an hour late, Dorothy Shank joined Tony in checking the missing newsgirl’s apartment, and then on a tour of Channel 8, which basically amounted to a pleasant drive and an easy chat with several of Stephanie Stanley’s colleagues. It did the detectives good to get out of the precinct building, and both were soon feeling somewhat better.

For the most part there seemed little to cause any suspicion of foul play in Stephanie Stanley’s disappearance. Her apartment was undisturbed, with no sign of a struggle, or that anything was missing.

The detectives knew that normally there would never be an investigation so soon after someone had been declared missing, but because of her employer’s ability to broadcast negative publicity about the police if they were seen to be less than serious in their efforts to locate the young woman, an effort had to be made.

Besides, as Tony pointed out, there just might be something to it.

The events of a year earlier still weighed heavily on his mind.



“So, what did you do once you got back to the marina?”

Andrew Mallaby appeared reasonably relaxed as he recalled the events of his recent sail-date with Stephanie Stanley. He interlocked his fingers on the desk before him, not bothering to make eye contact with either Tony Fisher or Dorothy Shank as he thought.

Perhaps it was the easy way Tony had asked the question, Dorothy mused.

Certainly this man’s time with Stephanie Stanley made him a prime suspect in her unexpected disappearance, but so far there was no proof that she had met with foul play. Or maybe it was just that he really was innocent of any wrongdoing. Dorothy found him difficult to read.

“We arrived back at the marina at about... five, maybe,” Andrew answered. “And since it was the one day of the week Steph didn’t have to go on air, we decided to have another bottle of wine. We figured we’d get a taxi later, so it didn’t seem to matter. It was harmless.”

Mallaby was tall – *very tall*, Dorothy thought. At thirty years of age, he was basically a wall of muscle, though not so disciplined that he looked like a professional athlete. With a heavy frame and a healthy head of thick, dark hair, he looked fit and rather handsome. His dark eyes showed no sign of fear, no matter how hard Dorothy tried to scrutinize him, and even her insinuations of suspicion made no apparent impact. On the contrary, he appeared to be genuinely fond of the missing woman, and seemed suitably concerned about her well-being.

“How harmless?” asked Tony, his tone becoming more demanding. “I mean, a pretty girl like that – out on the water all day. I think you can see our concern.”

“I can,” Andrew Mallaby agreed. “Or I *could*. If you were right. But there had to be *a dozen people* on the dock who saw us come in. There were people watching while we tied up too. And besides, Steph and I are *friends*. We *work* together. I’m her cameraman, for crying out loud. I had her out on my boat all day – from nine in the morning. I already told you we had sex – *okay*? But if I wanted to hurt her, I could have done it at any time. *Out in the water*. But I didn’t – I swear.”

“I didn’t actually say you did,” noted Tony.

“You thought it,” he countered. “And besides, you may as well have said it. I’m telling you, Detective. I can see how you might think I had something to do with Stephanie... *going missing* like this – but I swear to you, I didn’t. I’m just as shocked as you. And in any case, you *do realize* she’s not due back yet, so she could just... *pop back up* at any time?”

“We know,” assured Dorothy. “But we still have to check.”

“So, she just *disappeared* – right after a nice day and a bottle of wine. That’s what you’re asking us to believe?” Tony allowed the tone of his voice to become more pressing.

“Yeah, that’s *exactly* what I’m telling you,” Andrew protested, and for the first time there was a hint of anxiety in his reply. He sounded particularly keen to be heard. “I don’t get it, either. We had a good day. A *really good day*, if you get my drift.”

“We *get that*,” said Dorothy.

“And then, all of a sudden, I go to get us another bottle from the liquor store – just a block away, and when I come back she’s gone. I mean, that sounds strange, I know. But listen. Steph’s a bit like that. She already told me she was getting worried about the time, and she’s the sort of girl who might just... *go* – if you know what I mean.”

“Just up and leave after a day like that?” Dorothy asked, frowning.

“Yeah,” he nodded energetically. “No, really. I know it sounds strange, but she *really is like that*. She can be a bit... *impulsive*, I suppose. Ask the people we work with. If Steph thinks she’s putting her job in danger, or it’s time to go – for *any reason*, she’ll just... *go*. And she did! I was surprised as you, but it’s the truth. I *swear!*”

“We already *did* ask, Mister Mallaby,” Tony assured him. “We know she can be a bit... protective, of her job. So tell us, did *you* give her any reason to be... concerned about being with you?”

“Hey? Hardly!” he shot back, shrugging. “I’m her cameraman, not a rival reporter. Steph *knows* she hasn’t got anything to fear from me. And after the day *we had* together, she knew she had absolutely *nothing* to fear.”

Dorothy rolled her eyes, slightly jealous.

“Look,” Andrew insisted vehemently. “I swear I didn’t touch her. Well, not if she didn’t want me to, I mean. It’s just in her nature. Steph knows what she wants, and she just *goes after it*. That’s all. And I think that’s what happened. For some reason she decided it was time to go, and she just went. Look, if a good story walked by, she’d just grab a camera and go after it herself – without ever a word to anybody!

“She took her purse, her towel, her clothes – the lot. No note, no ‘good bye’ – *nothing*. I know you’ve got to look at me, Detectives, but I’m telling you, I *truly don’t know* why she left in such a hurry. I just know that sort of stuff’s in her nature.”

“What did you do when you found she was gone?”

“I called her cell. And I called her apartment. No answer.” Andrew Mallaby rubbed his dark hair back from his brow, looking perplexed. “I left messages. That would have been about... maybe six, and again at seven. I mean... you don’t know what to think, do you? At first

I figured she just got cold feet – you know, having a fling with a co-worker and all. But it's not like she couldn't have said something and *then* left. I'm as much in the dark as you."

"And you can't think of anywhere she might have gone?" Dorothy asked again.

"No, I can't. *Honest*," he replied without hesitation. "Otherwise I'd have called her. But I can guarantee you at least a dozen people had to see us when we arrived back at the marina. Mmm..."

"Mmm, what?"

"Well, I did just realize that it was a whole lot quieter on the dock when I went to get the extra bottle of wine," he explained, only just remembering it. "Like I said, lots of people must have seen us come in, but I'll admit, there was hardly anyone around by the time I went to the liquor store."

"Any objection to us taking a look at your boat?" Tony asked, his tone resuming a less threatening measure. It seemed, at least for the moment, that he might believe Mallaby's story.

"No, I suppose not," he agreed. "It's just..."

"Just what?" Dorothy prodded.

"It's just that I left Steph alone, and I was gone from my boat for about... twenty minutes or so, I guess – while I got the extra bottle of wine."

"So?"

"So, let's just say that the cabin door and the hatches were all open the whole time. They were still open when I got back. And by then, Steph wasn't there. So, I suppose *anything* could have been... *tossed in* during that time – if you get my drift. There could be... *stuff* in there that isn't mine, if you know what I mean."

"Mister Mallaby, we have no interest in any drugs that might be found onboard your boat," Dorothy assured him. "Unless, of course, you've got so much that we might think you were trafficking."

"No. Absolutely not," he replied, a tiny smile of relief turning up the corners of his mouth. So relieved was he that he almost started to laugh. "But if there *was anything*, then it wouldn't necessarily be mine. You get what I mean, hey?"

"You think this is funny, Andrew?" Tony asked.

"Hell, no, Detective. I'm not laughing. But it's my boat, and my stash is my stash." Andrew Mallaby shook his head and put on a more serious face, but it was too late.

"This is no joke," shot back the male detective's response, now more forceful than before. "Do you not realize that this girl – who *you say* is your friend, is missing? Don't you realize how that could implicate *you* if we find that anything *has* happened to her?"

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” he apologized. “Wrong time to make light of it.”

“Too right it’s the wrong time,” Tony insisted. “Let me be clear, *Andrew*. We don’t care about your drugs – not this time, anyway. We care about a missing young woman, and we expect you to give nothing less than straight, serious answers. Okay?”

As Dorothy Shank viewed the handsome cameraman, she could easily see why the young newsreader had been attracted to him. But then, Stephanie was attractive too. Little wonder the pair had ended up together.

With a mind darkened by her very profession, and with a few of her own dark secrets always present in the back of her mind, Dorothy could think of a number of reasons why the pretty Stephanie Stanley could easily have become an *anchor* of a very different kind. She couldn’t help but air the thought.

“You’d best hope we don’t find this *anchor* of yours at the bottom of the marina, Mister Mallaby,” she pointed out, watching carefully for his reaction. “If we do, drugs on board your boat are going to be the least of your problems.”

Mallaby didn’t show even a trace of guilt.

Fear, but not guilt.

And as Dorothy watched the cameraman’s cavalier demeanor, she could not help but ponder whether Andrew Mallaby really *ever was* a true friend of the missing newsgirl. Stephanie Stanley was clearly the fantasy of Andrew Mallaby, and fantasies could lead to uncharacteristic behavior – even in the most stable of people.

This was something Dorothy knew from bitter, personal experience.

More than once.



As Detectives Ed Brand and Mike Woodruff strode from the interview room next door to where Tony and Dorothy had questioned Andrew Mallaby, Ed called out, keen to catch their attention.

“Hey, Tony,” Ed called, scurrying along the corridor so as not to allow his senior colleague to escape. “You gotta hear this.”

Tony and Dorothy waited as the detective explained how they had just interviewed Mick Rose, a known associate of Vinney Bourke. And while Mick Rose had an ironclad alibi for his whereabouts at the time of Vinney’s murder, the interview had not been unfruitful.

“This Rose character is almost as big a grub as Vinney was,” Ed explained, shaking his head to make his point. “An absolute pig.”

“The tattooed guy?” Dorothy noted. “Yeah, we’ve met. And you’re right. What of it?”

“Well, it seems Vinney and our Mister Rose were pretty close,” answered Ed. “Watched each other’s backs, so to speak.”

“Obviously not close enough,” noted Dorothy.

“So, what’s your point?” asked Tony, keen to know.

“Just this,” replied the detective, his face twisting as if to say that it was serious. “Rose was a bit nervous about implicating himself in what he knew of Vinney’s business dealings, but he *did* give us one little gem. Vinney was packing a pair of .22 revolvers, and that’s not the worst of it.

“According to Mick Rose, Vinney had recently fitted *one of them* with a silencer. Took them with him every time he did a deal. Always tucked them in the back of his belt. It was his way of protecting himself, apparently. Only brought them out on drug deals, and said he didn’t care if the cops found out or not. Said he’d run the risk, ’cause he’d become afraid of a drug deal going south.”

“You think Mick Rose is telling the truth?” asked Tony.

Ed shrugged and tilted his head to one side.

“Well, he doesn’t have a lot to gain by lying about it.”

“How the hell did anyone get to stab Vinney Bourke so many times if he was packing?” asked Dorothy.

“Sometimes the extra length of the silencer makes it hard to get it out,” noted Tony. “Maybe Vinney trusted the guy. Who knows? Maybe he was just too slow. More to the point, where are the guns now?”

“I dunno,” Ed answered. “But I think it’s safe to say we have a killer on the street who’s now armed with something more serious than the knife he used to kill Vinney.”

“Great. Two guns, and one of them’s a got a silencer,” agreed Tony. He sighed, disturbed by the news. “Stay on it, Ed, and assume that Rose is telling the truth. And remember, whoever it is, they’re armed now, and they aren’t afraid to kill. So *be careful*.”

“My middle name,” Ed replied. “We’re gonna put some pressure on a few junkies, and some more of Vinney’s druggy buddies. If we can find the guns, I’m bettin’ we’ll find our man.”

Tony nodded and watched as the two younger detectives set off along the corridor to follow up their leads. As He turned to face his partner, he had a mental picture of a crossbow being pulled out from beneath the late Officer Brad Holloway’s cabin – the one used to kill so many women a year earlier.

“Hey Dot,” he groaned. “Just tell me we’re not going to end up with a heap of dead bodies

again. Would you?"

"We aren't," she replied, acquiescing to his deep need.

But something deep down told her that it might not be quite true.

CHAPTER 5

She trudged along, and it was difficult going.

Light from a waning moon was only just sufficient to light the meandering path, and the undulating ground was full of dark places where it was impossible to see hidden rocks and small holes. And it was often steep. Her ankles twisted on occasion, though always she recovered and managed to continue. But each time the resultant sprains worsened until there was swelling and pain.

Considerable pain.

But still she marched on.

It was eerie. The moon had gone past its best, and now the night air was cold, and felt a little damp. The ground, which consisted of sandy earth interlaced with jutting rocks and spasmodic portions of short grass, seemed far from friendly, continually seeking to trip or graze bare skin upon hard, uncompromising stone. A thin fog veiled the scene too, limiting visibility just enough to make it impossible to focus properly over distance.

But that was not the worst of it.

The woman's anguish ran as deep as her soul, until she had no idea how to fight it. *This isn't happening*, she tried to tell herself. But with each painful, trudging step she knew it was, and moreover, it was bewildering as well as laborious.

She had tried to resist, but that had only resulted in more pain. She could still feel the stinging blow she had sustained to her cheek a few minutes earlier. *Shouldn't have had those last few drinks*, she told herself, but it was too late for that now. Her mind was so slow. What had happened to her sharp, trained mind?

Could she have been drugged?

Should she run?

No. She doubted that would help. In the dim light she would more than likely only succeed in hurting herself on a protruding rock. One hidden hollow at speed and she could easily break a leg or an ankle – *or worse – her neck*. Besides, it was easy to think of running; that was natural.

But it took presence of mind to remain calm when there was a gun at her back.

A cold gust of wind caused her to pull her light sweater together at the front. She tried to button it as she plodded blindly along, but diverting her eyes from the track ahead was too dangerous in the state she was in, so she gave it up.

She could not afford to spare either her eyes or her outstretched, steadying hands from the upward, snaking track between the boulders and bushes.



“Now you can sit.”

The voice was terse, no less than she expected. And yet it brought relief. She was in a wild, deserted place, but it was elevated, and it was a strangely beautiful place. And of course, it was quite cool.

Best of all, she could rest. The uphill climb had cost her considerably.

As her mind slowed from its frantic quest for answers, she began to think of ways she might extricate herself. Besides, despite the fact that her mind spun with the effects of alcohol and likely she knew, a debilitating drug, she had managed to contain her fear thus far. This was not the time to allow her fears to run away with her. Even in her dazed state, she knew that a calm head would give her the best chance of walking away from this strange, threatening event.

It took time in the dark, but after considerable study, forcing her wandering eyes to remain focused, eventually she was able to identify something that hung from a thin strap about her escort’s neck. And the presence of a small movie camera only added to the bewilderment that rattled her mind.

“Okay, so... *what* are we doing here?” she dared to ask.

“Making you listen. Just like I already told you,” came a hoarse reply.

Apparently the climb had been hard on both of them.

“Making me *listen*?”

“Yes, *listen*. You know – that’s when *you* close your mouth and don’t say anything. When *you learn*.”

“Okay, so I’m... listening.”

No answer. Only panting.

“No, *you* listen,” she insisted. “You bring me here with *a gun*. You *shout* at me. What do you think you’re doing? What’s wrong? *What...? Why? Did you drug me?*”

Andrea Abbot looked even taller than usual dressed in faded blue jeans, and her small glasses reflected moonlight, hiding her intense, green eyes. Her short dark hair looked almost black in the dull light, but even in the shadows the traces of her strong, defiant nature were still

abundantly evident in her attractive face.

An intelligent woman, her confused mind raced, certain that she could find a way out of the bewildering situation. After all, if she could just engage and reason with her captor, perhaps she could escape harm. It certainly *seemed* likely. She had seen people snap before, and she hoped that's all this was.

Her head swam. *That* was the worst part.

She had been drinking. Not that there was any harm in that. It had seemed harmless enough at the time. *Surely there had been a drug*, she mused. *Must have been slipped a drug...* That made *perfect* sense. *But a date-rape drug?* The world was dizzying, unsteady, and oddly tiring. Now she wished fervently for a clear mind.

Think, Andrea. Think! This was a time for a clear head.

Andrea sat in bewildered silence while her abductor slowly and carefully began to explain the reason for their night venture.



"You can't be serious!" Andrea snorted.

"I'm very serious!" came the terse reply.

The darkened figure backed up several paces in the moonlight before a backdrop of glistening ocean and dazzling, white stars.

Andrea remained seated on a rock with her legs stretched out before her, refusing to move. In the distance she could see her captor fumbling with something, but silhouetted as the figure was, it was impossible to tell what was happening.

She considered making a rush for the gun, but realized that she couldn't even see it now. Besides, she was uncoordinated and very dizzy. The only thing in her favor, it seemed, was that at least now she recognized exactly *where* she was. She knew the place well.

"No," she said defiantly. *"I won't do it."*

"Yes you will."

"No, I won't," she repeated, drawing on all her courage. It was a feeble bluff, she knew, but what else did she have? *"If you fire that thing out here, people are going to hear it all the way into town. Now, just..."*

"Can it, Miss Perfect," came the bitter reply. *"And for your information, no, they won't – because I'm not going to shoot you – only show you something. Now, shut up and do what you were told."*

Andrea swallowed audibly in the dim light.

“Promise me you won’t... *shoot me.*”

“So melodramatic. You’re laughable. That’s *not* why we’re here. Okay... *I promise.*”

It sounded genuine enough. Andrea slipped sideways, then turned as she had been told. The sudden movement almost caused her to topple.

She knew the place well – and that meant she knew the dangers.

Even drugged and in the dark, she had a keen awareness of where to stay away from. Before her and to the left she could see one darkened area on the ground that stood out from all the others. And Andrea knew *exactly* why. It was long and narrow and just larger than a human body, and it looked like spilled blue ink on velvet sand in the moonlight.

The inky shadow was indeed a hole in the hilltop upon which she sat, a narrow crevasse between boulders. It breathed, like a living, sighing thing as salty air blew directly up from it, then sucked again as water entered and withdrew from the large cavern far beneath. Even in the dark, the narrow upper entrance to Deep Heart Cave was unmistakable.

And fearsome.

Like a pronouncement of doom, the voice behind her explained.

“Let me reword my promise. I won’t shoot you *as long as* you jump.”

Andrea Abbott drew a sharp breath. She had never been in the cave, but she had peered down through the small fissure on this hilltop many times.

There were submerged boulders in that black cavern, and even if one could hope to strike water deep enough to survive the fall, finding a way out in the dark would be almost impossible. Ocean swells continually surged in and out of the cave, which meant that finding a place to take refuge until morning light would also likely be impossible. And in the dark, she couldn’t hope to find the submerged entrance to the cave.

And now she was drugged! She tried to bluff again.

“I won’t do it!” Andrea challenged.

“*Get on your knees! You will jump!*”

“No, *I won’t!*”

She could see the weapon she had been threatened with earlier, now only a dull shadow, waving in her direction in the moonlight. In desperation she tried to rise from the ground, but her dazed mind and sluggish body would not allow it, and she fell backwards, never a threat to her tormentor.

“*On – your - knees!*” The voice was sharp and stern now. And very cruel. “*Do it!*”

“*No!*”

While Andrea had no intention of jumping, her stupefied, racing mind did see a glimmer of

hope amid the senseless, terrifying situation. To jump may mean she would die, but not necessarily. Her kidnapper would surely know that too. At the very least then, she felt reasonably sure that she would *not* be shot.

Apparently, she reasoned, the motive for this bizarre outing was not to cause harm, but to terrorize – her abductor’s lesson.

Andrea began to rationalize that the *real* motive was only to frighten her.

She moved to her knees, but not so close to the breathing hole that she might inadvertently fall in, or be easily pushed. Resting on her knees seemed a fair compromise. It fulfilled part of her abductor’s request, and so should derail some of the threat against her. Being low to the ground also helped her to feel more stable in her dazed state.

But *as for jumping* – she doubted she could do it. Moreover, she doubted she would *have to*. Her mind was in a drug-induced stupor, but it was still sharp, and all logic told her that this was nothing more than a threat.

Just a cruel game.

“*What the hell is wrong with you?*” she called, turning her head, while keeping her hands raised to shoulder level as a sign of submission.

There came no answer, only cold, cruel silence.

It was too much.

Terror was taking its toll, and she could barely keep up the ruse. If the stalemate didn’t break soon, she knew she would simply have to stand up and call her cruel tormentor’s bluff. To her utter amazement, out of the corner of her eye as she dared to turn her head just far enough to glimpse what was happening behind her, she saw her assailant holding the camcorder with one hand, capturing her fearful torment.

Andrea was incensed.

“*Is that what this is about?*” she blurted. “You want to *film me* so that you can show people how *scared* I am? What’s *wrong* with you? You *stupid...* Oh, *this is a really rotten thing to do...* That’s about as low a thing...”

“*Shut up, Andrea!*”

The voice was stern and domineering, and despite Andrea’s best efforts to defy such bullying, she fell automatically silent. Something in the tone told her to listen rather than berate. Besides, she still had the presence of mind to realize that being so influenced as she was by alcohol and some unknown drug, it wouldn’t pay to let her mouth run away.

When the voice spoke again, it was quieter, but no less demanding.

“Now jump for me, Andrea.”

Try as she might, Andrea could not restrain her anger and defiance. The stupefied lab assistant swayed, pursed her lips, then replied equally as calmly, *“I – will – not – jump, damn you.”*

Still with her head turned as she kneeled, Andrea saw the silhouette approach, a dark, innocuous figure before a dazzling display of celestial majesty in the night sky.

If it hadn't been for the gun, she thought. And the alcohol – and the drug she had been slipped...

“Are you sure?” The tone was low now.

Gone off the boil, Andrea reasoned. She could hear it in the voice. Probably realized just how insane this is! All the while she was aware of being filmed. This sicko wants something to boast about later, she thought.

It only served to make her more resolute.

“I won't jump,” she stated quietly, the calmness in her oppressor's voice proving to be just as contagious as its anger had been. Even over the dull washing of the ocean and the whistle of the wind, Andrea heard a definite sigh. It was as though a heavy weight had been lifted for them both.

“Fair enough,” came the casual reply. “I never really thought you would. You're brave. *Feisty and brave. I'll give you that.*”

Andrea swallowed audibly once more, a sign of just how frightened she really was – and how relieved. A sense of release washed over her, and she lowered her hands to rest upon her thighs as she kneeled. She bowed her head just slightly too, quite overcome.

“You really scared me,” she admitted, kneeling steadily so as not to lose her balance. “I thought you were being serious about...”

Vinney Bourke's silenced .22 revolver was so quiet that it could barely be heard above the lapping of the waves. Two quick sniffs marked a cruel task easily performed, *at least for one of the players.*

For the other, it was a most difficult thing.

Andrea Abbot gave a grunt of protest as the silencer first mingled with her short, neat, dark hair, and then gently kissed her scalp. The weapon bucked twice, as each bullet punched through her skull and into her brain, and then skipped about inside her head. Being such a small caliber, the projectiles did not have the impetus to exit, but simply shredded and danced, ensuring an effective, if not immediate kill. Andrea whimpered and then toppled forward, grimacing with shock as her body jerked and shivered in protest.

Her killer watched with deep, excited breaths as Andrea shuddered, then gurgled noisily,

then stiffened and quivered. Even in the dim light of the waning moon, the small reflex movements of her fingers could be seen, as though she was struggling to keep death at bay.

She wasn't. Or at least, *she couldn't*.

Andrea made no sound as her killer rolled her on to her back to better capture her every small movement of protest at her cruel fate. And Andrea did not disappoint. Her killer relished every tiny quiver, gasping while capturing Andrea's dying twitches to later make her a movie star in a growing library of brutal, malicious murder.

Andrea shuddered for some time, stiffening and relaxing repeatedly, her slender fingers clawing at the sand as though she was trying to hold on to something that might save her.

But nothing would.

As her body's nervous reflex movements dwindled, her killer moved to stand over her, then, still filming, fired the remaining four bullets into the fallen woman's chest, one for each lung, and two for her heart. Small puffs of fabric spat up as each projectile made its mark, though Andrea did not protest. Only when the pistol's hammer struck home on a spent cartridge did the trigger-finger cease its excited, trembling contractions.

And all the while the camera swayed and recorded.

Andrea's killer stared down silently for a time, always recording, trying to hold the camera steady. While one hand continued to film, the other then placed the smoking weapon on the grass and began to toll Andrea in an effort to push her closer to the yawning, inky entrance to the cave beneath.

Andrea's eyes remained open, her glasses somehow still in place and reflecting moonlight. Even in death she had the appearance of intelligence, and now, as her body ceased to spasm and shiver, absolute peace.

Her unbuttoned jacket fell open, revealing a bloody white blouse beneath, something that caused her killer to pause and record some more. The four bleeding wounds began to meld into one large, dark stain, but their owner showed no hint of pain. Andrea looked peaceful, as if merely sleeping.

Another half roll and the lab assistant began to slide into the inky chasm of Deep Heart Cave.

Her head was first to disappear into the ominous void, her lovely face slipping silently away as she rolled once more. The very last thing that could be seen of her was her legs, limp and lifeless, her blue jeans scuffing on dry sand as she plunged headfirst into the inky, wheezing abyss.

A soft thudding splash marked her arrival on wet rock and shallow water below, and again

the tiny crabs were happy to feed in the darkened cavern of Deep Heart...

(Continued...)

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