



Loose Id

CANTERVILLE

BOOK ONE: THE DEAD SPEAK

MARIE A. ROY

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Prologue

January 28, 1986

He followed her. He knew the exact path she took home, a path that took her through secluded woods around Crandall Lake.

He spotted the black Lincoln hearse parked at the side of the road and recognized it. They had probably picked up a removal. Sometimes the drivers would park like that, taking a break before taking the body in.

It was weird what they did, Davies thought, but he didn't really mind working there after school hours.

They paid him really good for what he did, like running errands for them and helping with those removals and other things he was told to keep his mouth shut about. It was no skin off his nose what they did behind those closed doors. And the clients certainly weren't about to complain. He chuckled at the thought.

Keeping his eyes on the girl, he stayed a safe distance behind so she wouldn't spot him.

Once she got to the edge of the frozen lake, he'd make his move. Scare the hell out of her. She damn well needed to learn a good lesson. No one made a fool of him. Kendra Bettencourt needed to know that and the sooner the better.

* * * * *

The girl had sensed since leaving the school that someone was following her. She only had to cross the next short stretch of woods, then several more yards over a clearing. She would see the front of her house from there.

The fear kept rising inside, making her feel as if she were walking through thick sludge rather than over hard-packed snow.

She could hear the sound of crunching boots behind her and quickened her steps. Suddenly, someone pulled at her scarf, tugged at it, tried to yank it away from her neck. The forces pulled her backward. She grabbed at the knitted fabric, screamed a long, piercing shriek.

A startled flock of snowbirds shot straight into the air.

Snow started to fall. She stumbled, hit the ground face first, felt a sharp pain to the side of her head. She crawled and was suddenly rolling downward, kept rolling until she reached the bottom of a small ravine. Snow continued to fall, concealing her.

The last thing she saw was her red scarf, floating above as if it had flown into an upper tree branch. And then she heard more screams, a low wail, and someone calling for help.

Not her voice. Silence fell along with the snow.

Then total blackness.

Chapter One

Present Day

"A body putrefies mainly by climate and insects," Kendra Bettencourt's steady, no-nonsense voice began. She drew shut some of the blinds, eliminating the afternoon glare, then turned back to Edmond Cutler's high school biology class to continue. "When a person dies, the body starts to decay right away. The same enzymes that help us digest our food in turn eat away at the decaying tissue and speed up the process of decomp...decomposition," she corrected, remembering to shy away from forensic jargon. "If the person died of, say, a bacterial infection, then that process is sped up more so by that fact."

Kendra inwardly smiled at the reactions on some faces. At least she captured their interest, especially those students sitting in the front seats who now had a clear, unobstructed view of her charts.

Bettencourt's lectures at the local high school level had gained a reputation. They reminded many of gory horror flicks or those PSAs of traffic accidents meant to discourage teens from drinking and driving. Difficult to look at, but impossible to turn away from.

* * * * *

A self-service station, a Chinese restaurant, a diner serving all-you-can eat specials on Thursday night, a coffee shop usually crowded with patrons from the local dance clubs on Saturday and Sunday mornings -- shutting down before the dinner hour -- and Wilcox's New and Used Book Nook were Josh Tyler's closest neighbors.

On this quiet, wet Tuesday morning Josh's bones ached. Josh didn't mind the quiet, but he hated the dampness that came with these late spring rains.

Traffic was usually light in the small town of Canterville, especially on Tuesday. A bedroom town nestled between two Connecticut cities, it confessed of some minor crime within its narrow borders, but far enough removed from urban corruption, it offered a peaceful enough existence for most of its residents.

And Josh liked that just fine, not having to worry about what went on outside his dojo. With no classes running tonight, it gave him an opportunity to plow through a pile of mounting paperwork.

He worked a Tootsie Roll Pop out of its bag, peeled off the wrapper, and stuck the candy into the side of his mouth. He hung up the phone, relieved this time the caller wasn't the local bank reminding him of his late mortgage payment. He needed no reminders. As he jotted down a few notes, his tongue caressed the chocolate candy.

"What? No class?"

Josh spun around. Luke Sloane stood in the outer doorway.

"The new class doesn't start until next Tuesday. But hey, while you're here and you have a few minutes, go hang up the bag and have a go at it. You know where the gloves are. I'd join you, but I whacked this hand good the other night demonstrating a backhanded punch," Josh said, rubbing the knuckles of his left hand.

Luke looked down at Josh's hand, his face showing mild concern -- followed by a grin. "Gotta go easy on yourself, old boy. You're not getting any younger. And when are you going to quit eating that junk food?" he commented, eyeing the crushed wrappers scattered across a faded blue blotter. "All that sugar's no good, especially on the nerves."

Josh merely smiled, then said, "Man's got to have some vices."

Luke snorted and slapped his hard, flat stomach. "I'm pushing thirty-eight, and I'm still in great shape." He puffed, flexing arms that brandished well-formed biceps. "I eat right, get enough exercise, and keep my love life under control. That's all it takes." He laughed a hearty, contagious laugh.

Josh couldn't help but reciprocate. "Your love life, or the present lack of it, keeps you under control." Josh stood to help Luke lift the long punching bag onto a ceiling hook.

"Hey, Josh, when are you going to come back full time?"

Josh's smile disappeared. "How'd we get on that subject?"

"I dunno. It's been a couple of years. Somehow I never thought you'd go this long working only part-time on the force. I know you have this dojo to fill your time, but knowing you..."

"Don't waste your energy thinking about me." With his uninjured hand, Josh gave the bag a well-placed punch, peering at Luke from the other side.

He straightened to his full six feet one frame. "I changed my mind about the sparring. The hand is fine." Josh fixed his eyes on his opponent.

Luke pulled on a pair of gloves, ignored the cold, hard pain running up his right thigh, which always ached more on damp rainy nights serving as a constant reminder of the scar caused by a bullet. He assumed a fighting stance. "Let's get started."

Luke's cell phone rang from the clip on his belt. The men looked at each other. It wasn't Josh's personal phone. It was the dispatcher, and that meant official business.

Luke answered. His eyes dark turned serious, distracted. "Looks like I'm going to have to take a rain check on this. Someone found a body up near Crandall Lake," he told Josh, snapping the phone shut.

Chapter Two

“Depending upon climate and time of year, the first to arrive on the scene are your quintessential blowflies, belonging to a group known as” -- pointing to a chart showing its lifecycle -- “*Chrysomya megacephala*. These flies feed directly on corpses.

“For those of you thinking about entering the field of forensic science, specifically forensic pathology, you might consider taking courses in entomology, which will help you become more aware of the stages in insects’ development. Because these insects only gather on a body once it’s dead, the stage in the insects’ development can help us calculate how long the body has been dead. We know there are six distinct stages. The eggs hatch into a first-stage maggot, also called a first instar.”

“Cool...” suddenly rose from the back of the room.

“Any questions before I continue?” Kendra inquired. Usually, even this early in her talks, most of her audiences found themselves reeling.

“Why?” a young man asked, sitting off in a side row.

Awkward silence.

“Why?” Kendra repeated.

“Yeah. Why do you like working around dead bodies?”

Kendra eyed the boy’s blond hair and felt jarred by a chill, a disorienting sense of déjà vu. Kendra knew the answer, but had a cold sense that she had to reach for an even deeper reason. “As a kid, I was a bug freak,” Kendra provided, dismissing the disorientation, ignoring that faraway voice. “I enjoyed studying insects, their movements, and how they went about their business.”

“Yeah, but what does that have to do with dead people?” the young man probed. “Doesn’t it bother you to be around them?” Despite the naïve expression on his young face, his clear blue eyes held concern and a genuine curiosity.

"I will admit it did at first, but curiosity has a way of taking hold and not letting go. I still remember that first year in medical school, in the human anatomy lab. We worked on cadavers, and I was curious about how those people had died. I viewed it as a mystery that I could unfold, a mystery that might need to be solved. I knew if I looked carefully enough at what the body was telling me, most, if not all, of the answers could be found in the flesh and bones. All I had to do was read through the clues left behind." Images of her first cadaver rose in her mind. Tan gray. It wasn't exactly the shade she'd expected. All cadavers were placed on their backs in the lab. That first cut required touching the corpse. Some people say that you never forget your first love. She never forgot her first dead body...not its grayish color...not that first cut.

"Morbid as it all might seem, miracles can be found on the nonliving," she went on, pointing back to the chart. "The female blowfly smells death a mile and a half away --"

"And what about the male?" someone asked.

Kendra grinned, grateful to get back on track with her lecture. Getting a little too philosophical was not her thing. Although she enjoyed reaching deeply into the whys of things, she didn't like reaching into her own psyche that deeply. Yes, delving into the mysteries of death was part of her job, but at times she preferred to remain on the surface, and like now, talk about blowflies. Smiling she said, "Let's say, they're a bit slow to respond."

"Not surprising," a female voice commented.

"How do you tell them apart?" someone else asked.

"Easy enough," Kendra replied, turning toward the back of the room, suddenly aware of the tall man standing behind Cutler.

"The male's eyes are set close together," she pointed out. "The female's are set wider apart."

Kendra shot a glance toward Lucas Sloane, who had moved farther into the room and now stood at the back. Officer Lucas Sloane of the Canterville police department was out of uniform, dressed in snug-fitting jeans and a brown suede bomber jacket. Tall, lean, and muscular, with light brown hair worn military style, Lucas always appeared at ease in his surroundings. Kendra wondered if anything really ever fazed the man, touched his psyche, or made him wonder about his own place in the world. She doubted it -- too much testosterone to allow him to venture that deeply into himself. Luke was the type of man who made a woman wonder just how good in bed he'd be and if his masterful presence gave any clue to his sexual tastes. The man was definitely hot. She imagined the fucking would be no-holds-barred, but she pushed the thoughts from her mind. Right now, he looked like he meant business.

Luke leaned close to Cutler and whispered into his ear as Kendra watched. Something serious had happened.

Cutler nodded and straightened. "That's all the time we have," Cutler announced. Kendra consulted the clock. She hadn't expected to finish for another fifteen minutes. "Let's

thank Dr. Bettencourt for a very informative discussion today. Hopefully, we can have her back at another time and learn more about other areas in forensics --"

"Yeah, like blood splatter and gunshot wounds, like they talk about on *Law and Order*," Danny Tyler offered.

Moments later, as the class made its exit, Kendra and Edmond turned to Luke, their expressions begging to know why he was there.

Luke looked directly at Kendra. "Seems they found a body down by Crandall Lake. Your office told me you were giving the kids a talk today. I thought I'd stop here first, considering they're going to call you on it anyway."

"You've been out there already?" she asked, turning to gather her things.

"Briefly. Josh is there now, protecting the scene and briefing the personnel from the crime lab."

On cue, Kendra's pager sounded. "I guess you did beat them to it," she said, certain that it was the lab calling her.

"I told them I'd get you." He grinned. "I guess they got impatient."

"Them?"

"State police are out there as well. Remember, Canterville's a small town. We don't have the resources," he reminded.

She gave him a look that told him she didn't need any reminders on that count. She held the briefcase against her and looked up at him with some skepticism. "Well, now that you've found me --"

"I can take you --"

"No, I'd rather take my own transport. It's packed with everything I'll need."

Luke nodded.

"Look, if you want to ride with me," she offered, "you're welcome to come along." The words were out before she could fetch them back. She preferred to work these cases alone, without distraction. Lucas Sloane might prove too much of a distraction. In the past, when she had worked with him on smaller cases, he'd captured her attention. He captured, she guessed, most women's attention with that penetrating dark stare. His appearance, too, was evidence of the long list of ethnicities in his family, and his looks seemed to capture the best of all the worlds. Fuck them and leave them, that was his style. It seemed to work for most women, but she wasn't willing to be one of them.

"I think it would be best if I followed you," he said. "Then we'll both have a car in case either one of us needs to leave sooner."

Edmond Cutler looked on, silent up to that point. "Do you have any idea who it is...the body?"

"Not yet, and it really wouldn't be responsible of me to conjecture," Luke said.

Edmond shrugged and looked at Kendra. "I guess we better postpone that dinner, unless you get through early enough."

Kendra shook her head. "This is going to take the better part of the night and probably into the morning, depending on what I find out there." *Damn*, she thought. She had looked forward to that dinner. Looked forward to enjoying a leisurely evening, even if it was with someone as bland as Cutler, whose preference for gourmet cuisine had at least promised an interesting culinary adventure.

Suspicious circumstances would dictate an autopsy be performed as soon as possible. She thought of the frozen dinners waiting for her inside her own freezer. She thought of Patti's Skillet Café and the greasy home fries she would end up forking down tomorrow morning instead.

Moments later, Kendra, Edmond, and Luke walked out into the cold sunlight. Certainly, Kendra thought, not the type of day anyone should discover stiff corpses. Although it was late spring, the cold temperatures contrasted with the bright light and crept through the layers of her clothing.

One of the staff at the Manheim nursing and rehab facility hadn't showed up for work last week, and Kendra wondered if the body by the lake would solve at least the question of the disappearance. Kendra's paternal grandmother, Grace Bettencourt, lived at the nursing home. She hoped it wasn't anyone Gram had taken a particular liking to. But she needed to view this latest crime scene, if it was in fact a crime scene, with clear objectivity to determine the cause of death.

Nonetheless, a numbing coldness filled her.

Chapter Three

Kendra steered the SUV along Canterville's winding back roads, down one incline after another, at times slowing down long enough to allow the SUV to do its four-wheel thing on the rocky and uneven terrain. When she turned right at the bottom of one steep incline, then made a sharp left, she spotted the white sign designating the entrance to Crandall Lake's public beaches and boat launches.

There she would find responding officers, crime lab personnel, maybe reporters, all of whom would have a role in handling Canterville's latest death. Latest murder, though? Canterville was a small New England town. Murder was rare, but dead bodies in the woods could make it an all too real possibility. The body might be that of someone she knew in life. A possible murderer might be someone that she knew right now.

Since her return, Kendra had allowed herself to become part of a community again, a community that at one time she'd fled, unable -- and more, unwilling -- to face her own demons.

Her father had died in that town, as well as her grandfather -- and then her husband. Memories were not good, but painful and deep, putting her at times among the walking wounded and making her feel more like the walking dead. Even so, she had returned to a place that at least offered somewhere to plant roots. She needed the stability.

She pulled up behind one of the state vehicles. No sooner had she put the SUV into park than Lucas Sloane was knocking at her side window. He'd been a Canterville police officer for several years, but detective work was a fairly recent endeavor for him. His grim expression told her that he was learning that patrolling and peacekeeping were far different than solving a homicide. Kendra knew as well as Sloane that mistakes made at the beginning of an investigation could mean the difference between whether a prosecutor would earn a guilty or not guilty verdict for the story's ending.

Her hands felt clammy, a normal response for her when approaching the dead. She gripped the steering wheel, reminding herself why she was there. She reached over and pushed the power button to lower the side window.

“Okay, what have we got so far?” she asked, then inhaled a slow breath of cold air. She let it out slowly.

Luke bent down, placing both hands on the rim of the open window. “Her death might be from natural causes, but we’re not ruling out foul play. No marks of any kind, it’s as if she just lay down” -- his voice hesitated -- “and died.”

For a moment Kendra stared up at him, mentally repeating his words. The words created an inexplicable sadness as she imagined someone doing just that, giving up on a life that no longer held promise. Especially in that first year after her husband’s and grandfather’s deaths, she had felt like doing the same thing, simply lying down somewhere, giving up, expiring to the elements. Grief counseling helped, but did only so much. Though time softened the pain, it was always there, tucked under the surface -- a hunger that gnawed away at her, that at any given time could simply rise and wreak havoc with her life.

“I can’t explain it. It’s just an impression that I got from what I saw. As if she picked this spot to lie down, fell asleep, and never woke up again. Yeah, I know it’s weird to think like that without the facts. I can’t see bruising -- no tears in clothing, nothing to indicate foul play. You’ll see what I mean when you check it out yourself.” He opened the car door.

As Assistant ME for the state, Dr. Kendra Bettencourt was responsible first for determining the time of death. Then later, as the forensic pathologist in the autopsy room, she determined by postmortem how the victim died. Death might very well be due to natural causes -- or not. Luke had his work cut out for him. They all did.

“Looks like she’s in her mid- to late-thirties,” Luke went on.

Small farms and newly built houses surrounded large sections of the still undeveloped land that was fairly isolated any time of the year -- hilly terrain, overgrown underbrush, and sharp inclines that could easily conceal a decomposing corpse for a very long time. This one could have gone for days, weeks -- even months -- undetected in what was essentially a no-man’s-land.

She slid out of her side of the SUV and collected her equipment. The sun had started to set, and the air was getting cold. She wrapped the knitted scarf around her throat, adding looped layers of warmth over her turtleneck sweater. Grandma Bettencourt had lavished love on the hundreds of scarves that she’d knitted over the years, every one with her unique pattern of knits and purls. Kendra had donated scores of them to charities all over the place. Kendra was glad to be dressed warmly. It could get damned cold in the higher elevations.

In silence, she and Luke walked to where yellow crime tape looped around and cordoned off what she thought was a rather large area.

A special designated path allowed quick access, and at the same time, prevented any evidence from becoming tainted. Although it wasn’t yet dark, a generator stood nearby,

which would later provide enough illumination for most of the area that still required processing. They had one chance to find any real clues, trace or otherwise, that could point them in the right direction to what had happened.

Most scenes struggled to relate their own unique stories. This one, Kendra surmised, would prove no different. The difficult part was making sense of it, pulling it together, and developing a scenario -- a theory of what had happened during those crucial moments before the victim's death.

Grandma Bettencourt had been admitted to a local nursing facility for rehab after a hip-replacement operation. If this body in these woods was an aide from that facility. That would only encourage her grandmother's fantasies. Lately her grandmother had shown some delusional behavior, coming up with nonsensical ideas that a conspiracy was transpiring up there at the home, putting those who took the time to listen to her ramblings on edge.

Kendra shook her head, pushing these wayward thoughts aside. She pulled the zipper up on her jacket, a gift given to her by her late husband, Holt Walker, a reminder they had actually once shared a life together.

Married eight years...long enough for that special bond to form, a bond that held them together forever, even after death. They had been soul mates, connected in a way that even death couldn't break.

Kendra noticed several utility vehicles lined haphazardly along the back roads leading to the lake. Lights from local and state cruisers flashed brazenly, warning others that something serious was going on here. The bright strobe lights acted on neighborhoods the way corpses did on those blowflies she had spoken of earlier in Cutler's class, drawing them inexorably to the cordoned off area.

Josh greeted them. "There's no blood," he said. "No drag marks. No tire marks. It's pretty clean and pretty damn eerie out there. If Dolinski's dogs hadn't found the body, I'm not sure it would ever have been found."

Dolinski's dogs had discovered the body before decomp had fully begun. Thankfully, it had been domesticated animals and not wild ones to find her. Feral animals could tear a body to shreds, scattering its remains over a wide and unpredictable area. "Man, it's cold out here," Luke said and zipped up his jacket.

"Did this fellow Dolinski say anything after his dogs discovered the body?" she asked, ignoring his discomfort, and approached the taped off area. "You know this guy?" She searched for his name.

"Olez," Luke supplied.

She nodded absently. "Olez. Is he a credible enough witness?"

Luke responded. "He's been around as long as I can remember. Forever, I think. If you're thinking that he might have had something to do with this, it's pretty unlikely,

considering his age. Although I suppose we shouldn't rule out that possibility," he added, his words assuring her that he wasn't one to close doors. "Rose received the call-in."

"You mean about the body?"

"No. It's what makes us pretty sure that this isn't as simple as it looks. Rose said a male voice called in telling her we were going to start finding bodies out here. It came from a pay phone several towns over. Anyone could have made the call."

"Do we know who the victim is...was?" Everything that she could learn would help later, help her know what she might look for, help her recognize things for what they were.

"A woman from the nursing home has been reported missing. A co-worker called it in late Saturday night," Josh interjected.

Luke stepped back, regarding her for a moment. "Some cops never get to work a crime scene in these hick towns. Lucky fucking me," he mumbled with little enthusiasm. "This might be just the first if that caller makes good on those threats."

She cut him off, "Yeah, some of us have all the luck. Here, help me carry this stuff. A busy mind has no time to dwell on such things." She looked at Josh. "Thanks, I guess I will take it from here."

Josh looked relieved and she knew he was probably ready to relinquish the crime scene to them knowing that whatever happened at this point could affect what happened later in court if this was a murder and it got that far.

It had been a dry winter. The reservoirs and lake levels were far lower than normal and still receding. If no rain came soon, they would all be hurting come late summer.

Patches of gray-brown earth shared space with patches of crusty snow. A chilling cold produced an eerie feeling inside her. Depending on how long it took, even wearing insulated gloves over the customary latex ones might still not be enough to protect her from the biting wind that blew toward them from across an open ridge.

Anticipation flooded her as it always did before processing a scene, right along with rising nausea. At the same time, the sensation of pure surrealism threatened to engulf her. Bitter bile, another physical response, threatened to burn the inside of her throat. Kendra was thankful for the antacids she carried in her coat pockets.

Suddenly, through the low, howling wind she heard her grandfather's voice. "What in the hell ever possessed you to take up working with dead bodies? What kind of life is that for a woman?"

Kendra followed Luke, carefully making her way along the designated path. She heard Luke ask one technician, "Has the photographer been called in?"

"Yeah. He's over there now, setting up."

There was the woman's body. Kendra stood slightly to one side, holding her metal case, her focus more concentrated on the supine form positioned a foot or two away. That's when she realized Luke's hesitation.

She was tempted to take his hand, lead him in the rest of the way, tell him it was going to be okay. Instead she bit her tongue. *Get used to it*, someone had once told her -- probably one of the teaching physicians in a gross anatomy class.

Just get over it.

She knelt as she approached the body and drew out her microcassette recorder.

Was this death a natural one? Accidental? Suicide? Or a homicide?

Gut feeling ruled out the first three.

With gloved hands, she opened the case, took out a twenty-gauge needle, crouched down further, and pierced the corpse's eyeball, sucking out its vitreous fluid. She ignored the winces and groans of the investigators standing nearby, unprepared.

She looked up at Luke. "This is generally a reliable source in determining time of death. Since the time the victim died, the concentration of potassium has been rising in the vitreous fluid -- the fluid inside the eye. Although we are working with variables here, and nothing is foolproof."

Luke simply nodded, also oblivious to the reactions of the others.

Gently, she lifted one arm, then the other. "No marked stiffness. Rigor has either set and disappeared or hasn't occurred at all because of the cold temperatures," she said to him.

Body temperature was the same as the surroundings, meaning also that the body had been there for a while. All indications were that the body had been there longer than two days, but no more than three, considering the woman hadn't been reported missing for that long a time.

"I'm suspecting that death may have occurred sometime late Friday night or early Saturday morning. I'll know more after the autopsy."

Luke again made no comment.

After completing a swabbing, Kendra watched as individual bags were placed on the hands, feet, and head. The techs then carefully bagged the entire body.

* * * * *

Luke stood by, touching nothing that compromised the area, ensuring a chain of custody was upheld.

Protocol would have him escort the body to the morgue. Protocol would have him stand guard until identification officers and a pathologist joined the scene. Protocol would have him there from the time of discovery to the beginning of the postmortem exam, all the while maintaining that continuity.

Because of and in spite of all the protocol, Luke would make a connection with the victim. He thought about the other women in Canterville, about their safety. Was this woman only a killer's first victim? Would there be others, as the caller had promised? Would

the area become his dumping site? Or had it already become that? A killing ground where others were yet to be discovered?

He thought about his sister, Lisa, and her friend, Deirdre, who had just moved into the area. Young women...potential victims.

He felt his frustration rise.

This was his case. Was he up to the challenges it would present?

Chapter Four

Luke waited self-consciously for Kendra. Anxiety about the postmortem had his already nervous stomach tied in knots. His determination not to embarrass himself in front of her was the reason for his light and liquid breakfast: a glass of orange juice and black coffee. He prayed that it stayed down.

The room hadn't changed much from the last time he was there for body identification. Bright overhead lights provided a sharp contrast to the cold bleakness. The lights made his eyes hurt. The corpse on the table made his heart ache. The whole scene made it difficult to focus, to fully concentrate on what was about to happen.

One of the technicians smiled, condescendingly, he thought. He smiled back and wondered if that was appropriate.

The morgue attendant had prepared the body and stood ready to help during the exam. An exhibit officer had already taken samples: scrapings from under fingernails and samples of hair. A photographer had documented visual evidence.

And Luke? Luke's only function: simply witness what was taking place. It bothered him as he stared down at the victim. She had a name now, and each new fact painted a picture of her identity. Rhonda Woods lay there, her eyes shut, peaceful, a serene expression on her face.

It was essential he be here. His presence ensured the chain of custody for the evidence, if any were found, ensuring that whatever evidence they came up with would not be altered if that evidence were later presented at trial.

There were so many other places he preferred to be, thinking of Patti's eggs Benedict waiting for him down there at the Skillet Café.

Plus it would have been a perfect morning to get in a good run out by the lake. But considering what happened out there, the evil that had taken place -- starting with Dolinski's dogs discovering Rhonda's lifeless body --

"Okay, let's get started," Kendra said behind the mask. "The sooner we get this done, the sooner we move on."

Her detached manner made Luke suddenly wonder what events in the woman's life brought her to this place. She obviously had completed years of medical school, and with all that education, had many doors opened for her. Far fewer doors than what he had for himself, working up the ranks, taking courses at the local community college. It presented for him a puzzle as to why she had chosen this door -- this profession. He doubted that he would ever know the answer. Kendra Bettencourt may have had doors opened but, he guessed, had closed many of those doors behind her. She was very attractive, sexy in her own unique way, but he doubted they would ever get to a level of intimacy that allowed him access into those other parts of that inner psyche. Kendra Bettencourt, as many in their profession, his as well, acquired a world view that shifted from original ideals, making them realize that people committed extraordinarily evil acts in the course of living quite ordinary lives.

"Ready?" she asked.

Meaning, was he not about to faint. "Yeah," he responded.

Her olive black eyes looked directly at him above the clear plastic protective mask, her brows furrowing. "You sure? Because I've got smelling salts at the ready." She grinned.

He straightened. "I'm sure." His voice was strong, yet he regretted that extra cup of coffee Patti served him earlier.

* * * * *

Kendra pulled on a pair of latex gloves and adjusted the microphone. "This is case number 203-1114, Rhonda Woods. The body is that of a well-developed, well-nourished, thirty-four-year-old Caucasian female with dark brown hair and brown eyes. The body is" -- Kendra took a moment to adjust the measuring tape -- "sixty-five inches long and" -- glancing over at the numbers -- "one hundred and fifty-five pounds."

Suddenly she stopped and looked over at Luke. "Did you get someone to take care of her cats?"

"Cats?" he questioned, pulling his eyes away from the cadaver.

"Yeah. Rhonda owned a couple of cats."

"Someone from the crime lab is over at the apartment now. If there are cats there, they'll be taken care of."

She shot him a look. "How? By sticking them in the local pound, then having them euthanized? I'll take them," she announced, picking up a scalpel.

"You?" he responded, his focus on her face and she sensed he was avoiding looking at the first cut into the torso.

"Yeah, why not?"

"You own a big, not-so-well-behaved dog."

Kendra ignored his remark. "I don't find anything external showing how she died. There are no defense wounds telling me she fought off the killer. No hesitation wounds. I'm sure it will become more obvious the cause of death here is cerebral hypoxia, secondary to compression. There is occlusion of the vessels supplying blood to the brain. She probably lost consciousness in ten to fifteen seconds. You'll notice marks encircling the neck in a horizontal plane, but no abrasions or contusions, which in a ligature strangulation aren't usually present, although not saying they can't occur."

"He probably blitz attacked her. Never gave her a chance to do anything to defend herself."

Kendra nodded. "When I finish this dissection, it will tell me more." She ignored the stiffening in Luke's body. Carefully, Kendra made the customary Y-incision across the chest from shoulder to shoulder and down beneath the breasts from the xiphoid, or lower tip of the sternum. She made another midline incision that extended down the entire length of the abdomen to the pubic area.

Systematically, she cut through the ribs and cartilage, eventually exposing the heart and lungs. As protocol dictated, she took a blood sample from the heart after cutting through the pericardial sac. This would determine Rhonda's blood type.

She threw an oblique glance Luke's way. Despite his strange pallor, he was still standing.

She proceeded to weigh each organ, examine it, slice into each one to determine its internal structure and any damage. This would also help her determine whether toxicology or histology testing was needed.

"Do you see anything?" Luke asked.

"Nothing yet. She must've suffered from acid reflux. Noticeable erosion of the esophagus. I'm suspecting nothing else at this point, but when I prepare these microscopic slides, I'll have them do a tox, and then I'll know more."

She aspirated fluids from the abdomen for further examination, then removed the next organ, weighed it, measured it -- all of it a painstaking process. She stayed totally absorbed in what she was doing.

Luke remained silent as he moved closer to the table.

The room, cold and anything but comfortable, smelled like death. He knew it would be a long while after completion of this autopsy that he would stop thinking about that smell. Fresh killed meat, he suddenly thought.

His mind drifted to his father and the times they'd gone hunting. He thought of how proud his father had been when Luke shot his first deer. And how they together gutted the beast and enjoyed the venison his mother cooked for them later. Suddenly, the image of all that no longer brought the remembered and expected pride; instead, he felt a sudden remorse, regret, and knew he wouldn't be hunting with his father anytime soon.

"Doing okay?" Kendra inquired.

Luke merely nodded, adjusted his mask, and wished he had a cold or some type of allergy that prevented his olfactory nerves from kicking in. Despite that, he moved another step closer to the table, his curiosity overtaking his previous apprehension.

Kendra removed one more organ. "This is the urinary bladder," she explained. "I'll send the urine to tox. It may tell us something. If she used drugs, it will usually show up. Although detection of a drug tells us only that they took it, doesn't indicate they were on the drug when death occurred."

Kendra suddenly stopped.

"What?" Luke asked softly, relieved they were near the end.

"Rhonda was pregnant."

Luke stared at her, then down at the naked form. Sudden nausea rose as the knot tightened further inside his stomach and created a bitter taste in his mouth.

"You fucking sure about that?" His voice low.

Kendra nodded. "The appearance of the uterus tells me."

"A possible motive?"

A cynical grin followed. "Always a possible motive," she answered.

All that remained was the skull, which Luke knew was never easy for anyone to watch.

"You still with me?" she asked. Continuing, he watched as she examined the eyes and lids for signs of red specks. He noticed beneath the eyelids showed red spots...petechial hemorrhaging that he knew could have resulted from the neck compression during suffocation.

"Find any?" Luke asked, peering over from his side.

"Any?"

"Petechial hemorrhaging," he went on, a mirthless grin followed.

"Been doing your homework. Yes, these purpura, or Tardieu's spots, are usually common in asphyxial or slow deaths. I also noted petechiae in the conjunctivae and sclerae."

He nodded.

"Despite there being no ligature marks, she could have been choked in a way that might not leave distinguishing marks. We find that in autoerotic asphyxiation. Towels or pads are used below the ligature so as to not leave impressions. If she had been smothered, petechiae of the face, sclerae, and conjunctivae are virtually absent. Though we might find

some in the epicardium around the heart tissue or pleural surface of the lung...if we did, it still might not mean anything significant.”

“You think Rhonda Woods was into some of that kinky stuff?” he asked, taking off on the autoerotic scenario. “BDSM? If that’s the case, her death could have been an accident. Something gone fucking wrong. Two people pushing that envelope too far. You’ve got to be careful with stuff like this. Communication is always the key.”

Suddenly, she looked at him directly. Their eyes connected. A shot of warmth passed up his groin area. It made Luke wonder, *How much did Kendra know about this SM stuff?* The prospect of what she might know sent another shot of heat through him. He was thankful for the table that more or less hid his response.

Then he remembered, clearly stated in the same manual on crime description, that the act of killing may be eroticized. That asphyxial modality is often noted after the deliberate tightening and loosening of a rope around the victim’s neck as she slips in and out of consciousness. If that were so, then this would be his first planned sexual homicide.

He would need to go back to that section, reread it, go through case studies...hopefully get the same outcome for those cases given a conviction.

“Yeah, we may need to do a psychological autopsy on this one. Autoerotic deaths usually occur in males fifteen to twenty-five. It’s rare for it to happen in females.”

“Psychological autopsy?” he repeated.

She looked at him with raised brows. “We analyze and form a logical understanding of their death, getting it from tangible physical evidence, documented life events, and intangible, sometimes emotional factors, which at times can be elusive.”

“Sounds fucking complicated.”

“You need to find out what she was like, what stress she might have been having in her life, how she coped with that stress.”

“Shit. Meaning I need to question her family, friends, co-workers, which I’m doing anyway, but doing it knowing she may have enjoyed this leather, chains, and bondage stuff, and whatever else that involves.”

She smiled. “Yeah, could be embarrassing for the family. Anyone ever tie you up, Lucas Sloane?”

He looked at her, but did not respond.

“Whoever you ask will get curious and conjecture what might have happened here. It’s never an easy thing to accept.”

“What? That their daughter took part in sadomasochistic practices that ended up killing her?”

“To each his own in life,” Kendra said with little emotion as she made an incision across the top of the head, starting behind one ear, extending across the top to the back of the opposite ear. She looked up at Luke.

"You don't have to watch this part," she suggested.

"I'm fine," he stated, his tone less than convincing.

Kendra shrugged as she pulled the scalp down over the front of the face to remove the front quadrant where she would remove the brain and examine the frontal craniotomy.

Luke took slow breaths. "I'm okay. Don't worry about me. Continue on," he said, but with every word, his voice sounded faint.

Using a small power saw, Kendra cut into the skull and removed a wedge-shaped section. The brain exposed, she pulled it out of the skull and placed it on the autopsy table. She looked at him. "There's no need for you to stay for the rest. We're going to put her back together and get her ready for the funeral home."

Luke sensed more than heard the emotion in her voice, the first indication the woman had a heart.

"And I don't know about you, but I'm famished," she suddenly added.

Luke regarded her with incredulity. "You're kidding. After what you did here?"

"Once I'm finished I'm heading over to Patti's place. Want to join me?"

"No, I got stuff to do. I'm going back up to the crime scene area."

"Suit yourself."

"I'll grab something later," he said.

She stared at him. "When you've done your hundredth, you'll still act and respond the same way. For some it never gets easier."

Moments later, Luke opened the door leading to a back parking lot for Kendra. "What makes you think that it'll get more bearable? You certainly didn't look like you were going to lose any of your breakfast in there. And here you are off to eat one of Patti's all-you-can-eat specials."

"Low blood sugar," she rejoined. "If I don't get something in me soon, I'm flat on my face." She paused. "Look, you did fine in there. You came, you stayed, you stood, and you held on. No one can ask for more than that."

He glanced upward. The skies had turned gray as the sun struggled to come out. It was just as well, as it all fit his mood. Absently, he watched Kendra fish for keys in her purse and get into her vehicle. Before she shut the door, she looked up at him. "Look...it will get better. And we're going to catch this one." The determined look on her face should have made Luke feel better.

Instead, he glanced toward the direction of Crandall Lake. Answers were still in those woods waiting to be discovered. He snickered. All he fucking had to do was find them.

Chapter Five

Kendra pulled into the back parking lot of the Skillet Café. She had been at the lab longer than planned. She was used to losing track of time. There was always a case to work on. Losing track of life...her life. Lately it had all become habit.

Tall, slender, platinum blonde Patti Thompson greeted Kendra from behind the counter while holding a carafe of freshly brewed coffee.

"I hope you still have some of that meatloaf left," Kendra queried. "I'm starved and in need of comfort food."

"Knowing what goes on behind those walls, it's a wonder you have any appetite left," Patti commented as she wiped the counter in that hurried manner of hers and pocketed the previous customer's tip. Patti was a no-frills person, but still attractive enough to gain the attention of many of her male customers, both single and married.

"It's a job."

"A job? If I did what you have to do, I'd have a difficult time slicing into the slabs of roast beef back there."

Kendra stared at her for a moment. "Mm, I never thought of it that way. Although, I'll admit," she said, thinking back to a first encounter with cadavers in that anatomy class, "it's difficult at first. You learn to separate from it. Which is what I'm doing now, as soon as you deliver that damn meatloaf of yours, with that so-called 'secret' ingredient. Meantime, let's have a cup of that coffee this place is well known for."

Patti smiled. "Sure, no problem," and immediately poured her a mug full, some of which spilled over the sides.

Kendra took the mug from Patti's hand, and couldn't help think about the dead aide and how every morning she had seen that her grandmother got physical therapy to prevent atrophied muscles.

"I heard about this new case you got on your hands," Patti said, returning the carafe to its base.

"Word travels fast," Kendra mumbled, taking a quick sip of the steamy brew.

"C'mon, you know how the town is. Everyone's talking about the body they found up there by the lake, and it's got a lot of folks really spooked up...including *moi*. We all know where bodies end up...in your neck of the woods. I get shivers whenever I think about something like that happening so close to home."

"Remember, I live up in those same woods. Alone," Kendra pointed out. "But, hey, it keeps me gainfully employed."

Patti laughed. "I know I'm always complaining about how boring this town gets, duller than some of my used razor blades and one ex-boyfriend." She suddenly slapped Kendra's order onto the counter behind her for the short-order cook. "Anthony will have it ready in a minute." Then coming closer to Kendra, Patti said, "I'm going to find me the right man. Yep, got me a laptop, and a friend of mine helped me get hooked up to the Internet."

Kendra stared at her, clutching her mug. "Is that right? You don't mean you signed up on one of those online dating sites...you know...romance dot com...affairs dot com, get your bootie here dot com?" She chuckled.

"Don't knock it until you've tried it," Patti rejoined, then bent over, elbows on the counter. "And let me tell you, I have never had so much fun with this cyber stuff. Not since finding out that cars had backseats for more than sitting." She straightened. "Hell of a lot better than the bar scene, which gets pretty tiring. I was getting to be a damn fixture down there at The Cavern...and at Jay Jay's. One can only take so much country western for Christ's sake. They're all probably wondering if I left town." She laughed. "But now I'm enjoying myself right in the comfort of my home."

"So have you met anyone off these sites?" Kendra had to ask.

"I just got started. I get lots of e-mails, and I spend a lot of time chatting. See, you chat for a while, then you get them to call you, to chat on the phone, then you meet them in a safe public place. And if it clicks, all the better. If not, you move on to the next. No moss growing under these feet, for sure."

"Mm, sounds like you have a pretty efficient system going there," Kendra commented, unable to disguise a sliver of rising doubt in her voice.

"It ain't perfect, because online you still got your weirdos and don't really know who you're talking to. So it can get a little hairy, but, hey, no different than being out there in that meat market searching for Mr. Right --"

"Any of that lemon meringue pie left?" a familiar male voice shouted from the doorway.

Kendra turned slightly. "Glad to see you got your appetite back," she shouted back to Luke Sloane.

Luke gave a half smile. "Yeah, well I'm glad that last one's done and over with. So, did your woman's intuition prove out right?" He immediately sat down beside her at the counter.

Kendra knew he was talking about the pregnancy test. "Tests confirmed my hunch...that she was," keeping her voice low so as not to let out evidence that could leak out to others. Yet, she also knew despite all precaution, stuff like that managed to get into the public domain. "Which provides at least a motive," she added. "After I'm done here, I'm heading to the nursing home and checking in with my grandmother, then home to flip on the TV and spend the rest of the night watching Nickelodeon reruns."

Luke stared at her. "Can't imagine you doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Vegging out on Nickelodeon. I only see a woman bent over a microscope, looking for trace evidence."

"Yeah, well wipe that image from your mind. We got people at the lab doing that better than I do. Sitting behind a microscope actually makes me dizzy. Ever done it? It's like being on a boat, all these things floating around. Can actually make you seasick."

Kendra turned to Patti, smiled, and looked down at the plate that contained a thick slice of meatloaf nestled against two large dollops of mashed potatoes and creamed corn -- the epitome of comfort food -- "Ah, this will hit the spot."

Luke liked what he was seeing: a woman who enjoyed her food, as if Kendra Bettencourt with her petite five-feet-three-inch frame needed to count calories. She couldn't have weighed more than one hundred pounds. He surmised she would have no trouble wolfing down that plate of food with the energy she generated.

"Did you get a place yet?" Patti suddenly asked Kendra, simultaneously placing a huge slice of her famous lemon meringue pie in front of Luke.

"I haven't had a chance to look around yet."

"You don't mean you're still living out of that tin can your grandfather left behind?" Patti asked.

"It isn't so bad...not really," she responded, her voice less than convincing. Better than living inside the house with those images that now stayed locked in her mind.

"Not so bad?" Patti shook her head. "I cannot imagine living in that thing day in and day out. Plus I'd be afraid, especially now with what's happening around here."

"Afraid?" Kendra shook her head. "No different from living in a regular house."

"Still," Patti went on. "There are lunatics out there. Obviously, there's a killer among us. Maybe the murderer is one of our own, living right here in this town."

"Who said anyone got murdered? Yes, I know Rhonda's death is suspicious, but we haven't confirmed yet that it's murder. Anyway, I've got Sam."

"Sam's a mutt. And I'm not sure mutts know what to do in circumstances like that," Luke mumbled between bites of his pie.

Kendra turned toward him. "He's one damn fine dog. Hell, he won the ugliest dog contest at last year's local fair. He's half-Shepherd, half-Doberman; I even think there's some Pit Bull in there. He'd make mincemeat out of anyone who came into that thing without my permission."

"I hope you don't always keep him locked up in that tin can. Don't seem right," Luke complained suddenly.

"He's fine where he is. I'm guessing he's a lot better off than where he was inside that damn animal shelter. I had him running out earlier today, and we'll do it again when I get home tonight. What's the difference between keeping him in a regular house and where I keep him now? And he's got that large pen to stay inside when it's nice out. Plus, I don't hear him complaining," Kendra went on, hating to find herself on the defense over a damn dog.

"Nothing's wrong with that," Luke rejoined. "But you know if you're looking for a place, I know one you could probably rent. I'm not sure about the dog, but the landlord might go for it."

"Yeah, where's this place?"

"Center of town, actually, right across the street from this café. There's an apartment right over The Book Nook that is vacant. The Wilcoxes used to rent the third apartment, but Maddie and Wally are planning to move into that assisted living community."

Kendra turned and looked out the window. "You mean over the karate studio and bookstore?"

"It's not so bad there. The owner has done a lot of renovating. There might be a dance studio coming in if my sister's friend likes those units. You might want to look at that third vacancy."

"Think he'll let Sam in? I don't go anywhere without Sam. And I surely don't want him ending up inside any cage like he was when he was inside that shelter. At least he doesn't mind the fenced-in run I made for him."

"I don't know," Luke said. "Worth looking at and asking."

He studied her; Kendra Bettencourt was a woman more like him. Not looking to get hooked up with anyone. A woman so focused on her work she probably couldn't imagine room for anyone else.

"Your mind looks like it just traveled a million miles away," Patti declared, refilling Luke's cup with more steaming coffee. He never had to ask for more. She was always there, ready to refill his cup.

A quirky smile followed. "Probably has -- like who's dumping bodies in this town?"

"Any leads?" Kendra asked. "And so far we're talking only one body dumped."

"I have a few possible leads. I might go over to that nursing home as well to see what I come up with. You say that your grandmother is there?" he said, a hint of sympathy in his voice.

"Yes, she's in rehab. Once she's back on her feet, I'm taking her home with me."

"Didn't she sell the farm?" Patti interrupted.

"Not yet. It's on the market, but she can still live there until it's sold," Kendra explained. "Farms don't sell all that fast in today's market. People are looking more for single-family homes with not that much land, or investment properties that they can rent. Still, if it does sell, it's hard to think it won't be in the family anymore, but what with costs that health insurance doesn't cover...there's no other way."

"Sometimes we need to do what we need to do," Luke said. "Especially when life gives us few good choices."

"You are certainly full of wisdom today, Luke," Patti said, suppressing a grin. "Either that, or all that sugar from that piece of pie's gone to your brain."

Luke shot her a look.

Kendra pushed the almost empty plate of food to one side. "That's enough for me. You always give extra portions, Patti. If I ate this whole thing, I'd have to buy a whole new wardrobe several sizes larger."

Patti laughed. "I don't ever want anyone saying they walked away hungry."

Luke laughed. "That's probably the least of your worries." He pushed his empty plate toward her. Then looked at Kendra. "Ready to get going?"

She merely nodded, gathered her purse, and opened it.

"Let me," Luke offered.

She looked up. "No...I couldn't."

"Why?"

"You and I are working on this case. We're not dating. It would make me feel uncomfortable. We need to keep a certain professionalism in place."

Luke stared at her for a quick moment and nodded. "Suit yourself," he said and immediately paid for his pie, then walked out of the café toward his car.

Kendra followed and got into the SUV. Suddenly, an unlikely thought invaded her mind. Together. She and Lucas Sloane together.

She had nothing against having sex with the man. He was the sexiest thing she'd known in a long time. But emotions screwed everything up. Someone once told her that once you have sex with a man, certain hormones are released, and suddenly you're connected in a way you hadn't planned. And that could cause complications. If he turned out to be a bastard, you're stuck on a roller-coaster ride that could have your stomach turning

upside-down. And she sure as hell didn't need her stomach doing somersaults over any fucking man, hormones or not.

Sloane looked like a man who knew exactly what to do behind bedroom doors, who catered to a woman's fantasies. But he wasn't the kind of man a woman needed to get emotionally involved with. Sex she could enjoy with Sloane. She damn well knew how to please a man. Wasn't shy about what to say to a man, letting him know what pleased her.

But love? Love she wasn't looking for, especially with a man like Sloane. Love would never come again for her -- not as long as she took another breath on this earth. Love produced a pain that at times became unbearable...intolerable.

You love them, and then they disappeared from your life. And they leave you with this relentless longing, a hunger that bordered on a form of cruel torture.

And since she wasn't into that kind of masochism, she damn fucking well wasn't going to put herself through that again with any man.

Chapter Six

Danny Tyler pulled the secondhand Honda into the pebbled driveway. Although it was going on four years, at times he still couldn't get accustomed to the fact that his father no longer lived with them. Things hadn't been going too well between him and his father, and it was one of the reasons why he had chosen to spend most of his summers with his grandparents in the Napa Valley region of California. Except this coming summer he planned to stay put in Canterville, mostly at his mother's request.

"Hey, Danny, what do you want on your hamburger?" his mother, Maureen Donatelli, shouted from a back deck.

"The usual," Danny shouted back, hoping it would include onions, pickles, and a slab of American cheese. His mother tended to forget at least one of those items every time.

Through a large, back kitchen window, he spotted her, an attractive woman in her late thirties, wearing something denim, spatula in one hand, worrying over the gas grill. His mother had a way of worrying, and at times, it tended to get on his nerves. But he also understood a single woman with a teenage son took on a lot. Especially those things his father should be in charge of, like igniting a gas grill. At the beginning of every season, she would ask Danny to show her.

Yeah, he knew it wasn't an easy world for a woman to be alone. Dusk was falling, and it felt like rain. Which was good, he thought, considering the dry winter and spring they had been having.

Maureen smiled at her son as he walked out onto the deck to join her, a can of soda in hand.

"How was school today?" Maureen asked absently, as she flipped a hamburger.

"It wasn't bad. I got this great science class. They had someone in from the state lab, a forensic pathologist, and she talked about dead bodies."

Maureen made a face. "Mm, certainly sounds interesting...though I'm not sure I would enjoy it."

"Actually," he began, reaching over for a slice of what he guessed would be low-fat cheese, "she was very interesting. She works in the medical examiner's office. She's one of the Assistant ME's. Works in the morgue -- where they do autopsies -- and knows a lot about dead people."

"I suppose she sees them too," Maureen said, remembering the video they had both watched the night before.

"Maybe she does," Danny considered. "Dr. Bettencourt seems to know her stuff. She's got me considering going into that area."

"What? You? Working with dead people? Danny, you don't even like dead bugs. You're always looking under your bed to make sure there're no spiders crawling around."

"I'm doing pretty good in biology," he went on, ignoring her comment, knowing entomology wouldn't be a favorite subject. "I don't mind dissecting. I figure I probably wouldn't mind doing what Dr. Bettencourt does, especially when they find a body...and then doing those autopsies. Which is probably what she's doing now with Rhonda Woods."

Maureen stacked several cooked hamburgers onto a clean plate, and alongside the dish, placed a package of rolls with them. "I don't envy her or her job," she said. "And for you to go into that area is a major decision on your part. It will mean getting into all that pathology stuff. You'll need to go to medical school, and it may require a lot more education than a regular doctor goes through."

Danny knew what his mother was saying was true. Four years of medical school, one year of medical internship, four years of pathology residency, one or two years of forensic pathology fellowship. He'd already discussed the possibility of going that route with his guidance counselor, who told him to think about it. And he was deciding it was an area he wanted to pursue.

"It may take longer to become a forensic pathologist than just a regular doctor because you would need to know all the legal implications in your work," his mother went on. "And do you really want to get caught up in that law enforcement/legalese stuff like your father? Look what it did to his life."

"I could become a forensic pathology technician," he told her. "That only requires a high school diploma." Even though he tried to change the subject, Danny also knew his mother wasn't one to let up, and once she got on the subject of his father, why they had divorced, she was certainly not going to quit. He had opened the umpteenth can of worms. It seemed whatever went on in their lives, it somehow always led back to his parents and what was going on with the two of them. His father, Josh Tyler, was known to want Danny to follow in his footsteps, either helping him run the karate studio or entering the police academy. "I've been doing well in all my science and math classes," he told her.

His mother nodded. "I know that, and if this is what you want..."

"I know medical school won't come cheap," Danny went on. "You think Dad will go for it? He said he would help out with college costs. Plus, I can always apply for scholarships. And since I'm working part-time now at Manheim's Funeral Home..."

Sighing, she said, "Danny, I don't know why on earth you want to work there. Maddie is always looking for people to help Wally stock their shelves."

Danny took a bite out of his hamburger. "Hey, it's one way to get used to being around..." He paused, seemingly hesitant to say it.

"I know," she began. "Dead people." She looked at her own hamburger and held it for a moment. "I suppose that's a logical approach, though I have to say this conversation has taken on a somewhat bizarre tone. Next thing you'll tell me you want to enroll in mortuary school...bury people for a living."

"Nothing wrong with that. I hear they do quite well and never go out of business," a male voice interjected.

They both looked up. A tall man, quite handsome, wearing faded jeans and a white shirt beneath a burgundy sweater appeared, seemingly from nowhere.

"Hi, Bruce," Maureen greeted. "This is my son, Danny. And don't you go encouraging him to become a funeral director."

"Hi, Danny," Bruce Braddock greeted him.

Danny looked puzzled at first, but knew that his mother had been dating for a while, so it wasn't unexpected that someone new would appear at the house.

"Hi," Danny offered, his voice lacking some enthusiasm.

"Bruce and I are going to start a catering business together," Maureen said, ignoring the surprised look her words evoked from her son.

"A catering business? You? But you don't really cook...I mean, you..."

"I have other talents. I'm good at drumming up business. I know a lot of people in town, and I'll be able to line up clients for the business. Isn't that right, Bruce?"

Bruce nodded, sat opposite Danny at the table, and reached over for one of the hamburgers and buns. As he assembled them he said, "Yes." He looked over at Danny. "Your mother and I have a lot in common. We're both creative, and when it comes to food, I excel in that area. She excels in the planning."

"We may already have an assignment," Maureen interrupted. "I was talking to Maddie Wilcox this morning, and she's setting up a book signing with Alicia Powers, who just completed a book on vegetarian cooking. A nice buffet would bring in the locals."

"See, your mother works fast," Braddock declared.

Danny shifted uneasily, smiled, and suddenly needed to be out of there. He wasn't naïve. Braddock was a handsome man, and his mom was a good-looking woman, and the way they were ogling each other made his stomach churn. It had been difficult enough to

accept his mother's dating other men, but knowing that she was probably "with" other men made him wish he stayed in California the entire year with his grandparents. But he was there. And he would make the most of it.

He had to wonder how these two had even met. He hadn't seen this guy around. He would check it out with his dad. Maybe he could find something on this guy. Danny's intuition told him something wasn't quite right here.

He'd lost his appetite for the hamburger, but knew if he didn't finish, his mother would give him the third degree later.

He forced the rest of the hamburger down, suddenly glad that medical school was going to take as long as it would if Bruce Braddock found his way into his mother's heart and life. Even mortuary school would be better than putting up with this crap.

He suddenly pictured Bruce Braddock filled with toxic chemicals from containers lined up inside that back prep room and then laid out inside one of Manheim's caskets, one specifically made for cremation. Yeah, he thought bemusedly, a simple shake and bake, no wake, no services for this one. Thinking about it, he started on a second hamburger.

Chapter Seven

Luke flipped through the entries of copious notes he had so far taken on this case. Over the past several years there had been an increase in new housing construction around the Crandall Lake area. Josh had purchased some of the available land himself and was in the process of building a two-story dwelling along the south shore. Rhonda's body was discovered on the north side in a higher elevation. He had been conducting a door-to-door sweep since early that morning, searching for someone, anyone, who might have seen something, or detected anything, that might help him pin down the hows, and more importantly, why Rhonda Woods had ended up where she did. He had to get out there while things were fresh in people's minds. He was still waiting for the autopsy report, which he knew would only confirm what they all knew. This was probably a homicide.

Eyewitnesses were known to be unreliable. But he needed to try to gently pull memories out without distorting what was there.

He also knew many wouldn't be able to tell him what went on in their own backyards, let alone anything that might have happened in the secluded spot where they found the body. If they hadn't received that phone call from Dolinski, and if those dogs hadn't discovered her when they did, Woods's body would still be out there, days later, weeks later, possibly years later. It had happened to Roger Davies, and some still remained doubtful that the recently found skeletal remains were his.

Luke needed to know who frequented this area, an area not easily traversed either on foot or using an all-terrain vehicle. Who belonged there? There were hikers, hunters, and those living in nearby farmhouses or in the newly constructed housing. The spring and summer months brought plenty of activity to the lake. Yet, as far as he could recall, no past criminal activity had occurred recently in that section. That made him assume the perp chose the spot for its isolation.

Was it someone familiar with the location? Or was it merely a random act? Did he think they wouldn't find the body so soon, had hoped for decomposition to occur first?

Luke fought his rising angst. It had been bad enough watching Kendra perform that autopsy on a body that was still intact, but to do it on a decomp...no way could he have kept any amount of breakfast down that morning, liquid or otherwise.

"Hey, Lukasz, how you doing? Did you catch that killer yet?" Old man Dolinski, who'd lived longer, Luke knew, than any other person in the area, was coming toward him. He'd been told Olez was convinced Rhonda's death was the result of foul play.

"Not yet, Olez, but I bet you can tell me more about what you were doing out there last Friday night. Did you see or hear any strange goings-on? How about those hunting dogs of yours? Did they find anything else? Something out of the ordinary? Maybe bring it home?"

Olez tugged his black knitted cap off his shaven head, scratched the back of his head, and then pulled the cap back on. "Don't recall anything different that night. Me and Edmond, Edmond Cutler, were out there night fishing, and I remember the wind coming up quick, could hear it howling through the trees, at times sounding like a freight train. Gets pretty blustery up here. That's when my dogs started getting jumpy, couldn't quiet them down. So before the neighbors complained, Edmond went home, and I let them out for a run. I remember spotting a couple of SUVs, one parked by the old fairgrounds. Didn't think much of it, though. People always coming down there at night -- especially Friday nights -- you know, young teenagers parking. These woods get pretty dark and shadowy when nighttime comes. If there's no moonlight reflecting down, you can't see the back of your hand."

Luke jotted down more notes. "Think you might recognize any of those SUVs you mentioned? Did you by any chance get a license plate number? Recall the year? Make?"

Olez suddenly looked upward into the branches of a tree as if he would find one of the answers up there. "Come to think of it, one was a Ford Bronco, dark in color, not white like that one that Simpson fellow probably got away with in his murder case."

Luke laughed. "Yeah, I guess he never did get very far, did he?"

"Considering how that case turned out, I don't think it matters none now."

Luke shook his head and laughed again. "Anything else?"

"I wish I could help you out, but this aging brain of mine, it don't readily work as well or as fast as it used to. Lately, I'm lucky if I can remember my own name or what I ate this morning. Come to think of it, not sure what that was. Probably leftovers...one of Patti's specials. Sure do love that meatloaf of hers. I can eat it any time of the day." He chuckled.

Luke merely smiled. "Yeah, she makes a mean meatloaf. That's okay, Olez. You've given me enough, more than what I've gotten from most around here. But if you recall anything else, you either call me or come right down to the station. You know Rose always

has a good coffee brewing, and if you hit it on the right day, Krispy Kreme donuts to go with that coffee.”

“I sure will, Lukasz,” he said, preferring the Polish form of Luke’s name. “If something else comes to mind, I’ll be sure to let you know. I don’t know if this has anything to do with anything,” Olez suddenly started, “but last year there were some fellows out here, walking about. I remember because my dogs got all worked up. They don’t particularly like strangers nosing around.”

Luke reopened his notebook. “And why do you think they were out there?”

“Heard rumors someone was thinking of building some kind of facility in this section. Some were saying maybe a new cemetery...or what they use to burn bodies...a crematorium.” He paused. “That’s going to bring up some memories for me.”

Luke knew Olez had family who had died in the ovens at Auschwitz during World War II. Luke knew the years never erased those kinds of memories.

“I think zoning laws may prevent that from happening,” Olez went on. “I won’t mind the cemetery, those kind of neighbors wouldn’t be giving anyone problems. They stay nice and quiet.” He smiled and then suddenly chuckled. “A crematorium, on the other hand,” he paused, shaking his head, “not something I want too near me. Don’t mean no disrespect by it.”

“It’s understandable, considering,” Luke said. “Thanks, Olez. I don’t want to hold you up.”

Olez nodded, called his dogs, and as Luke looked on, they soon disappeared back into the woods.

Meantime, Luke jotted down the rest of Olez’s comments and walked over to the area still cordoned off with yellow crime tape. They had searched the crime scene via the circle method, ensuring that every inch from a fixed focal point had been covered. Orange flags remained in place, eerily signaling spots that might still help put some of the puzzle pieces together. Scattered leaves covered the ground. The dry winter now predicted a drier spring. Lakes and ponds were seriously low, as was the nearby reservoir, giving concern to a lot of folks. The fire index was already at a high level.

Lately, the days had been mostly sunny and dry. A piece of crumpled paper caught Luke’s eye. Hooked to a branch, it fluttered helplessly in the breeze. He picked it off the branch, wondered if it meant something, if it could provide yet one more piece to the puzzle.

How it got there he couldn’t say. He could only assume it had blown in after the scene had been processed. State lab techs were known for their thorough, methodical ways; usually nothing got past them. Luke studied it and realized it was a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication. Parts of where the name would be had gotten torn off. Did it belong to Rhonda? Had she suffered some form of anxiety disorder, which he suspected was common in the field she worked? Luke wondered if the woman had died from fright, vulnerable to the elements and to whatever torment she had been forced to tolerate that night. But perhaps he

was imagining that. He remembered Kendra's description of the cause of death -- strangulation, possibly through autoerotic asphyxiation.

He took a small plastic bag and placed the paper into the bag, sealed it, and labeled it. He'd get it to forensics to see if they could make anything further out of it.

He looked around some more. The techs had done a pretty good job. He could see the lake from where he stood, yards away. He remembered the times he and his buddies boated out there, held all night parties out there. Lugging those kegs of beer down to the edge of the water at night, and drinking too much, until local authorities came and put a halt to their goings-on.

He chuckled. When had he become the "authority," the spoiler of good fun?

He and Josh used to swim out to the middle of the lake, to a floating raft, sitting there talking about what they were going to do with their lives. One night, they decided on law enforcement. Why not, Josh said -- uniforms turned women on. They had already been involved in the martial arts, had taken lessons at the local dojo for a number of years. Yeah, he and Josh shared good memories.

This wasn't the place to be finding bodies -- not the place for any woman to be found dead of either natural or suspicious causes.

A sudden chill went through him. It was damn lonely here, desolate. He felt isolated -- who would even care if they found his body out here.

Suddenly, he wondered about Kendra. She was heading over to the nursing home. He didn't like thinking about her too much, but lately he couldn't get her out of his mind. He'd known her for a while, but only professionally, and could never really recall any physical reaction on his part. But lately, he'd been having dreams about her and him...together...and fantasizing about her and him together. He had never seen her naked, but his imagination had her small, firm body fitting perfectly against his.

Luke gave the area one more look-over, knowing the yellow crime tape would eventually have to be removed. There was a connection here between the land, the body, and if his hunch was right, the killer. The story just waited to be told. And he was damn sure listening.

Chapter Eight

Hands placed on broad, well-padded hips, Maddie Wilcox stood in the doorway. Glaring sunlight streamed in through a back window at the far end of the room, its rays spilling over onto burgundy comforters of several twin beds.

Colorful birthday and holiday cards decorated two of three bureaus, along with happy face photos of children and grandchildren who seldom visited the residents of Manheim Convalescent and Health Center.

Maddie's nose twitched slightly as she caught the subtle odor of urine mixed with a strong antiseptic smell found prevalent in most nursing homes.

Norman Mindel, Maddie's elder brother, sat tucked into a chrome and black wheelchair positioned at the back of the room. He faced a small-screen TV. Slightly hunched over, leaning precariously to one side, he didn't bother looking up when his sister entered the room. He was probably still angry with her. Only she could be blamed for putting him into a place where he now spent the remainder of his days as well as nights.

"When are you getting me the hell out of this damn place?" Norman sputtered, still not looking at her, his eyes seemingly glued to the flickering screen.

"When you do what they tell you to do," Maddie responded, her impatience clearly evident. "And don't think I don't know how you've been giving them a hard time of it."

"What do you know?" he mumbled, shifting in his seat, his eyes now directed to the floor. "You're never around here anymore."

"I'm here enough to know that you've been balking on that physical therapy they need to give you. Every time the therapist comes up to work with you, you tell her you don't feel up to it. As long as you keep up with that attitude, you stubborn old fool" -- desperation now more evident in her voice -- "you're not leaving this place."

Norman finally glanced up, but still not directly at her. "I don't have to do anything they tell me here," he croaked, and waved a fragile hand, as if he could dismiss her as easily.

"No, you certainly don't, but as long as you don't cooperate, you're staying put," Maddie repeated, feeling like one of Wally's vintage LPs, where the needle got stuck in its groove.

Norman was a stubborn old mule, she thought, and wouldn't it serve him right if he ended up rotting in this place, which was the last thing she wanted for him. At one time he had looked after her, his baby sister. Now that the roles were reversed, he wasn't making it easy for any of them.

Suddenly, a commotion sounded across the hallway.

"That's Grace Bettencourt spouting off again," Norman said matter-of-factly. "Don't pay no attention to her, 'cause she does that all day long. Gets her some attention."

Maddie squinted toward the doorway and spotted two nurse's aides gathering around Grace's bed.

"Hell, she's always fussing about something," Norman went on. "Always telling someone off. It's a wonder someone doesn't shut her up for good."

"I guess she has a right, considering," Maddie responded. "Someday we're all going to end up in places like this, and that's all we'll have left to do...our sputtering and our fussing." Maddie noticed the younger woman wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt standing within the gathering circle of caregivers. The young woman turned and caught Maddie's eye and waved.

"Hi, Maddie," Kendra called out and was soon walking over, carrying a large shopping bag. "Gram's read all of these," she said. "I was going to bring them over to your store later."

Maddie peered into the bag filled with paperbacks. "I'll save you the trip."

Kendra let out a sigh and whispered, "I think Gram's reading too many mystery novels. It's got her brain going in all directions. She's starting not to make sense."

Maddie's ears perked up. "Why do you say that, dear?" she said, taking the bag from her.

"All morning she's been telling me there's a conspiracy going on in this place and that she's the next victim. I can understand her fear after what happened to poor Rhonda. I tried to calm her down, but the more I tried, the more agitated she became, telling me that no one's listening, and people are disappearing from here."

Maddie gave a slight shrug. "I don't know anything about people disappearing, but considering what this place is, and its residents, no one stays too long here, especially when you think most of them are in the last phase of life." Maddie lowered her voice. "I've had to accept the possibility that my brother Norm won't be leaving here, at least not alive. He's got so many things wrong with him, and Wally and I are too damn old to give him proper care anymore. I don't like sounding morbid, but from what you see here, that next trip is either into the morgue where you work or straight to Manheim's."

Maddie Wilcox pulled no punches and despite the morose conversation, Kendra couldn't prevent a smile. "No, Maddie, Gram really thinks someone is committing evil acts here. I'm well aware that her mind isn't what it once was, but she's convinced and has me starting to wonder."

"I think from now on we'll get her romance novels to read," Maddie suggested. "Then again, she may think everyone's involved in some clandestine love affair." She chuckled.

"Yeah, probably," Kendra responded. "Gram and her overactive imagination. Married to a private investigator all those years didn't help, I'm sure."

"I remember your grandfather well," Maddie said. "That retired old detective could never put away that magnifying glass of his, thinking something was getting past him. He'd come in and talk up a storm with Wally. They'd go over cold cases...piece together pieces that didn't quite fit. Your grandfather really had this thing about the Davies case, never believing the boy simply ran off like most people believed."

"Yes, I know," she said, her throat tightening reminded of how her grandfather couldn't let go of anything once he suspected foul play was involved. Her husband, Holt, was almost as bad, relentless in putting those puzzles together, especially the ones that stubbornly refused to fit.

Before her marriage to Holt, soon after her father's death, her paternal grandparents had taken her in. For a time they lived in the upper part of New York State before moving back to Canterville. After her grandfather's and Holt's deaths, a dangerous fall placed Grace Bettencourt into the Manheim facility. Frank Bettencourt had kept that small RV on the farm, where Kendra now stayed. Unable to stay inside the farmhouse, it was enough, and in its own way a reminder that life with Holt was forever gone, destroyed by fate's cruel acts.

"I better bring her some of those romances before she drives everyone crazy," Kendra said, yanking herself out of her thoughts.

According to Grace, relatives were hiring hit men to kill off elderly aunts, uncles, and grandparents who hadn't been wise enough to protect their assets. Both ludicrous and plausible, Kendra thought.

"Grandma needs a life," she said out loud. Uncharacteristically, Maddie said nothing and stared at her.

"She comes up with these diabolical plots that are supposedly taking place here." She required round the clock care, and it wasn't feasible for a working granddaughter who had to be out in the field determining time and cause of death. Knowing she was doing the best she could for her still didn't lessen any of the guilt.

"I better get going," Kendra said.

"I guess things are keeping you busy," Maddie said. Kendra knew she meant the Woods case.

“Yes,” she responded, unwilling to discuss what could have possibly occurred out by the lake.

Maddie seemed to understand, but merely nodded and returned to her brother’s side.

Moments later Kendra left the nursing home. A pale afternoon sky greeted her. A scattering of dark clouds had started to move in. It felt like rain, welcomed by most, and it reminded her of a poem. *The sky is darkening like stain, something is going to fall like rain, and it won’t be flowers.* A poem she’d probably learned in some lit class, its author W.H. Auden, and for some unexplored reason the words now came to mind.

She hoped the rain would hold until they fully processed the Woods crime scene. The rain would wash away anything left, anything that still waited to be discovered. That’s not the way anyone should leave the world, she thought, not like that -- so alone, abandoned. Except Rhonda might not have been alone, and if this was a murder, her murderer might have stayed with her, stood there, getting his perverted thrill watching while she took that last breath. Some kill their victims, return to the scene, needing to relive the high. Some dumped bodies in areas they were familiar with, and that was why Luke said he suspected it was someone from the area who knew the terrain.

She tugged at her sweatshirt, pulling the bottom of it down, at the same time pushing images of the dying woman back to a distant part of her mind.

Occupational hazard, she mused, knowing that in her profession death images became her constant companion. It was similar to living with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, where without rhyme or reason images could play out whenever and wherever.

She planned to stop by the lab later, finish up some blood tests, and go home. She thought of the RV located on that patch of land nestled between tall spruces that helped shield it from a glaring afternoon sun.

Some called her eccentric for living inside that thing, especially since she could still occupy and enjoy the comforts of the large farmhouse.

At thirty-five, she didn’t particularly care what anyone thought...not anymore. Nor did she particularly care where she lived. She needed nothing more than what she had, although lately hating to admit to it, she had felt some restlessness.

She attributed the restlessness to the fact she hadn’t enjoyed sex in a while, not since she and that young recruit from New York decided to “get it on” during that one hot summer night.

A mere fling, short term, no commitment, definitely no possible relationship there. He had been okay with it. So had she. It wasn’t something she wanted, needed, or sought. It simply helped to fill a void.

As she made her way through the center of Canterville, she spotted the overhead sign of the Skillet Café where they served that comfort food all year long. She recalled the meatloaf she enjoyed the other day, Patti’s specialty.

It was the kind of food that made anyone okay with the world, as long as they weren't counting calories. When she pulled into the parking lot, she noticed Sloane's car parked outside. The man was a definite distraction in more ways than one. Then again, she hadn't enjoyed sex in quite a while.

He reminded her of that dark side...enjoying that dark side with someone the likes of Sloane. Absently, she licked her lips, ignored the rising heat of anticipation, and pulled into the back parking lot.

Chapter Nine

Allwoman4u: Hello, Starfire. I read your profile. I like what I read. I'm also looking for fun.

Starfire: Hi. Thanks. What did u like about my profile?

Allwoman4u: Let's say you're a guy who's up front with what you're looking for. u tell it like it is. You're a man who knows what he wants. And since we're adults and enjoy certain things...

Starfire: That tells me u and I are on the same wavelength. That's a start. I see you're divorced. How long?

Allwoman4u: Long enough to know what I want now. LOL

Starfire: What DO u want?

Allwoman4u: A man! Not a boy. There are a lot of boys in my town who think they are men. I want a man I can enjoy. A man not afraid to try new things.

Starfire: Mm...That presents possibilities all very intriguing. I think we should get through the preliminaries and meet ASAP!

Allwoman4u: I totally agree. I live in Canterville. Do u know where that is?

Starfire: That's not far from here. How about we schedule to meet at the end of the week?

Allwoman4u: I can manage that.

Starfire: Sounds good. Where do u suggest?

Allwoman4u: There are some nice discreet restaurants off the interstate. We could meet at any one of them.

Starfire: Sounds like a plan.

Allwoman4u: Okay, then, say let's meet at Sam's Coffee House? That's convenient for me.

Starfire: I know where that is. Plan on late Friday afternoon. That way we can take our time and get to know each other.

Allwoman4u: I'm sure we'll have fun doing it.

Starfire: I have no doubt about it. I have to run. I'm looking forward to meeting u. If things go well with us, don't go making make plans for the rest of the night.

Allwoman4u: LOL Mm, it all sounds so promising. I'll leave the night open. Bye.

* * * * *

He enjoyed the chatting, the bantering, and certainly the sexual innuendoes, which moved fantasies beyond the realm of possibility into the probability. It took him out of his present reality.

It put him into a place that possessed a darker side than these women planned for or even bargained for. This one talked about pushing the envelope. He knew about pushing that envelope, pushing it far enough to the point of no return.

"Mr. Manheim, you called for me?" Danny Tyler asked softly from the doorway.

Martin took in a deep breath, forced to return to his present surroundings. He immediately signed off the site and shut the computer down. "Yes, I did."

"I just got back from the nursing home. That place sure has lost a few patients this past month," Danny commented.

"They're called residents," Martin corrected. "Once they get past these doors, then they're no longer residents, they become the deceased, the loved ones -- to us, the cadavers, dead bodies, retorts," he added, his voice relatively emotionless.

A solemn expression covered Danny's face. "Yeah, I know. I remember. Still, it's kind of sad."

"Yes, well, everything about this business is sad," Martin mimicked, his face completely devoid of any expression. "There's nothing about working with dead bodies that has anyone dancing a jig. You've worked here long enough; you should know it changes one's perspective on things."

Danny looked at him, saying nothing.

"You'll find there's not much in life worth sweating over. Nothing in life worth worrying about. And if there're some things you really want to do, want to enjoy, do them now. Because the longer you wait, you may never get around to doing any of it later. We're all here on borrowed time. You'll simply end up here."

Danny remained silent, uncertain how to respond.

"You're young still. You got a lot of years ahead...but even then, at some point you'll realize they go pretty fast. Our time here is just a blip on the screen like the cursor on this monitor. Think of it. Every time it blinks that's one human life. We're all a blink in the universe."

Danny could only nod, and Martin could only grin, knowing the boy would need time to assimilate what he'd just been told.

"I need you to take the van and do another pick-up, this one from the morgue," Martin said, finally addressing the reason for summoning him.

Danny's eyes lit up, which Martin thought was unusual for anyone, considering most made a face instead to demonstrate their squeamishness at having to go into a place like that fooled no one as to what was happening behind its closed doors.

"I just hope the autopsy they probably had to do on that one wasn't too extensive," Martin said. "I have to shoot the juice before the family arrives late this afternoon. Takes much longer when they go through that procedure."

Danny winced.

Martin regarded him for a moment, understanding. "You'll get used to the lingo."

"I'm not so sure, Mr. Manheim. Don't get me wrong; most of it makes sense. Still --"

"Yeah, I know what you're saying...as long as you don't know them. It's the ones you know. Those are the hardest."

Martin smiled, thinking the boy was a good worker. He knew when to keep his mouth shut...when not to...and appeared to have an interest in learning the business. It helped when these new ones showed at least a curiosity for what they did at Manheim.

Past employees over the years didn't stay long, demonstrating it took a special person who would choose to stay in the business for any length of time. That's why he suspected Audrey stayed on as long as she had. She had a natural ability for it. No matter how distraught survivors were, she never failed to provide them strength to help them through the entire process. She had come to be an invaluable employee.

Danny might prove the same after a time, either that or join the ranks where he ended up putting Manheim Funeral Home on a resume under the heading of Past Employment.

"I better get going. Hopefully they're through by the time I get over there," Danny said, referring to the morgue personnel. "If so, then you'll have time to...shoot the juice." He attempted a smile.

* * * * *

At least the job was never boring, Danny mused, as he readied himself for this next transport. Before leaving for the morgue, he decided to take a shortcut through the embalming room, AKA the prep room. Despite the warning sign, he figured he had as much right behind that prep room door as any other employee who worked at Manheim.

As soon as he entered the room, smells of chemicals and decay caused something to rise from the middle of his heart. He should have felt nausea, he thought, instead he felt an explicable sense of sadness and pity, even some reverence.

On two of the six tables lay bodies, each covered with a sheet. A third had already been prepared, dressed, and placed in a casket, which lay open. Whether it was his imagination, there was an eerie smile, a knowing smile on the old woman's face -- a reminder of his own mortality. She looked like, if he took the time to listen, she would tell Danny what it was now like on that other side. As if she wanted to tell him all was well with her, and it wasn't so bad after all.

Part of one sheet had dropped away, partially exposing parts of yellowish-white skin of one of the cadavers.

Cadavers. He needed to get used to these terms -- cadavers. Especially if this was the road he would eventually be taking.

They were dead bodies that would never wake again, cry again, or tell their story. Someday, he might as a forensic pathologist do that for them.

Two had been ones he had transported from the nursing home -- frail old folks whose last journey would soon end. It made him feel a helluva lot older -- putting him into a place where he knew most of his friends never thought much about. None of his friends addressed the subject of what happened to dead bodies. The thought evoked a snicker. Wouldn't he be able to tell them a thing or two?

Death hid itself in these places.

A fast learner Martin called him -- a rare compliment -- and suggested that Danny start an apprenticeship, letting him know that he was gaining wisdom others seldom received in the course of living an ordinary life.

He spent time reading up on the various rituals and customs concerning the dead and discovered that many cultures prohibited touching dead people.

This part-time job had him doing that at least several times a week.

If some of the beliefs existed in his own culture, like those that existed in the Fiji Islands, he wouldn't be allowed to touch or eat food for a month. Some Native Americans required those who touched a corpse to sleep on "thorny branches" for a year. Ouch!

Awkwardly, he bumped into a table that caused an arm to fall to the side, and in the process, the arm hit him sharply at the hip. It made him jump, falling partially backward into another table, which in turn knocked over a few items on a nearby counter, among them a Styrofoam cup. Clumsily he straightened the stuff out, causing the contents of the cup to spill out. He stared at the pieces scattered across the counter. Suddenly, he guessed where they must have originated. Realizing what they were, where they came from, he wondered if this was part of the embalming process. Something told him no.

In another corner of the room sat another casket, this one closed, and he assumed, scheduled for a wake that night. On top sat a Styrofoam cooler, which not only looked out of place, but after what he had discovered inside the cup, it piqued his curiosity as to the contents. Danny knew he couldn't leave the room without knowing what was inside the cooler.

He lifted up the top. "Omigod!"

His hand shook as he closed the lid. He needed to talk to someone. He thought immediately of his father. Yeah, he needed to talk to someone soon.

And he needed to get out of there.

Chapter Ten

The fucking bitch was back in his life. He'd known she would return eventually. Most thought she had moved away to make her place in the world. But he knew better. Kendra Bettencourt erroneously had thought she could get away.

At some point, she realized that wasn't going to happen. No one escapes the past.

And now she was right where he wanted her.

And making it too damn easy for him.

Too fucking damn easy.

She presented enough of a challenge, enough to keep him playing this game they had started a long time ago...a game of hide and seek.

He would always recognize her. Years didn't change a person all that much.

In those jeans, that sweatshirt, that baseball cap that hid some of her features, he would still pick her out in a crowd.

It had all gone wrong that day. She was supposed to go through the ice along with Davies. Instead she had gotten away. Only Davies ended up drowning. Davies deserved what he got. The damn kid had messed up, chickening out. And Davies knew too damn much.

Vengeance kept him going. Kept him focused. Pushed him on, getting him through college, into a good profession where he could continue to play out these charades. A chameleon was what he was, changing colors whenever it suited him, doing what was necessary to feed that part of him that cried out for sustenance.

Yet, no matter what he accomplished, a part of him always returned to that place, to that afternoon, where it all started, where his cravings started -- always looking for that adrenaline rush, that high no drugs could ever provide.

The scenario would play itself out in his mind over and over, until some nights he thought he'd go mad.

He had been able to keep that other part of himself separate for a time, hiding the savage beast that resided mostly in the darkest part of his mind.

No one had a clue. He reveled in the challenge. But lately, he needed more. He needed to move beyond what was available. He was getting older, too old to start a family. Whatever Rhonda had been thinking, she had it all mixed up.

He was through playing. He told her to be patient. She had refused. She wanted it all. Giving her what she wanted would have destroyed what he had already built for himself in the community.

Rhonda knew he was married. Christ's sake, it was right there on the Internet where they met. Unhappily married, yes, but nonetheless married and staying.

It hadn't made a difference to her that he was committed to another. He crouched behind the large, thick tree and hoisted the telescopic rifle to one shoulder. Fixed his position. One squeeze would end it all. End his nightmares.

Too easy, he thought. Therapy helped him learn patience. Patience allowed you to think things through and then do whatever was needed without making many mistakes.

His patience allowed him to play out the scenario first in the mind, from beginning to end. Until it no longer held him in its grip. He no longer woke up in the middle of the night covered in a chilling, cold sweat.

He had made up his mind. Unlike Rhonda, who would no longer suffer his torment, this one in the sight of his gun needed to suffer for all those years of torment she'd caused him.

He lowered the rifle.

He'd continue to dump the bodies. He'd dump them in places where they would always be remembered in the afterlife.

He watched them as they processed the crime scene. They wouldn't find much now.

He missed the sex with Rhonda. They were on the same page when it came to kinky. He had been satisfied for a while with her, but he expected more. More than those dark fantasies she was willing to play out with him. More than the dark side each knew the other possessed.

Dr. Kendra Bettencourt had a dark side.

He laughed.

Dr. Bettencourt with her medical degrees --

He drew a cigarette from its pack. Yeah, he considered himself a patient man and he no longer was willing to allow nightmares to dictate his life. No longer willing to run from unseen forces.

He wanted to stay within the parameters of the normal world. Spend the rest of his life unfettered by his demons.

He was ready to confront them. But first -- Bettencourt needed to go.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm here to view the embalming," Luke told Audrey Symington. She smiled, turned from the monitor, and leaned slightly over the ornate oak desk.

Her red hair was pulled up into a fancy, but appropriate style for her surroundings. Large green eyes peered up at him through a pair of trendy glasses, their pupils widening.

"No kidding."

"Don't I wish."

"I think you're the first who's ever asked to see it done."

"Martin said to meet him around three. That's when he was going to...do it." Luke knew he looked damn uncomfortable. "You know...do whatever he does back there."

Audrey Symington grinned, a silly grin that really had no place here, where in the next room lay someone's deceased relative. "Well, then, if he's expecting you, just go right through those doors. He's in the prep room now."

Luke followed the direction of her eyes with his own, to a door with a sign clearly marked DANGER. HEALTH RISK. EMPLOYEES ONLY PAST THIS POINT.

Luke wasn't an employee, meaning he had no business going past that point. The job got crazier, he thought. A familiar dryness edged up the back of his throat, always a signal that what lay behind those doors wasn't going to be pleasant.

Suddenly the DANGER sign moved toward him as the door opened. Luke jumped slightly back. An impeccably dressed, tall, distinguished man with blond hair that was fast turning gray.

"To be honest, I didn't think you were going to show, Luke. I didn't really take you all that seriously in the café the other day when you asked to see this done." Martin Manheim

chuckled. "I don't often get these requests. In fact, this is a first, at least for me, from someone outside the business." He cast an oblique glance at Audrey, who nodded.

"Yeah, I know. Audrey said as much," Luke said. "But I always think it's good to know these things."

"Know what things?" Martin asked, his grin disappearing.

"What you guys do behind closed doors. Who knows, something back there might help me on a case. Might help me get a handle on this whole death scenario."

Martin shot him a sideways glance. "I don't know about cases. I know you're working on the Woods case. And of course, you know that's who we're doing today."

Luke nodded, the all-too-recent autopsy still fresh in his mind. Suddenly, he wondered if looking inside someone's body constituted forming a type of intimacy with another human being. Intimacy wasn't something he was ever good at, even with the live ones. He shook his head at his own irreverence. Still, establishing an intimacy with anyone pretty much scared the hell out of him, knowing for him it meant a form of control. At this point in his life, he wanted no woman controlling him.

The more he learned about Rhonda Woods, the better he could put together pieces of a puzzle that he felt held some, if not most, of the answers that he was seeking. Gut feeling told him some of the pieces could be found inside that room, along with Rhonda, who now lay naked on another stainless steel table.

"Then let's get started," Martin said.

Luke followed Martin into the room.

"Here's a lab coat and apron," Martin offered, donning his own, plus a pair of thick latex gloves and plastic goggles.

"I guess we should be careful," Luke said, putting on the coat. "Take precautions against AIDS."

"Actually, more for hepatitis. If you notice the toe, there would be a tag telling us to take extra precautions if Rhonda Woods had hepatitis." Martin handed him a pair of goggles. "For the formaldehyde. Don't want to blind you if some should spray in your eyes."

Luke took the goggles and immediately put them on.

"Did you know the word 'embalm' means to impregnate with aromatic substances?" Martin said. "A lot has changed since the Egyptians. Formaldehyde to preserve, glycerin to stop dehydration, and borax to keep the blood liquid for draining."

Martin took a spray bottle from a shelf and sprayed the body starting from the face, moving toward the feet. "I'm using disinfectant here first -- phenol, sometimes potassium nitrate or an acetate...kills mites, insects, maggots. We thoroughly disinfect the body, and then wipe out fluids in the mouth, eyes, nose, genitals, and rectum with cotton. Muscles relax, which of course includes the bladder. Then I'll use a germicidal solution, usually sodium hypochlorite...kills viruses."

Luke watched and noticed the gentleness in which Martin conducted these steps.

He also noticed the table, similar to the one Kendra used for the autopsies. This one also had a lip around it. Water flowed from a hose at one end to a drain at the other.

"The legal definition of embalming is disinfection, preservation, and restoration." Martin looked directly at Luke. "Restoration if any damage has occurred, and then, of course, making the body look lifelike for the loved ones. That's when we use dyes, such as safranin, methyl red. There are actually eight chemicals we routinely use here."

Luke suddenly felt a slow heaviness threatening to push him into the floor, but was damn determined not to faint in front of Martin Manheim and have the whole town find out -- never good for the image of any hard-nosed detective.

"After we wash the body, we set the features the way they will look in the casket."

Sudden wooziness joined the heaviness. Shit, he wanted out of there. Instead he took slow, easy breaths. Instant regret followed as odors of formaldehyde, along with other chemicals, filled his nostrils.

Martin picked up what Luke made out to be a large contact lens. He smeared it with a substance that looked like petroleum jelly. Carefully, he pried the eye open, positioned the disc on the eyeball, and then gently closed the eye. "This keeps them closed and moist, so they don't dehydrate or disfigure. Doesn't look good when they sink into the skull."

Luke winced.

"Next, we make an incision above the collarbone, right side, for the jugular vein to withdraw the blood. This step is called raising the vessels...veins, arteries... Puffs up the body if it has lost weight. Rhonda doesn't seem to need much puffing up, does she?" Martin chuckled at his own irreverence, as he proceeded to make a two-inch cut above where the right leg connected to the body. "She was always going to go on a diet. Those anti-anxiety meds she was taking slowed down her metabolism. Why she probably couldn't lose the weight."

As Luke conducted his usual note taking, he noticed there wasn't much blood and commented.

"Most of it settles to the back of the body."

"Yeah." He remembered lividity, which Luke knew took approximately six hours to complete, and it let them know that she had been in those woods at least for that duration.

"Ah, here it is," he said.

"What?" Luke inquired, peering over.

"The femoral artery."

Luke saw what he would only describe as something the color of a pearl.

"I'll tie a piece of surgical string around it," Martin went on in a matter-of-fact tone, as though this was something Luke regularly witnessed.

Suddenly, he stopped. "Doesn't she look peaceful? It's nice when they do. I'll massage her face a little. Relaxes the muscles. Gravity does the rest. When I do this with the old folks, it's like they had plastic surgery. Too bad I couldn't do it for the live ones; I'd become a billionaire." He chuckled.

Luke didn't respond, wondering if it was a prerequisite to have such a dark sense of humor when you had this job.

"No more of life's problems for this lil' lady," Martin went on.

Luke remained quiet. It wouldn't be unusual for a man in Martin's profession to have such reflections about his clients, and then wondered if the term "client" was the correct one when referring to a body.

"No longer has to worry about mortgage payments, car payments," Martin continued, as he moved toward a compendium of bottles filled with various chemicals.

"We use some of these to dissolve the coagulated blood. I'm glad the autopsy didn't take long. It gets more difficult to embalm them the longer we wait. Bettencourt does a good job, and I suspect, keeps in mind what we do here."

"Meaning?" Luke had to ask.

"She doesn't cause too much disfigurement. Some tie the wrists, and that leaves marks. Some techniques obstruct the entry of embalming fluid. Or cut into those areas that will be viewed."

Luke thought about the extra care Kendra took with Rhonda during that autopsy.

"But when they go through that procedure," Martin continued, "it makes it a little more difficult, depending on what they did during the postmortem exam. We usually use a six-point injection when a body has been autopsied...two carotid arteries, two axillary arteries, and two femoral. Then we need to fill the cavity...sometimes putting the organs back, dusting them with embalming powder. Years ago, we used to fill it with sawdust, except when it got wet, it produced a sour odor. Now we use fillers, sew it up, and coat it with a liquid sealant. Takes more time, and that is why we're never particularly happy to hear that an autopsy is required."

Luke nodded, noting the comments in his notebook, at the same time noticing a large five-gallon container sitting on a metal housing. On the sides were pressure gauges, dials, and switches that read Low, High, and Pulsate. Above it another sign that warned of danger -- FORMALDEHYDE, IRRITANT, AND POTENTIAL CANCER HAZARD. It made Luke suddenly feel strange, the irony that a person's peaceful end would find them in such a dangerous environment. He recalled Martin's words about aromatic substances or balms. None of these fit that bill.

"I'll add a gallon of water to this tank and then PH-A, which helps break up blood clots. Then DI-CEN a co-injection...promotes formaldehyde penetration into the tissue. Treats the water to make it the same pH factor as the body."

Luke wished he had stuck with patrol duty rather than attaining the status of detective. He could be out there now on the street, engaged in life, dealing with the living. Not where he was, dealing with the dead and finding out things best not known.

"I usually use Hy-Form, has the highest index...strength. The higher it is, the higher the degree of fixation." Martin looked at Luke, knowing Luke had no idea what he was referring to. "The more fixative I use, the more rigid it makes the skin. This one doesn't really need a high index. I'll probably use a lower index on her, which will make the flesh more lifelike. The old ones need the higher form because of clogged arteries."

Luke looked down at Rhonda's face. He could almost fool himself into believing that she was merely sleeping. Resting for her next journey, which would take her to a place where she needn't think about those mortgage payments. Suddenly, he wondered if he had sent his in on time. He made a note of that in his book.

"The red coloring gives a more natural flesh tone," Martin went on, intruding into Luke's thoughts. "While that's mixing, we'll open the artery." He picked up what looked like a thick hypodermic needle that had an air pump connected to it. He inserted it into the artery, tying it in place with more of the surgical thread. He then connected the hose from the pump to what Martin referred to as a cannula.

"This machine can force fluid into the body up to thirty pounds per square inch," Martin continued, pride evident in his voice. "It also pulsates to circulate the fluid just as the heart would have."

The words made Luke consider how the body was only a machine. Here they were, putting a false illusion of life back into a body so that others would be able to pay their last respects.

It was becoming surreal, too surreal. The pulsating actions of the machine made the body come alive. A lifelike pink glow began to spread throughout. Luke felt his weakness grow. He spotted a nearby stool and pulled it over. He definitely needed to sit. The lub-dub sound of the machine made it seem like a beating heart. He suddenly had the feeling that Rhonda was going to sit up, tell them it was all a mistake, or better yet, tell them who committed this inhuman act of violence upon her.

"You've been doing this a long time, huh, Martin?" Luke suddenly asked, ignoring his nausea.

"Yeah, I guess I have. It was my grandfather's business, passed down to my dad, and now to me. It's all I've ever known, when you think about it. Some of the guys in high school would go off to McDonald's to work. My brother and I would come home, work here, and once I finished my schooling, I started doing what I've been doing now for close to twenty years. The hard part is when it's someone you know."

"Did you know Rhonda? Didn't she work at your brother's place, the Manheim nursing facility?" Luke suddenly asked, remembering that another Manheim could be involved

here...though he was elusive, since it seemed as though the other brother was always away on some business trip. "It's hard to get hold of your brother."

Martin hesitated, then answered, "Yes, he's been known to become, let's say, inaccessible at times. Rhonda was an employee of his. She and I would run into each other and sometimes chat." He looked down at her. "Yeah, though it's hard emotionally, it does help you do a better job of it when you know them. You know what they looked like alive. With Rhonda, we'll try our best to present her the way her family and friends remembered her. At least she's young, no blood clots, so maybe only a couple of incisions. Then when I'm finally finished I'll tie up the veins and arteries. Later, I'll let Audrey do her cosmetics," he explained. "Yeah, anyhow, Matthew's always off doing something. That's one reason I think my father didn't think he would do well here, plus the fact he never did finish mortuary college. No one can do this while traipsing off to exotic islands like he manages to do. Don't know how he runs that facility the way he does."

Luke detected a change in Martin's voice. He couldn't tell if it was envy or something else...anger.

"Anyway, all we know is that Rhonda is at peace," Martin went on. "The first time I saw this kind of peace was with my own mother. I was eight years old, and my grandfather made her look beautiful. Everyone said how peaceful she was compared to the life she lived those last few years suffering from the cancer. No more pain. No more fear. No more worrying about what was going to happen to Matthew and me. She...actually looked happy. The happiest I had ever seen her. That's when I realized the importance of what my grandfather and my father did, giving these families a sense of comfort, knowing that loved ones are going to a better place and are in a peaceful state."

Martin was no longer looking at him, and Luke suddenly felt invisible, or that Martin had forgotten he was there. Martin's face had taken on a transformation, and it sent chills through Luke.

"I think as that young boy I knew I needed to do the same."

"Knew what?" Luke had to ask.

"Bring these people a sense of peace, a sense of comfort, maybe even a sense of joy."

"But, Martin, they're dead." Luke felt weird, this need to remind him. "They no longer feel emotions of any kind."

For a moment Martin stared at Luke. "Of course, I know that, Luke. And perhaps you think it's silly of me to say what I've said here. Still, when you look at Rhonda like this, you have to wonder, is she really gone? Is there not some part of her that remains with us, wanting us to know that she never truly disappears from our lives?" He proceeded to wash the body from top to toe with what Luke guessed was more disinfectant soap. "Because I'd like to think so," Martin said. "That they are in some way always with us. Letting us know that there is eternal life."

Several moments of silence passed between them. Martin's words reverberated inside Luke's mind. He suddenly had the impression Martin needed to know eternal life existed. Needed to know his mother had found it and others like her.

Martin covered the body with a pink sheet, leaving the head exposed to be cosmeticized later.

Moments later, as Luke walked out and down the steps of Manheim Funeral Home, like a fish that had been out of water and managed to find its way back, he gulped in deep breaths of fresh air.

Eternal life. The words passed through Luke's mind, recalling Martin's words. Did any of them find such a state? Luke continued to take in deep breaths of air, knowing that damn well the only way anyone ever found that out was after they died.

Chapter Twelve

It had been a long difficult day. Luke lay on his bed, closed his eyes, opened them, and then closed them again. He couldn't shake the fucking images. He tried to ignore the sinking feeling inside him.

Worse, he couldn't get rid of the smell, even if it was only inside his mind. It surrounded him. He worried if others could smell it as well. As soon as he came home, he had immediately stripped off his clothes, washed them, and took a long, hot shower, then later spent time in the hot tub.

As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts...all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

That was a passage he'd come across as a boy when his paternal grandfather insisted that every morning they read parts of the Bible together. A passage he was told to memorize, and for some ungodly reason, it remained with him.

He also learned new terms this week, terms he didn't think he'd use in everyday conversation.

Would he ever not see that gray face -- Rhonda's face -- the color resulting from blood draining from her heart? Embalmer's gray, Martin had called it, explaining to Luke why it was necessary to elevate the head to avoid it.

Luke left his bed, despite the fact that he needed his sleep. Required a certain amount to function. He padded over to a side window, suddenly wishing the neighbors lived closer. But he had chosen the house for that reason -- no nosy neighbors who could see into his windows -- into his soul.

Luke slept naked. He also slept with the windows opened. He glanced back toward the bed. King-sized. He also enjoyed a lot of room. What was Kendra doing now? Accustomed to

all that death stuff that surrounded her, he would guess even an embalming wouldn't keep her up nights. She was probably sleeping a helluva lot better than he was now.

Depending on how many bodies they would find if this killer developed a bigger appetite, death was now becoming a part of his world, and it made him realize how ordinary it had been before discovering Rhonda's body. And it left him feeling more unsettled, more restless, and wanting to get on with his own life.

Adam had committed the sin of disobedience. Somewhere in his mind he always heard his grandfather's voice, like a mantra. The Angel of Death took on the whole animal world. As a punishment for all that Adam did, bodies of dead men decayed. And questions always followed, tumbling out of his mind one by one. When did Rhonda Woods die? Why did she die? Was it natural? Accidental? Was it an outright murder?

The cause of death...asphyxiation. Someone had strangled Woods in those woods. He repressed the urge to chuckle at the sudden play on words.

And she was pregnant, which of course provided a viable motive for the killer. Maybe her killer was married. A baby born out of wedlock wasn't conducive to keeping marital bliss in any relationship. Except, Luke suddenly wondered, did she know she was pregnant? The autopsy revealed it was at a point where she could have known, but it was early enough that she might not have suspected her condition.

And if the killer was also unaware, did he kill her for other reasons? Or was her murder a random act? Randoms were tricky -- a whole lot of variables involved where the possibility existed that the case would never get solved.

Usually it was someone the victim knew. Luke would start there. Questions queued up in Luke's mind. Accustomed to it. Welcoming them. If Josh's dojo were open now, he'd go down there. Have a go at that punching bag. Fucking kick it to hell and back. It would keep his mind focused. Sometimes, working out like that gave him insight into what he had to do next.

He stared at the king-sized bed -- too big and too empty. He pictured Kendra next to him, naked, her body pressed against his. He guessed there was a side to her that many never saw. A side that now intrigued him. He wondered what it would be like making love to a woman like that. Have her make love to him. He knew what most women liked when it came to sex. He wanted to know what Kendra Bettencourt liked to do in bed. His bed. He wanted to know what could make her forget that part of her life, the part she did for a living, which was anything but normal. He wondered if there existed a dark side, one that he would enjoy discovering once he got her behind those bedroom doors.

Naked himself, he left the bedroom and walked out onto his deck where the darkness offered enough privacy and seclusion.

He knelt down and brought his hands together, palms upward, in a cupped position. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly through his nose. He imagined the breath going up over his head and down into the pit of his stomach. He let his breath out slowly through his

mouth. He knew he needed to rid himself of these worries, these concerns, these distractions. He thought of *rishu*, the Japanese term for running water, representing tranquility. He needed to quiet his mind. He needed to quiet his soul, now reckless, searching, causing him chaos.

Yet, he knew he would never get rid of that rising feeling inside for a woman he guessed would never allow him complete access to her heart. Another man still possessed her soul, even if that other no longer existed in their world.

Chapter Thirteen

Slowly, cars pulled into the back and side parking lots. From the wide front marble steps, Martin made sure his countenance showed an unclouded demonstration of his sympathy for the family and friends of Rhonda Woods by maintaining a more stoic posture, yet occasionally producing a faint smile that acknowledged their grief.

He also knew that some of those now coming in would feel uncomfortable, uncertain how to behave under such somber circumstances. Part of his job would be to lead them and guide them through this most sorrowfully profound experience. He also knew that most of them didn't want to be there.

They had held the wake the night before. Many showed. Not many were showing today, as it was a workday. Enough, though, he told himself. Enough were coming to pay their last respects to a friend, a colleague. Close family. Close friends. All anyone required when making that final transition.

He had ensured that everything inside was perfect. He had personally lined up the floral baskets and sprays around the mauve-colored casket, ensuring the photo collage her family had put together and the guest book were in a place where people wouldn't miss them upon entering.

You couldn't make too many mistakes in this business. Too many emotions were involved with this last rite of passage. And it was what Manheim Funeral Home's brochure promised. A social function -- the guest of honor being the deceased, the central attraction. For some, it was probably the only time in their life they would enjoy such an esteemed role. Suddenly, as it always did, the words of a poem by a nineteenth-century poet named Matthew Arnold floated through his mind.

*Spare me the whispering, crowded room,
The friends who come, and gape and go,*

The ceremonious air of gloom --

All which makes death a hideous show.

Hideous or not, it all needed to be done. A final reminder by this particular honored guest, to his or her own mortality, that most every person in the entourage would eventually enjoy a similar funerary privilege.

He raised a brow. It was a given. He nodded to some as they came in, pointed to others where they should go. Shook hands with those he knew personally, most of whom were from the immediate area.

He accepted the compliments on how beautiful Rhonda looked to those who had come the night before. Manheim took pride in their work. He had stood by while Audrey did her thing. Rhonda had gotten the works.

Rhonda was Catholic, though, he suspected, not a practicing Catholic. Still, her family saw to it that she would receive the Mass of the Resurrection, and then a burial in St. Theresa's Cemetery, Canterville's only cemetery, located a few miles down the road. There would be no burial with this one, remembering the family's specifics.

They would go to the church where a white-robed priest would welcome the casket. This, he knew, symbolized the joy of faith, overcoming sadness and death. The casket would proceed down the aisle of the church. And once there, the prayers would be said, music played, songs chosen by a family member sung, the appropriate Bible passages recited, and communion given to those who wanted to become more a part of the service. After the closing rite of commendation, the family would accompany the casket back down the aisle. The finality of it all, he knew, didn't hit for some, not until much later, when they had all returned back to their mediocre lives.

It was pretty straightforward, Martin mused, as he continued his nodding, simultaneously giving out prayer cards.

He always felt good that he could provide this service to the community. *The man who made it didn't want it. The man who bought it had no use for it. The man who used it didn't know it.* A riddle he'd recited as a kid floated through his mind.

Rhonda Woods's family had rented the ornate casket that was now sliding out of the back of the hearse. She wouldn't be buried in it. Deciding on cremation, Rhonda would be transferred to a less-expensive, combustible casket.

No final ride to the cemetery for Rhonda or her family and friends later. Her body would instead be taken to the crematorium. Later, her ashes would be given to a family member. And one day, Rhonda Woods would be buried in consecrated ground with a loved one, probably, considering her single status, he would guess one of her parents.

To each his own, Martin mused.

He never argued with the family, but only made helpful suggestions that hopefully were never offensive, never taken the wrong way.

*Don't you laugh when the hearse goes by
Or you will be the next to die.
They wrap you up in bloody sheets
And then they bury you six feet deep.*

Another poem, this time anonymous, taught to him by his father. There wouldn't be many children here today. Though he encouraged adults to let them attend such functions, knowing that attendance was far less frightening than what fantasies could conjure --

"G'morning, Martin. Everything went very well last night," greeted Maddie, dressed completely in black, except for a small, red rose pin. Wally Wilcox stood awkwardly to one side in a dark, charcoal gray suit, his usual wiry gray hair brushed and somewhat under control.

"How are you, Wally?" Martin asked. "That old arthritic knee kicking up again?"

Wally scowled, demonstrating his reluctance in coming. "Only when we get that damp weather. Then I get out the heating pad and take some Tylenol. Seems to do the trick. But don't worry, no arthritic knee is going to bring me in as one of your customers anytime soon."

"Shush, Wally. No way to be talking at a time like this," Maddie broke in, then turned to Martin. "I noticed quite a few of the staff from Manheim showed up last night. Shame it should happen to a nice person like Rhonda. Everyone was so low-key, not much socializing," she said. "Then again, when they're so young like that, gives people something to think about. Here today, gone tomorrow...for any of us...young and old."

Martin knew what Maddie meant. Wakes were most noisy with the passing of elderly loved ones. Those cut down in their prime tended to create a much more somber atmosphere. "She was always so helpful with Norman," Maddie went on. "I couldn't bring myself to tell Norman what happened. I believe it would've upset him greatly. And then there's Grace Bettencourt telling everyone that there are strange goings-on up there at the facility. Why, she has everyone spooked."

Martin shook his head in public sympathy, knowing that his brother Matthew ran a tight ship at that facility. Yet places like that were filled with people suffering from some form of psychosis, delusions, and dementia. "What happened to Rhonda I'm sure has everyone stumped," Maddie went on.

Wally nodded. "Can't believe something like that happened in this town. I'm having Josh put extra locks on the back doors. You just never know anymore."

Martin gave another condescending, sympathetic smile. "No. We never do, do we?"

Chapter Fourteen

He pushed in the button and waited for the hard drive to do its thing. Then typed in the addy for the online dating site, signing in with his ID and password. He had several messages waiting for him. His grin widened. One was even local.

* * * * *

Starfire: Hi Allwoman4u! I was watching u 2day, and now I'm caressing my cock. Ah, your long legs, how they entice me. And I'm imagining u slipping off those panties, revealing a nice wet clit.

Allwoman4u: Hi Starfire. Mm, so u were watching me 2day? How did u manage to do that?

Starfire: Let's say I know where to find u. I'm not far away. I dream of the day and even more the nights when I will finally have u. u will be my sex slave. Isn't that what u want?

Allwoman4u: Mm, yes u r getting to know me well. That is what I want. I want u to make me cum, make me do all those things we fantasize about...u and me, together, cumming together...

Starfire: I know u like to play sex games. And so do I. I would love to watch u...watch your hips sway, and then I think of me inside u. Do u think of me in that way?

Allwoman4u: Oh yes, I think of the games we will play. I think of how u will make me explode. I think of u exploding inside me. Yes, we will play that game soon...very soon.

Starfire: And when we're through playing our little games, u will be mine forever.

Allwoman4u: Mm, so many promises. Do u make good on those promises?

Starfire: Yes, I always keep my promises. I will fuck u until you tell me no more. Do u like to be fucked?

Allwoman4u: More promises? What woman doesn't?

Starfire: Soon my little one, soon u will be mine.

* * * * *

He quickly signed off and exited the program, not bothering to take the time to respond to the others, at least not this time. He would take them one at a time. He and this first one would enjoy a few drinks, and if the chemistry was there, they would order dinner. Then afterward, as he promised, they would enjoy each other.

Online dating had become a feasible way to finding these pretty playing pieces. As long as they let him play the game his way. The Internet made them almost disposable. Lose one, discover another. So many young lovelies out there, lonely, wanting to find that special someone to complete them.

His appetite for certain things had grown with each one. At first they provided him with what he sought, what he needed, and as long as they played the game his way, fed his appetite. He'd become addicted to this heady sense of power that he could have over them -- this control. It satisfied his appetite. Except he found he was still hungry afterward, a gnawing that would start in his gut, making him realize that with each one it created more of that appetite, one that he had come to accept could not be sated.

Still, it was a game. A game that he was getting good at playing -- with him, so far, the winner.

* * * * *

It is cold. It is snowing. Like a shroud, the snow covers her. Numbing coldness seeps through.

From a distance, she hears their voices, yelling, screaming, each one growing louder. Male voices. Arguing. Looking for her. She can't let them find her. The cold continues to hurt, but she bears the pain. She can't let them find her. She lies on her right side, tucked into a small ravine of rocks, gravel, and ice. She pulls her knees to her chest and forms a ball of human flesh and bones. Suddenly she wonders, is this how she will die? How will they find her? Huddled into this fetal position? Eyes frozen wide open, staring into nothingness? No...she can't let them find her.

* * * * *

Kendra couldn't get back to sleep. Something had woken her up, and she didn't know why. The digital display on her alarm was now reading two a.m., letting her know she damn well wasn't going to get anymore shut-eye tonight.

She padded her way to the main area of the small trailer and spotted the manila case file on the counter where she had left it. The file contained Rhonda Woods's crime scene photos. She had gone through them earlier that evening, trying to get more of a feel for what might have happened out there.

She fingered the edges of the folder, thinking this woman was no longer among the living, her funeral now over, her body ready to enter into that next stage. Dust to dust. How appropriate, Kendra thought, considering they were into the Lenten season, a reminder made to her by her grandmother that morning. Kendra had had her own husband cremated, something he always told her to do in case anything happened to him. He'd joke about it. Holt figured he'd just get cremated and that was that. Things sometimes never worked out the way we think they should. Life gives out no guarantees on anything.

Absently, she flipped through the photos of Wood's body, feeling a sadness build, but nothing more than that. Life would always continue to deal out these blows, indiscriminately, without rhyme or reason, taking lives based on a rationale known only to a higher power. It was her job only to determine how these particular souls left the earth, not why.

* * * * *

Luke Sloane stood to one side of the yellow and black tape that cordoned off this new crime scene area. He made copious notes into his notebook: time of initial call, time of arrival on the scene.

Again, this was his crime scene, whether he wanted it or not, at least until the crime unit arrived.

Although not yet officially concluded, this might turn out to be his next homicide. Whatever experience he had gained before that morning would do nothing to alleviate the sheer panic that now rose in him. This half-exposed body of a female -- discarded like so much garbage -- this time, someone he knew personally.

A sense of guilt filled him recalling how Patti Thompson enjoyed her sex. What a way to be remembered, he thought, and closed his notebook.

Would she want to be remembered for that, he suddenly wondered, making him wonder about himself and what people might say about him if they were to discover his body in a similar secluded location.

Ordinary sex hadn't been enough for her. She needed more, she had once confided to him. She took pleasure from venturing into the kinkier side of life. She enjoyed the role-playing and a willing partner who would dare plunge into places most wouldn't dare.

Whenever they got together, she played the game. Innocent fun, she told him, testing one's imagination, taking them to places she referred to as excruciating pleasure. He'd

learned a lot from her, discovering that some women had as strong a sexual appetite as any man.

Patti needed to push the envelope. He wasn't willing to go where it could endanger a life. He put on the brakes that last time. They'd argued about it. She believed that was the way that allowed them to experience total pleasure. Explore their full potential. No abuse involved as long as it was consensual, she'd argue. He knew the experience could be intensely euphoric, intensely ecstatic, intensely intimate, and he surmised for her it had become intensely addictive.

A jogger had made the nine-one-one call shortly after daybreak.

Luke, the only officer on duty at the time, had gotten the call from Rose, their dispatcher. Disbelief immediately filled him, realizing this was happening again in his town.

He found the corpse sprawled among patches of dry grass and dirt, seemingly undisturbed, as was the immediately surrounding area.

Outdoor crime scenes were difficult to contain. Yet he knew an uncontaminated scene was necessary, offering homicide the best possible means to interpret the evidence. Reconstruct what had occurred there, which would hopefully help them solve the case.

Solve the case. It sounded simple enough, like playing a game of Clue, by process of elimination. The butler, with the knife, inside the drawing room.

He spotted Kendra who had obviously taken no time to come down there and wondered how she was taking this, considering she was also acquainted with the victim. Kendra appeared no older than the body she now examined.

It didn't seem right, he thought, Patti exposed like that. Photographed by a stranger whose main purpose was to document a crime scene. She loved the camera, he suddenly remembered. That time they had gone hiking, and he couldn't take enough photos of her. Long, blonde hair flowing, dressed in those fitted jeans she often wore, and those too-skimpy tops. She was one helluva sexy lady. Except neither of them were ever interested in anything long-term. Patti had been divorced for five years and wasn't ready to settle. His excuse was, like most men, he simply never found the right lady. He had told his sister who had kept hounding him as to why he was still single, until she realized her ranting was not doing a bit of good and finally stopped.

Patti deserved more dignity than this, he thought. He tried not to think of the autopsy that would now be required -- further indignities committed on a life cut too short.

Emotions weren't allowed here. Not while on duty. Yet knowing that did nothing to prevent some moisture from forming behind the dark lenses.

"Looks like blunt trauma to the head," he heard Kendra state into the microcassette recorder, also to one of the other forensic personnel.

"There are ligature marks, notable petechial hemorrhaging, indicating also strangulation. A lot of bruising around the ankles, thighs, and wrists. Looks like she'd been

bound at one point. There are also multiple defense wounds.” Suddenly, Kendra’s voice broke. She paused and released the button on the recorder. “Whatever happened between her and the perp, Patti put up a fucking damn good fight. Someone’s got to be sporting some pretty good bruising.” Kendra stared ahead at nothing and no one in particular. “We’ll know more when we get her into the morgue and perform the autopsy.” She avoided eye contact with Luke, making him realize that Kendra probably knew he and Patti had a thing going.

Luke listened carefully. He suspected no one connected this woman making these comments to what she did for a living.

Mahogany hair pulled away from her face. Bangs covered her forehead. A baseball cap perched on top of her head. He guessed well-worn jeans and a faded sweatshirt beneath the white coveralls that all forensic personnel wore. And Nike sneakers that had seen better days, now also covered with booties. Her appearance, Luke noticed, depicted a person preferring to live life rather than examining a tragic end. He straightened, realizing she was walking toward him.

“Hi.” She smiled an even, white smile that as quickly disappeared, but remained long enough to make him almost forget where he was and why.

“Another one,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” she responded. “Has anyone touched anything?”

He shook his head, tempted to remind her he knew how to handle these scenes.

“Rigor is complete. Means she’s been dead just over four, maybe six hours. Fixed lividity brings it closer to ten or twelve. Though that sometimes is sped up if there’s a struggle before strangulation. Body temp pretty much confirms the first two.”

“I was at the café yesterday,” he said. “She had a part-timer covering for her.” He knew that Patti seldom took time off, especially on Fridays, when it got really busy. “I thought, good for her,” Luke went on. “The woman needs a social life...needs to get out there and enjoy herself.”

“I thought you and she were a thing?”

“We were...last fall. Until it went sour.”

“Sour?”

“Let’s say we ended up not on the same page,” he replied, recalling that over the top kinkiness Patti enjoyed.

Kendra shrugged. “If this is a random, it’ll be another difficult one to clear,” she said, more for her own benefit, he sensed, than for his ears.

“I doubt if it’s random,” he commented. “It’s usually someone they know.”

She regarded him carefully. Luke felt that this was the first time the woman was acknowledging his presence plus what he had to say.

“You’re right. Probably a boyfriend? Maybe an ex? This could turn out to be a crime of passion.” Suddenly she was looking at him with some suspicion.

“I doubt if it was the ex-husband,” Luke responded quickly. “He hasn’t been around in years. Took off for parts unknown. Some say he’s remarried. I think this weekend was the first time in a long time she’s been out on a date. Whoever that was, and don’t look at me like that, I was on duty...”

Kendra nodded. In a matter-of-fact voice that grated hard on Luke’s psyche, like long fingernails scraping across a blackboard, she said, “Right. And the body will tell us more on how she died. As far as the perp who did this? That’s a whole other ballgame. As I said --”

“Yeah, I know. These cases are hard to clear.”

Chapter Fifteen

Starfire: Hello, CandyGirl. I saw your profile and I do like what I read. I think we have a lot in common.

CandyGirl: Hello, Starfire. After reading yours I see you're very adventurous.

Starfire: Yes. How about u? Are you also as adventurous?

CandyGirl: My, my, that is a personal question. We haven't even met.

Starfire: No, but we can change that.

CandyGirl: Yes, we could. So what do u like to do for fun?

Starfire: Everything. And anything. I like to push the envelope. How about u? Are u into bondage? SM?

CandyGirl: Chuckle. My, my, so that's what u mean by fun? Mm, u are a very adventurous man.

Starfire: If I'm off base, then I apologize. But your profile said "sexually adventurous." In fact...extremely. I assumed that's why.

CandyGirl: I did say that, didn't I?

Starfire: Then?

CandyGirl: Yes, we could meet. See if there's chemistry. Take it from there.

Starfire: Sounds good to me.

Chapter Sixteen

*Deal on, deal on, my merry men all,
Deal on your cake and your wine.
For whatever is dealt at her funeral today,
Shall be dealt tomorrow at mine.*

A poem his grandfather taught him reflecting on wakes. Martin knew at Manheim, wakes provided the opportunity for friends and family to not only pay their last respects to a corpse, but to share stories about the person. His grandfather told him about the necromancers. Those who believed they could raise the dead. And if that were possible, he thought bemusedly, wouldn't Rhonda and Patti have their own intriguing, compellingly, evocative, scandalous stories to tell -- stories that not only bordered on the gruesome, but the macabre as well?

Stories beloved friends and family might not want to know, especially as they would learn the secret lives these two ladies enjoyed.

He clicked on the computer in his office, reminding himself that he needed to be careful. Marion had complained that he was spending too much time on the one at home and had pointed out to him the other night that he would lock himself up in that damn study of his for hours on end. That, plus the fact she was also becoming too curious, wanting to know what he was up to on that thing, fostering a suspicion that it may not be all work-related. It was the last thing he needed. Having her checking these things out, discovering her intuition, as always, rang true to form.

For more years than he wanted to admit, even to himself, their marriage had been lacking in certain areas -- the intimacy that had once brought them together in the

beginning had disappeared, becoming nonexistent. Virtually strangers, they were simply roommates living under one roof.

He often wondered why he stayed in the marriage, until all reasons for not staying reminded him that in the state they lived, a man gave up a lot when he decided to divorce. In his case, it would be a huge part of his life's work.

* * * * *

Starfire: Hello, CandyGirl! Are u there?

CandyGirl: Hello, Starfire. I missed seeing u online these last couple of days. Guess u've been busy, huh?

Starfire: Yes, this seems to be a busy time of year for us.

CandyGirl: What do u do?

Starfire: Let's say I provide a much-needed service to the community.

CandyGirl: Really? What are you a firefighter? Cop? Geez, hope not, though there are some on here that are...and looking for fun.

Starfire: You mean ones who are looking for kinky. Are u?

CandyGirl: Am I what?

Starfire: What do you think? Don't matter what a person does for a living, as long as they got these fantasies that need to be lived out. Have u lived out yours yet?

CandyGirl: What do you think?

Starfire: I'm guessing yes.

CandyGirl: Well, then, let's concentrate on us having some fun...okay?

Starfire: Yeah, CandyGirl, let's concentrate on that. What's your preference? Top? Bottom?

CandyGirl: Ah, whichever u want me to be. I enjoy both. I like to feel both sides of SM. I like the feeling of giving up control. I like the feeling of controlling. How about u?

Starfire: Always dominant. Always!!! It's what I do best. u won't be disappointed.

CandyGirl: There is something very erotic about bondage. Helplessness, powerlessness, sex, lust, heat... I am sooo looking forward to our little encounter. I have to sign off. Bye.

Starfire: Bye. Until next time.

Chapter Seventeen

“Mm, so you’re Starfire?”

“Disappointed?”

“No. Actually pleasantly surprised.”

“I’m delighted myself.”

He looked at her. She was petite with medium-length dark hair, and there was a definite sexiness to her. She didn’t have overly big breasts, but what was there would be quite tantalizing enough for his taste. He loved to suck nipples. She wore a low-cut black jersey that left little to his imagination.

“Do you want to order something?”

“How about something quick,” she told him and gave him a wink.

“Mm, CandyGirl, I’m thinking that maybe your appetite is not for what’s on this menu.”

“You are a very perceptive man.” She laughed a throaty laugh and lightly caressed the back of his hand, bending over slightly so that more of her cleavage showed, promising him what delights were to come later.

“Then a glass of wine and we can leave?”

She nodded. Soon after they left to play the games people like him played.

* * * * *

Sam was a mixture of various breeds. His head too small, his paws too big, he bordered on becoming outright freaky. Kendra decided there had to be some greyhound in him, though it didn’t show in his outer parts. But he loved to run, which he did several times a

day when she went home to let him out. The surrounding farmland's fallow fields gave him his needed space, allowing him to romp as wildly as his spirit demanded.

Woods's two cats learned fast to steer clear of Sam once he was out of his pen. Now living more or less as outdoor cats, they kept close to the RV, realizing that from now on, that was where their next meal was coming from.

Kendra hated keeping Sam in that tin can, as Luke put it. At least the pen provided some space. But who was going to take this dog in permanently? He had been the ugliest one in the animal shelter, a shelter whose no kill policy had them struggling to find good homes for these unwanted pets.

Passed by for the smaller, cuter breeds, Sam was the one always left behind, becoming in time the shelter's mascot.

Yet, the day she and Maddie went down to the local shelter because Wally wanted a cat to keep away rodents from the bookstore, Kendra had spotted Sam sitting off in one corner. She took one look into those deep, dark brown eyes of his and was lost to him forever. If she told anyone, even Maddie, the reason for choosing Sam, they would have had her committed.

That day Kendra wondered if it was possible that somehow Holt Walker's soul had become connected to Sam's. Why not? Taking on a new life in order to live out his next purpose here.

Certain lessons needed to be learned, and once accomplished, the soul then continued on its next journey.

Was it possible that Holt had come back to her in this other form, to let her know he wasn't that far away, that he was still there if she needed him?

Holt had been her life. They had been connected in a way that told them there was no mistake; they would have spent the rest of their lives together. He was her best friend, as she was his. The love they had for each other transcended everything the world could throw at them. The world was still as scary as ever. Fear her constant companion. Sam helped to make it less so, helping her keep some of that fear at bay.

Chapter Eighteen

He had her hands tied over her head. Her ankles were bound tightly inward to her thighs, which were spread as far open as they would allow, giving him full access. He was going to blindfold her, but changed his mind. CandyGirl had beautiful dark eyes -- soulful eyes -- that he enjoyed watching, as she lay there helpless there on the bed, powerless to stop him from playing the game his way.

He knew he could take her anytime he wanted, but first he wanted to play with her. Take his time. Enter her at will. It was a power that left him breathless and on the threshold of coming himself. Anticipation. That was the key. Anticipating what would come next. SM had its light side and its dark side. He tended to go toward the darker side of things. She suddenly arched upward as if to free herself from her bonds. He had her gagged, so she couldn't tell him anything. There were no safe words.

He was playing by his rules.

"Don't worry, CandyGirl, you will enjoy this. This is what you have fantasized, remember? When I take you fully, when I'm inside you, you'll feel spasms that start deep within you, and as we start to come, you feel my hot juices spurting inside, and when we climax together, you'll have truly lived out your fantasy."

He took a length of rope, wrapped an end around each of his hands, and approaching the bed, ignored the look of terror that had come into her eyes. He straddled her as he placed the rope around her neck and slowly pulled it tighter, then he entered her.

"Don't worry, you'll enjoy this," he repeated. "I promise you. You will come like you've never come before."

* * * * *

With book in hand, Luke walked into the Skillet Café. He sat at his usual place. It felt strange. Although the name of the eatery hadn't changed, knowing that Patti no longer ran the show created a huge void for most of its regulars.

When he first walked in, he half expected to see her tall, shapely frame standing behind the counter, business as usual, doing those things she normally did to keep the place running as smoothly as she did.

She would automatically turn toward him, give him a quick wave, and pick up the glass carafe to pour him a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Patti knew what her customers liked and she always delivered.

It had gotten to the point that he hadn't needed to give his order. Mornings, she would place the three-egg special, home fries, and crisp bacon strips directly down in front of him before he finished his first cup.

In the afternoon an extra large slice of pie, usually lemon meringue, was waiting. And the dinner hour brought the house special and plenty of it.

The last time, that special had been her meatloaf with some secret ingredient. Patti had been trying out a new recipe that someone had shared. Luke became the usual guinea pig, and always gave whatever she served him a "two thumbs-up."

The café had been closed for the better part of two weeks, allowing for the wake and all the customary funeral activities. A sign had been posted on the front door giving a brief obit of Patti, her life, and a fairly recent photo. Flowers and plants lined part of the front walk, left by those who would remember her. And by some who hadn't known her at all. That's the way small towns were, he thought; they didn't have to know the person, yet would still feel that connection and loss.

Patti's family decided to reopen, specifically Jack Thompson, Patti's older stepbrother, who now assumed the role of chatting with and serving customers -- Patti's customers.

Yeah, it still felt strange, Luke thought, but knew they were all trying to make the best of what occurred in their town, struggling to get themselves back to an ordinary way of living.

Luke flipped through the worn pages of his *Death Investigator's Handbook*, his bible to crime scene processing, forensic evaluations, and investigative techniques.

Scrolling down the Table of Contents, he saw it on page 243, "Autoerotic Death."

He read through the definition.

"In an autoerotic death, the individual attempts to stimulate and enhance sexual activity by utilizing some technique of oxygen deprivation (hypoxia). It may involve ligature strangulation, hanging, asphyxiation gases, or smothering."

"Death results when something unexpectedly goes wrong. This error in judgment is usually associated with the practitioner becoming unconscious, therefore prohibiting that

individual from reversing the chain of events, ultimately leading to that person's asphyxiation."

Despite the queasy feeling that spread through his stomach, he kept reading.

"...majority are adolescents or young adults. Single or married.... Ropes, if applied to the neck, will be kept away from the skin by towels or other soft objects to prevent marking the neck.

"Erotic or sexually explicit material may be present.

"...distinguished from suicides...presence of an escape mechanism..."

They'd found no such material in Patti's house, nor Rhonda's. Escape mechanism? So far undetermined, considering both bodies had been found at a secondary crime scene.

Luke thought of what his own house contained. A veritable bachelor's pad, some would say. Not that he was into that much pornography. A few *Playboy* issues scattered about. And he did have certain preferences, his own unique sexual appetite for certain things. He wasn't going to deny that about himself. Nothing he considered illegal. Nothing that prevented him from doing his job or keeping it. And knowing that Patti enjoyed that dark side of herself, it was a side they at times ventured into together.

Luke liked his women. He enjoyed pleasing them, doing all the things that gave them pleasure. Suddenly, he thought of Kendra and wondered what gave her pleasure.

Quickly, he dismissed the thought from his overworked mind, realizing it was not the time or the place to go there, not with a woman like that.

"The scene may be tampered with by relatives who discovered the body."

He guessed none of these women's families were aware of their relatives' sexual tastes. What had happened to these women hadn't occurred inside their homes, in their own living quarters, and whatever secrets they kept, sexual or otherwise, would be marked classified until the bastard was caught.

Only then would the lid of this particular Pandora's box get blown off as it exposed every one of those secrets.

Suddenly, a tall, lanky male with dirty blond hair, a striking contrast to his sister's platinum color walked over and poured Luke a cup of coffee. Luke immediately shut the book and took a sip of the dark liquid. Despite the bracing aroma, he refrained from making a face. Lukewarm -- not piping hot the way Patti had served it.

Jack Thompson surreptitiously eyed the book's title. "I'm hope you're working on my sister's case, Officer Sloane," he said. "Whoever murdered Patti needs to pay for this crime. The family ain't going to rest until that happens. You know that, don't you?"

Luke glanced up. Saw on Thompson's face the familiar look of pain combined with the expected anger. Families needed closure and assurance that whoever killed their loved one would get punished accordingly. Yes, crimes like this could go unsolved, never getting that resolution as the case ended up in a separate file marked "cold cases."

How does anyone explain to a parent that his daughter died due to what may have been accidental asphyxiation as a result of the sadomasochistic activities of the deceased.

AKA autoerotic death, sexual asphyxia.

What loved one wanted to learn of such things about a child's extracurricular activities?

And then have to explain to them the purpose of a psychological autopsy required under such circumstances. Evaluate these victims' postmortems. Discover what went on in their lives through what they had allowed others to see.

Then again, had it been purely fantasies on their part or the lethal fantasy of one individual?

Once he knew the answer, he'd have his killer.

Chapter Nineteen

Martin set out boxes of tissues. On the polished oak table surface, he placed a maroon folder, the embossed gold letters giving the name of the funeral home. Professional. Tasteful. Low key. The folder held important forms. Forms requiring the family's signature so that loved ones could make that final transition. In turn, family members would move on with their lives.

That was a final act many would reluctantly perform for a departed loved one. And Martin knew it had to be accomplished with the propriety expected for such an occasion. He would make the usual suggestions, never too firmly so that it looked like he was offering them choices. Nor would he rush them.

They were almost finished here with one or two forms requiring signatures. Once completed, he would escort the family into the next room, where they would select an appropriate casket. Manheim offered a wide range of price ranges. Of course, most wanted the best for a loved one, unless, of course, cremation was a choice, then a suitable rented casket was offered.

He knew there were those who referred to funeral guys as a bunch of crooks, vultures who regarded the elderly as merely ripe for the picking.

Yet he knew people were at a total loss as to what to do when someone died. Where did they go? Who did they call? Funeral directors and funeral homes were a necessary service. As unpleasant, as uncomfortable, and as emotionally painful as it all was, he knew there would always be a place for them inside the community -- any community.

It was a job, a profession. Hell, someone had to do it.

He thought about the computer in his office. He thought about what was on his hard drive. He thought about that other life that it now offered -- extraordinary, pulling him out of what for him had come to be an ordinary, mundane existence.

He was anxious to get back to it, to that other life. Anxious to sign on with his ID and password and read his messages. Lately, there had been quite a few -- ladies from everywhere, anywhere, all over -- all searching for something to fill that seemingly limitless void. Searching for something that would make their lives less dull, less humdrum, less uneventful. He knew what they wanted. And he was willing to provide it, though for some, they had gotten more than they had bargained for.

He opened the folder, and with an appropriate amount of solemnity, gently pushed it toward the new widow, Givens, and her son, gently pointing to where they needed to sign. At the same time, he moved the box of tissues closer to Mrs. Givens, who had just made the heart-wrenching decision to cremate a beloved husband of fifty-five years.

He remained silent, knowing no words were required. They were on a path -- a long, arduous journey that eventually would lead them through the healing process. Meantime, he thought about the messages waiting for him. So far the ladies hadn't disappointed him there.

"So expensive," Ronald Givens suddenly remarked. "To rent a casket that he won't even be buried in."

Martin knew better than to say anything. It was always better to refrain from comments.

"Yes, but it is what your father wanted," his mother reminded him in a whisper. "He always told me to cremate him, he didn't want to be put into the ground. He" -- she paused, her voice quivered, she reached for the tissue box, pulled out several -- "didn't want the worms getting at him."

Martin kept his eyes focused on the folder and avoided any direct eye contact, knowing all this reminded them of their own mortality and that someday someone was going to have to make similar decisions for them.

A part of the wheel of life, and more a part of life than most wanted to accept.

He thought about the smile he would put on Mr. Givens's face. He thought of the peace the man would finally enjoy -- a peace that came for some only at this time.

He was one of a few that gave complete peace. He smiled a solicitous smile, which merely acknowledged the fact he understood their pain.

"We do the best we can for them, don't we?" Martin finally said.

Mrs. Givens looked over at him, her tired, strained eyes fully demonstrating the extent of this unfamiliar grief. "I'm trying, Mr. Manheim. I'm really trying here. But we're never prepared to fully let them go, are we?"

"No. Not really," he responded. "But we do the best we can."

She looked down at the folder, at the handful of papers that now dictated what was going to happen to the man with whom she had spent more than half of her life.

In a voice Martin could barely hear, she said, "Yes, Mr. Manheim, we certainly do."

Chapter Twenty

"I swear, Kendra, there are things going on here that would make a person's skin crawl," Grace Bettencourt remarked. Her hands trembled as she covered herself with the pink and white lap afghan that her granddaughter had picked up at a local craft fair. "Housekeeping lost Mr. Mindel's dentures again -- the third time this month. Luckily they found them inside a trash bin, wrapped in a napkin."

"That's because Mr. Mindel takes them out, wraps them in those napkins, and puts them on his tray. When the aides come in to remove the trays, they think all of it is trash," Kendra explained. "You and I have heard Maddie yelling at him, telling him to put them into a container she brought in for that purpose."

"Don't go making excuses for what goes on here. They should check the trays," her grandmother responded. "I know better than to put mine into a napkin. I tell Norman not to do it, but old men are so stubborn and set in their ways." She leaned over and slowly reached toward the nightstand to pick up an unfinished piece of knitting work. "And he's always complaining about the chill in this place. I'm almost finished with this scarf. It'll at least keep his neck warm."

Kendra merely smiled, envisioning a red scarf looped around the neck of every man and woman inside the nursing home. Gram loved to knit her unique patterns, feeling that by doing so she gave a little part of herself to every person who came into her life.

"Gram, if you're unhappy here, and you don't want to stay, I can have them release you. But they say the hip is mending well, and you might be able to leave in a couple of weeks. I'll get people to come in when I can't be around."

"No, no, no, Kendra, you have enough responsibilities resting on your shoulders. I don't know how you do it. I do wish Holt was still around to take care of things for you...and Frank." Grace Bettencourt's faded eyes peered over the rim of her frameless

glasses. "Sometimes I think I'm dreaming, and one day I'm going to wake up from this nightmare. Because I never thought either one of us would be referring to our spouses in the past tense. It's never going to be the same for us...never." Kendra detected in the old woman's voice what had come to be an all too familiar sound -- demonstrating the painful grief that would never fully leave either of them.

"I know, Gram," she said, well aware that her own reality felt as surreal. "But we do the best we can," Kendra added, not wanting to go into it too deeply this time. She pulled her chair closer to her grandmother's wheelchair and patted the wrinkled, mottled hand. "Don't go worrying about me. I'm doing okay."

Grace Bettencourt stared at her, then shook her head, seemingly unconvinced. "With your grandfather and Holt gone, nothing's ever going to be the same for us," she repeated. Lately, Kendra noticed she repeated herself more often than not. "And I'm not going back to that house. Too many memories, some so painful... They no longer give me comfort. Plus, I keep seeing your grandfather in that study slumped over his desk, then finding out they had also discovered Holt's body lying down by the flower bed." Suddenly, she stopped, an expression of terror covering her face, her blue eyes widening.

"What in hell happened that day out there, Kendra?" She stopped, and Kendra knew that her grandmother was again reliving the trauma of that hot summer day. They had both been shopping at the local mall that afternoon, when the lab paged her. Moments later they made their way back to the farmhouse. A yard filled with the flashing lights of cruisers and ambulances greeted them. She hadn't been able to say good-bye. As if plucked from the earth, her grandfather and her husband gone, leaving behind her and her grandmother to deal with all that needed to be dealt with.

We make plans, and God laughs.

Those were words often expressed by Frank Bettencourt.

That day Kendra had been thrown from the ordinary into the bizarre. And God hadn't stopped laughing.

"Staying in the house will simply remind me of all that," her grandmother said, breaking Kendra's thoughts. "I don't think I can go back." She looked directly at her granddaughter, a misty expression filling her eyes. "It's never going to be the same for us," she repeated. "I get these images inside my mind, and they don't let go." She paused. "Why would your grandfather commit suicide? He was a Catholic. Good Catholics don't dare do such a thing. And why would he kill Holt? Why would they do that to each other? It doesn't make sense...telling us it was a murder-suicide. Your grandfather would never take his life, or that of another, certainly not his granddaughter's husband." She stopped. "Now they got me on these damn antidepressants. They think I'm nuts. They think I don't know what I'm talking about. Your grandfather and Holt were murdered, just like Rhonda and poor Patti. Maddie Wilcox was here this morning, and she told me they had found Patti's body."

Kendra said nothing, hesitant to go into any of the details of Patti's death, knowing she would be required to do the autopsy. Instead she stared ahead at the corkboard that covered part of the wall over the headboard. It was covered with cards and snapshots.

Was her grandmother entering a stage of dementia common at her age? If that were the case, then so was she, because all of what her grandmother was saying rang true. She had attended the autopsy on her grandfather, performed by her boss, Dr. Kenneth Stapleton, who discovered the astrocytoma, which she also learned was a common affliction in males. Perhaps even providing a motive for suicide, if that's what did occur. Still, it wouldn't have provided any motive for what had happened to Holt. The gun was there in her grandfather's hand, two bullets shot from it, ballistics proving by the inner surface striations they had come from the same gun.

She hadn't attended Holt's autopsy, a first for her. She didn't need to remember him in that way. Didn't need to have those images stuck inside her brain, to come back later and torment, obstruct those that might give her comfort --

She remembered her grandfather's headaches and his dismissing them, telling her that it was simply due to stress.

Everything had indicated that her grandfather had shot himself, to the side of the head -- one shot fired, direct contact. Gunpowder residue on his hands. No struggle, again indications of a suicide. Had he also been capable of murder? Had he, in the process of his madness, because of the brain tumor, killed her husband? Yet Kendra also knew it could have been staged. Proving that might be impossible, especially with no suicide note. None of it made sense.

Aware of that grace period that followed such injuries, she needed to believe that neither experienced much pain within that approximate half-hour interval that can protect a victim from suffering and allow them to die a relatively painless death. Still, painful or not, it didn't alleviate her own pain.

The fact that the cancer had been developing inside her grandfather's brain might have been a motivating factor behind his decision to take his own life. It might have compelled him to commit a violent act upon another. Kendra found her husband lying there in the garden, hands groping at the air. Movements she recognized -- known as the Lazarus sign, movements performed by a spinal cord not yet dead, unlike her husband's brain, that told her he was gone long before help could arrive.

She closed her eyes and pushed the images from her mind. Shutting down allowed her to function.

Since that day, she found herself living on the edge of a growing madness, like a fungus, letting her know that one day she would need to deal with that trauma.

"Isn't it time for lunch, Gram?" she said, immediately getting up and walking into the hallway, where moments later she returned with a tray. As she removed the tops from each of the plates, a pervading feeling that something sinister was happening in Canterville rose.

She felt something had taken hold long before the discovery of these bodies. Something that had been developing over the course of time, like poisonous mold in cracks and crevices, and would one day reach a point where containment might prove difficult. She sensed, more than knew for sure, that death would knock at their front door one more time.

Others would die. The thought produced a chill and had her wishing she had one of her grandmother's scarves looped around her own neck.

Chapter Twenty-One

Al Smart stamped on one of the cases designated for the crematorium “Au.” Danny noticed the markings, but refrained from commenting. He remembered from a chemistry class that Au was the symbol for gold. He suspected what he had found inside that Styrofoam cup was somehow connected.

Danny had also learned that these cases containing the bodies were referred to as “retorts” and were sent to a crematorium located on the outskirts of Canterville. Once the deed was accomplished, then the “take-back” containers came back to the funeral home, where the deceased’s family picked up the ashes. Sometime the ashes would remain inside the funeral home days, weeks, months later until the surviving loved one was ready to face this last step in a process that essentially had them letting go...accepting life’s final act.

Al Smart put some of the cases or retorts into the van. Others, ones marked with Au, were left to one side. Danny wanted to ask why, but his gut feeling told him it was better not to ask too many questions or raise suspicion.

He caught Al Smart staring at him. A touch of fear filled him, and realizing that he had been procrastinating, feeling that it was none of his business what he found in that cup, Danny knew now he needed to talk to his dad.

“Look, kid, we got a good deal going here. The pay is real good; the hours are good. And if we both keep our mouths shut, don’t get nosy about things, and don’t go asking questions, we’ll both do okay. You hear what I’m saying?”

Danny nodded. He was simply a kid making pocket money in this man’s eyes. A kid who would do what he was told. A kid who couldn’t put two and two together, went along with the status quo willingly enough so that it wasn’t going to create problems in anyone’s life.

Yet gut feeling told him he was on to something evil. He needed to talk to his dad.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Quiet morning,” Jack Thompson stated, and with a gray dishcloth, quickly wiped the area in front of Luke.

“You don’t see me complaining,” Luke responded, immediately picking up the container of milk and pouring some into his coffee mug.

“Yeah, but it must get monotonous at times,” Jack continued. “I was under the impression you cops enjoyed the excitement of chasing criminals.”

Luke cast him a look. He didn’t really want to get into any conversation with Jack. “Not before breakfast,” he said instead.

“I don’t know how Patti stood it this long in this town. I think once we get all the legal stuff settled, I’m going to sell the place.”

“Why? Find small town living too dull for your wandering tastes?”

“Hey, I’m a Californian at heart. Once winter hits, I’m out of here. I can see me now riding a surfboard, pumping iron on some sunny beach where temps never fall below eighty.”

Luke gave a half smile with his elbows on the counter, cupping both hands around his cup. “Yeah, that actually sounds good to me.”

Jack reached for a pen beneath the counter. “It’s a rat race out there. And trying to make this café work, I don’t know how Patti did it. I think once I sell, it’ll give me a nice nest egg.”

Luke now knew why he disliked Jack Thompson. He’d never helped Patti when she was alive. Knowing that he was going to benefit from his half sister’s death left a sour taste inside his throat, making him wonder if he could even down the runny eggs Jack had just placed in front of him. When he noticed Jack staring over his head, it caused him to turn, then spot the stranger who had just come in. Luke threw the man an intimidating glance.

Luke didn't particularly like strangers coming into his town, at least not lately, not after what had been happening around the lake area.

Potential troublemakers knew enough not to start anything when they spotted uniformed officers. Luke made a mental note to check the van he had spotted earlier outside the motel next door. Check the hot sheets, see if any BOLOS had been put out, or alerts on this guy. His notebooks were getting full of observations.

He refocused back on the plate of eggs, toast, and bacon. One thing for sure, he wasn't about to come to any conclusions about anything on an empty stomach. Yet, when he suddenly started to leaf through his notebook, he spotted a notation, a reminder, then looked up at Jack. "After I finish up these, I need to take a look at Patti's laptop."

Jack straightened and folded his arms against his chest. "I'm sure it's still in the backroom. I boxed it up with the rest of her stuff. Go help yourself."

Luke smiled, knowing Jack had no choice but to cooperate. Either that or Luke would need to get a search warrant issued, which wouldn't put Patti's stepbrother in too good a light. Suspects came in all shapes and forms. Stepbrothers proved no exception.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Allwoman4u: How are u today?

Starfire: Nice to see u again. Do we meet or not? u weren't sure last time we chatted. What do u like to do most in bed?

Allwoman4u: Mm, Starfire, not wasting time, are we? I see u want to enjoy a little cybersex?

Starfire: And I'm betting u know what I like.

Allwoman4u: Remind me. What do u like to do to a lady? Tie her up???? LOL

Starfire: Ah, u do remember our last conversation. Oh yes, tie u up and lick u all over. I want to caress those breasts of yours, nip at those hard erect nipples.

Allwoman4u: Blindfold me? Make me your sex slave???? u make such wonderful promises.

Starfire: I make good on all my promises. You'll see. Once we meet I'll make u scream with utter delight. I promise u. Bye for now. Chat later.

Allwoman4u: Yeah, chat later.

* * * * *

Dumbfounded, wishing he hadn't been able to get the password from the online dating server, shocked to some degree, though he had seen it all, or thought he had, Luke sat and stared at Patti's flickering monitor and at a fairly recent conversation she must have had with this Starfire.

He forced down the nausea that kept rising. He had played out a hunch. And now as he sat behind Patti's laptop, his suspicions had been confirmed. He contemplated where to go with this latest information.

Undoubtedly, she had been into this cybersex thing. Had she met this guy yet? Had they indulged in what was promised in this last chat session? Had he turned out to be the killer -- her killer? Questions queued up inside his mind, as well as the frustration of not knowing the answers. At the same time, he knew he was going further into the belly of this particular beast -- a beast that, once it was through with its feeding frenzy, would blatantly discard the bodies of its victims.

* * * * *

Kendra placed the small plastic bucket of garden tools down beside her. Though it was too early to plant anything; she felt the need to go down and keep the area free of debris, especially after the harsh winter they had just experienced. Although Holt had been cremated, she had purchased the plot where he now resided, waiting for the day when she could join him. Morbid to some, perhaps. She smiled and wondered what part of her life hadn't become some representation of the morose.

After purchasing the plot, some asked, What if she met someone else, fell in love, and married again? She was a young widow, too young to have entered widowhood. And the possibility of meeting another love in her life was still strong.

At the time, Kendra couldn't possibly conceive of sharing those kinds of feelings with another. Her grandfather's grave was there, as was her father's. She felt a strong sense of comfort knowing that one day in the future they would surround her. Her grandmother had already arranged to be buried beside her husband, and only the date of death needed to be inscribed on the marker. It was a given that they all end up together in this final resting place.

She looked around. Yards from her, she spotted an entourage of dark cars coming into the grounds. The familiar shiny black hearse led a line of ordinary-looking cars, all with headlights on, and slowly wound its way around the narrow roadway.

For some, the words "funeral procession" described an event that occurred occasionally in their lives. For others, it took on a more familiar meaning, becoming a larger part of their lives, putting them into a different place, a different space, a different level of awareness.

Flashes of memories rose. Holt's funeral. Her grandfather's. Flower arrangements that filled the house. Weeks after, she and her grandmother could close their eyes, still smell the sweet-scented fragrances that had once brought joy, but now made them nauseous.

And fruit baskets that they had been compelled to give away before the contents spoiled. To this day she couldn't look at a flower arrangement or a fruit basket without reexperiencing some of the trauma that had plagued them during the following months after Holt's and her grandfather's funerals.

She looked down at the flat bronze marker and at the recessed vase unit that she would later fill with wildflowers, Holt's favorite. Kneeling down, bending over, she brushed away

the dry leaves, thinking that a part of her mind still refused to accept this latest role placed upon her.

She should be making supper for them. She shouldn't have to do this, clean off a grave marker...their grave markers.

Murder-homicide.

Terms her grandmother used earlier that day. They were terms that had become a large part of her professional life, but had no damn business becoming any part of her personal life.

A cold wind blew, and she pulled the hood of her parka up around her, covering her head. The air smelled of rain, or possibly snow; it was cold enough. She glanced up at the assembling mourners huddled together, enclosing the coffin in a protective circle, their umbrellas at the ready.

It reminded her that she would soon be performing Patti's autopsy and envisioned another funeral, with another set of mourners gathering together as they reconciled the fact that death was as much a part of life as life itself.

At times she felt death was even more so.

Chapter Twenty-Four

He undid his belt. Unzipped his pants. Stared down at the naked woman sprawled across the motel bed. Hands over her head, wrists bound together with duct tape, and thighs spread wide apart, her ankles tied in such a way that allowed him easy access.

He would keep his promise to this one.

She was blonde, though he preferred brunettes. Small breasted, but then, he was never a breast man and knew he would enjoy nibbling at those succulent nipples. The harder he sucked, the louder he imagined her moans.

She told him she enjoyed it during their chat session.

He lucked out with this one. Wanted to get inside her, deep inside. He wanted to feel himself explode. He didn't gag her like he had done the others. Her full moist lips begged to be kissed. And did she love to kiss. After that first meeting, she had come on to him in a big way.

He liked the hunt, but was finding he also liked to be the one hunted.

"Fuck me," she whispered.

He was determined to take his time. Let her beg. Make her want it so bad...

They had been at it for a while already. She was hot...hot for him. He loved the taste of her. She wanted it. She wanted more. He smiled down at her. He was quick to oblige.

"Mm, you want it again, don't you?"

He glanced over at the nylon cord positioned near the edge of the bed.

Yeah, he was enjoying this one fully. He would take his time.

He looked at the closet, ensuring the door was partly open and the red light on.

* * * * *

"Something wrong with the meatloaf?" Jack asked. "I couldn't help noticing this is only your first helping," he added, pointing to a sign that read ALL YOU CAN EAT.

"Meatloaf's just fine," the stranger said, somewhat unconvincingly, and put down his fork. "I got this great recipe for meatloaf you should try."

Jack Thompson studied the man and placed both hands on the counter. "Is that so? What's so special about your meatloaf?" Jack gave a wide, engaging smile.

A mechanic, Jack guessed from the fingernails, which probably had been washed umpteen times, yet the stubborn dirt always remained. He had tattoos on one forearm and two small tattoos on one hand that were almost undetectable.

Jack thought of getting one himself. This man was definitely macho. No one knew of Jack's sexual preference, except Patti. But his stepsister wasn't talking...not anymore. She had guessed it that one summer in California while she was visiting a friend and spotted Jack with his "significant other," a young male with tattoos covering his body. She had put two and two together.

No sense, he felt, to deny a truth that simply needed an acknowledgement. He made her promise not to tell the rest of the family that he was bisexual. In due time he'd let it be known. But considering the state the family was in, now was not good timing for coming out of any closet.

"I'm not sure I should be giving away my secrets," the stranger said, referring to the recipe.

Jack laughed. "Hey, I got plenty of my own that my stepsister left me. I had to let poor Anthony, our short-order cook, go. He used to know them all by heart." Jack regarded the stranger more carefully. "Maybe you and I should get together and share some of those recipes?"

The stranger laughed, an uncomfortable laugh, suddenly understanding the implications of Jack's words. "Yeah, well maybe what you're looking for I can't give. Name's Al...Al Smart. Your sister's name was Patti, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," he repeated. "Hard to believe she's gone -- murdered by some serial killer, though cops aren't even admitting there's a serial killer lurking in this damn town. But who's kidding whom? How many more bodies are they going to have to find before they admit to what's really going on here?"

"Yeah...a real downer. I was supposed to meet your sister last weekend. We were going to try that Cavern place. But I figure she simply stood me up -- wouldn't have been the first time -- she just never showed."

Jack eyed him suspiciously. You don't say. How did you and she meet?" He started to wipe down the counter, remaining calm, showing no obvious angst.

"I met her in a cyber chat room."

"Cyber chat room? You mean on the Internet? Christ's sake, I told Patti she shouldn't be on that thing."

"Hey, it ain't so bad. Lots of people meet that way. You just got to be careful."

"Yeah, well, considering what happened to her and to a few others, I'm guessing you can't be careful enough." Thompson paused. "You sure you two didn't meet?"

Catching his meaning, the man replied, "Wait a minute, don't you go thinking I had anything to do with what happened to your sister. I'm really sorry about what went down here, but no one fucking better try to pin that rap on me." Suddenly, Al Smart appeared nervous, and started to get up. That's when Jack realized the tattoos were in the shape of what looked like bolts of lightning.

"You didn't finish your meatloaf, and remember, it's all you can eat tonight."

Smart looked at him as if he were crazy. "I lost my appetite," he muttered.

"You know, if I were you, I wouldn't let anyone else get wind that you and my sister planned to meet, because then you'd better prepare yourself to get pulled in for questioning by the cops. I'm guessing they're even suspecting me."

Al Smart's mild case of nerves turned to outright agitation. "Shit, I don't want no trouble from anyone. I've had my share of trouble. All I wanted was to take your sister out. But she never answered my last e-mail or returned my phone call. I hate to say this, but she damn fucking well picked the wrong man to meet that night. If it had been me, she'd still be here serving this damn fucking meatloaf."

Jack stared at him, then said, "Maybe. And if he's out there preying on other women, I'm selling this place, and packing up, because no one's going to want to come into this town." He looked down at the tattoos again. "Yeah, those are sharp looking tattoos you got there. Where did you get them done?"

Al Smart smiled, said nothing at first, and plunged his fork straight into the meatloaf. "Little gal next town over did them for me. I can give you her number."

* * * * *

Audrey Symington straightened out the plaque that read AMERICAN ACADEMY -- MCALLISTER INSTITUTE OF FUNERAL SERVICES. As Martin often told her, this was New York's premier mortuary science school, of which he was a third-generation graduate.

She had worked for Manheim's for more years than she could remember, right out of high school, and knew that when it came time for her to cross over to that "other" side, they would provide services for her family and for her own burial. She wouldn't have it any other way. Most people didn't know what they were going to do with their lives. Audrey knew exactly what would happen to her after her death. As administrative assistant and cosmetologist for Manheim she knew the family well. She'd worked for Edward Manheim,

Martin's father, until his death three years ago. She knew that for these men, what they did wasn't a nine-to-five job, but a sacred duty.

On the back wall of Martin's office, a framed poster listed the Embalmer's Commandments, given to Edward by an instructor who had suggested that his students write them down and never forget them. Edward never had. Martin she wondered about at times. But she had learned to keep her mouth shut, knowing families in their grief might not be getting what they were paying for, but were unaware of those things that bordered between the ethical and the not-so-ethical.

And lately, Martin seemed more willing to cross those lines.

Things like overcharging on some of the lower-priced caskets and adding charges to extra services not necessarily provided. She'd been tempted to complain, but instead, unwilling to risk losing her job, she simply kept quiet.

Audrey knew these commandments by heart. Specifically the one reminding her through its words, "There is no grief like my grief, no sorrow like mine." And that was why she always refrained from making comments to a deceased's loved ones. No one really knew how anyone felt after losing someone close.

Commandment number nine made her think of people like the one walking in. People who were morbidly curious were sick. And if that wasn't the truth when it came to Detective Lucas Sloane -- whose good looks belied the fact that he probably had a morbid curiosity about everything.

"Hi, Audrey. Martin around?" Luke asked, approaching her desk with the air of someone comfortable in most surroundings.

She sat down behind her desk. "No, he's meeting with a family right at the moment, helping them with arrangements for their son's funeral. The young man was killed while on maneuvers in Iraq, so I'm sure they will want a special funeral done."

"You mean the Connors's boy? Yeah, a tragedy, considering he was scheduled to come home for good next month," Luke said, remembering the recent newscast.

"They plan to have a full military service," Audrey said.

"I'm sure his family will appreciate that, though it won't lessen their loss," Luke went on.

"No, it won't." Audrey paused, then said, "Well, enough chitchat. What did you want to see Martin about?" She eyed him with slight suspicion, knowing how Luke came in with unorthodox requests.

"Audrey, are you giving me that now-what-do-I-want look?" Luke knew Audrey was as much a part of Manheim Funeral Home as any of its owners. He guessed the woman was in her mid-forties and probably knew as much about running the place as any of them. A lot of Canterville folks passed through Manheim's doors, and Audrey brought them as much comfort as any of the directors.

"I was just curious about Patti's funeral," he clarified.

"Why? You were there, weren't you? Although I'm surprised you didn't attend her embalming. Much different, isn't it? Harder to view when you know them personally. Although for Martin, knowing the person, he takes extra care. He does such a magnificent job, don't you agree?"

The woman was actually smiling, and it made Luke uncomfortable, uneasy, though he understood the feeling of taking pride in what one did for a living. He guessed morticians were no exception.

Still, they weren't talking about Martin's ability as a gardener, but his ability to bring the dead to a quasi-lifelike existence, making them presentable for viewing.

Realizing that, Luke could only nod at Audrey's comment, ignoring the sick feeling inside. Images of Rhonda Woods's embalming were still fresh in his mind. "It gets surreal at times, Audrey," Luke confessed. "Patti should be working down there at the café, putting together that meatloaf of hers."

An immediate look of sympathy crossed Audrey's carefully made-up face. "I know you had a thing for her, Luke," Audrey said. "I remember that time I spotted the two of you coming out of the motel room, how you both looked so happy, appearing to be having so much fun." Audrey shook her head. "You're right, she was too young. Why anyone would kill her is beyond a rational mind."

Luke stared at Audrey for a moment. He wondered why she never married.

"Have Martin give me a call," he said.

She picked up a pink message pad. "Sure, Luke. Is there anything else I should tell him?"

Luke hesitated. "No. I just need to talk to him about a few things."

"Okay, I'm sure he'll have free time later."

"He can get me on my cell."

She wrote down the number. "Martin did love her meatloaf," she suddenly added.

"What?" The comment took him by surprise.

She looked up at him, as she put the message pad back down on the desk. "Patti's meatloaf. Martin always looked forward to those days when they ran the meatloaf special at the Skillet Café."

Luke nodded. "Yeah, I guess a lot of people will miss her cooking," he said, thinking of the slop now being served by that long-haired stepbrother of hers. "It's never going to be the same around there." He paused.

"Is there something else?" Audrey asked.

"One question, and if I'm getting too personal, just tell me to mind my own damn business."

She smiled a closed smile, then said, "Luke, go ahead, ask. I know that's part of your job. Asking questions."

"How come you never married, Audrey? You're a damn good-looking woman. Someone should have snatched you up ages ago."

"Thank you -- you made my day." She laughed, then paused, as if struggling to come up with an answer. "Let's say, sometimes we fall in love, and it traps us into a place we can't seem to leave."

Luke studied her for a moment. "Yeah, I guess that would make sense. So I'm guessing whoever this man is, he's not free to be with you?"

"Oh, in his mind he's free to be with me. But not in the way I would want." She chuckled. "You're a good detective, Luke. With that thinking, you'll have your murderer behind bars for sure."

Luke nodded, and moments later as he slid into his car, he suddenly got the uneasy feeling that he had missed something important back there.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The call had come that morning around six a.m., and six hours later she was performing another autopsy.

There were a few health nuts, it seemed, out there on the Canterville back roads and in the fields, who enjoyed the early morning hours. Another jogger stumbling over yet another body, this one purposely buried under piles of dead leaves and debris and had been there for a time.

Suddenly, Kendra thought of words an instructor had shared with them during an anatomy class specifically geared toward forensics. “Whoever discovers a dead body has a duty to raise the hue and cry.”

And so it was for the jogger who that morning had discovered Canterville’s third body dump, consequently providing Canterville’s police and technicians another crime scene to process.

Luke stood by the table...silent in his full gown and mask, attentive, and she guessed, frantically processing this latest crime in his head.

She also sensed a change in him as she performed this latest autopsy on someone neither of them knew. She could tell that in some way he had become more desensitized toward the process, decompressing himself so that he could focus on what was happening.

Although he no longer cringed or made asinine remarks to ward off his own apprehensions, she missed the silliness, which at times helped alleviate her own angst.

It had been an unusually cold and misty morning when they went out to work the scene. The coldness now settled inside her, unwilling to let go, and she suspected she felt as cold as the remains that lay on the stainless steel table.

The dead woman was not from the immediate area. This one was different from the others.

This was a decomp...autolysis and putrefaction would be considered.

Kendra knew, depending on the environment, time of death would vary. When a body is exposed to the elements and wild animals, skeletonization could take place in little over a week. But the weather had been cold, also drier than usual, so that this one had taken its time. The smell was no longer as intense as it would have been during the wet stages of decomp. This one still retained a musty odor.

Decomps were always problematic, and determining whether the death was from a homicide or natural causes would prove more difficult. This one was holding back its story. Stab wounds, bullet holes, other signs of possible violence could often be hidden. All decomps required an autopsy, and as long as she did the procedure with diligence, some type of data would be obtained that might tell them what had happened in her final moments.

She looked up at Luke, knowing the smell -- though not as bad as it would have been if they had found her sooner -- could still end up driving him straight out the door to the men's room. She hoped to God that he hadn't had anything substantial to eat that morning.

"Just concentrate on the smell," she finally told him.

"What?" He looked at her as if unsure of what just said.

"Focus on the smell -- get it the hell over with. It will acclimatize you. Just don't fight it."

"Acclimatize me?"

"Help you adjust...adapt."

"I don't think anything's going to help me adapt to any of this, fucking smell or not. And I'm hoping that it doesn't stay with me. My social life hasn't been all that great lately, and this just might finish it for me with the ladies."

Kendra chuckled. "Hey, birds of a feather."

"Meaning?"

"This lady won't take a whiff and run."

"Very funny." He suddenly smiled.

She surmised he wasn't smiling at her attempt at sick humor and detected a greenish tinge coming up over the mask.

"Just be sure you shower and change your clothes once we're through here," she advised him. "The fact that we always risk contracting some form of hepatitis."

"Hell, don't remind me. Let's hope this one won't take as long."

Kendra didn't have the heart to tell him because of the circumstances it might take longer than the others.

"Yeah, well, I notice remnants of maggots and beetles, and by their identification and at what stage of development they are at might let me know how long the body has been in

those woods. And, depending on the type of insects we find here, can possibly tell me the postmortem interval.”

“If there’s that many...means she was out there a while.”

“Insects feed on the body, making the body attractive enough for the next set of insects to do their work. Each one enjoys the body at a certain stage during decomp. What insects are left let us know part of the story.”

And then identification of the body was going to require antemortem records, fingerprint charts, dental records, X-rays, also any other material associated with the postmortem death. She fucking didn’t have to spell it out for him.

“I pulled a missing person’s report out of the Waterbury area, and I’m guessing this one is going to match up. We think this is Jennifer Wilson, missing about two weeks,” Luke said.

“Oh, yeah? Well, then, identification shouldn’t be a problem once we get dental records and a forensic odontologist in here,” Kendra went on.

Kendra noticed a slight variation in the modus operandi of this killer and wondered if this was a copycat crime. Remnants of a cord remained around the victim’s neck area. The hyoid bone was crushed, meaning no padding had been provided, meaning they could possibly rule out an autoerotic death. Whoever did this meant to kill his victim, a clue given by the deceased that her demise had been no accident, instead an intentional act motivated by one thing -- to simply end her life.

So far they knew who had been killed -- how, when, and where remained to be determined. The whys were something Luke was going to have to work on. And the killer? An important piece of the puzzle that for now remained elusive.

Kendra didn’t envy Luke’s job. Her job was to document exactly what was here, form a view that resulted in a scientifically based conclusion, and present it within the format of an autopsy report. Yes, it had to be detailed and thorough. All she had to do: identify the deceased, who would probably turn out to be that thirty-five-year-old missing woman from the Waterbury area.

She wondered if this woman enjoyed chatting on the Internet, as one close neighbor told Luke during his survey of the neighborhood where the women lived. The time of death was within the last month, maybe longer. The manner...homicide. And the cause, strangulation. Clear-cut.

And if this was planned, deliberate, then they had first-degree murder to prove out and get a conviction.

“I asked the jogger if he touched anything, and he swore on his mother’s grave that he hadn’t,” Luke said. “He was pretty shook up, said he immediately got on his cell and called nine-one-one.”

Still, questions floated in Kendra’s mind. Why were bodies being dumped in Canterville? What had brought this monster into their community -- and one capable of

such violence? Or had the monster simply been there all along...living among them? Like one tiny cancer cell, at first going undetected, then mutating and multiplying in its feeding frenzy, where it could end up destroying the very host that gave it survival.

"I make a mean frozen daiquiri," Luke suddenly announced.

For an instant Kendra stopped what she was doing and looked at him. "What?"

"You told me once you liked them."

"I probably did. I'm surprised you remember something like that, especially now, here, with me doing this."

"When we're through, why don't you come on over to my place. I'll show you how mean I make them."

Was he baiting her? Of course, he was. Tempting her.

"Fine," she found herself saying behind the plastic shield.

He straightened as if not expecting her reply. "Really? You'll come over later?"

"Hell, sure, why not? I haven't enjoyed one of those 'mean' daiquiris in a while. I'm long overdue. Suddenly, I'm developing this deep craving for one about now."

"Well...good, then. I also got some steaks I can put on the grill," he added, and Kendra sensed his own surprise that he could actually talk about food. "I got some fixin's for a salad..."

"Sounds good to me. I'm going to be famished after I finish here." She ventured a glance his way, then taking her recorder, continued to dictate her findings.

"Yeah, me too."

She looked at him and surmised his last comment was for his own benefit, convincing himself that he actually would be as hungry.

With the autopsy completed, Luke told Kendra he had something to show her. Moments later, he brought a laptop into her office, placed it on her desk, and turned it on.

Moments later, "Allwoman4u? That was Patti's screen name?" Kendra had to ask, a modicum of disbelief evident in her voice. "Patti had told me she'd gone on the Internet to meet men. But, hey, millions are doing it. Still, I assumed she would not put herself into any jeopardy. But from what I'm reading here, it appears she was into some pretty kinky stuff."

"Yeah, I think Patti may have pushed the envelope a bit too far with this one," Luke said, not elaborating.

"If we find out the ID of this man, at least we'll have a suspect," Kendra said. "Unless, of course, he's giving a false one like most do, which is a strong possibility."

"I've checked into it. Whoever signed up on this particular dating site did give a false ID of John Roberts, with a Canterville post office box number, but there's no such actual person in the town. Although if he gave the necessary information to sign up, then he probably used a credit card...so that may be something to go on."

Kendra nodded, her focus on the screen, which she hadn't taken her eyes off since Luke showed her his discovery. A hunch on his part that panned out, giving them one more thing to work with that might reveal why Patti Thompson was no longer among the living.

"So now what?" Kendra asked, hopeful that the labyrinth they had been stuck in had opened up a path toward its solution.

"We'll investigate further, come up with some more dead ends, until we find one that pushes us forward."

"I have an idea."

He looked at her, said nothing.

"We know who she was chatting with. We go for the local ones, like this Starfire. Or CowboyMan. I notice she'd placed these names among her 'friends.' This one looks like he was the most recent one she chatted with besides this Starfire." She hesitated.

"And?" Luke prodded knowing she had more to tell him.

"Then I'll create an ID on this same online site, and I'll contact these men."

"You mean, I create an ID on this site, and I contact them," he corrected her.

"Whatever, but I'm the one who will meet him. I don't think you're their type. It doesn't say anything on their profiles about them being bisexual." She didn't conceal her grin, kept her eyes to the screen.

"You're not meeting anyone from this site or any site. It's too dangerous, especially if any of them turns out to be the killer. You're not trained to do undercover work. Remember you examine bodies, you don't put yourself in a situation where you can end up as one."

Kendra glanced at him, and when she saw that he was smiling that damn devilish smile of his. "Luke, there's no reason why I can't do this. Especially if it is someone from Canterville who's committing these acts and we end up nailing him."

"We don't nail anyone. I'll handle this," Luke emphasized. "Thanks for offering to help, but it's too risky for a layperson like yourself. We don't know who the hell you'll be dealing with out there."

Kendra found herself pulling back at the sound of his voice -- forceful, adamant, and knowing she could deal with Luke. Detective Lucas Sloane was another matter. Better not to argue than end up in a no-win situation.

It would only polarize them, even if she didn't like being told what to do, or in this instance, what not to do. She'd always found it more productive to keep the status quo and then do her own thing.

"Okay, okay, it was just a thought," she said, indicating her willingness to end the conversation.

"Yeah, you just keep examining those bodies when they pop up. As long as we stay on our own turf, we'll do okay. I don't need to have to worry about you being out there playing private eye."

"Then why did you show this laptop to me in the first place?"

"I wanted your feedback. I thought maybe you could give me some of that valuable insight. The fact that you knew Patti, and sometimes women chat about things they wouldn't chat about with a man."

"All Patti shared with me was that she had found a good way to meet men. How good that is I now seriously doubt."

"Like anything else," Luke interrupted. "You meet them in a bar; you still need to be careful. Same on the 'Net, but here I think one has to be cautious. You never know what you're bringing into your life: the man of your dreams or the monster in your own worst nightmare."

A feeble attempt, Kendra knew, but Luke wasn't smiling as he usually did at one of his corny attempts. Probably because this joke was neither corny nor funny and pretty much told its own sick tale.

"So, are we ready for those frozen daiquiris?" he asked.

* * * * *

Martin opened the book of poetry. Strangely enough, reading poetry by dead poets helped him sleep better at night, and at times, made him fully realize the immortality that lent itself to the creator of such poignant works.

*Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or gain,
That had been, and may be again?*

Sorrow and loss were a major part of his life. He reread the stanzas of the poem, the rhythm of the words lulled him into a state of oblivion. He was fortunate, considering what he did for a living, that he could sleep well very well at night. He looked over at the computer and at the flickering screen. Once logged in, there would be a new one tonight,

another adventure that could help lessen the effect of that natural sorrow inherent in his livelihood.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Luke peered through his kitchen window. Kendra Bettencourt had actually accepted the invitation for that frozen daiquiri. Kendra Bettencourt now sat on his back deck, enjoying the view of the lake waters.

It was still light out, but dusk was settling fast. It had been a long day for both. After such a day, usually he'd come home and shut himself off from the world. Or go down to Josh's dojo and kick the fucking hell out of that bag.

Tonight, instead, he would spend it with her. The steaks had turned out great. She had put together a salad of fresh greens and those plum tomatoes he liked. And, as he promised, they'd enjoyed a few daiquiris already. A chill hung in the air, and he had a roaring fire going inside his living room. Too perfect, he thought. It had been a while since he'd entertained like this.

All this was now a perfect diversion from all of that.

Kendra Bettencourt had a real sexy ass. She wore snug-fitting jeans and a loose-fitting sweatshirt. Easily he envisioned her in one of those sexy outfits he'd come across inside that Adult Super Store. He pictured slender legs encased in silky black fishnet stockings and a matching black garter belt. And a lacy bra that pushed her small breasts upward. Or better yet, no bra. That last thought sent a rush of heat through his groin. He could feel his cock swelling inside his jeans. He needed release, and he needed it soon.

That's when she walked back into the kitchen. He didn't turn to face her or else she would see the result of his wayward thinking.

"Can I help?" she asked. "I seem to always be needing to be doing something lately...quiets the mind chatter."

"There's not much to do. Everything's in the dishwasher," he said, his voice husky.

"This is a really nice place you have here. Lots of privacy. Though I suspect it must get lonely at times."

He let the hot water fill up a pot they had used earlier and put it aside to let it soak. Suddenly, he felt her standing close to him...too close. Reluctantly, he turned.

"I know you and Patti were a thing at one time," Kendra started. "Has anyone taken her place?"

Kendra looked up at him with huge dark eyes that made him feel he could melt beneath their gaze. He mentally stripped her out of her jeans and the oversized sweatshirt. Josh had been right about his love life. It had been lacking lately.

"I like it when you look at me like that," she said. "And I'm guessing you're having certain thoughts about me being here with you." She gave an oblique glance toward his crotch and then returned her gaze to his eyes. "We're both adults. We both have needs."

Suddenly, he realized he didn't have this woman completely figured out and suspected the liquor might be doing most of her talking about now.

As if reading his mind, she said, "Okay, maybe I have consumed a few too many of these, but I'm finding you quite irresistible, Lucas Sloane. You are one damn sexy man." Her words were slightly slurred. "You do stir up a woman's fantasy. In fact" -- her words slightly slurred -- "you are stirring up a lot of fantasies."

* * * * *

Kendra knew she had consumed one too many, but not enough to dull her senses. Quite the contrary. She knew exactly what she was doing. She knew exactly what she needed to do, and most of all, wanted to do with this man.

Although she hadn't yet read the books she had ordered through Maddie's bookstore, who better than to have that experience with than Luke Sloane.

"You and I," she started. "Let's get it on. It's been a while since I've had a good fucking, and I can't think of anyone better than you."

A reluctant grin canted the corner of Luke's mouth. "Do you realize what you're saying?" The unmistakable invitation in her eyes signaled him of what they could enjoy if he went along with her rantings. Still, he wasn't about to take advantage of a situation. Not usually. Not with someone like Bettencourt who might wake up the next morning cold sober and wanting to hang him from the nearest tree.

"Maybe you might want to go easy on those," he warned. "I'll make us coffee."

"The hell with the fucking coffee, Sloane," she yelled and drew closer to him, pressing herself against him. "I want you and me to try something tonight. Are you up for it?" grabbing his enclosed cock, gently squeezing, rubbing until he thought he would split his zipper.

Warnings sounded off inside his mind. "Try something?"

"I want you to tie me up, and then I want you to make love to me. I want to have sex with you, Lucas Sloane...tonight. Kinky sex." Her hands were still on him. "You up for it, Sloane?"

"Kendra, you do realize what you've just asked me to do...us to do," he repeated huskily. "I didn't realize you were into this bondage stuff."

"There's a lot you don't know about me," she went on, her words still slurred, and drew closer. "But in spite of what I drank, I do know exactly what I'm saying and what I'm asking and what I want to be doing with you tonight."

The thought of engaging in what she was proposing left him feeling hot, but at the same time apprehensive.

"You did it with Patti, then why not with me? I know you and she enjoyed certain sexual...adventures. Remember, women talk...talk to each other. She said you enjoyed tying her up, and then you fucked her in every possible way imaginable."

"She told you that?" he said, disbelieving, and backed away until he felt the edge of the counter behind him. Suddenly, the world -- his world -- had gone completely mad. "A dead woman had given away his secrets...his secret life...to this one who now showed her own willingness to enter a world many avoided, the world of BDSM."

"I know how much you love to fuck women," Kendra murmured, drawing herself further up against him, encircling her arms around his neck. She whispered in his ear, "I know you like the smell of them, touching them, tasting them in all ways possible. I know all that about you, Lucas Sloane. Patti told me everything. In fact, she had planned for her and you and moi...together."

She kissed him lightly at first on his neck. Feeling the warmth of her tongue, pure heat shot straight through him. She nipped at his earlobe, playfully at first, then tugging at it, letting him feel some pain. He felt her full breasts pushing up against him and realized he was right; she wore no bra. His hands went to her slender waist and moved up beneath the fabric of the sweatshirt. He loved the feel of her satin warm skin, and when he moved his hands upward, he heard her give a soft moan. He then cupped her breasts, his thumbs flitting over each hardening nipple. He reveled in this power he had over her.

Suddenly, he lifted her up and carried her into his bedroom, to the king-sized bed that had lately seemed too big and too empty.

Not tonight.

Moments later she was lying there naked, looking over at him.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he whispered in the darkened room, lit only by a few candles and a small light emanating from the bathroom.

Kendra looked at him, and he sensed a part of her wanted to tell him no. Yet the other part clearly revealed her anticipation of what lay ahead for them.

Kendra focused on the blindfold that he had pulled out of a drawer. Only one among many items that could help them play their little game.

He walked over to her and gently slipped the blindfold over her head, ensuring it fit snugly, but not tightly.

Then, using Velcro bonds that he had connected to a rope that ran beneath his bed, he bound her wrists to each.

Suddenly powerless, she lay there waiting for the rest to begin.

Women held certain dark fantasies, and he suspected Kendra would prove no different. They would make those fantasies a reality, and in the process, they would end up discovering themselves as well.

A certain element of danger and risk were always inherent in these activities. Danger became a large part of the allure, especially when it came to bondage.

Raw sexual energy ran through him. He wanted and needed to possess this woman. He would tease her at first, make her want him as much as he wanted her.

They could stop at any time with one word -- their safe word -- which they would agree upon. And it gave him a complete hard-on having this woman who controlled her life call him Master.

She knew the rules.

Total submission required.

Submission to him under every circumstance.

He stroked her naked body, ignoring her slight resistance to his touch. He loved the feel of her breasts, firm, not overly large, decorated with raspberry-hued rosebuds.

He bent down, with callused hands caressed each nipple, then bent down and licked them, feeling them stiffening beneath his touch.

She arched slightly from the bed as his tongue urged each one into hardness.

Hungrily he took one into his mouth, sucked it, reveling at the moans coming from her, feeling that sense of power that came from her struggle against her bonds.

He did the same to the other nipple.

He moved upward and teasingly kissed her mouth, and between kisses would pull away.

When he did, she yanked at her bonds, as if trying to reach for him, wanting more from him.

Deliberately, he took his time, and taking in her warm female scent, he returned to her nipples, kissing them again, then nipping at them, causing some pain that only made her attempt to wrap her thighs around him.

With his thighs, he pressed hers further apart, took another set of Velcro bonds and tied her ankles into position.

"God, I'm so hot," she moaned.

He stroked between her legs, slowly moved downward, until reaching that delicate space where he knew her intense ache grew.

"Fuck me," she whispered.

"In due time," he promised softly. "In due time."

"Now," she ordered, her voice louder, her body writhing as she attempted to take back some of that control.

"I don't take orders, remember?" he reminded. "And, my dear lady, you are in no position to give them."

* * * * *

Suddenly, Kendra knew it was no longer a game, and realizing that her helplessness, her powerlessness to stop him from doing whatever he wanted to do, meant following him through as they explored their darkest desires. He had become the captor, she the captive. Coercion first, then consent.

She had become his instrument, the tool he would use to accomplish and fulfill his fantasy as he forced her into the game of subjugation.

Then she thought, if he were the serial killer, how easy it would be to go into this dark side of herself, to go further into a place that would have her tottering on the edge and testing her sanity. At one point in her life, death had been the promise of release. A way to escape her unrelenting pain. Instead, she had chosen to acknowledge the dark side of herself, and go to a place where it also allowed her some escape from the painful reality of her past loss.

She arched upward and felt him, his tongue licking her clit. He held her butt firmly, and his tongue orchestrated sensations that had her begging him not to stop.

His callused thumbs reached up and raked the skin between her thighs, the hard touch followed by more strokes of his tongue on her clitoris.

She moaned as searing waves of lust swept through her.

Pure lust filled her as her whole body cried for pure physical release.

Then she felt the first wave, that first spasm of her climax starting and bursting through.

She welcomed the release that would eventually give her a reprieve from the sheer ache that had risen to an unbearable height.

She held her breath, feeling the ache growing deep within, feeling the urgency building, like hot molten lava spreading downward between her legs.

Blindfolded, she felt herself transcend.

He had truly become the Master -- her Master.

The realization set in as she stared into the darkness of the blindfold, her voice crying out, finally announcing her climax.

Wave after wave wracked her body with their sweet assaults. She felt, more than heard, the low, ecstatic moan that came deep from within as his finger entered her while licking her clit, increasing that surge of pure lust.

She struggled against her bonds, trying to open her legs further, wider, allowing him more access to her drenching wet pussy.

A cool breeze came in from some window, acknowledging the sweat that now covered them.

Drenched, her lack of control, her body reminding her of her helplessness as well as her inability to stop him, she could only endure and at the same time enjoy as her voice let out animalistic grunts that only further demonstrated the ultimate pleasure he gave her.

In the throes of this sexual submission, within the content of this erotic surrender, eventually her release spewed forth from the sweet torment.

Yes, yes, her mind continued, she had indeed become his sex slave.

He took a moment to stop and moved over her, then kissed her fully on the mouth, probing her with his tongue.

She drew him in, the only control she felt she still had, and refused to let go.

He managed to pull away, and his thumb this time rubbed her clit, expertly fingering the small nub and stopping whenever he knew she was on the brink of another climax.

Ahhh, such sweet torture, her mind cried.

He seemed to enjoy tormenting her.

Reveled in his domination of her.

"I control you. I control your sex. I know you want release. Only when I say you're ready."

She strained at her bonds, cursed him, realizing he was playing out their little game to the fullest, dark and dangerous, as he promised. They were touching the shadow side together and boldly venturing to places unknown.

She could only begin to guess.

Yet this unknown made her feel alive, like dead winter grass responding to the warm rays of the sun.

Reality set in as she suddenly realized why Patti had done this and more. She knew Luke would go just so far, certain that he wouldn't go as far as the killer -- Patti's killer.

Luke would play his part out. That other part played out by the killer remained inside her fantasy, inside her mind, where it needed to remain. She couldn't ask that of Luke.

That was beyond a place that even Patti might not have been prepared to go before she was forced.

She heard the faint rip, imagined him sheathing his shaft in thin latex.

He was ready. Ready to take them both to that place of no return.

She felt him undo the bonds that were wrapped around her ankles.

Even if she wanted, she wouldn't be able to stop him now, wouldn't be able to refuse him entrance. She felt his body pressing against her as he lowered himself to her.

She felt the slight resistance as his cock pushed against her clit, then her body giving, allowing him access.

She took him in fully, inner muscles clamping around him as tight as the condom he remembered to use.

She wrapped her legs around his waist. He plunged into her, again and again, his breath in short rasps. She felt him shudder and pulled him more into her, her leg muscles clamping more firmly around his waist. And as he promised, as her moans became loud grunts of pleasure -- his thrusts became fierce and hard -- her release again came.

Each lost to the other.

No words of love expressed.

No words of endearment forthcoming.

Over and over she heard herself repeat the words, "Fuck me! Fuck me!"

* * * * *

Afterward, Luke lay partially on top of her, his own body trembling, spent, realizing that something unique had happened here. Not just the act of sex.

No, something more. Something all-encompassing that had formed not only a physical and emotional bond, but close to something more spiritual.

Luke felt very close to this woman. As close as anyone could to a person. They had ventured into that shadow side where nothing lay hidden.

She trusted him to do this, Luke realized. They shared a rare experience involving the complete giving of the other. Even with Patti, he had not felt this trust, this bond. He couldn't explain it, and it left him disoriented.

Gently, he untied her wrists and removed the blindfold. They lay there side by side, naked, silent, Kendra facing away toward the wall.

Luke gently encircled one arm over her naked form, pulling her against him. It felt nice, he thought, but he knew that in the morning they would resume their separate lives. The physical part was all she could give.

And, he surmised, all she was willing to give.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Maddie peered over at Kendra with her half-frame glasses. "Here are the books you ordered." She hesitated, then said, "I have to tell you, I'm a little more than shocked at the titles."

Kendra merely smiled and looked Maddie straight in the eye. "It's for research," she said, emphasizing their purpose, maintaining her smile, all the while wishing Maddie would keep her comments to herself. "How's Wally doing?" Kendra quickly added, steering the conversation into another direction. "I heard he's been a bit spooked about what's been going on in this town. Who can blame him? Seems no one's safe anymore."

Maddie punched the keypad on the cash register. "Wally knows enough to stay put and not be traipsing off like he does." Maddie shook her head. "Research, you say?" she said, not to be put off. The older woman glanced down at the pile of a half dozen books. "Lord, what kind of research you doing anyway, girl?" She turned over one of the books, seemingly studying its cover. "Why this one's titled *Internet Slavemaster*. Can only guess what that's all about. And this one." Her voice started to rise. "Sadomasochism? Bondage? Hell's bells, why do you want to know about this stuff? We don't usually carry these subjects in this store, although Wally suggested we convert the backroom and use it like they do in that video store at the other end of town for such filth. I told him I don't want X-rated material like that in here. We got kids coming in from the schools, and I don't want them wandering into that backroom or my having to keep an eye on them. Their parents would come in and complain for sure."

"I understand what you're saying, Maddie. But there are some things that a person must do, places they must venture into, that are not always nice places. I appreciate your ordering these." Kendra could only imagine what was going on in Maddie's mind. She agreed that these were not subjects anyone openly discussed with anyone, especially in a small town like Canterville, let alone displaying them out on any bookshelf. Maddie, like many of

Canterville's residents, lived in safe cocoons, unaware of or simply choosing to ignore what was happening out of their ordinary existence. She wasn't about to tell Maddie the reason for reading these books. Nor let her know what she was setting herself up to do. Connect with some of the men Patti had met on that dating site, among them Starfire.

Another would be CowboyMan. Once she found out what they wanted, it would put her on the right track. She hadn't told Luke about her latest plan, knowing his disapproval. She was trespassing on his territory, as he would put it. But it was in her blood, this detective work, thinking of her grandfather.

Kendra took the bag of books from Maddie's grasp, fearing the woman might change her mind and refuse to give them up.

"I'm not so old that I can't figure things out," Maddie remarked suddenly. "And I've read enough mysteries to know what might be churning around in that mind of yours. It's not difficult putting two and two together. Those women must've died horrible deaths if these are the books you're using for your research."

Kendra held her breath, refrained from responding, knowing now she should have ordered them online.

"You be careful, that's all I'm saying for now. Your grandmother's not going to have much of a will to live if something should happen to you as well."

Kendra attempted a smile. "Don't worry, Maddie. I'll be careful."

Kendra's assurance did nothing to wipe away the skeptical look on the old lady's face.

Moments later Kendra left the store and walked into the glaring sunlight. She put on her sunglasses. The baseball cap and sweats pretty much created one identity. And now she would be creating this other one, one that would allow her to become more in touch with what went on in these dating sites.

Those brief e-mails with Starfire had told her she was headed in the right direction. Others had responded as well. Now all she had to do was go over to that Super Adult Store and look over some of the outfits, ones she wouldn't normally ever consider wearing. Her mind replayed the conversation of the night before.

Starfire: Hi. You're up late.

Lookingforfun: So are u.

Starfire: Yes, I couldn't sleep tonight.

Lookingforfun: Why not?

Starfire: Thinking about u...and our meeting.

Lookingforfun: Yeah, I guess that's making me a bit nervous also.

Starfire: I keep fantasizing how we will enjoy each other.

Lookingforfun: And...

Starfire: Mm, maybe I shouldn't say anything now...wait...simply show u.

Lookingforfun: u could give me a quick preview.

Starfire: I would first start with wine and then a nice dinner.

Lookingforfun: So far sounds good.

Starfire: Then if things go accordingly, as we get to know each other better...

Lookingforfun: How much better?

Starfire: u and I will spend the night enjoying all of those dark secrets we've kept to ourselves, secrets yet to be discovered.

Lookingforfun: Mm, does sound very intriguing.

Starfire: Let's just say that I aim to please...and pleasing women is what I do best.

Lookingforfun: Do I dare ask how?

Starfire: Ah, that's one of my secrets that you will discover when we are together.
Goodnight, my pretty one.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Martin, you need to be more careful.” Audrey immediately addressed him, as he strolled across the industrial carpeting into the chapel area. Audrey had been helping to set up for their next wake. Torcheres, eternal flames, and a cross were in position at the head of the room. Floral arrangements placed so that the guests could easily read off the cards who gave what. A collage of photos providing a glimpse into the life of the deceased stood to one side.

William Connors lay in state, his wake scheduled to start in an hour, a reminder to others that for some, life wasn’t so kind. His young wife would be sitting there, carrying the baby he would never know or hold. Some might not come into the room, unable to look at the casket, not yet able to accept the reality of what happens in the course of ordinary living.

Except with Connors, his death was anything but ordinary, cut down by the act of a suicide bomber bent on a senseless destruction of lives.

Audrey had it down pat. Martin knew he could count on her to get it right. He counted on her for a lot of things, though their personal relationship had deteriorated over the last several years. In the beginning, she had presented that challenge most men sought when pursuing a female.

And he had enjoyed the hunt. But for some men, prey once caught somehow lost its edge.

“You left your computer on the other night,” she told him.

“Did I?”

“Yes, remember you had that phone call, and the family wanted to see you right away. I guess you became distracted. And when the screen went blank, you probably thought you had shut it down. I do that myself, forget that I hadn’t completely shut down the system, then find it’s still on when I come in the next day.”

“Yes, that’s probably what happened.”

An uncomfortable pause ensued.

“Martin, are you meeting women on the Internet? If you are, you have to be careful. You don’t know what’s out there.”

He looked at her, as if he didn’t know what she was talking about, which only infuriated her.

“I’m not stupid, Martin. I’ve surmised for a long time that you’ve been having affairs with other women. Considering you had one with me, why would there not be others? You’re a man who likes the hunt, the challenge. It’s what I finally figured out about you.” She suddenly smiled, a smile that felt like nails scraping across a slate blackboard. “You’re really not much different than most out there.”

“A lot of people go on these sites,” he began. “We’re talking millions. It doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m meeting anyone or having an affair with anyone.”

She eyed him with a skepticism that made him cringe. “You left the screen open to a chat format. I couldn’t believe what I read on that thing. Is that why you and I broke up? You didn’t think I would go for all that kinky stuff you’re obviously now into. I certainly misjudged you.”

Martin stiffened, cursed himself for being so careless. He resented the fact that Audrey stumbled upon this secret life of his...a life he made sure no one knew existed. It now put him into a more vulnerable position. And he certainly had a lot at risk if any of it leaked out to the community about this “other” side of his life. His position in that community dictated a certain amount of propriety, discretion, not to mention a moralistic facade. What loved one would want to place a dead relative’s care in the hands of a funeral director known to indulge in questionable acts?

“Martin, when did you start this bondage stuff, this sadomasochistic crap? Before our affair? During it? Or was that appetite for such things always there? And was that the reason you dumped me? Because you didn’t think I would take part in” -- she paused -- “such perversions?”

He stared long and hard at her. “Would you? Would you have indulged yourself in my fantasies? Would you have helped me live out those fantasies? It’s a different experience. There’s a certain amount of erotic intensity involved...on both sides. And if it’s not present, then neither gets satisfied; it doesn’t work. I never pictured you would get into that kind of stuff with me,” he emphasized. “Most women don’t. It’s one reason why I never asked.”

Audrey walked over to the casket and straightened out a floral arrangement. “You never gave me the choice,” her voice soft, tentative. “I do have...fantasies. Actually a lot of women do, but society doesn’t really allow us to express them or live them without some repercussions.”

Suddenly interested, he asked, "Really? You never mentioned them or shared them with me."

"Yes, well, like most women, I was afraid to make my fantasies known. You know...play them out."

"Is that what you want to do?" he said, his interest growing. "Play out these fantasies of yours with me? I'd be interested to hear what they are."

She further straightened out the spray of flowers. "Working here every day makes anyone realize it's now or never when it comes to the things we enjoy. All my life I lived off the approval of others. And where has that gotten me?" She looked around the room. "It seems lately I've been spending more of my time here, among the dead, than I do out there with the living."

Martin studied her, realizing another persona seemed to be evolving from the one he thought he knew so well. "What motivated you to have an affair with me?" he asked. "That certainly wouldn't have met with much approval if anyone found out. I'm guessing I might have been one of those fantasies you wanted to play out."

She stood seemingly frozen, not looking at him, one hand on the smooth, polished surface of the casket. "I don't know. I think I was searching for something. Or maybe I was just curious to know if I could."

"Curious if you could?" he echoed.

"That I could have sex with a man. I was a virgin before we...." Her voice trailed off.

He chuckled. "I guess you found your answer."

She finally looked at him. "You know what I mean, Martin. I wasn't the most experienced one you've ever been with, but still, I thought what we had shared, enjoyed, was good."

"Audrey, what we shared was good," he echoed, "but I...needed...need more."

She looked at him this time with disgust evident in her eyes. "I gather that from what I read in there." She motioned to his office.

"Did it pique your interest in any way?" he asked in a somewhat oily voice.

"What? The fact that you enjoy tying women up and then having sex with them?" Her usual soft voice rose slightly.

"Keep your voice down, Audrey," he warned with sudden concern, reminding her that family and friends of the deceased would be arriving at any moment.

"I don't actually do it --" he said.

"I don't understand."

"I can't go into it. You wouldn't understand --"

"Martin, I understand enough to know you're having sex with women off the Inter--"

"Keep your voice down."

“What are you worried about? That others will find out? And if they do, you think they’re going to want to entrust their dead loved ones knowing you live this other life? Do you think they’re going to want a pervert working on a loved one’s body?” Her voice rose again this time slightly higher.

“Audrey, look, you and I need to talk about all of this,” he said, forcing calm into his voice. He couldn’t let her detect his anger. He needed to quiet her, not further excite her.

She reached for another floral display.

“Audrey, the flowers are fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “Look, we’re almost through here. Why don’t you meet me at our spot tonight.”

Warily she looked at him. “You mean that small restaurant near the fairgrounds?”

“Yes,” he answered, his voice restrained.

“We have this wake tonight,” she reminded him. “Quite a few will show, I’m sure.”

“It’ll be over at eight... Let’s say about nine-thirty?”

She hesitated.

“We need to talk, Audrey,” he repeated. “Maybe get ourselves back on track. Maybe what I need is a woman like you back in my life to help me through this. I seemed to have lost my way.” He came closer to her and touched one shoulder. “You were always the one to keep us here at Manheim on track.” He smiled. “None of us would know what to do without you.”

She returned his smile, though wariness stayed in her eyes. “Martin, I don’t know. I don’t know if I can do this again. Emotions get so involved. And then dealing with the hurt afterward.” She clasped her hands, unwilling to touch him. “It took me a long time to separate from what happened between us, detach from it.”

“We had some good times together, didn’t we?” he reminded her, touching her hair, then her cheek. “Didn’t we?” he repeated. “The first time you came with a man was with me...remember?”

She pulled away slightly. “Nine-thirty?” she whispered.

“You won’t be sorry,” he said, giving her a wide smile.

She merely looked at him, said nothing, turned, and walked back to her own office.

Martin stared at her, his smile replaced by a frown.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lookingforfun: Hi, Starfire. How are u today?

Starfire: Welcome back. Haven't heard from u in a while.

Lookingforfun: Busy. Hectic week.

Starfire: U need to wind down. Do something fun! Hopefully with me. This weekend?

Lookingforfun: Mm, sounds good...anything to help me forget this past week.

Starfire: I'll help u forget all your troubles.

Lookingforfun: Sounds like u know how to please a woman.

Starfire: I sure would have fun discovering what pleases u.

Lookingforfun: I'm guessing we both would have some fun finding that out.

Starfire: Let's meet...soon...this weekend.

Lookingforfun: Let's.

Starfire: I want to get to know u better...much better.

Lookingforfun: That's the game plan.

Starfire: Let's meet at the Cavern. It's out of the way, yet close enough. Shouldn't be a problem for you. Wear something sexy.

Lookingforfun: That's certainly an incentive to go shopping. What do u like?

Starfire: Black. Lacy. With lots of openings for easy access...if u know what I mean...

Kendra felt only sheer relief as she logged off.

So far, nothing in these recent chats outside of the usual sexual innuendos indicated this guy was looking for anything out of the ordinary, and it made her wonder if she was barking up the wrong tree. She would meet him as well as others who contacted her. From

there she could tell more. As long as she was careful and took precautions, she didn't see any reason to let Luke in on it yet, knowing he would simply put the kibosh on what she was doing. When things got too perverted, then she would call in the troops. She was close, answers just beyond her reach. She couldn't risk it. She looked at her watch. Remembered she was to go over to Luke's tonight. A smile crooked the corners of her mouth. She could have used a good night's sleep...except thinking of their last time together would keep her up all night. Heat coursed up her groin. The thrill of the anticipation of again playing their game.

Chapter Thirty

It was cold.

She couldn't feel her fingers or toes.

Numbing pain attacked every inch of her body, and yet she had to remain hidden in the ravine where she fell.

Was it worse to die like this with her body gradually freezing, until it could no longer function? Where her lungs could no longer take in air, and her heart could no longer beat?

Would she simply black out first?

Lose consciousness before the final moment?

Would she realize her own death? Would she even know she was dying?

She remembered her grandmother talking about how her uncle died. He survived his first heart attack and knew then he was in trouble. Said it felt like the air going out of a balloon. "Pifft." The second time it happened to him, her grandmother years later would tell her granddaughter the same thing -- her son shrank like a balloon.

And wondered if that would be how she would look to others when they found her. A deflated balloon? Would she be able to let them know, even through death, what happened here? She needed to tell her story despite taking her last breath.

She couldn't let them win. They had taken so much away already. She crouched further into the ravine. From a distance, she heard them thrashing around above her...looking for her. If they found her, they would finish what they had started.

Snow steadily fell, covering her, concealing her from them. When they gave up looking, she'd make a run for it.

She thought of the Challenger earlier that day, exploding in the Floridian skies, and suddenly hoped there was an afterlife. Would she meet them there? Dead astronauts.

She hoped so. If this was her fate, to leave this world, and if there was such a place, she wouldn't mind it so much.

Roger Davies's friends tried to rape her, but Roger had tried to stop them.

She never saw their faces. Much older than Davies, one wore a ski mask, the other a cap pulled over his face.

Except for that mole. He had been the one who Roger pulled off. And they had fought, shouted at each other, the three, with Roger ending up in the frigid waters of Crandall Lake, where an underground stream ran through parts of it so that section never completely froze over. Roger went under the ice and never surfaced. Neither of his friends made any effort to pull him from the waters.

She heard the crunching of snow beneath their boots, as they made their way through the darkening woods.

"She's probably home now. Do you think she recognized us?"

"No. And if she knows what's best for her, she'll keep her damn mouth shut, because if she doesn't, then I'm taking care of that father of hers." He had shouted out the words in case she was still close by and could hear his threats.

At that moment, she realized she had to survive and get out of there. But if she died, she hoped in some way her body could tell its story to whoever took the time to listen.

* * * * *

Kendra woke with a start. She struggled to orient herself to where she was and quickly realized she wasn't in her own bed. Then she remembered she had gone over to Luke's.

Her mouth was bone dry, as if someone had stuck cotton inside and wiped away all the moisture. Her heart was pounding, and she floated in and out of reality as fragments of her dream replayed in her mind. As always, the images faded too soon, dispersing to other parts of her mind where they would become hidden. And the more she tried to remember the dream, the more elusive it became, until it made her wonder if any of it happened.

"I'm scared," she said, her voice soft, intense, breaking the stillness.

Luke slowly lifted his head from his pillow, then propped himself up on one elbow. He reached over and gently rubbed her shoulder. She was facing away from him. Words he hadn't expected to hear from this woman, a woman who always appeared to have it together.

"There's evilness out there," Kendra said, slowly turning over toward him, then drawing herself against him, a delicate hand splayed across his bare chest. "It touches everyone in this town. I feel it's out there watching us, waiting for the chance to wrap its tentacles around any one of us and squeeze the life out."

A sudden, inexplicable sense of danger coursed through Luke, and he hated the helplessness he was feeling, though he wasn't about to show it. Instead he wanted to give her words of reassurance against the terror that had placed an icy dagger inside her heart.

He wanted to tell her it was only a matter of time before they would get their suspect, pull him in, prove beyond a reasonable doubt his guilt, and make the streets of Canterville safe again. He knew they were running out of time.

Luke knew a quiet panic threaded itself throughout the townspeople. And people were complaining, quietly, not so loud so that they would stand out and set themselves up as a possible target.

The faint light of dawn crept into the room. Outside had turned cool from the rain the night before. Luke would guess neither of them looked forward to starting their day, wanting to remain beneath the covers, warm flesh pressed against warm flesh, enjoying the illusion that the world was safe and secure.

"It's okay to be scared," he finally responded.

Kendra's weak smile gave him no positive feedback.

Most of his life, Luke had avoided this level of intimacy. Staying uninvolved, allowing none of those awkward emotions to surface that could lead to a shared intimacy. Detachment protected him from experiencing someone else's pain and fears and all those associated emotions. Yet suddenly, he felt it was okay with this one. That if by sharing Kendra's pain and fear, that if he did this, maybe he could help her face them as well.

She encircled an arm around his neck and drew her naked form up against his. His arms went around her waist, cupped her buttocks -- firm, enticing -- and realized he was damn again ready for her again. Had been ever since she woke him.

He'd fucked a lot of ladies in his time.

But this one?

This one he made love to, and that first time made him realize the difference.

He knew by making love to Kendra Bettencourt he risked exposing himself, making himself more vulnerable, and becoming attached to her in a way that he couldn't yet begin to sort out.

All he knew was the world became more bearable with this woman lying beside him.

Suddenly, a terrible foreboding gripped him, and it made him realize it was he who now felt afraid. Afraid of what, he couldn't say, but suddenly wrapped his arms more securely around her and never wanted to let go.

Words echoed in his mind. Words passed down through time. Words he learned taking up kendo, spoken by one of Japan's famous swordsmen -- Musashi Miyamoto, a man who had lived centuries ago.

"To win the battle is to be prepared to die."

Chapter Thirty-One

“What the hell! A body stocking?” Kendra held up the meshed fabric into the light, wondering how anyone got into this thing. Wondering how she would ever get it on. And where exactly would she wear something like this? Imagine the tan if she were to spend any amount of time in the sun. “Obviously not for someone strong on modesty,” she commented aloud. The saleslady working in that area of the Super Adult Store merely grinned. “Well, no, I don’t think that’s the purpose for wearing it.”

Kendra held it up against herself. Peered into the full-length mirror, then pictured nipples peeking out through its holes.

“You can try it on if you like,” the woman suggested. “We have fitting rooms back there.”

“What is there to try on? All I have to do is imagine myself encased in a fishnet stocking that not only covers the legs, but the entire body.” She couldn’t suppress a giggle at the thought of Luke’s reaction at seeing her in this thing. She immediately flung the garment onto the counter along with other impulse purchases, which included a short, black, leather skirt, a black low-cut knit top, and the proverbial black leather stiletto-heeled boots. She rationalized away the entire choice of garments and accessories as playing the part of seductress required when she put Plan B into effect.

Seductress?

Her? A seductress? She, who lived and breathed in sweats, baseball caps, and Nike sneakers, preferring to pull her hair into a ponytail rather than letting it hang loose down her back?

She planned to meet men who might end up more than the viable suspects for the Canterville killer. But at the same time, tucked away in the back of her mind lay the question: what effect would these choices have on a man named Lucas Sloane?

She and the sexy Detective Sloane had already tasted passion, and the thought that she could further fuel his desire for her gave her a feeling of empowerment.

"We have a nice selection of accessories...toys...things that glow in the dark," the woman shared.

"Glow-in-the-dark toys?"

"Yes, we have glow-in-the-dark bubble bath in sweet melon scent," the woman offered, a Cheshire cat smile spreading across her artfully made-up face.

"Really. Sweet melon...sounds interesting," she said with slight sarcasm.

"And we have these wonderful massage oils in vanilla and cherry, and there's edible underwear over on that counter. Plus edible body paint, in four tasty flavors: banana, cherries jubilee, crème de menthe, and daiquiri --"

"Daiquiri? No kidding?" she said, thinking immediately of the daiquiris she and Luke shared. "And you say edible underwear? Do you also have that in daiquiri flavor as well?" she asked, repressing the urge to laugh.

"Oh, yes, and whipped cream in cherries jubilee, 'a body dessert topping.'" Again, the woman's smile widened as she read the labels. "It says here you can turn your lover into a late night sumptuous dessert with these edible paints. Lick clean for easy removal." The woman then started to laugh, stopped, then said, "In fact, I can make up a nice little gift basket of such goodies, put in some floral musk and body lotion."

"Mm, does sound nice. But maybe next time." Moments later she walked out of the store, after checking that no one she recognized lurked nearby. As she carried the several bags filled with clothes and goodies to the SUV, she thought about that Jacuzzi tub in Luke's house and the glow-in-the-dark bubble bath inside one of the bags. If nothing else, she would simply put them into a closet and write it all off as research. Maybe someday they'd come in handy. For now, she would concentrate on her cyber date.

They had agreed upon a restaurant in the city, a place big enough that the chance of her getting recognized was slim. Thursday night she was meeting CowboyMan at Sylvester's. He had suggested they meet at Jay-Jay's, but Kendra felt too many people would show up there that knew her. Sylvester's wasn't as popular within her own social circle, more out of the way.

Kendra gathered from the chats she read on that laptop that CowboyMan was among six men that Patti had already met. CowboyMan was a man looking for fun, adventure, and appeared willing to play the "game." Kendra didn't know exactly what that "game" was that Patti often alluded to, but from steamy conversations she shared with others, Kendra knew she would easily find out soon enough.

CowboyMan sounded like a man who, as Patti Thompson often did, was willing to venture into areas that put him on the edge, into that dark side that resided in most, but which many denied.

She knew that for some women, fooling around on the 'Net meant they could have these fantasies, control them, and still stay in power. "Doing it" over the Internet meant if things did get out of hand, you pushed a couple of keys, signed off, and returned to the ordinary world.

Then there were those who, like Patti, needed to keep trying their luck and play out the fantasy further, see what more could be found, and enjoyed, and sampled. Still, despite precautions or the so-called right attitude, they ended up becoming psychologically involved, letting emotions get in the way.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kendra put the bags of clothes and “goodies” into her locker. Later, once home, she would go through them again and decide if she really had the moxie to wear them for her date.

Date. The word sounded strange. Even more strange when she prefixed it by adding the word “cyber.”

It had been a while since she had gone out on any date. Meeting a stranger, knowing he was coming off the Internet, filled her with both apprehension and anticipation. The Internet, like anything else in life, had its good side and its dark side. She knew through ads in cyberspace that whoever was committing these murders was looking for a woman interested in the kind of games her date played. The killer was looking for not only adventures in sex, but also to play them in a manner that put his victims in a dangerous situation. She knew he was drawing from an unlimited pool of women off the 'Net, women willing to let someone like him rule and dictate their lives, women who could become emotionally dependent. They all had their fantasies, and many at some point in their lives were willing to live them out.

Then finally, when they met that stranger, a false sense of intimacy allowed them to play out the game.

Friday night was her night to meet one of those strangers. She had already revealed some of her own dark fantasies to him. She'd already established that sense of false intimacy. She was ready to bring it to that next level.

Based on her reading, she knew a rapist's mind could be mapped. Depending on how he viewed her, whether he saw her as an object, a vehicle, or a person, he would either exert his control on her, or force her to participate in a variety of sexual activities, or try to

establish some form of intimacy. Whatever scenario played itself out, the outcome was the same: a rape that could end in murder.

Tonight she would finish the tests she needed to complete and write up the autopsy reports. It was all on file now, what had happened to those women. Had she missed something in the process? It left her feeling unsettled, ambiguous, and wishing she could do these reports over again, though knowing that wasn't possible, since the funeral for the last victim had just recently taken place.

Manheim Funeral Home had been busy lately, for a small town. She hated going into those places, despite what she did for a living. It left her feeling sad for the families, at the same time feeling helpless that she couldn't have done more to bring about their closure. It was all about closure, the knowledge of what had happened to their loved ones and also knowing that justice would be served. She had been at it long enough to know that at times justice would not be served and that closure might remain elusive.

She thought about Luke, her partner in getting closure. He was a determined man who at times didn't particularly like what he was doing; nonetheless, whatever he undertook, he saw it through from start to finish. She liked that about him. And he was an excellent lover, pleasing a woman in all ways possible. She knew the emotional element in what they had already shared together wasn't there, and in a way she was glad. She would always enjoy the sex with Lucas Sloane. She didn't particularly want to fall in love with the man.

Thankfully, that emotional part of her died when Holt died, and so far, had prevented love from happening and making that emotional connection. She felt dead inside. At least dead persons didn't fall in love.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Built in the late 1800s, Sylvester's had once been an old tavern, rustic, inviting to those who needed a reprieve from their lackluster lives. The upgrading done by past owners over the years eventually resulted in an upscale version of the old. It was now known as a supper club, with its many rooms, one specifically designed for receptions, another with dance floors for Sunday night singles' dances for the older crowd. Another room in the back provided its own bar, a couple of TVs, where every Friday night locals came and took part in karaoke sing-alongs.

Kendra was glad they hadn't picked Friday night to meet. She was not a singer, and no way was she going to spend the night listening to karaoke aficionados.

Instead, she was to meet CowboyMan for drinks, possibly dinner, if things went well. She had to laugh at that possibility.

"Went well." The words held several meanings. In her case it meant chemistry: they hit it off...things could move to the next level -- a physical level, meaning sexual.

Then what?

From that point on, where did she go with it?

Okay, her plan had a few inherent flaws. She figured she would address those when the time came.

She knew that she would get to a point in the charade where she would need to wing it for a time until she felt this man was a possible suspect, that he could have committed murder.

Yet, the knowledge drove cold hard chills through her. How far would she go to prove that deduction? How far was she willing to go where all doubts disappeared?

And then, when that happened, would she survive to tell her story?

She couldn't allow herself to catastrophize, a word she often used when worrying beyond what might never happen. She needed to focus on the present.

She adjusted the short leather skirt. Wearing jeans would have been so much easier, so much simpler, she thought, as she headed into the dimly lit barroom.

Kendra walked over to the bar and ordered a light beer. She took the bottle and a glass, and sat at one of the tables tucked away in the back of the room, all the while hoping she wasn't making herself any more conspicuous than she already felt, especially in her stiletto-heeled boots.

How she was going to recognize her date was anyone's guess, except that he had told her he would be wearing jeans, a plaid flannel shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat, which is what she expected from someone who called himself CowboyMan. Based on that, Kendra didn't think she'd have any trouble spotting him.

So far there were only a few patrons inside the bar area, most coming in headed for the main restaurant. She guessed that would change as they went past the dinner hour.

In the dim lighting, she spotted the cowboy hat. Black with a thin silver band telling her this guy took things seriously...maybe too seriously.

He spotted her and immediately sauntered over. She crossed her knees, one hand twirling the beer bottle.

She looked up at him.

Her jaw dropped. Words simultaneously blurted out. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Does Martin know you’re back in town? He mentioned last week that you were attending some health conference in the area,” Audrey asked Matthew Manheim. Matthew, the elusive Manheim, was either traipsing off to exotic locales, where he would give a seminar on health care for caretakers of the elderly, or as he was now doing, he attended conferences on the latest changes in health care for the elderly.

More often than not, no one knew when he was going to show his face again in Canterville.

Some who weren’t aware of the brothers’ twinship confused one with the other. Although he and Martin were identical twins, a small mole on the right side of Matthew’s face clued Audrey to their true identity. But even those aware of that slight distinction often forgot which had the mole.

It surprised her when Matthew called that morning and asked her out to dinner. He sounded concerned about something, but refused to go into it over the phone.

Audrey knew the brothers never really got along, not since the senior Manheim left the funeral business to Martin, leaving Matthew out. No one knew the reason for Edward Manheim’s decision. Matthew was forced to go out and make his own way into the world. It wasn’t surprising that he spent little time in a town where his brother ran a successful business that should have also had him at the helm.

“No, I think I’ll surprise him,” Matthew responded. “I’m required to attend a couple of board meetings at the healthcare facility this week. He’s also on them, so we’ll connect then. Though what with all these electronic communications, I don’t see why I had to leave a veranda looking over the warm coastal waters of Bermuda and come here. It’s why I hire capable people -- to do all the things I would have to do myself.” He grinned. “Martin’s lucky to have you there. He knows it all gets done.”

"Thank you for saying that. And it was nice of you to ask me out to dinner tonight," Audrey said. "But I sense this is not just a social thing."

"That's another quality I envy. Your intuition...always on the mark, Audrey. But regarding the social aspect, you and my brother have already covered that, haven't you?" he added, a knowing, smug smile replacing his condescending one.

Audrey knew he was referring to the affair she had enjoyed with his brother.

"What do you mean?" she asked innocently enough.

"Martin always had a thing for you way back when my father first hired you right out of junior college. He enjoyed older women even back then."

She smiled. "Yes, but he also became engaged to Marion at the time, and she's two years his junior."

"That's true. Still, didn't stop the two of you from...getting it on." A lascivious grin slowly spread from ear to ear.

She felt a hot blush rise up her cheeks, knowing he'd hit on the truth. "We were always very discreet about it," she said, as if that was enough of a defense. "The only way you would have known about us is if he told you, and he promised he wouldn't tell anyone."

"Don't worry, Martin kept his promise. Besides, he didn't have to tell me anything. It's been said twins sometimes create this psychic bond. I think Martin and I created that bond at birth, though he may try to deny it now. I did bring it up once, though, about you and him. He told me to mind my own business and to stay away from you. Probably thought I would try to horn in on the fun." He chuckled, paused, and then said, "I reminded him that he had a good marriage and that he didn't need to screw things up. Plus, it wasn't good for the image of the business. You know as well as I that funeral directors do need to maintain a certain sense of propriety."

"And that's why you asked me out here tonight, to throw all this at me?" Seconds passed as she waited for a response as the impulse to get up and leave grew.

Sensing this, he reached out and gently touched the inside of her forearm. "No. Don't be ridiculous."

She stared at him, clutching her purse. "You've always been jealous of your brother." She knew if she had a moment to think about what she had just said, she might not have said the words, but neither did she regret saying them.

Unfazed, he merely smiled. "Me? Jealous? Of Martin?" He snickered. "Not really. But I know what you're getting at. I'm the one who flunked out of mortuary school. And Martin? We all know how he passed with flying colors. Martin is very good at what he does, and dad knew that. He's good at pushing sealers, convincing families they give loved ones extra protection. He knows it increases the profit margin. Not to mention passing tin cans off as more."

Audrey cringed, never comfortable with the terminology. She knew that at times Martin would sell caskets made with the least expensive grade of steel and fail to tell the families.

"And he does a hell of a job shooting the juice...always damn good at raising an artery. Me? I never could find the right one, and I always botched something up during the embalming process. I never minded removals, but traipsing through malodorous, seedy hospital basements? Not exactly my cup of tea. I'd always end up getting blood and fluid stains on my clothes, no matter how well I covered up. Constantly fighting the nausea, odors of decay, rotting flesh. I never could get used to the smell of formaldehyde, either. I'm sure my asthma originated just from being exposed to those chemicals." He paused and took several sips of wine, as if to obliterate the images he'd just created for them.

"That's one reason why my father felt Martin would be the better son to run the business. Martin never complained about any of it, always willing to do what was necessary. I might feel some envy over that, the fact that he has made it as successful as he has. But jealousy? Not really." He finished his wine and poured himself more from the carafe.

"Then why have I always sensed this animosity between you two?" she asked.

"Maybe because he was more open with you, more willing to take chances, follow his inclinations...do things most of us fantasize about, but never turn into reality. It's like that poem."

"Poem?"

"My brother has established himself as a pillar of the community, and like Richard Cory in Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem, my brother is also '*a gentleman from sole to crown*.' And there's me...the wayward brother. Like Richard Cory, my brother seems to be one of the elite, rich, wealthy -- contrasted to someone like me, who struggles every day, despite what others think. '*So, on we worked, and waited for the light, and went without the meat, and cursed the bread; and Richard Cory, one calm summer night*'" -- he leaned over toward her -- "*went home and put a bullet through his head.*" Smiling he said, "One day my brother may find himself doing just that. Because what he's doing now, it'll catch up with him. It should have a long time ago. Ever since that day when he and I and Roger Davies..." He paused, and the sentence remained unfinished.

Nonetheless, Matthew's words sent a cold, stark chill through Audrey, and she knew partly of what he might be referring to, thinking of what she had discovered on Martin's computer screen the other day. How much did Matthew know about Martin's dark side? How much did he know about her dark side? Suddenly, besides that feeling of doom that was slowly descending upon her, she had the uneasy feeling that she was sitting across the table facing the son of the devil, or in this case the devil's brother.

* * * * *

“Edmond, please tell me you’re not CowboyMan.”

“I won’t, if you tell me you’re not the woman known as Lookingforfun.”

In disbelief, both stared at each other as Kendra started to recall some of the chats they shared. She guessed both of them wished to hell this wasn’t happening.

Instead, they sat and continued to stare at each other, letting the awkward moment settle in.

“Edmond, I can’t believe you’re not only into this online dating thing, but pretending to be someone else. Why not just be yourself?”

Edmond studied Kendra for a moment, giving himself a chance to respond. “I could ask the same for you. You’re the last person I’d expect to meet here, looking like that,” he pointed out.

“You took the words out of my mouth,” she rejoined, suddenly laughing not only at herself, but at the whole scenario.

“You know as well as I that it’s not easy meeting someone in these hick towns,” he began. “Everyone knows everyone. I figured I had to take some drastic measures. Patti mentioned how she was meeting these men, and I thought hey, why not me? Why don’t I try this online dating thing?”

“You mean Patti encouraged you?”

“In a way. She gave me her screen name and we chatted online for a while, helping me practice, what I should say to these women to get them to meet me. Believe me no one’s in a rush to meet a fucking science teacher. Macho cowboys? Well, that’s another thing.”

“So, all those chats you were having with Patti...they were just pretend chats?” Let him say yes, she thought, because then it would take Edmond Cutler off her list of possible suspects.

“Well, yeah...she said it would give me confidence. So she even made up the name for me. And we would practice. She was good at it. She was meeting quite a few men from what I gather.”

“Yes, well, she may have met a few too many,” Kendra couldn’t help but add. “Edmond, you and she never practiced offline, any of that stuff that you talked about doing online?” she asked innocently, not to make him suspicious. So far, what he had told her she believed. There was a naïveté to Edmond Cutler that Kendra knew made him one of her least viable suspects, yet she could not rule him out.

“Don’t I wish. Actually, I haven’t done anything...yet.” He smiled. “But a guy can hope, can’t he? I’ve met a few women, but to tell the truth there was no chemistry there, and I couldn’t see myself wasting their time or mine.”

Kendra suppressed the urge to laugh, remembering some of their own chats. “Edmond, I think maybe you should pull back on some of that stuff. I think you should try meeting

ladies who aren't into...what Patti was into...and maybe you will find that someone special, if that's what you're looking for. Just be yourself."

"But what about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, Kendra. Look at you in that tight-fitting top, that short skirt, and my Lord, those boots. Why they're downright dangerous. What are you after? And you can't tell me a nice gentleman who will simply walk you to your front door, give you a brotherly kiss, and then take off."

Kendra had to laugh. "You're right, Edmond. That goes to show you we all have a dark side. You do believe that, don't you?"

"Believe what?"

"Good versus evil. And that it's happening in this town. A battle is going on, part of a silent war."

"Silent war? Battle? What are you getting at?" he asked.

"You haven't been living in a cocoon have you?"

"Of course not. I know you're referring to those murders. But don't you think Canterville's simply a microcosm of what's happening all over?"

"Not to the extent that it's happening here -- three murders in only a few months time. As if this tide of darkness has enveloped us. And it's not normal; it doesn't fall within the realm of logical statistics."

Edmond didn't respond at first, but the pained expression on his face told her he knew what she was talking about.

"Kendra, you don't think I had anything to do killing those women? You don't think I would hurt Patti! She was my friend."

She could see he was visibly nervous. "Personally, no, I don't think you did. It doesn't look good that you're on her laptop as this alter ego, though."

"Geesuz, I could lose my fucking job," he suddenly said, soft enough so she almost couldn't hear. "Teachers are supposed to be above such scrutiny."

"I know, Edmond." Edmond Cutler needed to be careful about what he did in his private life. If word got out about his Internet activities, there would be those who would regard his lifestyle as questionable. She could see parents calling the Board of Ed now, complaining and wanting them to take action. Edmond was a damn good teacher, and she believed, knew where to draw the line. A lonely man, he had found a viable way to meet someone who might take away that loneliness. Who was she to judge? In twenty-some years of teaching, he had dedicated his life to educating the masses, as he often put it. This other side was something new, and she guessed that after tonight it was an area that he wasn't about to stay with.

"You need to be careful," she told him. "Online dating isn't bad and is turning into a viable method to meet others," she continued. "But be careful who you meet out there."

"Patti told me the same thing. It's easy to venture off into areas I would never venture into normally, if you know what I mean. After Patti died, I stayed off the thing until one day I got on and saw that you had contacted me with an e-mail."

"And you became curious, right?" She smiled.

"Yeah, wouldn't you? With a screen name like that...Lookingforfun. It was too tempting."

"Sorry about that."

"I think you taught me a lesson. There are good sites, and I think I'll stick with those, but like you said, I'll become a little more discerning."

Kendra nodded. "Why don't we have something to eat, call it a night?"

"Yes, but you still haven't answered my question. Why is someone like you here, doing this, dressed like that?"

"A long story, Edmond, and if you have time, I might share it with you."

"I've got the whole night, or at least enough to buy you a great meal, considering I owe you one. We never did go out after that...first murder."

"Yes," knowing he was referring to Rhonda Woods. "That's true. And I'm not one to turn down a meal."

"I have to admit, that outfit is something. I only wish..." His voice trailed off.

"Sometimes it's fun to pretend. I'm finding that pretending to be someone I'm not helps me forget a lot of things about my own life. It puts me in a different place, one where I don't have to think too hard about anything else."

He looked at her puzzled, then, "Yeah, I think I know what you're getting at. When I walked in here earlier I was no longer Mr. Cutler, science teacher, somewhat boring, a bit dull, gullible, diffident, oafish, a chap who gets lost in the crowd of two. Should I go on?"

She gulped her beer. "No --"

"But a moment ago, there I was, Macho Joe, the cowboy, looking for a good time."

"Until I burst your bubble," she said apologetically.

"You pulled me back to reality." He suddenly laughed. "Who was I going to fool? Myself? It would have caught up with me eventually. You can't play that kind of part and make it work too long. If you were someone else, it wouldn't have taken long for you to eventually see through my façade."

"Maybe."

He nodded. "Trust me, I know. I'm a man with blatant transparencies. Whoever I met here tonight, she would have seen through me like a plate-glass window."

"Maybe."

“You’re too kind. C’mon, I hear the salmon Florentine is excellent tonight.”

Suddenly, she realized she hadn’t eaten since early afternoon, and the one beer she’d enjoyed was going straight to her head. “I think that’s the sanest thing the two of us have said here tonight.”

He laughed. “I think you’re right.”

They both got up and headed for the restaurant. As they crossed the room following their waiter, they ignored the stares that were coming their way. She knew some might recognize them...the Assistant ME and the science teacher, maybe attending some kind of costume party. She noticed in the far corner Martin Manheim, but couldn’t tell who the lady with him was. Marion Manheim’s hair was stylishly blonde, cut close with not a hair ever out of place. This one had bedroom hair, the kind a man would enjoy running his fingers through. The kind Luke Sloane would enjoy. He hadn’t called in a while, not since the last time. She’d pushed it out of her mind, and only at times like this did it dare surface. She reminded herself that she and Luke had enjoyed a fling, nothing more, nothing less.

As they passed Martin’s table, he glanced their way, but no recognition came into his eyes, and she assumed whomever he was with had his full attention.

Chapter Thirty-Five

“C’mon in, Luke,” Martin said. “Audrey told me you stopped by the other day. Sorry I haven’t gotten back to you. It’s been a hectic week. I had several peek-a-boos just today.”

“Peek-a-boos?” Luke had to ask, his notebook at the ready.

“Quick viewings of the body, involving brief funeral services as well. Usually just immediate family. Still, takes time to set up, even if it’s just a shake and bake.”

“Don’t tell me” -- referring to the jargon -- “cremation, no services.”

Martin chuckled. “That’s why you’re the detective.”

Luke stood in the doorway and crossed over toward Martin’s desk, then settled in a nearby armchair. “Yeah, I guess. I know you’ve been busy lately. Business has been booming for you, though that’s unfortunate for some.”

Martin smiled. “Yes, it’s one thing I hate thinking about, that our success depends on another’s loss. So what can I help you with this time?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. I woke up the other night feeling I’m missing something here. Something that’s trying to tell me, or at least, show me where to go with this.”

“This?”

“I’m talking the Woods case. Remember how I told you that watching an embalming, specifically hers, might help me gain some insight, tell me something, head me in the right direction?”

Martin appeared perplexed. “Yes, I think I recall you saying something to that effect.”

“You had mentioned something about meds Rhonda was on, and why she couldn’t lose the weight.”

In the background, Martin’s computer screen suddenly went blank as the screensaver clicked in.

"I might have. I honestly don't remember."

Luke waved his notebook. "I have it here in my notes. One thing I learned over the years is you can't take too many notes," he said with emphasis. "What might look insignificant at first can later prove vital. I've always gone with that premise, that note taking can't be detailed enough. Then again, I become a second evidence witness if and when any of this goes to trial. All because of what I write inside here."

Martin peered up at the notebook, and at the same time, edged back in his chair. "So what are you getting at?"

"To be aware that a person is on medication usually means a certain amount of intimacy has taken place for that person to confide that information. Why would Rhonda Woods tell you that, and when would she have done so? It's not like you and she circulated in the same social circles. She's a nurse's aide in your brother's facility. And that has me wondering about the connection between her...and you."

"I am simply aware that certain meds like anti-anxiety medications do slow the metabolism, and that was probably the case with Ms. Woods. It was all conjecture on my part."

"I suppose, but for what reason would you know something like that? And that tells me that you and Rhonda knew each other, let's say more closely than the fact that she was an employee at your brother's nursing home."

"Okay, yes, I knew Rhonda. This is a small town, you know that, Luke. People are always running into each other. I'm sure she attended enough of the wakes and funerals here at Manheim. You always run into people in my business. Considering the fact I was born here, grew up here, make a living here, I know just about everyone in this town." His smile did not falter. "Those notes aren't going to be very substantial in court, if and when any of it goes to trial."

Luke knew what Martin was saying was correct, but also felt he was on track with this one. Yet, proving what he suspected about Martin was going to be difficult if not impossible.

The look on Martin's face told him that more than a superficial relationship had existed between him and Rhonda. He glanced over at the computer. He'd bet a year's wages that the dating site Patti belonged to would be found among Martin's files on his hard drive. Yet did he have enough probable cause to get that search warrant?

"Is there anything else? I have clients waiting to meet with me."

Reluctantly, Luke pulled his focus from the computer screen. "No...that's it for now." He closed the notebook, tucked it into his back pocket, started for the door, stopped, and turned. "But, Martin, I would not take any trips right now, just in case we need to call you in for questioning."

Martin's face grew somber. "I have nothing to hide."

"That's good, Martin. Then you have nothing to worry about."

Martin didn't respond. Instead he swirled around in his chair and positioned himself in front of his computer.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Kendra stripped off her work clothes and pulled on faded sweats. She glanced over at her desk, noticing the scattered photos. She went over and sifted through them. All showed battered bodies and destroyed faces of dead women.

Luke had dropped them off, looking for feedback, more insight from her that would tell him what he was missing.

She placed the photos in chronological order. First one: Rhonda. Second: Patti. Third: Jennifer Wilson.

All signs indicated the same offender, yet any evolving nuances could still point to separate killers. Luke once told her that he tried to see things through a killer's perspective. She was damn sure trying, but nothing was happening.

She knew that by going through these photos something might jar her memory, something she had missed while performing their autopsies.

The dead always tried telling their story, struggling to let the world know what had happened to them, and why they had died. In their own right, they were also trying to save others from suffering a similar fate at the hands of a madman.

Based on liver temp and stomach contents, Rhonda died somewhere between late Saturday night and Sunday morning. Last seen at Jay-Jay's, she left with a man no one recognized, except that the man wore jeans, a cowboy hat, and a green plaid shirt.

Which of course could have described Edmond to a "T," considering what he wore at Sylvester's.

Yet, Edmond provided an alibi -- night fishing with Olez, confirmed by a sentence or two among Luke's copious notes.

Kendra didn't need to be doing this. Part of the ME's department, she had performed and completed her primary function in the process of investigating these crimes.

Luke had told her the same, that those involved were now conducting a meticulous search, including him, and clearly told her to butt out. Officials of the town were on his back. The *Canterville News* was crying out for justice and appropriate punishment. People were skittish, wary, distrusting of any stranger that came into town, and even their own.

Still, Kendra knew she would continue to go over autopsy reports, lab reports, and crime scene photos, all of which would hopefully in some way trigger something that might head them in the right direction and not have them find themselves getting another call about another body dump.

She glanced over at her computer screen, then typed in the dating site, signed on with her password and screen name. He must've seen her come on, because he immediately responded with an Instant Message.

Starfire: How are u tonight?

Lookingforfun: I'm fine. It's a quiet night. Just relaxing here.

Starfire: Quiet night, huh? Surprised that you're even home. It's Saturday night. u should be out there having fun. I can change all that for u.

Lookingforfun: u can, huh...

Starfire: Meet me 2night. And I will show u how much fun...

Lookingforfun: 2night?

Starfire: It's early enough, and it will give us the whole night together, a whole night to enjoy each other. That is what you're looking for...right? We'll play out some of those fantasies.

Lookingforfun: Okay. Where?

Kendra jotted down the address he gave, a place not far from where she lived, in the next town. Moments later, as she went through her clothes, she saw the outfit she had worn to Sylvester's. Dare she wear the leather ensemble again? Dare she assume that role? Dare she do any of this?

One of the postmortem photos of Patti caught her eye. It lay on another part of the desk, separate from the others. A testament to a life wasted, reminding those who looked at the photo this life had been cut too short by an act of mindless violence.

Reminding Kendra other young women in Canterville could meet a similar fate.

She went over to the closet, reached up and took the leather skirt off its hanger, as well as the matching low-cut top. Again, she stripped off her comfortable sweats, turned on the shower faucets, and stepped beneath the streams of hot water, all the while thinking about the night ahead, and what it might bring.

She thought of Holt and her grandfather and needed to believe they were looking out for her.

Because did she have a choice.

Canterville had its very own online sexual predator. And she was now offering herself as the next hapless prey.

* * * * *

It was getting too damn fucking easy, he thought, as he checked himself in the full-length mirror. His wife was spending the weekend with her sister and wouldn't be back until tomorrow night. They had stopped going out Saturday nights a long time ago, preferring to enjoy their time "alone."

Except lately he didn't adhere to that pattern. Not at all. He no longer enjoyed spending his time alone.

Instead, he enjoyed the anticipation of these meetings, the uncertainty of not knowing who he was going to end up meeting when he got there.

Tonight he'd chosen a nightclub known as a biker bar. A place patronized by pretty young women wearing too-tight tank tops, too-tight jeans, and basically on the prowl.

Like he would be.

It was a popular enough bar, but for young ones, which made him confident that no one would recognize him.

Wearing his snug-fitting jeans, his cowboy boots, and plaid shirt he looked no different from the others.

His own wife wouldn't recognize him. He laughed at that one, imagining her expression.

At times he would have liked to do it right, but once they got past that certain point, things would go too fast. Once he had them where he wanted them, his need for playing out the game to the end took over. And he always saw it through from start to finish.

Tonight, he felt it would be no different. The thought of what was going to happen excited him, sending hot sensations through his groin. He enjoyed making love to them at first. By their responses, he knew they enjoyed it as well. Then something changed inside him. He needed more. He needed a different response. He knew he got off when he controlled them, when he had this power over them.

It had been a while since the last one.

Tonight he would do it all to her.

The thought made his crotch tighten.

Some were not aware that death could be as erotic. He taught them well. He helped them transcend to that place of psychic death. He showed them that when darkness

swallowed them up, they could experience an exquisite pleasure. He showed them that through dying, they would enjoy pure ecstasy.

Through his power and his control of others, she would come to know this tonight.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

On a whim, Luke drove by the Bettencourt's property. Once a working farm, the only sign of life was the RV sitting in darkness except for an outside light that illuminated part of the yard.

Luke guessed Kendra was out, possibly on a date. The thought didn't sit well with him.

Sam was outside in his pen, jumping at the fence and frantically barking. Luke opened the chicken-wire gate and tried calming him down. Sam recognized Luke, but the mixed breed didn't want any calming and probably wanted to go for a good run.

Luke checked the food and water dish. The night wasn't cold, and the shelter provided enough protection from the elements. Rhonda Woods's two cats sat off to one side, busy grooming themselves.

He looked up at the house. All the lights were off, except for an outer light at the back door.

Since their last time together, he didn't want to think of her with another man. But Kendra kept part of herself totally cut off, separate, especially the emotional part that he hadn't been able to touch.

They enjoyed the sex, as she put it to him once, but she reminded him that making love and having sex involved different areas of the psyche. She'd settle for the sex, but wanted no emotional involvement, and purposely held back her emotions.

Unusual, he thought, for a woman. Emotions were something he'd never let himself get wrapped up in before. So far it had been easy enough to do, until Kendra shared his bed.

This one not only fucking threatened to pull all the emotions out of him, but got him tangled up in them as well.

The woman had definitely gotten under his skin, like sharp, tiny splinters that refused to be pried. And damn if he wasn't at a loss on how to free himself from her.

Locking the gate behind him, he knew The Book Nook was open until ten o'clock and decided to go over there and chat with Wally and Maddie, who always seemed to know everything that went on in the town.

It was a quiet night so far, though lately that could always mean the lull before the storm, considering what had been occurring.

* * * * *

The off-the-beaten-path bar and grill they had decided on caused Kendra to wonder if this guy wasn't married.

Sitting in her car, with windows rolled up, she could still hear the pounding beat of heavy rock music. A mixture of muscle cars and motorcycles filled the front parking area.

Finding no empty parking space, she had pulled around to the back. To her dismay it was dimly lit. Instant foreboding ensued, and it made her wonder if she hadn't gotten in over her head, and had badly misjudged her ability to pull this off.

She had her cell phone tucked inside her purse. She thought of Luke. At least she could give him her location. It was a practical and logical approach, yet she hesitated.

She sat crouched behind the wheel contemplating this next move, all the while knowing something wasn't right.

She hadn't felt like this before meeting Edmond.

Then again, the dissimilarities between Sylvester's and The Cavern had a lot to do with it.

Sylvester's, a respectable and relatively safe place, did not have her worrying about getting out of her car and walking through the parking area. This place left her feeling she should have brought her grandfather's Glock. The handgun would have offered protection.

Her angst grew, causing her chest muscles to tighten, letting her know maybe she should back off, leave the undercover stuff to the pros.

Get the hell out of here, you fool!

She thought of Patti and suddenly wondered if Patti had felt like this before meeting the man who had made the choice to end her life.

Then again, Starfire might prove to be another Edmond, innocent, searching for fun as he clearly stated in his online profile. She would never know if she didn't go in. She had to play this thing out.

Yet she hated feeling this vulnerability, which came more from the fact she was wearing a skirt too damn short and boots too damn high.

What kind of fucking getaway was she going to be able to make if that was required?

Damn, she cursed and wished the Bettencourt part of her wasn't so strong, so stubborn and thickheaded that it would compel her to see this through from start to finish.

Holt, unlike her grandfather, would have cautioned her, tell her outright that she was fucking nuts.

She thought of Luke again, about calling him on his cell, and pictured him pulling up to this place, car wheels squealing, and pulling her out of there.

She turned the ignition off, gathered her purse, keys, and opened the car door.

Only seconds out of the car, she felt a hand touch her left shoulder.

She turned slightly and looked up at the dark shadowy figure.

"You?"

"What is our illustrious medical examiner doing out here at The Cavern? I never picture your type...I mean...somehow this place and you" -- crooking his head in that direction -- "simply don't mix. Or maybe I had you figured wrong."

He stepped back to assess her. "In that get up, I'm now seeing quite a different woman."

Feeling self-conscious, "Yeah, I guess I sort of go with the décor."

"You go in there, and you're going to get hit on, so be careful. Nasty elements come to a place like this. Maybe I should escort you inside." There was a sudden gleam in his eye. "Because if you're here alone, anything can happen."

"Actually, I'm meeting someone."

"No kidding."

"Yeah, I mean, no, I'm not kidding. He should be here any minute."

Jack Thompson studied her. "You are going to be careful, aren't you?"

"I'm always careful," she said, wishing she could believe her own words.

He hesitated, then, "So was Patti."

She looked at him. "I'll be more careful."

He smiled. "I have to leave. My part-timer can't stay, so it's back to the grindstone for me."

"Sorry about that." Though she wasn't, and was actually relieved that Jack Thompson wasn't going to be there when she met her mystery man.

"Yeah. Well, you take care in there," he added.

"I will."

He reached over and gave her a slight hug, which she hadn't expected. Despite the fact she didn't like putting feelings out there, she found herself almost welcoming the hug.

* * * * *

Wally always professed to being a connoisseur when it came to making coffee. When Luke walked into the bookstore, he smelled the aroma of some expensive brand.

Several people were clustered around a small coffee table in one of the back rooms, which held weekly book club meetings, one way Maddie and Wally could get some of the locals involved in reading and discussing the classics or a latest bestseller.

"Hi," Wally greeted. "Must be quiet out there, seeing as you're in here tonight."

"Yeah, not much going down, but the night is still young. Give it time," Luke said, thinking about Jay-Jay's and how weekends brought out the crazies who couldn't hold their liquor and were bent on wreaking havoc.

"Actually, I'm off duty. I covered for Josh earlier. He had to make a trip to the Rhode Island shore. One of the reserves is covering tonight."

"Things are nuts around here," Maddie exclaimed, pouring Luke a cup of the freshly brewed coffee and handing it to him. When he took the cup, it reminded him how Patti would do the same thing without asking. Suddenly, Danny Tyler emerged from one of the aisles.

Luke glanced down at the small stack he was carrying. A couple of mysteries. Then one book caught his eye -- a book on death. Danny noticed him staring down at the cover.

"I'm working part-time at Manheim's," Danny started, as if those few words would satisfy Luke's curiosity.

"I guess it helps knowing something about what you're working with," Luke said, attempting to understand why a seventeen-year-old might have an interest in working at such a place. He remembered himself at seventeen -- death was the furthest thing from his mind.

"It baffles me," Danny declared quietly.

Luke didn't respond, yet hoped Danny would expand.

"Death is baffling," Danny reiterated. "I keep reading about it, and I work around it, but I can't quite get it."

"What do you think there is to get?" Luke asked, tempted to say, *It's the end of the line for all of them.*

"I know why it has to happen; otherwise, there would be no room on this earth. That's why old people die. I don't understand why young ones die."

Luke stood silent, realizing at this age Danny needed ears more than a mouth.

"I don't know. It gets scary." His face, no longer a boy's face, not yet a man's, was serious. Too serious for a seventeen-year-old, especially on a Saturday night.

Maddie, overhearing the conversation, came over and put an arm around Danny's shoulder. "You know, Wally is always looking for someone to play a game of chess. And your Dad told me you're pretty good."

Danny looked at her and smiled. "Thanks, but I need to get home. But I'd be happy to come over sometime and play a few games with Wally."

Maddie looked at the selection of books Danny had just placed down on the counter. "Lord, a young man like you should be out there having fun. I don't know what is happening lately. Kendra comes in the other day and picks up books on subjects that would not only raise a few eyebrows in this town, but singe them as well. And you..."

Hearing her comments, warnings went off in Luke's mind. "You don't say?" He drew closer. "Now tell me what books would a nice lady like that be buying that would be singeing eyebrows?"

"I'm not saying anything disrespectful about that woman," Maddie went on. "But I do hope she's careful out there doing whatever she's doing."

Luke maintained a passive expression. "Careful? Why would she have to be careful?"

"I think she's got her own sting operation going that's going to end up luring some sicko out of his hole." She paused. "Either that, or I'm just reading too many detective mysteries."

Luke stared at her, remembering the RV, no one around, and Sam howling up a storm.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kendra thought the recent changes in the law had stopped them from smoking in places like this, but she still smelled it around her, permeating everything, the patrons, the wood, the air she was breathing.

The smoke mixed with the liquor, served hard and fast. The strong steady beat of music made her disoriented. It had been a while since she had set foot in a place like this. Years ago, when she'd first met Holt, they would venture into these out-of-the-way clubs, explore, experiment, see what the other side of life was like. Holt said it helped him judge people, made him aware of their intentions, made him better able to do his job as a private investigator.

Moments later, she found a small empty table tucked away in the back. And there she sat, and waited, and nursed a zinfandel. Two were her limit. Three made her doubt whether she should drive, although it didn't affect her senses. She had turned down several dances already, knowing her precarious balance in the high-heeled boots. She didn't want to end up breaking an ankle before meeting her knight in shining armor.

"Hi, pretty lady. Name's Al...Al Smart. Want to dance?"

Kendra looked up at the man in jeans and a plaid shirt, which seemed to be the customary attire.

Was this him?

Was this Starfire?

He hadn't yet introduced himself.

Would he simply ask her to dance before doing that?

"Actually, I'm meeting someone," she said, hoping that would clue him in and let him know who she was.

"Lucky guy. I don't think I've seen you here before."

"You're right. First time," she told him, and wished he hadn't taken that as an invitation to sit down.

"First time? Well, you sure picked a damn good night for it. Got a new band playing."

She nodded, glanced toward the doorway, wondered if her online pal was going to show his face. She didn't like waiting like this. She didn't like waiting, period. She didn't like the idea of someone knowing she was waiting. She'd been there twenty minutes now and was going to give it another five and then leave. Go back to her place. And back into those comfortable sweats.

"Well, if he don't show, I'm right over there," Al said, stood, and pointed over to the bar. "Just give a holler, and I'll come running."

She smiled, knowing full well she had no intention of doing any hollering.

Except when Al left, she felt suddenly more conspicuous. At least with a stranger sitting there, she could pretend she was with someone and not get the stares.

She finished her drink, glanced at her watch, gathered her things, and was soon heading out the front door, then realized she had to walk all the way around to the back parking area.

She was halfway into the parking lot, heading for her SUV, when a sense of foreboding hit and she had the sudden urge to flee. She wanted to run, but knew the impossibility of that happening. In these boots she'd fall flat on her face.

She teetered and tottered over the uneven terrain of stones and small potholes, shadows lurking within the framework of her peripheral vision.

Someone was watching her and drawing closer. She could turn, confront him, or keep going until she got into the SUV and locked its doors. Almost afraid to use the remote to unlock them, knowing the noise it would make, she carefully kept walking in that direction, all the while thinking maybe this was how Starfire operated.

He never actually met them, instead he waited outside for them, in the shadows. When his victims were alone, vulnerable, and helpless, he made his move.

* * * * *

"I saw that you folks were still open. I'd thought I'd let you know the Skillet Café is also open until midnight."

Wally looked over at Jack Thompson, who had just walked into the bookstore, and seemingly, appeared out of his element.

"Thanks for letting us know. Though after we're through here, I'm heading home and hitting the sack. Saturdays are long days for Maddie and me."

Maddie nodded as she bagged Danny's books.

"Maybe so for some," Jack responded. "But it don't seem long enough for others...like our little Miss ME."

Luke's ears perked up, fear and anger knotting inside. "And why do you say that?"

"I spotted her earlier this evening. Told her to be careful."

It was almost nine-thirty, Luke noted on the wall clock. "Did you now?" Luke said not wanting to appear anxious.

Jack smiled an irritating smile. "I'm sure you'd want to know, considering the two of you being so close."

The town was fucking too small, Luke thought bemusedly.

"I almost didn't recognize her, but I did recognize the SUV as she was getting out of it."

"She was alone?" Luke asked, no longer bothering to mask his concern.

"Yeah. And, man, she was all dolled up...black leather."

Almost afraid to ask, "And where was she headed?"

"Since we were in the parking lot of The Cavern, that's where I'm guessing she was headed. She told me she was meeting someone. That surprised me, considering who goes there. I told her to be careful...at least, more careful than my sister was."

"Dear Lord," Maddie sighed. "She's actually going through with it."

Luke turned sharply.

"All those books she ordered on kinky sex -- she's actually going to lure that sicko out of his cave."

Jack stood there, dumbfounded, unsure what Maddie was talking about. Danny stood by, silent, listening, his mouth slightly ajar.

"I'm hoping she's still there by the time I get there," Luke said, not caring what anyone thought. "Damn her, I told her that was a crazy scheme. But she's one stubborn lady with a mind of her own."

Suddenly, he felt the evil that had lurked in the town was getting too bold. Bent on destroying not only their peace of mind, it was reaching out to touch and destroy another innocent victim.

* * * * *

A blanket of snow shrouded her body, concealing her, protecting her. She heard their frantic angry voices. Killers determined to find their prey. Finish what they had set out to do. They'd already killed Roger Davies. Roger tried to save her...and failed.

Two against one.

They beat him, forced him onto a part of the ice where warning signs had been clearly posted.

Deep. Dangerous.

It never froze there. Davies broke through, disappearing into the flowing underground spring waters.

Roger had set out to get even. He knew she enjoyed ice-skating and followed her to the lake. They in turn followed him, with their own diabolical plan.

Roger Davies knew too much. She didn't know the whole story. It had to do with a funeral home. Goings on there he discovered working part-time. She didn't understand any of it.

But they figured she knew too much. Why they couldn't let her live.

She crouched further into the frozen earth.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Yeah, she was here earlier,” the tall, bearded bartender responded with indifference. “You’re sure?” Luke asked.

“Well, if you’re describing a lady in black leather, you’re describing a hell of a lot of ladies that come in here every night. But this one.” He paused. “Something different about her. I didn’t recognize the face, but I wouldn’t forget that shape, built like a brick shithouse, if you know what I mean, especially with what she was wearing. I figure this was her first time in here. A lot of guys probably thought the same, you know, fresh meat, looking to get laid.” His stern face relaxed enough to let through a lascivious grin.

Luke’s face remained stoic, resolved. “Yeah, I get your point.” Luke didn’t like the way he had described Kendra, at the same time knew enough not to antagonize this witness. “Did she meet anyone? Anyone you remember?” Eyewitnesses, he knew, oftentimes distorted reality especially in a chaotic environment like The Cavern that presented a mix of faces mingled with the steamier side of the human condition. Still, it was a start.

“No, not really. Men walked over to her table, but from what I could see, she was rejecting them right and left. Like dominoes, they were falling one by one. Finally, she got up, left around eight or eight-thirty. I guess she didn’t find what she was looking for.”

“You sure about that? Eight-thirty?” Luke didn’t think the timing was right. “I got someone saying he saw her here around nine.”

“Naw, new band starts at nine. She was gone by that time.”

Luke struggled to assimilate what he’d just been told. It left a bad taste in his mouth as possibilities floated through his mind. Jack Thompson told him he saw Kendra at The Cavern, although didn’t give an exact time.

Suddenly, a scenario formed. Even with a half-hour difference, was Jack providing some kind of alibi? Was he at The Cavern when he had stated? Yet what motive did Jack

have to cause harm to Kendra? Still, she hadn't shown up at the RV or the farmhouse. He'd even gone back after talking with Thompson. Sam now sat outside in his jeep.

Luke knew the obvious put you on track. Yet, it could also lead in the wrong direction. But if his hunch played out, it could lead him, for the first time since the murders were discovered, toward the identity of the killer.

* * * * *

He had left Kendra there to die. Or was she already dead? Because then it was true. Her life was now playing itself out in milliseconds.

She was cold, and what she wore gave little protection from the elements. And she knew those elements could finish what he had started. If only she could feel some pain, then she would know for certain. Dead people don't feel pain. Right now she was feeling nothing, just numbness.

Was this how it was to die? Was she now passing over to that other side? She thought of Holt and her grandfather, and hoped it had been the same for them, passing over like this without much pain. Confusion, yes, but nothing excruciating.

Just an indescribable numbness where pain no longer had room to exist.

Yet, a fear from somewhere deep inside her subconscious now had her wondering about her condition.

If she were dead, considering what her life had been like lately, she would probably soon find out if Hell existed. She hadn't been to confession in so long, stopping soon after Holt's death. Her grandmother kept insisting she go back, confess her sins. Get back to the church, she would tell her with each visit.

The state of grace -- they were all brought up to believe in it. At one time, yes, she had enjoyed that condition, as an innocent child, ignorant of what constituted most sins.

Mentally she recited the words, a prayer she learned in catechism. It always struck her as odd that she never forgot some of the words. That she could repeat enough of them years later so that she felt it still counted. It would still allow her into Heaven.

Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee. I confess all my sins...because of thy just punishment. But most of all, they offend thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love -- the Act of Contrition -- Yes, she was sure it went something like that.

She repeated the first lines over and over, unable in her mental confusion to go further. Then covering all bases she started another prayer -- Hail Mary. *Hail Mary, full of grace...*

Father Tom, the parish priest, always gave them at least ten Acts of Contrition and as many Hail Marys to recite for penance. Would this help her to cross over to the good side, the better side? She didn't want to find herself descending into Hell. Descend into Hell...descend into Hell...and felt as if her body were melting into the earth...

Suddenly her neck hurt, and that made her realize she was having difficulty breathing. Realized there was something around her neck. A thin wire.

The fact that she was now experiencing these things -- pain, difficulty breathing -- that had to be a good sign.

She suddenly remembered a term Luke had used recently describing how the first victim had been assaulted and killed.

Blitz attack.

The bastard had used a blitz attack on her as well, controlled, calculating, the use of a garrote around her neck.

She never saw it coming. He'd rendered her unconscious. Then, thinking she was dead, left her in the woods, yards from The Cavern...left to die.

His first mistake...

He hadn't taken time to ensure she had expired. Maybe noise coming from the bar had scared him off.

She remembered struggling, and in the process, tried to free herself, and ended up twisting her damn back.

Now she couldn't move.

Yet, senses still intact, she heard wild barking from a distance. She thought of Olez's dogs, how they had discovered Rhonda's body.

And now would they end up finding hers? She could see techs from the crime lab, examining her, documenting the evidence. Stapleton, her boss, hovering over her cold, rigid body, determining time of death based on how stiff she'd become.

From her peripheral vision, she spotted a shadow emerging from the woods. A new fear formed, growing into terror. Was he coming back to finish her off?

Suddenly, she felt a wet, cold nose, gently poking at her face, a warm tongue licking her nose.

In a faint, weak voice, she cried, "Sam?"

Sam immediately lay beside her and propped one paw on her forearm, as if to say everything was going to be okay.

Soon she heard a sound and recognized Luke's voice.

She closed her eyes, allowed herself to relax. In moments she felt Luke's fingers working to relieve her of the wire noose.

Suddenly, an image emerged in her mind. Tattoos...two lightning bolts. On the backside of one hand.

Chapter Forty

Kendra sat on the porch of the farmhouse.

It was good to see her sitting up like that. It meant her injured back was on the mend. "I picked up some Krispy Kremes," Luke said.

Kendra smiled. "You keep bringing me stuff like that, and I'm never going to get off this porch, let alone out of this chair. But thanks. My grandmother will enjoy them as well."

Kendra had moved back into the farmhouse and soon planned to move her grandmother back as well.

It eased Luke's mind, telling him although the physical mending had started, the emotional one now taking place would take longer.

"Gotta get that strength back up," he said, as if could explain his purpose for bringing the goodies.

"That and fifty added pounds on this body."

He set the box of donuts aside on a nearby rattan table. "Looks to me like you've lost weight."

"Yeah, well, I don't seem to have the appetite for much of anything lately."

"Understandable considering --"

"Don't hold back," Kendra encouraged. "I know you've wanted to tell me I did a really stupid thing."

Luke sat down on one of the steps and looked up at her. "Let's just say that I knew eventually you would come to that conclusion yourself. I was just biding my time until it happened."

"You were, were you?" Her smile widened. Since her brush with death, she knew Luke had refrained from throwing it up to her that her own stupidity had put her into a dangerous situation, presenting herself as prey.

"There's a fourteenth-century philosophy known as Ockham's razor."

"Not familiar with it," she said.

"Basically it's telling us the fewer assumptions we make, the better, because we may find ourselves going in circles."

Her eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, if there are several solutions, the most obvious is the one to go with."

"Okay...I'm trying to follow you."

"You saw Jack Thompson at The Cavern. And you said it was around eight or eight-thirty."

"Yeah, that's when I left. I figured Starfire chickened out...decided not to show."

"Do you think it might have been Thompson who accosted you?"

Kendra stared ahead, unfocused. "I've gone over that night in my mind, hoping that some little thing will trigger some meaningful element. But whenever I try too hard, my mind simply refuses to focus, as if it simply doesn't want to be put through the torture of remembering. I saw him when I went into the Cavern, but I don't think I saw him actually inside."

Luke understood, yet by Kendra going back to that night and looking at it from different perspectives, in a different order of events, it might spur something and produce some clue or detail that could help them.

"I know you say he came from behind, but was there anything that you could have seen that would allow you to remember something about him?"

"There was."

Hope filled Luke. "And?" He didn't want to pressure her too much, knowing that could work against them also.

"I can't remember. So many thoughts were going through my mind at the time. I actually thought when I didn't feel the pain, I was dead. I remember thinking that dying wasn't so bad."

Luke studied her face, not wanting to break this pattern of thought she was now in.

She looked directly at him. "You know, it's like you simply sink into a black abyss...like you're falling asleep," she went on. "But when I realized I wasn't going any further into that abyss, I started to get scared. And when I heard Sam's barking...I thought it was Olez's dogs, and they were going to find my body...like they did with Rhonda's...and the tattoo."

"Rhonda had a tattoo?" Luke had to ask, not remembering it in the autopsy report.

“No...no...*he* had a tattoo. In the shape of two lightning bolts. That’s what they looked like. Whoever blitz attacked me has those tattoos on the back of his hand.”

This, Luke knew, would put them back on track. Now all they had to do was find the hand and the two lightning bolts.

Chapter Forty-One

An antique wall clock clicked the passing moments, the only sound in the room. Martin passed a worn composition book over his desk toward his brother. "Marion was going through old files the other day. She came across this. It's yours. Somehow it got mixed up with my stuff. She thought you might want to keep it."

Matthew took the time worn notebook and opened it to the first page. Poems Matthew had written during a college literature course.

He read the first page.

*She'd call in a high-pitched voice,
One breath, one name
Matthew Martin, Martin Matthew
Two souls merged/interchangeable parts.
Independence impossible.
Conceived as one.
Double births meld together
Mirrored bodies, separate minds
Ignored
Known by one,
"Twin."
Into adolescence, through adulthood,
A double-edged sword.
Experience slices us in smooth, bold strokes,
Separating, plunging, glued identities*

Into hot, scalding water...

Dissolve...

Yet an invisible bond remains permanent

Between two halves where the whole is missing.

Matthew said nothing and slid the notebook to one corner of the desk. "Another time...another life" was all he said. Then. "How much does he know?" Matthew asked in a voice that didn't disguise his anxiety. Identical twins, Martin -- because of an additional twenty pounds to his tall frame, coupled with graying hair despite their same year of birth now appeared the elder of the two.

Matthew, on the other hand, still sported a relatively full head of hair, with mere flecks of distinguishing gray at the temples bringing out a boyish charm against a Bermuda tan.

"He's a part-timer --"

"So was Davies," Matthew reminded.

"That's true," Martin confirmed in a low voice, so those in the nursing home's outer offices wouldn't overhear. "Still, Davies knew too damn much and attempted to cash in. This one, he's a good worker, ignorant of what's going on, and simply stumbled onto something he shouldn't have. I don't think he's put two and two together. Davies's greed did him in."

"Give this one time," Matthew warned. "If any of the families find out, we'll have every regulatory agency in the business down our backs. After investigating what's been going on here, they'll close both businesses for sure. We've been careful since the Davies fiasco. We've had a good run all these years. I'm in the process of creating a tissue bank. Do you realize what we get selling to research for knee joints, tiny bones from the ear, and one single heart valve? Not to mention bone, skin, and corneas making these bodies worth thousands. It's gravy. And with the crematorium business in place, we'll bring in hundreds more--"

Martin shifted uneasily in his chair. He knew his brother had the knack for making any business venture profitable -- too profitable, making it impossible to turn away from, impossible not to benefit from, and impossible not to become involved.

For years they had been getting away with cremating multiple bodies, stuffing as many as they could into a crematorium built specifically for that purpose with no one the wiser. Still, it was always a risk, one day all of it going up in smoke -- he almost chuckled at the unintended pun -- yet knew it could blow up in their faces any time. It did almost once, with Davies.

Matthew was a genius when it came to paperwork, leaving legitimate paper trails that raised no suspicion.

Rewording ATC forms that gave authority to cremate so that it also authorized removal of "tissue" in order to remove pacemakers that could explode in the cremation process.

In turn, legally giving them permission to remove tissues in other forms such as organs -- hearts, lungs, brains...

"Shit," Martin hissed, "you created that fiasco with Davies," he suddenly couldn't help but point out. "That day telling me we're going to scare the shit out of him...and we did. But for you that wasn't enough. Didn't figure on the girl being there. Why did you push it? The kid wouldn't have said any --"

"Couldn't risk it. Why people get classified as 'disposable.'"

Martin knew he meant Rhonda Woods, who knew about the multiple burnings. "Too many people knowing too much, we risk getting caught. I don't know about you, but I don't like the prospect of getting sentenced to the electric chair or whatever else they do here -- fried...injected...hanged even. And if Bettencourt ever regains her memory of that day..."

Martin's face turned red, signaling his rising blood pressure. "Especially since Smart botched that one up. And to think you were going to meet that little lady. You and that damn fucking Internet!"

Martin cringed, thankful that Edmond Cutler had too big a mouth and liked to brag as well as let things out of the bag, telling him at the café how he met Bettencourt on the Internet.

It wasn't hard to figure out that Bettencourt was posing as Lookingforfun.

Nor was it difficult setting her up.

"You should've thought of that before hiring Tyler," Matthew said. "Danny Tyler is the son of a Canterville police officer, for Christ's sake. If anything happens to him, you think they're letting that go into a cold case file? Davies was a troublemaker, a bully. No one cared what happened to him. No officer of the law would have spent any more time on the case than he had to. As far as any of them were concerned, Davies headed out of town to parts unknown. If this Tyler kid starts getting too nosy, starts snooping around again, and discovers that tract of land and what's happening out there."

"All I have him doing is picking up and delivering regular bodies -- transports -- no more than that," Martin said.

"We'll let it go for now. I don't want to bring any more attention to us. But, if that kid starts snooping around and mouthing out, then there might have to be a similar accident. Cremation covers up a lot of mistakes."

Martin studied his twin brother. He knew Matthew always made good on his word. The man allowed no interference with his objectives. Davies had presented not only a risk and a danger, but also an obstacle to Matthew Manheim's success. A threat that could have resulted in the demise of the businesses they had created between the funeral home and the nursing facility.

Yet, that day at the lake still haunted Martin. Still had him twisted inside with nightmares that refused to let go.

Chapter Forty-Two

"Here, help me load this plywood onto the back of the truck," Josh asked Danny. They stood in front of a local home building supply center.

Danny didn't respond, as if he hadn't heard his father's request. Josh sensed something was on the boy's mind.

"Look, when we're finished here, we'll grab something to eat."

Danny merely nodded.

"Everything okay?" Josh asked finally. Danny, Josh knew, had always been introspective, ruminating about something, reflecting on stuff most boys his age wouldn't think about.

"Is the job at Manheim going okay? School? We'll have to start getting together those college applications."

Danny lifted and pushed the slats of plywood into the truck bed. "Things are okay, Dad." He stopped and leaned against the truck gate. "But something's got me stumped."

"Stumped?"

Danny straightened. "Yeah. Something I saw and I'm not sure what to make of it." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Gold teeth inside a Styrofoam cup."

Josh listened, held back comment.

"I mean, I didn't know they did that. Yanked teeth out of...cadavers."

"I'm not sure they're supposed to," Josh said, thinking of his own dental work, wondering if it was worth anything to anyone else beside himself. Several dental crowns, a small permanent bridge, couple of veneers...expensive work, but on an open market he didn't think it would bring in a dime. Gold teeth, on the other hand, might be another can of

worms. Usually found in the elderly. The potential to make money probably existed for those who were bold enough to embark on that kind of venture.

“Where exactly did you see this?” Josh asked.

“I kind of stumbled onto them walking through the prep room. I really wasn’t supposed to be in there, but got curious. I bring the bodies in, and then they take over. I came back early from a delivery, and before going out for another I took a tour of the place, figured it would help me do a better job.”

“Danny, I’m not sure why gold teeth would be stored in a cup, but something tells me that’s not part of the embalming process. I could ask, find out. Luke attended one recently.” Josh realized he really didn’t know what went on behind those funeral home doors. Luke, during his investigative work on the murders, had actually witnessed the procedure being performed.

“Maybe it’s no big deal,” Danny said. “I don’t mind the job, and I’m learning stuff I wouldn’t learn elsewhere. It kind of ties in with what I want to do later.”

“Yeah, your mother told me about the pathologist thing. If what they’re doing at Manheim is illegal, then it should be looked into.” Josh felt that funny sensation crawling into his gut, telling him this could mushroom into something he might not want his son involved in. Danny would become part of the investigation. A witness called in to give testimony. A target for those who might not want him talking to anyone about what he saw.

Danny hoisted the remaining boards into the truck. “This might sound weird, but sometimes I feel the dead keep secrets. That they needed me to find that Styrofoam cup. That something’s up with Manheim. Things need to be looked into.”

Josh smiled, wondering if this was the birth of a criminologist, a Dr. Lee in the making, who not only found out the whys, but also had the determination to put pieces of a crime puzzle together.

He knew this would prey on his son’s mind until it got resolved. Until the reason for that cup filled with gold teeth was made known and made sense.

Suddenly, the thought that they were mining cadavers for gold and who knew what else, left a sour taste inside his mouth. He wondered if he had put any Tootsie Roll Pops in the glove compartment. He hoped to hell he had.

* * * * *

Starfire: How are u?

Sexylady: u never made it the other night. I waited, then left.

Starfire: Something came up.

Sexylady: Yes, I gathered. I don’t like wasting time on deadbeats.

Starfire: I'm no deadbeat. I told you the business I'm in has me on call 24/7. I had an emergency situation that needed attending. I still would like to meet u.

Sexylady: I don't think so.

Starfire: Why not? We can still get it together. I had to work and couldn't get out in time.

Sexylady: The magic is no longer there. I don't find this fun anymore.

Starfire: u won't know unless we meet. One more chance?

Sexylady: Well...maybe one more chance.

Starfire: Thanks. u won't regret it.

Sexylady: That will be up to u, now. Won't it?

Starfire: Yes. Same place? Time? Day?

Sexylady: Sure. We'll make it for this Saturday night, 8 p.m. at Jay-Jay's.

Starfire: Okay.

Moments later Kendra printed out this latest chat session. The man was still on the hunt. She had been able to convince Luke to set up another identity. She wouldn't be meeting Starfire this time or at any future time. She folded the paper and gave the printout to Luke.

The state police had an undercover cop set in place for this one, ready to go play out the rest of this charade. Starfire would meet his match.

She clicked off the computer. It was late, and her back still hurt. She knew better than to overdo it, knowing she needed the rest. Luke insisted she stay in the farmhouse rather than the RV. She didn't argue with him this time, knowing that the house afforded more safety. She glanced over at the rolltop desk situated in one corner of a room used as a temporary home office. Holt's gun was tucked away in the top drawer. A box of cartridges sat in a drawer below it. Luke insisted on the protection.

Sam sat by her side, never leaving it since her discharge from the hospital. She had been lucky, thinking of Rhonda's, Patti's, and Jennifer's outcome. She could have been one more name added to that fateful list.

And Luke? He'd been around more often than not lately. Still, she felt nervous, apprehensive, and anticipating something yet to come. She knew she was far from being out of the woods.

It seemed, lately, Roger Davies haunted her dreams. Dreams filled with lightning bolts, shadowy figures, and red scarves.

* * * * *

Luke walked into the dojo. Another rainy Tuesday night, and with class over, he spotted Josh standing at the back of the room sweeping and cleaning up.

"We had a good session tonight," Josh said. "Too bad you missed it. Some of these kids are getting really good. I like it when they challenge me." He popped a Tootsie Roll Pop into his mouth. "Want to have a go at the bag?" he asked, smiling.

"Actually, I'm here because you wanted to see me about something."

"Yeah, I did." His smile faded to an expression of concern.

"I'm not sure if this is going to tie in with your murder investigation, but Danny told me something the other day that didn't sit well. He'd tell you himself, but he's working tonight."

"That's okay. I'll catch him later," he said, knowing he would still require and prefer Danny's own version.

As Luke listened, adding to his notes what Danny had confided to his father, he knew a whole brand-new Pandora's box was opening. He also knew motives to kill were becoming clearer. His gut feeling told him that Kendra was still in danger. Her attack might have been part of far-reaching tentacles put out there to hide a diabolical process that may have been in play for longer than any of them cared to admit.

He snapped shut his notebook.

"What do you think?" Josh asked, knowing Luke processed everything up to that point. Knowing inside the man's head lay answers fighting to surface.

"I think, after seeing Danny, I'm going to have another talk with Martin."

"Be careful with this one. This is circumstantial evidence that can go either way. Gold fillings in a cup might mean simply anything." They both knew the burden-of-proof requirement encompassed two burdens -- burden of production, which introduced sufficient relevant evidence to prove the fact at issue...enough to show something illegal.

Failure meant they could lose.

Then burden [IW1]of persuasion where the prosecutor needed to provide there was enough facts as well as evidence collected to prove a crime had indeed been committed.

* * * * *

Martin signed off. He smiled. He wanted to meet this one. It had been a while since he had met anyone from the Net...and a while since he had enjoyed playing his special game. He felt this one was worth the pursuit. He had had to cancel their plans originally because of business -- a family asking for him personally to help them set up funeral arrangements. He couldn't refuse her this time.

He would meet Sexylady at Jay-Jay's. Then if the chemistry was right, they would play the rest out.

He could feel the stirrings inside him, that familiar tightening, that wondrous feeling of excitement and anticipation. Yeah, he was looking forward to meeting Sexylady and teaching her how to play his game.

Chapter Forty-Three

Officer Miranda Gonzalez, a rookie who had just joined the force, felt overexposed. The only thing that gave her any feeling of security was the wire beneath her bra. She was actually enjoying the music at Jay-Jay's, her foot tapping to the beat of one of the latest country western tunes. It made her think about going back there herself when off duty and taking up those lessons they were giving in the next room. Virtually new to the community, most of the patrons whom she did not know now, she'd come to know with time. When that happened, going under was going to be tricky.

He stated they would meet in a booth. She sat, patiently waiting, felt the gentle breeze of an overhead paddle fan that helped disperse the smells of alcohol, perfume, and cologne.

She knew a few friends who were into this Internet dating thing. They told her they had no problems with it. One actually had just gotten engaged. But as with anything, there was always that dark side, one that now needed the attention of local authorities. And that's where she came into the picture.

She spotted him, brown plaid shirt, dark jeans, tall, blond, but older than she imagined. He glanced around, looked her way, and smiled, demonstrating he liked what he saw.

Miranda smiled back, suddenly realizing she was the potential victim, he the potential predator, and keeping that in mind, she focused on the job at hand.

Starfire was about to meet his match.

* * * * *

"Your grandmother is asking for you," the woman's voice said over the phone.

Kendra was just getting ready for bed when the phone call came in.

"Is there something wrong? She's never called for me at this hour," Kendra said, suspicion entering her mind.

"She's been slightly confused, agitated. I think it would be best if you came over. I apologize for the lateness."

"I'll be over in about fifteen minutes," Kendra said, knowing it wouldn't take her long to throw on jeans and a sweatshirt and drive over.

"Thank you, Dr. Bettencourt. We'll be expecting you."

Kendra dialed Luke's number. His answering machine clicked on. She left a message. She dialed the headquarters, found out he was on duty. Kendra didn't know if this was an emergency or not. It might be just what they were telling her, that her grandmother was in an agitated state and needed family there. Kendra wasn't about to refuse, knowing at times, only family helped in these situations.

She told the person on duty what happened. Then she pulled on her clothing, and moments later, headed the SUV toward Manheim's Nursing Home.

* * * * *

Corridors partially lit by overhead lighting positioned over the nurse's station appeared different at night.

A skeletal nightshift sat in place at that ungodly hour, letting her know others were as wide-awake.

Most of the residents slept, despite stirrings from those who suffered various forms of insomnia. On the whole, the place was relatively quiet.

She approached one nurse, identified by her name badge as night supervisor. The tall, dark-haired woman eyed her curiously.

"I was called in to see my grandmother, Grace Bettencourt," Kendra explained.

"Yes, your grandmother has been extremely restless, and we felt she needed to talk to you. It's why we called, although we always leave it up to the family member whether to come in or not, especially at this hour. Your grandmother simply refuses to go to sleep, despite the medication we gave. And we know the family likes to know what's going on."

Kendra nodded. "Did she say anything specific as to why she's feeling this way? What brought it on?" Knowing any clue would help her face what was ahead.

"One of the aides told me it could be because you've moved back into that farmhouse. Your grandmother's afraid for your safety, especially after what happened to you. And I guess what happened there at the house. Then again, she does tend to go off on her tangents."

Kendra knew since the attack that night she played undercover cop at The Cavern, her grandmother's imagination had worked double overtime. "I'll talk to her, reassure her I'm okay."

"I just checked on her a few minutes ago. She's still awake. We gave her a light sedative that should soon kick in."

Kendra headed toward the room, thoughts whirling in her mind, wondering if it was a good thing that her grandmother was still awake.

Grace was sitting up in bed, the overhead light on, arthritic fingers occupied with a pair of fat, wooden knitting needles and a ball of bright red yarn. Tired, aging blue eyes looked up from the work in progress and focused on her. "You need to get back to the church," her grandmother said, right off. "Father Petrocelli was here earlier. Go talk to him. He'll listen to your confession. You need to reconcile with God. You can't keep living the way you're living, Kendra. Holt is gone, and you're not dealing well with that. I hope you're not bringing any men you're dating into that house. People will talk --"

"Gram, is that why you called me in tonight? To preach morals, drill me on my sex life?" Kendra asked. "We could have talked about it at another time, at least at a more decent hour," Kendra reminded her, trying not to sound too sarcastic, yet knowing she had no intention of discussing the subject of her personal life with her grandmother. What she did behind closed doors was her business, no one else's. If she were still married, no one would care to ask what she did in private. Now suddenly, becoming a widow gave others the license to probe. She never asked to become a widow, and she damn well never asked to live a life of celibacy. She was simply playing the cards life had dealt her as best as she could.

"No, I didn't ask you here to talk about that," her grandmother responded. "But some things shouldn't wait when the moment presents itself. Who knows if I'll be alive tomorrow morning when they bring in that breakfast tray. I could simply drop dead in my sleep. They do...here."

"Gram, you're not going to die, at least not tonight. The doctor told me you'd be able to leave this place soon. Then you can come back to the farmhouse." As soon as the words were out, she regretted saying them. This was not a good time to broach the subject of returning to that house.

"That's the last place I want to be," her grandmother responded in a frail, anxious voice. "I don't know how you can stay there after what happened. I thought we were getting rid of the damn thing."

Grandmother had too much time on her hands, Kendra decided. "Gram, why *not* come back to the house? Stay there with me. Give yourself time to adjust. It's really not so bad there anymore. I've been able to do it, even when I thought I couldn't."

The clicking began as it usually did when her grandmother refused to listen.

“Good memories still exist,” Kendra went on, ignoring the clacking of her grandmother’s knitting needles. “They still outweigh the bad ones. I’m finding comfort there, Gram.”

The needles clicked discordantly as the swatch of red grew longer. “I’ll think about it,” her grandmother mumbled, refusing to look at her, focusing instead on the pattern, a pattern on which Kendra knew her grandmother didn’t need any focusing, a pattern she had worked for years.

But it was a beginning, she thought. “Good. Get some sleep tonight,” Kendra suggested. “I’ll be back tomorrow.” She paused, then, “The trees are starting to change, and I think it’s going to be a good fall. I remember how you loved autumn on the farm.”

The old woman peered over her spectacles. “Yes. I finished this scarf for you.” She put down the needles and took a small, square white box off the nightstand and handed it to her granddaughter.

One more red scarf. “Thanks, Gram.”

Her grandmother pushed the knitting needles and the ball of red yarn to one side. “I’m getting a little tired.”

Kendra stood and pulled up the sheet and comforter to cover her. “That’s good. Otherwise you won’t get much sleep tonight, what with them coming and delivering those breakfast trays so early like they do.”

Her grandmother’s smile deepened the lines around her eyes.

That was it, Kendra thought, a simple reassurance that life could get back to normal once they were both back in that farmhouse.

Moments later, as Kendra made her way through the nursing home parking area, she thought more of that longing for normalcy. Simply living life constituted normal, until it changed again. From the corner of her eye, she spotted the headlights of a car, except the car wasn’t moving. She hurried to her own vehicle and quickly got inside and locked the doors. She turned on the ignition, glanced into the rearview mirror, breathed a sigh of relief as the car slowly made its way out of the lot in the opposite direction.

Chapter Forty-Four

Luke sat in the van one street away from the blinking neon NO VACANCY sign of the Crossroads Motel, located on the outskirts of Canterville.

A small motel that held no more than twenty units, although the weekends often brought in a lucrative business from the local bars and dance places.

Tall trees gave it enough separateness from the main road for those seeking a discreet venue.

Officer Gonzalez was inside one of the units -- Unit 14. So far the wire remained in place, but when things would reach a certain point, Luke worried the possible discovery might endanger a fellow officer.

Gonzalez was good at what she did, and Luke felt confident she knew when to make her move. He simply had to stay put, wait it out. He glanced over at the dashboard clock. It was late. They had been at it for some time. He had tailed them right after they had left Jay-Jay's, and both cars were now parked at the back of the motel directly in front of Unit 14.

* * * * *

"Let's enjoy a drink first," Starfire suggested.

"I don't drink much," she told him, sitting on the edge of the bed, shapely legs crossed. Wanting to get it over with, Miranda knew she had to take it slow and do nothing that raised suspicion.

"I have scotch, there's ice and water."

"Okay, a small one," she responded, figuring she'd sip it slowly enough. She'd been a scotch drinker in her heyday as an exotic dancer, before ever thinking she would carry a gun and badge.

"I find you very sexy. You certainly live up to your name," he commented.

Ignoring the rising nausea, she forced a smile.

He came closer and handed her a short, chunky glass filled with ice, water, and the scotch. She thanked him, then raised the glass as if in a toast. "To us and to what comes next."

"Yes, to us," he smiled, and the hopeful, anticipative look in his eyes signaled her he was expecting a lot to happen tonight. It made her stomach lurch, reminding her of a life she had once lived.

He sat next to her, edging closer. He put a hand on one slender shoulder, gave it a slight squeeze, demonstrating a familiarity not yet there, but falsely put into place by previous Internet conversations.

"You are a very beautiful woman. I feel lucky, considering."

"Considering?"

"Not all women meet my expectations. Either they show up looking a lot older, or heavier, and certainly not as sexy."

She found herself struggling to maintain her smile.

He put a hand on her knee, pushing up the short black skirt. She closed her eyes, held her breath.

"I think you and I will have some real fun tonight."

Wondering how far she was going to have to go with this, where she could finally say the word that would bring in the troops. Knowing that Luke was out there ready to come to her rescue, though she didn't particularly like the idea of anyone having to rescue her from anything.

Suddenly, he was drawing her against him and kissing her. She stiffened. He forced her mouth open, and she felt his tongue slide between her teeth. She fought the urge to gag and push him away. Yet she needed it to go further. Luke would probably not approve, but she needed to nail him.

"Yeah," he murmured, "I think you're going to enjoy what I'm going to do to you. This game we play."

Suddenly, he was all over her. She was no longer in control as his body mounted hers, pushing her legs apart. There was the strong possibility she was going to get raped, and she arched her body against him to throw him off balance.

"Relax, I'm not going to do anything yet," he said, pulling her hands above her head. His slender body belied the strength he possessed. Quickly, he was fastening her wrists together with duct tape, practically sitting on her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe. Realizing she could pass out. Realizing there was something around her neck -- a towel and a rope -- he worked fast...and the reason for her increasing breathlessness.

"You're going to like this...you're going to come like you've never come before," he promised, looking down on her, grinning, knowing he had the upper hand, thinking this was what she wanted.

Terror crawled into her mind, realizing fully what was happening. Her attempts to scream were thwarted as he began to put strip of duct tape over her mouth, preventing her from uttering the word that would bring in that rescue.

In a matter of seconds, he had rendered her helpless, reconfirming in her mind the horrifying truth: the women he had murdered so far had had no chance to save themselves.

"So far I've only lost a few doing this," he mumbled. "Rhonda, Jennifer, all practice...for the real thing."

He pulled slightly on the rope now looped around her neck. Blackness descended somewhere in her head, and she started to see actual stars. She was going to black out. Totally under his control, she felt him positioning himself to take her.

"I usually take my time at this point," he whispered. "But I've been so horny for you, I can't wait."

She writhed below him, hoping to get enough leverage with her legs, strong legs, once dancer's legs, that became lethal with the right angle.

Except the weight of his body made it impossible, incapacitating her.

He was pulling at her blouse and then tearing it open. He tugged at the front clasp of her bra. That's when she knew he saw the wire. Shock filled his face, followed by rage.

She read his mind. He had to kill her...get rid of this witness. He had no alternative. He'd confessed to Jennifer Wilson and Rhonda Woods's killings, more than enough for probable cause to arrest him for those murders.

She felt the rope tightening more and again the black engulfing her. It was true, she thought, moments of her life floated before her mind's eye.

Suddenly, a crashing noise sounded from somewhere in the room.

Shouts made...loud male voices.

Moments later, the Canterville police hauled a handcuffed Jack Thompson's ass out of the motel room in front of a group of sleepy-eyed occupants from the other units.

"You haven't read me my rights!" she heard Thompson scream, as they pushed him into the back of a patrol car.

"Don't worry," one officer shouted. "We'll get to that once we're down at the station."

Luke stayed behind to make sure she was okay. "Don't," Luke said.

"Don't what?" she asked, zipping up her skirt. "If it were just me, I would be Canterville's next homicide, joining the list of body dumps."

"Don't go over this now. There's too much adrenaline going through that system of yours. You won't think rationally about any of this yet."

"Rational or not, I fucking let him get the jump on me. I should've been more prepared --"

"He's good at it. I'm betting he's had a lot of practice. Maybe more than the three we know about."

"That's the curious part: he confessed to Woods and Wilson, but not Patti Thompson's, though I'm suspecting if he was responsible for that, it was for other reasons."

"It might've been a cover-up. He may have had other reasons to kill his stepsister. She might have been onto him. Maybe they argued...all conjecture on my part, of course." Luke added, "But gut feeling's telling me I'm right on the mark with this one." He paused.

That's when Miranda noticed Luke was looking at something behind her. She turned. Doors that made up a closet and met in the middle were partially open. He walked over and separated them further, then with gloved hands pulled out a small camcorder.

"I'm guessing that you just made your debut as a BDSM porno queen," he said, struggling to maintain his professionalism.

She ignored the comment, "I'm guessing he's got quite a collection, which of course gives us probable cause for a search warrant." Miranda knew that Luke would waste no time in getting the necessary papers together to get that warrant put into effect and search Thompson's place as well as the Skillet Café.

Many would sleep better tonight knowing they probably had Canterville's serial predator behind bars.

* * * * *

Al Smart didn't particularly like what Matthew Manheim was telling him to do. He was no fucking killer. He didn't mind bringing bodies to the ovens or going through and finding gold teeth that had been overlooked.

Nor did he mind cramming corpses piled high into a space small enough for one...and letting families believe they were getting the pure ashes of their loved ones. It was all economics. Manheim paid him well for the work. For Christ's sake, they were already dead. No more harm could come to them.

But this.

This was goddamn fucking different altogether.

As he had once told a prison inmate who was stupid enough to get himself back behind bars, he was never going back there again.

He merely nodded as Matthew finished his spiel.

"Danny Tyler needs to have an accident. I told him that he'd help you load bodies into the crematorium. The one we used for the special ones. I want you to add his to that pile.

Danny will simply become another missing person, like so many his age who run off to find themselves.”

Al Smart took the manila envelope from Matthew’s grasp, filled with hundred-dollar bills, which would add up to five thousand dollars, enough to get him a good distance away.

“Sure, if that’s what you want.”

Matthew sat back in his chair. “And don’t bother saying anything to my brother about this. Sometimes Martin gets a bug up his ass. I think he’d prefer not to even know about this one, either.”

“Sure, if that’s what you want,” Al Smart repeated, tucking the envelope into the side pocket of his jacket.

Moments later, Al Smart veered off Route 6 onto the interstate and headed south, straight out of Canterville.

South was a good direction to go. He would not stop until he was far out of the reaches of the town and the Manheim brothers.

* * * * *

His watch read five a.m. Luke locked his service revolver into the gun locker. The last thing he needed was Thompson, now sweating it out in the booking area, getting hold of it. Once done, Luke was ready to confront Thompson in a distraction-free environment. And preferred no barriers between them. They would sit practically knee-to-knee, close enough to touch, yet far enough away not to make each other uncomfortable.

Close enough to read Thompson’s body language. Determine the cause of his fear.

Twenty-seven inches was the right distance, he recalled from his readings. Putting it into practice, he found that it worked. Farther than that would not allow him to read Thompson’s face.

It was going to be a long morning. What was left of it, as well as a long day ahead.

Chapter Forty-Five

There was one more piece he needed to get rid of, Matthew thought, and figured he'd do it himself. With Thompson in jail, and considering that Danny was still among the living, Matthew needed to play the vanishing act himself -- but not before accomplishing what he had set out to accomplish.

Kendra Bettencourt had been a thorn in his side, and the only one who could connect him to Roger Davies's disappearance.

He sat inside his car, staring straight ahead at the long, secluded dirt road that led to the farmhouse. He knew he could easily get inside. He'd done it once before, history repeating itself, recalling five years earlier when he suspected Frank Bettencourt had come too close to the truth about Davies.

Frank had been relentless in his quest, questioning Martin and then Matthew that morning. Bettencourt had come too close to the truth. And that truth was still locked inside that house, inside a file drawer.

Frank Bettencourt kept notes on everything. At least, that was what he told Matthew.

When he spotted the familiar SUV of the notable AME making its way up the winding driveway at this hour, he knew she would be alone. Although some years had passed, Matthew knew his way into the house through a back door that led into the basement. He watched her go inside and then waited a few more minutes to see what lights she turned on.

When a faint light illuminated behind several window shades, he smiled, patting the pocket that held the gun and garrote.

Chapter Forty-Six

Luke purposely let Thompson stew a few minutes longer before entering the interrogation room, a room void of everything except two chairs, one situated at the far wall, and a table. Luke dropped a thick folder onto the table, more to intimidate than anything else.

Thompson, as a suspect to the crime and prepared to be questioned, Luke was now required to read him his rights.

"You have the right to remain silent -- you do not have to talk."

Thompson sat there, mute, his eyes directed to the floor, his dirty blond hair falling to one side of his forehead. A man waiting for that second shoe to fall, his lanky arms hung down into his lap, palms facing upward, long legs sprawled out in front of him.

"What you say can be used, and shall be used against you in a court of law," Luke continued in a monotone voice.

Thompson remained passive, made no attempt to respond.

"You have the right to talk with an attorney before you talk with us, and you have the right to have the attorney present during the time we are talking to you."

"Can't afford one," Thompson finally mumbled, maintaining his focus on the gray-tiled floor.

"If you do not have the funds to employ an attorney, one shall be appointed to represent you free of charge," Luke continued undaunted by Thompson's statement.

Thompson merely nodded, demonstrating not only his understanding, but also a resignation to his fate.

"Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you, yes or no?"

Thompson nodded again.

"Do you want to talk to me about your case now, yes or no?"

Thompson looked up at Luke for the first time since Luke had entered the room, and Luke felt a struggle going on inside the man whose response would now decide his own destiny.

"Look, I know I got caught red-handed back in that motel, but I swear I ain't the only one going down here."

"Do you want an attorney present during the time we are talking to you, yes or no?"

"Does it fucking matter?"

"Yes or no?"

A look of uncertainty bordering on fear flashed in his eyes. "I'm not sure. Don't think he's going to help much, considering what you already got me on."

"Yeah, considering we did catch you red-handed," Luke said.

"I could tell you it was consensual on her part." Thompson looked at him directly.

Luke laughed. "You don't really think that's going to fly do you, Jack? Considering you were trying to screw around with an undercover cop?"

Thompson shrugged. "Damn, she was good. She had me fooled. Fucking broad really had me going."

"Would you sign a Waiver to Rights form?" Luke suddenly asked, sensing Thompson's need to talk, realizing they had formed a rapport of sorts between them. "You should know you can withdraw at any time. But also realize if you cooperate with us, we might work something out with the DA. You did say you weren't going to go down on this one alone."

Thompson's eyes widened slightly. "What kind of deal you guys willing to make?"

"That's up to the DA. I will say cooperation always helps in cases like this, sometimes making a difference between living and dying, considering what we got here."

Moments later, Luke waited while Thompson read a form that provided the same warnings he had been given and stated Thompson did not want a lawyer, understood what he was doing, assured no threats or promises were made, and no pressure or coercion used. Thompson seemed to think he and Luke had become allies more than adversaries.

Relief filled Luke when Thompson signed the Waiver to Rights form, despite the fact he knew it could reverse itself at any time if Thompson decided to withdraw. Rose and Josh came in to witness the signature. Luke waited for Josh and Rose to leave. "Considering what we found inside that closet," he said, smiling, as if he was about to tell some inside joke they could share and enjoy. "Tell me about those tapes."

Jack's face remained stoic.

"I'm guessing you were making those tapes, selling them on the black market?"

"You guessed right. Reality TV at its fucking best," Thompson quipped. "Only one person was buying them. And he paid a damn good price." Thompson let out a snort.

Luke ignored the rising nausea. "And what were these tapes, considering the subject? Would you have called them snuff films?"

Jack's eyes widened realizing the implication of these words. "No...no...at least they didn't start out that way... I mean it wasn't supposed to go that way. The first time...a mistake."

The slight remorse in Thompson's voice surprised Luke. "They happen," Luke responded in a sympathetic voice. "We all make mistakes. Are you referring to Woods? Wilson?"

"Yeah...yeah...Wilson. I'm not sure what happened there...with her, I mean. She and I actually hit it off pretty well. She was into this stuff as much as I was. Shit...you'd be surprised at what some of these ladies like doing behind closed doors and with a fucking camera going." He snickered.

Luke repressed a sudden urge to take his fist and clip him across the chin. Then he thought about Patti and her dark fantasies, even Kendra's fantasies, rooted in the dark corners of their minds. He fully understood what Thompson was getting at.

"Then are you saying their deaths were a mistake?"

"No -- not all."

"Unintentional?" Luke asked calmly.

"Yes...some unintentional...some an accident." Panic filled Thompson's eyes. "I guess I'm saying that I'm no murderer." He rubbed his head, then the back of his neck. "I don't know what came over me. I never intended to kill any of them, I swear. It just happened, and I found after it happened the price went up on the tapes. He said he could make copies of them...get a fortune for them...and I would get a percentage."

"Was Patti's death an accident?" Luke asked, knowing he would eventually get back to the tapes and "them." He needed to keep the momentum, get Thompson to confess to what his gut feeling was telling him...that Thompson was responsible for her death.

Thompson's face crumpled. "Patti's? Yeah. Kind of. Yeah...another fucking accident. Patti found one of the tapes. She threatened to go to the authorities if I didn't include her in."

"Include her in?" Luke repeated softly, fully aware of the implication in Thompson's words.

"Yeah, she wanted to be a part of her own story. She said the tapes turned her on. She said she wanted to do one, see what it was like. Dumb broad."

Luke couldn't believe what he was hearing, yet knew he shouldn't be all that shocked, considering Patti had always dared to push beyond the point where most would not venture.

"She wanted us to make a tape together, see how far she could go with it."

A bitter taste filled Luke's mouth. "She wanted you to do the tape with her? A porno flick? She's your sister, for Christ's sake --"

"Stepsister. We...when we were young...when our parents started shacking up in the same house, and we were teenagers...our bedrooms side by side...at night she'd sneak into my room. We found we...liked to experiment...sexually. She was into S&M even then. Used to practice tying each other up." He paused. "Even at fifteen, she knew more than any fifteen-year-old should know."

Luke felt his world turning upside down. Yet, anything was possible in his world. He had heard it all when it came to how people lived their lives, even in a town like Canterville where ordinary folks might live not-so-ordinary lives.

"She'd been after me to do it with her. She said she would tell the family not only about my bisexuality, but also about us...together like that. Patti always got her way, I quickly learned. You dated her. You know what I'm talking about."

Luke knew.

"Yeah, she always got her way," Thompson repeated. "And I guess that's what made me angry because I knew she had me over this barrel. I could've been charged with molestation or statutory rape for what we did. Who knows what the statute of limitations is for that. I was eighteen; she was fifteen. She had this hold over me. Knew my weaknesses, because the sex with her was good...very good."

Thompson paused as if to reflect on his last words. "She was a fucking damn good lay. Might be why I never looked at other women...tried the gay thing. I knew she would use all of it against me one day. So I agreed to make the tape with her." Again he paused.

Luke detected deeper emotions rising. He needed Thompson to continue. He needed him to get the rest of it out, because he damn well knew there was more to be said.

"Go on, Jack, I'm listening." Giving permission to go on, knowing inside the man existed a weak attempt for absolution.

"We made several of them. Got paid pretty well, too. Manheim said there was a growing demand, especially from that Adult Super Store, though you won't see these tapes on any of their shelves." He grinned. "Special order."

The room grew silent. Faint light shone in from a high-positioned window...another day gone unnoticed by the likes of Jack Thompson, whose days and nights ahead would begin to merge into one.

"And so what happened, what went wrong with the tape you made with Patti?" Luke asked.

"This last tape...after I fucked her, I found I couldn't let go of the wire, I kept tightening it around her neck. I forgot about the tape. All I knew was she wouldn't have this hold on me anymore. I wouldn't have to worry about her blabbing to everyone about us." He paused. The hum of an air conditioner clicked in.

"Except now I have nightmares of her and me. Fuck, she's got more of a hold now dead than she ever did alive."

A rage of emotions stirred inside Luke, but knew better to keep his own emotions in check, separate, locked behind a separate screen. He needed those tapes of Thompson and his stepsister together.

“So then, Patti’s murder wasn’t planned?” Luke asked.

“No, I never planned for it to go that way,” Thompson confessed. “Plus, I knew Manheim wanted to keep her alive...do other tapes with her. She was good. Very good. She...had an appetite for such things, and he knew it.”

“Manheim?” he asked, getting back to the earlier reference to the name.

“Yeah...he pays a good price for the tapes. I did tell you I wasn’t the only one going down on this.”

“Which Manheim?”

Unfocused, Thompson looked up, then back at him. “Let’s say, Matthew pays me, but I’m sure his brother gets the same jollies from viewing them. Martin connects with them on those online dating sites, sets up a meeting. Patti was surprised when she planned to meet him at Jay-Jay’s that first time, and I showed up. We had a good laugh. You don’t know who you’re meeting. They go only by a screen name.”

It was making sense, Luke thought. The Manheims might not have done the actual act of killing, but the fact that they bought those tapes and created a market, he felt, made them as responsible as the one who actually committed the murder. Still, buying “snuff” films didn’t actually make a buyer a killer.

Pinning this on those two wouldn’t be easy, considering their position in the community. He needed to focus on Thompson. One step at a time.

At least he knew what had been said here so far would be admissible in a court of law. No physical or psychological coercion involved. Thompson had been freeing himself of his demons by his confession.

Yet, Luke knew, Thompson had become a simple cog in a wheel. If the Manheims weren’t stopped, the killings would continue in Canterville.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Sam's ears perked up. A low growl sounded deep inside his throat. Kendra, sitting at her grandfather's desk, noticed the dog staring toward the window. Lately, she could find solace there, a place to get away from the world and think about what was happening with her.

A place where she could think about her life, where that life was headed, and where she wanted it to go.

Knowing they had the serial killer in custody gave her a sense of hope that things were going to get back to a more familiar routine.

She liked routines.

She enjoyed her job, but examining the bodies of those young women cut down in their prime had started to get to her -- senseless killings resulting from senseless motives.

Sam padded over to the window, placed his muzzle on the sill, and poked his head through the lacy curtains.

"You were out already," she reminded him. "It's probably a raccoon out there, a deer, or one of those two cats."

Sam looked at her, unconvinced.

Moments later, she was putting him into his outside pen, where at least he had room to romp around. With neighbors not close enough to be disturbed, even if he barked, he would keep only her awake. And the way things had been going that night so far, with the alarm clock about ready to sound off, she would be returning to her duties at the ME's office in a few hours.

And life would finally get back to normal.

* * * * *

Matthew heard the sound of a shower, which blocked out the sound of the barking dog.

He could've taken care of the animal, but had decided to let the fucking dog bark his fool head off. No one was going to hear him, and even if they did, a barking dog in that remote area meant little.

He glanced around the room. The room appeared pretty much the same as it had back then, the ornate dark oak desk still in place. Bettencourt had been there, with those sharp, scrutinizing eyes of his, and that manila folder lying opened in front of him, taunting him, containing reports of Manheim's operations.

Frank Bettencourt had put it all together. The fact that Roger Davies worked part-time for the Manheims' after school. The fact that a building permit had been secured from the town, allowing them to erect a metal shed in a remote, unpaved area. The fact that Davies may have known too much about the operations, particularly what was happening behind those walls.

Yeah, Frank Bettencourt had gotten too close to the truth about what was going on inside that framed metal building that housed two industrial-sized kilns.

Kilns used for purposes other than what was disclosed on official documents provided to a zoning committee.

No one questioned the Manheims. The business provided tax income for the town, along with a good-enough explanation. Ceramic tiles were a growing business back then. Many products were even coming out with ceramic coatings, and all they were doing was providing that service. Who would know the difference? Baked or burned? Ceramic tiles or retorts? Who would know the difference as long as no one came sneaking around and looking inside those kilns.

Then again, who else would add up the number of cremations done at Manheim Mortuary, numbers in excess of what could actually be burned in that amount of time.

Numbers that would indicate more than one body was being burned inside those kilns.

Who else would attach corrupt intentions to the fact that residents from the nursing home were being shipped directly to the facility? For most, it made sense, considering the brothers ran the respective businesses. Still, Frank had felt more was going on than met the eye.

A private eye nosing around like that needed to be dealt with. Then his granddaughter's husband showed up at the wrong time.

And now his granddaughter...the last link to an unsolved mystery, which would remain unsolved once he took care of it, creating an urban legend to be handed down through future generations.

Matthew noticed a white box lying on the corner of the desk. Curious, he opened it, spotted the red scarf.

Déjà vu hit.

As if from the grave, a reminder from Davies of Matthew's earlier attempts to eliminate the only witness to a murder.

He drew the scarf out of the box, wrapped the ends around each hand, gave it a slight snap, and proceeded toward the sound of running water.

* * * * *

With Thompson's confession signed, sealed, and delivered, Luke made his way up the long driveway toward the farmhouse. Kendra had mentioned returning to work later this week. If she wasn't home, then he would head toward the ME's office, figuring he could catch her there and fill her in on what had gone down. Ease her concern, considering the fact that Thompson had been her attacker that night at The Cavern and was now in jail.

They had all known Patti. Or thought they had known the woman. Demonstrating the question whether anyone really knew anyone after discovering that dark side that held darker secrets, which in Patti's case had been way over the limit.

Luke wasn't naïve. He guessed many in the town hid their dark secrets. Unluckily for some, some got let out of the proverbial bag, divulged in ways that led to their demise.

One thing he knew for sure. The memory of Patti and certain images associated with her were damn well going to stay inside his mind for a hell of a long time, whether he wanted them to or not. Fucking with her own stepbrother like that left a real bad taste.

As he circled around the drive again, he spotted Sam locked inside the pen. He immediately felt sorry for the dog, especially on such a great summer morning with the sun shining fully, and the air holding warm breezes that promised a good day.

Repeatedly, Sam lunged at the wire and clawed at the fence. The dog's obvious hysteria raised more than just concern inside Luke. The clawing and the struggling to get out alerted Luke that something more was going on than simply wanting to get out of the pen.

As Luke approached the door to the pen, he spotted blood spatters covering some of the wires. The dog refused to calm down, which he usually would do when Luke came this near. No sooner did Luke open the gate, than Sam was streaking toward the back of the house.

Luke shouted after him, but Sam ignored the call and disappeared.

* * * * *

"I'm here to finish what I should have finished years ago," Matthew said. He had waited until she had finished showering and had put on a robe. Then, catching her unaware, he now had the red scarf looped around her neck.

"I'm going to take pleasure in this," he said. "You still don't remember, do you?"

Kendra struggled, unable to speak, her hands pulling at the scarf, pulling it away enough to let her breathe, yet knowing as soon as he tightened it further, she would lose consciousness and not be able to save herself.

"Roger Davies," he whispered in one ear. "I want you to remember that day, just before you join him."

The man was mad -- finally over the edge -- and especially if he felt he had nothing to lose by killing her.

"I've lived with the fear that you would eventually remember," he kept on. "Do you know what that's like? Always thinking your life is going to end? I could have had you killed in a hundred ways since. I hired someone, but that failed. That's when I knew it's better I do it myself."

She could only look straight at the wall ahead, at the portrait of her grandparents.

"That grandfather of yours had the right idea about me. But he couldn't prove anything. Except he got too damn close to the truth. He would have ruined everything."

Kendra realizing what he was saying, that it was Matthew Manheim who had come into her grandfather's office that day, killing him, and in all probability, killing her husband as well, then trying to make it look like a murder-suicide.

Someone needed to know this, she suddenly thought, after her own death. She needed to tell this story after she died and hoped to God someone was going to listen.

Virtually all ligature strangulations are homicide. They needed to know this was a homicide.

Kendra felt the scarf tightening, cutting off more of her air supply.

Most common method of homicidal asphyxia, the words rang out in her mind.

She felt a familiar blackness envelop her.

Occlusion of the vessels that supplied the blood, which in turn provided oxygen to the brain, was taking place.

Females predominate as victims in ligature strangulation.

In ten to fifteen seconds, she would lose consciousness --

Images of her face floated through her mind.

Suddenly she was performing her own autopsy, and under the section Evidence of Injury: *Markedly congested, confluent scleral hemorrhage and petechiae of the conjunctivae. Ruptured vessels.*

She heard the howling scream of a dog.

Someone, something, pushing her forward straight to the floor.

A human scream...mixed with savage sounds -- an animal bent on killing its prey.

Free from the bonds of her death struggle, the scarf hung loose around her neck. She crawled to the edge of the room, rolled onto her back, sat up, exhausted, leaned back against the wall, knees drawn up, and in horror, gaped over at the other side of the room.

Blood covered one side of her attacker's face. Realizing that Sam could actually kill this man, she managed to get to her feet, went over, and attempted to pull the dog off. Except she was no match for a raging animal bent on destroying its quarry.

Suddenly, she felt hands pulling her away. Relief filled her on seeing Luke.

"Sam!" Luke shouted. In a matter of seconds, Luke managed to pull the eighty-pound mixed breed off a cringing killer now in the throes of hysteria.

Visibly shaking, Kendra went over to Sam, put her arms around him in an effort to calm them both down. She thought of that day when she rescued him from the animal shelter. Sam had looked at her in the same way that he was looking at her now. And again, Kendra saw in his eyes -- not caring if some might think her crazy -- the soul of her departed husband.

Luke, realizing Manheim's bleeding wounds were superficial to the head, handcuffed him and called for backup. He wasn't taking any chances with this one getting away. Two for one, he thought, thinking now that he had Thompson and one of the Manheims, and there was no reason not to pull in the other. He had gotten Thompson to talk. All he needed now was more on Martin.

He looked over at Kendra, who sat with Sam. She held a red scarf in her hand. She looked up at him, said nothing.

"Are you okay? We should get you checked over," Luke suggested.

She shook her head. "I'm okay. I guess maybe now things will get back to normal?" She struggled to get to her feet, then walked over to the desk to the white box that once held the scarf.

Luke smiled weakly.

Both knew that what had been happening over the past several months had changed them...changed them forever.

Both knew life would never be the same again, for either of them, nor for anyone else in a town where not much happened.

Both knew mysteries remained hidden, mysteries yet to be found, yet to be solved.

Both knew with that knowledge there came an uncertainty that could settle somewhere inside them and let them know tomorrow anything could happen.

She started to return the scarf to the box, though she knew it needed to be collected and held for evidence when the crime lab got there. Then she saw something else lying on the bottom of the box, previously concealed by the scarf.

A string of pale lilac rosary beads.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Martin knew, although it didn't look good for his twin brother, they really had nothing concrete on himself, nothing that would hold up in a court of law.

Martin also knew his brother wasn't talking. He wasn't about to implicate any Manheim in anything that would pull them away from running the businesses.

Even with Matthew possibly out of the picture, bizarre things happened once a trial got started, especially with a damn good lawyer who could work miracles -- a hung jury, a mistrial, jury nullification -- any one could bring Matthew back into the fold. And the businesses would continue. The Manheims were not about to go down on this one without a damn good fight.

All Martin had done was what millions were now doing, signing onto the Internet. No law against that. Pure coincidence if some of the ladies he chatted with turned up dead.

He hadn't touched any of them. As far as the tapes, they could search to their heart's content, but they were long gone from the premises.

But it seemed Detective Sloane was not of that same opinion. Martin watched from the window as Sloane made his way up the walkway into Manheim Funeral Home.

Moments later the two men sat opposite each other in Martin's office.

"I'm going to let you know I might not have enough to pull you in, but I know you're not innocent in any of this." Luke held up the search warrant. "I'm sure you won't mind if we take a look around."

Martin nodded, knowing he had no choice but to cooperate. "I'm sorry you feel that way Luke, but you and I know I can't be responsible for my brother's actions. He's been under a lot of stress lately, and that can cause any of us to do strange things. I will cooperate as fully as I can. Feel free to look around." Martin smiled. "I'm sure Audrey will be as

cooperative,” he added, looking toward the door where she now stood, only no smile covered her face.

Luke sensed that the search would come up with nothing, but it was always worth the try.

Martin Manheim would walk away from this and continue on with his life without interruption.

Two out of three wasn’t bad, Luke thought, thinking of Jack Thompson and Matthew Manheim, both in custody, one with a confession beneath his belt, the other hopefully the same soon.

Then things would get back to normal.

Yeah, he thought.

Canterville’s residents would all go on with their lives. Still, this strange sense of doom filled him, knowing the past always affected the present as well as the future.

Meantime, he would need to find another place where he could get that cup of strong black coffee and piece of lemon meringue pie.

Epilogue

The only living person inside the room, Kendra stared down at the cardboard box where stored skeletal remains had been brought in earlier that year. She knew skeletal bones made a viable attempt to tell its story.

By the shape of the hipbone this was a young male. Noting the surface of the auricular region of the hipbone, where it joined the sacrum, she also knew the age would fall somewhere under twenty. The epiphyses on some of the long bones were unfused. Although she wasn't a forensic anthropologist per se, what she had read in anthropological textbooks and journals told her this one died between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.

Roger Davies had been going on seventeen.

It all fit.

Mitochondrial DNA, a reverse process in which a DNA sample could be taken from the mother and matched with the remains, could confirm what she felt, except no one could find his biological mother.

After her son's death, Roger Davies' mother had divorced his father, had left the area, leaving no forwarding address. No other relatives lived nearby.

Still despite that missing link, no one could tell her these bones were not Roger's. That, plus the fact that Matthew Manheim's confession of what occurred on that fateful day, confirmed it in her own mind.

Roger had set out to get even with her for embarrassing him in front of the classroom that day. Yet events had turned themselves around in such a way he ended up doing himself in.

Small remnants of red lay alongside the remains. Whether this could still link suspect to victim in the eyes of any court she had doubts. But she knew the red material had once been part of a knitted scarf, discovered in the same area of the skeleton. One that her

grandmother had knitted. One she had worn that day to ward off the January cold. And one she had pulled off as she struggled to free herself from her attackers.

Her grandfather had put enough of the puzzle pieces together through the years that told him something evil happened that day out there at the lake, and it involved his granddaughter, though he never talked about it with her, afraid he would re-traumatize her.

Years later, he might have put it all together, if it hadn't been for Matthew's violent act.

They would now reopen the case of her grandfather's and her husband's death. Scrutinize more closely the facts, and more importantly, the clues that still might exist, and hopefully make a linkage to Matthew as having committed the crimes against them.

As she fixed her gaze onto the table, she realized, in his own unique way, Roger Davies had managed to tell his story from beginning to end. Matthew's ego, his need to control his existence did him in -- his misconception that getting rid of her would put him out of harm's way with the law.

"Closure?" Luke said quietly, slipping into the room.

She turned. "Yeah, I think it might happen, eventually. Something we all look for. It allows us to move on."

"And are you ready?"

She stared at him.

"To move on?"

She gave a half smile. "I thought I was. Looking down at all this, knowing that a part of me will always stay back there in that past, I'm not so sure if that's even possible." She let out a sigh, signaling a sense of resignation.

Luke nodded. "The past, I guess, always holds on to us." He touched her shoulder. "There's a new café in town. I hear the coffee's almost as good as Patti's. How about you and I go and test it for ourselves?"

She looked up at him. "I think that's the best offer I'm going to get today."

* * * * *

Josh drove down the main drag, passing the Skillet Café, although now it had a different name. The large black-and-white GRAND OPENING sign hanging just outside the outer door left an empty feeling inside, a reminder that life goes on, despite tragedies that unfurl at any given moment.

In a way, he hoped that whatever renovations they made inside, they would not change it enough to make it too different. The town needed stability.

As far as most of the townspeople were concerned, things were getting back to normal. But he knew better. Crandall Lake would always have them wondering. What else was out there yet to be discovered? What other mysteries remained unfound, unresolved?

The green canvas awning of Manheim's came into view. Danny, according to Luke's request, would continue to work there. Luke was convinced that something "not right" existed behind those doors.

They both knew, though, that Martin Manheim would be careful from now on, and whatever illegalities had taken place would probably stop, at least for the time being.

Josh still wasn't sure about going full-time with the department, despite hiring extra help for his dojo.

He heard sirens from a fire truck in the distance. Over the course of early spring, and now, heading into summer, rains had come, teasingly, but not enough to take care of the drought that caused occasional flare-ups and brush fires.

Canterville was not a perfect town. Could any town make that claim?

But it still wasn't a bad place to live.

 THE END 

Marie A. Roy

Marie lives and writes on the East Coast of the U.S. Published in contemporary romances, Marie moved into the area of mystery, suspense and forensic science. Criminal Justice courses plus a keen interest in TV shows like *CSI*, *Bones*, and *Crossing Jordan* have helped her develop what has become her Canterville Project, a series of mystery suspense stories that take place within a typical New England community.

Marie also writes erotica under the name of Collette Thomas and with several stories published her alter ego continues to create sexual fantasies that clearly push the envelope.

Among Marie's many interests besides writing romance, mystery and erotica she loves spending an evening dancing, where she often becomes inspired for a storyline while following the beat of the music.

Marie currently hosts and moderates an online writing group -- Erotic Romance Workshop -- where authors generously share their expertise on topics that involve the writing process. Anyone interested in joining the group, or presenting a workshop simply click on the link below and join up:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EroticRomanceWorkshop/?yguid=283942630>