

THE  
ABORTIONIST

g u t t e r

“We are the hollow men”

—*The Hollow Men*, 1925

## PROLOGUE

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SUSAN POWERS DREAMED SHE WAS SUBMERGED IN DEEP WATER. SHE HAD always feared drowning, but now she felt no need to breathe. Instead, she floated like a child in a warm salt sea. Her mind drifted between the darkness below her and a distant light above. Slowly, she realized she was waking from a profound sleep. She opened her eyes with drowsy concentration. She was surrounded by whiteness without boundary. She wondered if she was in heaven.

The light was overwhelming. She tried to cover her eyes with her hands, but thick canvas straps bound her wrists. She struggled to move her legs, but something held them too. A thin sheet covered her nude body from her breasts to her ankles. She was as helpless as a newborn.

She shifted her eyes, trying to see the rest of the room. Light stabbed from a fluorescent fixture hung low from the ceiling. A respirator sat against the far wall and an intravenous drug pump stood to her right. She thought she might be in an operating room. That would explain the unyielding surface of the table beneath her and the smell of disinfectant in the air, but where were the doctors? The nurses? Nothing moved, and the room seemed unnaturally quiet.

“Hello?” she said, her voice thin and raspy. “Is anyone there?”

A man appeared at the edge of her vision. He wore teal surgical scrubs, a hood of the same fabric, latex gloves, and a white cotton mask. Beneath the outfit, his body was thin and hard like a steel bar.

“Hello.” The mask muffled the man’s voice.

Prompted by a blurred memory of sudden pain, she asked, “Have I had an accident?”

“No. Not an accident,” the man said.

"I feel really out of it."

"That's the anesthesia."

"I don't understand. Did I have an operation?"

"Not yet." He moved a tray of gleaming instruments into her field of vision. "I'm just getting started."

She searched for some sign of pain or discomfort. She found nothing, although the anesthesia had left her disoriented and nauseous.

"What kind of operation?" she asked.

"An abortion," he said.

Pregnant? There was no way she was pregnant, and she sure as hell hadn't come here—wherever here was—looking for an abortion.

"But I'm not pregnant," she said.

"Of course you are," the man said. "Pregnant with possibilities. Like an egg," he hesitated and then added thoughtfully, "or a sperm. Besides, I'm not giving you an abortion. I'm aborting you."

Even through drugs, she felt her heart quicken. What the hell was going on here? Where were the other doctors and nurses? Who was this lunatic? Tendrils of panic crept from her stomach into her heart. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't believe anything bad could happen in this well-lit room. She was in a hospital, not a dark alley. She was in one of the safest places she could imagine. Doctors helped people. They weren't supposed to hurt them. Whatever was going on, it must be some kind of sick prank.

"What are you talking about?" She said slowly, rationally, playing along. "You can't abort me."

"Why not? Doctors do it all the time. In fact, I think you were in town supporting their right to do so. Or am I mistaken?"

"I'm not a fetus."

"It's all the same."

"It's not all the same," she said. "Fetuses aren't human."

The man rested his hands on the edge of the table and leaned over her. "I suppose they're vegetables then? Like a carrot? Or maybe they're germs. Like a bad cold."

She couldn't believe she was arguing semantics with a man who had her tied up and helpless, but she wanted him to see her point.

"Fetuses aren't people," she insisted.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "if you can convince me there's a categorical difference between a fetus and any other human being, I'll let you go. I won't cut you up." He rested a rubber-gloved hand on the tray that Susan now noticed held a disconcerting collection of gleaming surgical instruments and ordinary garden tools. Scalpels lay beside pruning shears. The silver teeth of a surgical saw were matched by the green-stained grin of a tree

saw. "But every time you lose a point," the man cautioned, "you lose an extremity."

His pale blue eyes watched dispassionately as he waited for her to say something. Her theory that this was all a joke began to dissolve. Still, his face was hidden. So was his hair and body. If he released her, she wouldn't be able to identify him. Maybe this was one of her pro-life opponents trying to make a point. Trying to scare her. After those lunatics had started killing doctors, she'd figured anything was possible. The days of simple fire bombings were past, and she knew that some of these nuts believed everything they did was justified by a higher good. Whatever the explanation, she felt a sudden surge of optimism. She could argue her way out of anything. She had been debating since college, and abortion was a subject she knew a great deal about.

"An abortable fetus isn't viable," she said. "If it was born, it would die without life support."

"Nice opening," the man said. "But viability is an artificial distinction. A newborn is no more viable than a three-month-old fetus. Without continuous care and attention, it would die within hours."

"But viable means being able to survive outside a woman's body without medical technology."

"According to that reasoning an old woman who can't live without dialysis is fair game for anyone who wants to kill her."

She squirmed beneath the freshly starched sheet. "Forget viability. A fetus is just a blob of protoplasm. It's only a human being in potential. It doesn't have any rights."

"No," the man shook his head, "sperm and eggs may only be 'human beings in potential,' a lovely phrase by the way, but a fetus is not a potential human. It's an inevitable human. Unless something interferes with its development, a fertilized egg will become a human being. The only thing that separates it from a thirty-year-old woman is thirty years and nine months."

The fear she felt was quickly being displaced by a frustrated rage. Her face burned with anger. "It's just part of a woman's body and she has the right to do whatever she chooses with her own body."

"That's not really true, you know. Taking drugs is illegal. So is prostitution. And a fetus is not part of a woman's body. It's not an appendix that can be cut out and thrown away whenever it should prove to be a little troublesome. Every fetus is made up of 46 distinct chromosomes, only half of which are shared by the mother. The baby is a genetically distinct individual connected to the mother through its umbilical cord. You might

as well say a breastfeeding infant is part of her body, too, and she's entitled to kill him whenever he gets to be a little inconvenient."

"You twisted son of a bitch," she hissed, arching her back off the table and tugging at her restraints. "I don't know who you are, but I don't want to do this anymore. I haven't seen your face, I can't identify you, just let me go."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," he said. "Besides, that's not really on-topic, is it? Do you have anything to add? I remain unpersuaded."

She was half-crazed with fear and frustration. "How can I convince you when you're the judge and jury? I'm helpless. You've already made up your mind and I can't do a thing to stop you, can I?"

"That's rather the point, isn't it? Nothing else? Last chance, you know."

She couldn't think of a single argument. Her mind wasn't blank. It was too full. Frantic questions and desperate hopes flashed through her brain and tore at her concentration like sharks in a feeding frenzy.

"I'm sorry, your time is up." He looked down at the instrument tray and selected a battered pair of pruning shears. She watched in disbelief as he carefully placed the blades of the shears on either side of her big toe and clipped it off. The toe popped from her foot and rolled across the white tile floor. It came to rest with its red-painted nail facing up. For a breathless moment, she was too stunned to scream. Then an anguished cry surged out of her.

"No need to be a baby about it," the man said. "No one can hear you. And if you're screaming, you can't argue with me. Then I'll be forced to continue with the procedure." He reached over and clipped the second toe from the same foot. She screamed again, but quickly clamped her mouth down on the sound. Tears ran from her eyes and her body was shaking so hard the metal fixtures on the restraints rattled.

"That's better," he said soothingly. "Do you have any further points to make before I continue?"

She knew she was dead. He had just hurt her worse than she knew she could be hurt. And he wasn't going to stop until all her blood pooled around his ankles. She frantically searched for alternatives, but the pain in her foot was a searing distraction. She couldn't contain her fear and all at once she lost control of her bodily functions. Hot urine ran down the cheeks of her buttocks and beneath her shaking legs.

"I'm waiting," the man said. He swung the pruning shears at the end of his arm like a pendulum. Blood ran down the blades and dripped to the floor. She wanted to say something, but all that came out of her mouth was a whimper.

"Well then, if there's nothing further." He brought the shears back up to her foot. Even before he made the next cut, she began to scream.

## CHAPTER 1

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JUST DON'T KILL THE KID, ELLIOT STEARNS SAID TO HIMSELF AS HE TUGGED his .45 from its shoulder holster. Two armed men stood in front of him. One clutched a struggling mother. The other carried her kicking toddler tight to his chest. Elliot thrust his pistol towards the man wrestling with the woman. The sun glared in his eyes. The front sight of his .45 wavered from the head of the man, to the face of the woman, and back. He pulled the trigger. The gun roared. Bull's-eye, he thought.

He shifted his aim to the man crushing the child—the wriggling, wailing, white-faced child. He hesitated. Jesus, he didn't want to hit the kid. He held his breath and squeezed the trigger. The gun kicked and a bullet tore through his target's chest just inches from the toddler's head. He started breathing again with a sigh. Both men were definitely down. He carefully lowered the hammer on his pistol and snapped the weapon back into its holster.

"Good shooting, El." Detective Sergeant Jack Hartman of the Milwaukee police department shouted as strode towards him along the gun club's firing line.

"Thanks," Elliot said as he took off his safety glasses and removed the plugs from his ears. They both looked down range to where the black silhouette targets representing the kidnappers were partially obscured by the white "victim" targets. "Personally, I think this scenario is totally nuts," Elliot said. "There's no way I'd try to take these guys out. You're just asking to nail one of the hostages." He tucked the glasses and earplugs into the pocket of his polo shirt.

Jack shrugged. "It's just a game, man. The best shot wins."

"It's never just a game." Elliot backed his wheelchair away from the firing

line and spun towards the clubhouse. As they moved down the sidewalk, he looked up at his old partner. Jack's coffee-colored eyes were filled with concern. A slight summer breeze ruffled his thinning, crow-black hair and gave an awkward, boyish look to his normally rough features.

Elliot wondered if Jack was thinking about the day he took the bullet that shattered his spinal cord. They had walked into a convenience store at two in the morning and found themselves facing a crack-head trying to use the cash register as an automatic teller machine. The robber shot him without saying a word—shot him with a dinky .22 caliber pistol that looked like something out of a Cap'n Crunch cereal box. Jack's .357 Magnum blew the guy's brains all over the checkout girl. Elliot lived, but sometimes he thought the other man might have gotten the better part of the deal.

"You're not feeling sorry for me are you, Jack?" he said.

His friend recovered his half-grin. "Actually, I was hoping you'd take a little pity on me. I've got a problem I need some help with."

Elliot stopped pushing his wheelchair long enough to reach past Jack's khaki sports coat and pat his friend's bulging stomach. "A couple of weeks sweating to the oldies should take care of it just fine."

"How 'bout exercising this for a change?" Jack tapped a finger on top of Elliot's head. "You know, the thing that's been going to waste ever since you quit the force to write that bog."

Elliot snorted. "It's called a bog. And should I assume you guys have hit a dead end in some case?"

Jack took a deep breath and his eyes slowly filled with darkness like ink poured into a glass of water. "More like a dead alley," he said. "We've spent the last couple weeks digging bodies out of dumpsters all over town."

"The Black Bag murders?"

"Is that what your friends at the newspaper are calling them?"

"In private. Since the Chief contends the killings are unrelated, they've been afraid to refer to them in print with one of those catchy little phrases."

"If I were them, I'd start thinking of a good one."

Elliot looked up past his friend into the perfect blue of a Wisconsin summer sky. Even though there were no clouds, something sinister seemed to writhe between the sun and his up-cast face.

"So it's a serial killer?" he said.

"Probably. What do you know about the first two killings?"

"Not much. Last month, a woman was found dismembered and stuffed into a dumpster behind that spy-themed bar, what's it called?"

"The Safe House," Jack said.

Elliot nodded. "Then, a couple weeks ago, a Chinese girl showed up in

another bag behind the old Wisconsin Gas building. I've been up north, so I haven't really been following the story. But I know the paper is going nuts trying to pry something out of you guys."

"Yeah, after the Dahmer thing got spilled on the same day he was discovered, the department has been pretty serious about shutting down leaks. We weren't lying about thinking the earlier killings weren't related, though," Jack paused and looked around to make sure no one else could hear him. "The first two bodies were completely different. Number one was chopped up into little pieces. Wherever there was a joint, the psycho had taken her apart. The second body was intact, but it looked like it had been dipped in burning napalm. Every inch of her was red and sticky."

"So what made you change your mind?"

"We found another one this morning, sliced and diced like the first. And three bodies in black plastic trash bags is starting to seem like too much of a bad thing."

"Pictures?"

"In the car."

Elliot spun his wheelchair towards the parking lot. He gave the wheels a few quick jabs and Jack almost had to jog to keep up with him.

"Tell me about the victims," Elliot said.

"The first one was Lisa Shriver, a 35-year-old mother from Wauwatosa. She was reported missing the day before we found her. She'd left her husband to babysit their two-year-old and went out to dinner with a couple of girlfriends. She never made it home. Her friends said they all left the restaurant together, but Lisa's car was in a different lot. They split up at the front door. Her car was still there the next day. We're checking into the husband, though he'd have to be one cool son of a bitch to take his kid with him to kill his wife."

"He could have hired a hitter."

"Possible. But a pro would have just kissed her with a .22 in the back of her head. No way he would have gone to the trouble of chopping her into kibbles and bits."

"Any cigarette butts in the spaces on either side of her car?" Stalkers had been known to chain smoke while waiting for a victim, and Elliot had actually caught a kidnapper once with a fingerprint taken from a half-smoked Marlboro.

"Nope. There was no sign that anyone had been waiting for her."

"And number two?" Elliot asked.

"Tracy Wong: 18-year-old Chinese girl from the south side. Her parents said she hadn't been home in weeks. She'd been living with her boyfriend. Apparently, he'd knocked her up a couple of months earlier."

“She was pregnant?”

“Not at the time of the murder. The parents say she had a miscarriage.”

Elliot stopped his wheelchair next to the passenger’s side door of Jack’s department-issue Crown Victoria. “Is the boyfriend a suspect?”

“Minor. He’s got a record. Mostly piddling shit, although he was arrested for beating on a girl he was living with a couple of years ago. He’s a 24-year-old assembly line worker at Harley-Davidson. He’s big and mean, but we can’t find any connection between him and the other two victims.” Jack opened the car door, picked up a battered manila envelope off the seat and sat down in its place.

“Here you go.” He untucked the flap on the envelope and handed Elliot a stack of eight-by-ten color printouts. “That’s Tracy Wong,” Jack pointed to the top picture. “Looks like she was in a fire and someone scraped off the charred bits, don’t it? The medical examiner says someone poured hydrochloric acid over every inch of her body.”

Elliot studied the picture. It had the same strange unreality of most crime scene photos, almost as if it was a movie prop rather than an exact record of an 18-year-old’s brutal murder. In the photo, the black plastic bag that wrapped Tracy Wong’s naked body had been slit open to reveal its pathetic contents. She was barely identifiable as a human being.

“Here’s a little tidbit we haven’t told the press yet,” Jack leaned over and tapped the picture with his index finger. “Doc Toranaga says she was alive when the asshole did it. He poured the crap down her throat last, after her nerve cells had burned away and she couldn’t feel the pain of her skin anymore.”

Elliot shuffled through the deck of pictures. The next body was just pieces of blood-soaked meat stuffed in plastic sacks.

Jack continued, “Toranaga thinks the other two victims were mutilated before they died. As near as he can figure, the killer cut both of them up starting with their toes. They could have lasted until he reached their ankles, although they probably died from blood loss before that.”

Elliot sucked air through his teeth. “Jesus Christ.”

“The Lord had nothing to do with this one, chief. I think this psycho is a lot tighter with the guy downstairs.”

“What about the third victim?”

“That’s one of the reasons I came lookin’ for you, Hoss. It seems the body we found last night was a friend of yours. Or at least a friend of your ex-fiancée’s.”

“A friend of Caroline’s?” He picked out the third set of photos and studied the remains more closely. “Who?”

“Susan Powers.”

Elliot sat stunned. He knew Susan. She was one of Caroline’s closest friends. She was also one of the foremost feminists in the country.

“Holy shit,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what we figured. We’re gonna need some pretty good public relations on this one.”

“The feminists are going to go berserk.”

“It gets worse.”

“How? Is Gloria Steinem one of your suspects?”

“Powers was staying with Caroline while she was in town,” Jack looked down at the scuffs on his black leather shoes, “and you and I have an appointment to interview her in about 10 minutes.”

“No.” Elliot shook his head. “No way. I’m not going.”

Jack put his hand on the wheelchair’s armrest. “C’mon, El. You know her. You knew the victim. I could use your help on this. Just come on over, listen to her story. I’ll buy you dinner.”

“I’ve already lost my appetite.” He tossed the crime scene photos onto Jack’s lap.

“You haven’t talked to her in like a year,” Jack said as he stuffed the pictures back in their envelope. “You’re 33, for God’s sake. Don’t you think it’s time you grew the hell up and gave the lady a break?”

Elliot rubbed the back of his neck. He didn’t want to think about Caroline. There was an empty space inside of him where she used to be. But now, thanks to Jack, he was torn between an overwhelming desire to see her again and the certain knowledge that she wouldn’t want to see him. He wondered if she would look the same. Was she still angry? Did she ever think of him? Memories of her swarmed around him like a crowd at a subway station pushing him towards a train he didn’t want to ride. After a long moment, he looked at Jack.

“I’ll drive,” he said. “That way we’ll leave when I want to.”

Jack just nodded.

Elliot swiveled his chair around and wheeled towards his black RX-8. People often assumed someone in a wheelchair would use a minivan for transportation, but he’d ride in a hearse before he drove a minivan. Besides, the sports car’s “suicide” doors made it easy to store his chair behind him.

He shrugged out of his shoulder holster and locked his pistol and other shooting gear in the trunk. He opened the driver’s door, grabbed the roof of the car, and hoisted himself into the front seat. Twisting, he popped the rear door open from the inside. Then he folded his chair into something that would actually fit into the back. By the time he had the chair stowed,

Jack had locked up his own car and was fastening the belt in the seat next to him.

Elliot dug keys out of the pocket of his blue jeans and turned them in the ignition.

“Does she still live in her studio?” he asked.

“Third Ward,” Jack said, “I haven’t been there since we all got toasted on vodka and lemonade when I turned 40.”

Elliot threw the car into gear. “That was like a week before I got shot, wasn’t it?”

Even before he finished saying the words, he wished he could take them back. He’d said it to be cruel; to let Jack know that he was angry about being forced to see his ex-fiancée — especially under these circumstances. But Jack let it ride. He just sat on his side of the car looking at the passing scenery as Elliot steered the vehicle onto I-94 and headed downtown.

Some people wondered that a paraplegic could drive at all, but for him it was the easiest part of being in a chair. His car made him as mobile as anyone with two good legs. Instead of handling the brakes and accelerator with his feet, he used a special rod attached to the steering wheel and extending down to the pedals. By pulling back on the handle, he could accelerate. A quick push down would bring the car to a skidding stop. Sometimes when he was driving, he could almost forget that he would never walk again.

As he slipped smoothly through traffic, he thought about the last time he’d seen Caroline. They’d fought until two in the morning. He’d told her that he needed to get away, that every moment with her reminded him of a life he could never have again. She pleaded with him to stay, but he left the next morning. When he asked her to help him carry his stuff to his car, she threw his duffle bag out their third-floor window. Now, he was driving to interview her about the death of one her dearest friends—a friend he had never gotten along with. Susan Powers was a little too strident in her feminism and, because he was a white male cop, she had seen him as a symbol for everything that was wrong with society. Even back then, he sometimes thought she might have a point.

“Does Caroline know about Susan?” he asked Jack who was still studying the passing cars.

“Just the fact, not the details. Dismemberment is an awkward subject to bring up over the phone.”

Elliot slipped into the outer lane about half mile before the turnoff into the city.

“You know,” he said, “when I had to leave the department, the one thing I knew I wasn’t going to miss was telling people that their friend

or husband or kid was never coming home again. But two or three times since I started freelancing, I've had to call someone and ask them what it felt like to hear that news. I hate that shit. At least when I was a cop, I just had to listen to their grief, not dissect it."

"Yep, death sucks. No doubt about it."

Elliot navigated the sports car down the curving off-ramp into the Third Ward. Once a collection of old warehouses and factory spaces, this section of the Milwaukee had been converted into expensive offices and condos for the terminally trendy.

"Do we have anything on this guy?" Elliot asked. "Tissue samples from the victim's fingernails? A murder weapon? Anything?"

"Zip-a-dee-do-da. Toranaga thinks he used a variety of tools on the women he cut up; saws, scalpels, some sort of cutting tool, maybe a bolt cutter or heavy-duty pruning shears," Jack paused, struggling to remember, "lopping shears, I think he called them. The acid he used on Tracy Wong could have come from just about anywhere. Hell, he could have mixed it up from a sink full of household cleaners."

"What about the garbage bags? Industrial-sized, black bags make me think janitorial service."

"We're checking all that stuff out," Jack sighed and shook his head. "I don't need another lab tech. What I need you to do is tell the story. Let the locals know there's another psycho out there. Encourage women to watch their backs. And I want you to come at it from the motive side. Why is this guy chopping up women? What's he got against them? It's what you were always best at, putting yourself inside their heads. Just tell me who I'm looking for and I'll find him."

"Sorry. Sometimes it's hard to get out of old habits. But if want my help on this, I have to see everything."

"No problem. I'll copy the files and have them delivered to your place tomorrow."

Elliot pulled into a metered parking spot in front of Caroline's building. The enormous whitewashed warehouse had been subdivided in the early '90s and turned into loft-style condominiums. Caroline lived there because it gave her enough space to work. The ceilings on the top floor were close to 20 feet high, and the expansive living room was perfect for displaying her paintings.

While Elliot went through the elaborate process of getting back into his wheelchair, Jack studied the building. Elliot knew he was wondering if this was where Susan Powers had been snatched. He had never noticed what an easy place this would be to grab someone. Pull a van up to the curb, jump out the side door, put a hand over her mouth and drag her

back in. A couple of the streetlights in front of the building were broken. It looked as though someone might have shot them out with a pellet gun.

“Hey, Jack? Look at this.” He pointed to the nearest streetlamp.

“Yep, looks like someone wanted to turn down the lights. Maybe he was planning on changing Ms. Powers into something a little less comfortable; like 110 pounds of raw meat.”

Elliot wheeled over to the warehouse’s entry and held the door open for Jack to go through. Usually when he held a door open for people they hesitated as if they weren’t sure about the etiquette. Shouldn’t they be holding the door for him? But Jack was an old hand and went right into the lobby. Although it had been a year since Elliot set wheel in the building, nothing had changed. The center of the structure was open all the way to the ceiling. A row of skylights was cut into the roof and filled the open space with shafts of light. Above the first floor, there were no hallways, only iron platforms that ringed the walls like an indoor fire escape. Just inside the entryway, five brass mailbox doors were set into the white-painted bricks of the left wall. Along the right wall a freestanding cast-iron stairway zigzagged its way up to the platforms on the second and third floors. The stairway rested on two-inch-thick, braided metal columns that stretched all the way to the roof like a forest of thin, black trees. Against the back wall an ancient freight elevator sat behind a newly refurbished iron gate. A battered steel door to the right of the elevator led down to the basement.

“What do you say we take the stairs?” Jack asked.

“You’d run out of breath before I would,” Elliot shot back as he rolled over to the elevator. He raised the gate with his right hand while holding the wheelchair in place with a firm grip on the left wheel.

After Jack got on, he slid the gate down behind them and pushed the button for the third floor.

“First floor, yuppies.” Jack boomed like an elevator operator announcing departments in a store. Elliot figured he was referring to the lawyer and the doctor who lived in the bottom two condos.

“Second floor, perverts.”

Elliot scowled. Jack meant the two interior designers who lived together in #3.

“Third floor, unrepentant feminists.”

He shot Jack a dirty look and pushed himself off the elevator. Caroline’s condo was to the left. He rolled past the stairway to the door, his chair racketing across the grated metal floor of the platform, and waited for Jack to catch up. He thought about trying to straighten his perpetually tousled brown hair, but he knew from experience that nothing short of a bottle of gel would get it to behave.

Jack knocked.

"I'll be right there." Caroline's voice was muffled by the thick steel door, but even that quiet hint of her was almost too much for Elliot. When the door opened he was startled by how beautiful she was. It was as if he had never seen her before. Her long blond hair was bound up in a ponytail and tied with an elastic ribbon. She wore an oversized man's white button-down shirt untucked over a tattered pair of denim shorts. Her feet were bare and a gold band in the shape of a snake encircled one ankle. Elliot could see she was as slender as ever. She was about five-foot-six, but her legs were so long and slim she often seemed taller to people meeting her for the first time. They also thought she was a lot younger than her 32 years.

Her green eyes went wide when she realized that Jack hadn't come alone. For the swiftest of moments, he thought he saw something tender in her look, but it was quickly masked by an angry squint.

"Let me guess," she glared into his eyes, "you forgot your toothbrush?"

Jack interceded before he could reply. "I asked him to come," Jack said. "If you don't want him here, I'll send him away, but I could really use his help on this."

Caroline turned her anger on Jack. "Is this an official visit, or an impromptu press conference? Maybe I should call the *National Enquirer* so we can get some real journalists in here to counterbalance your friend."

Jack sighed. "C'mon, Caroline, I know you're upset, but Elliot can help. And anything he writes might just keep this from happening to someone else."

"Keep what from happening? What exactly happened to Susan? And why would Elliot be writing about it? I thought he was just here to rub it in."

"You know better than that, Caroline." Elliot said gently. It was the first time he'd spoken to her in nearly a year.

She thrust her finger in his face like an accusation. "You hated Susan," she growled. "And I haven't decided if I'm going to let you stay yet, so just keep quiet."

Jack backed towards the elevator. "Maybe we should come back another time," he said.

The thought that the two of them might leave before telling her about Susan's death seemed to drain the anger and agitation from her.

"No, I'm sorry," she said, "but you should have told me you were going to bring him. I've been off balance since you called. I just can't believe it. It's like a bad dream. Come on in," she hesitated, and then said, "Both of you." She turned her back on them and walked into the condo.

Jack held the door while Elliot rolled onto the polished wood floor of the entranceway and turned left into the enormous living room. The condo was thick with ferns and potted plants. The air smelled of apples and when he filled his lungs he was reluctant to let each breath out again.

All the walls were covered with giant paintings, some leaning against the white brick, others hanging eight feet off the ground. Each canvas consisted of thousands of tiny, delicately painted squares. Up close, the small patches seemed like random swirls of contrasting colors: brown next to pink, blue beside yellow. But from a distance, the paintings transformed into stunning, larger-than-life portraits of women. The small squares blended into a single image like pixels on a television screen. Around the room mothers and grandmothers, young women and teenaged girls were immortalized. Each picture was totally different in pose, color, and mood. And yet, they all seemed related — variations on a theme.

He had always been fascinated with Caroline's paintings. On the night he asked her to marry him, she gave him the only self-portrait she had ever done. It was smaller than her other works, but it glowed with life. He left it when he moved out of the condo. A week later she had it delivered to his duplex on the west side. He kept the painting carefully wrapped and put away in an unused room.

"Take a seat, Jack." Caroline indicated a hunter green leather couch that shared the immense living room with an overstuffed club chair and a glass coffee table.

Jack eased his bulk into the couch as Caroline settled into the chair. Elliot pulled his wheelchair up beside one corner of the sofa.

"So what do you know?" She pulled her legs up underneath her and sat hunched forward with her arms crossed over her stomach.

Jack said, "I'm sorry, Caroline. It's an old cliché, but right now, I'm the one asking the questions. When did you last see Ms. Powers?"

"No," she shook her head. "Nothing until you tell me how Susan died."

"Care," Elliot leaned forward, trying to look into her eyes, but she looked down into her lap. "I promise we'll tell you everything we know, but first you have to answer a few questions. What we tell you could affect how you answer. Please just cooperate with Jack. He's on your side."

She looked up and glowered at him. Then she turned to Jack and said, "She didn't come home last night. She left around eight to go to a pro-choice rally at Cathedral Square. I saw her on the news at 10. She was arguing with some pro-life nut. The reporter was egging both of them on. Susan looked like she was having a terrific time."

"When was she supposed to be home?" Jack had a small reporter's

pad out and was taking notes. Elliot thought about doing the same, but he knew Caroline would clam up if she thought about him writing a story.

“No set time. When Sue’s in town, she does pretty much anything she wants. She has her own key so she lets herself—”

“She had her own key?” Elliot interrupted.

“Sure, lots of people do. You had one too, once upon a time.”

A sudden fear grabbed his throat and squeezed the breath out of him. “Can I use your phone?” He felt like he was forcing the words past a gloved hand on his larynx.

She hesitated, regarding him with distrustful eyes. “You can use the one in the bedroom.”

He steered his chair towards the back of the condo. At the end of the hall, the door to the bedroom was already wide open. The white painted-iron bed was unmade, and he smiled at the tousled blue- and white-striped down comforter that sprawled across it. He stopped next to the nightstand and picked up the phone. He noticed his name was still on the list of programmed speed-dial numbers handwritten in dark pencil on the base of the phone. Out of curiosity, he pushed the memory button followed by the number two and listened while his answering machine picked up.

“You’ve reached Elliot Stearns. That growling sound you hear is Ripley, my German shepherd. Please leave your name, number and blood type in case you plan on breaking in while I’m away.” He hung up on himself and wondered if it meant anything that she hadn’t erased him. He released the disconnect button and dialed quickly from memory. Peter Engle answered on the second ring.

“Pete, this is Elliot Stearns.”

“Hi Elliot, how ya doin’?” Pete sounded like a German beer baron interviewing for a job in the Mafia.

“Great. And you?”

“Nothin’ to complain of.”

“That’s good to hear. Hey, I was wondering if you could come over to my old place and install an Abloy deadbolt? I’d also like you to put in a New York steel bar lock.”

“Actually, I have something simpler than an old-fashioned bar lock installation. It’s a steel bar that slides under the doorknob and rests against the floor on a rubber foot. The harder the bad guy tries to push in the door, the more it resists.”

“That sounds great. Can you make it over tonight?”

“For you? Sure thing.”

When Elliot was still a patrol officer, he had pulled two rapists off

Peter's 13-year-old daughter. When they resisted, he snapped the wrist of one and broke the other's leg so badly he still walked with a limp. Since then, Peter had treated him like a brother. He made sure that Pete had the right address, told him to ask for Caroline Becher, and said goodbye.

When he returned to the living room, Caroline was offering Jack a cup of coffee.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked when he rolled in from the hallway.

He waved "no" with his hand and resumed his place next to the couch. "I just called Peter Engle. He's a locksmith. He'll be coming over tonight to change the deadlock on the front door and install a backup lock." Even before he finished speaking, he could see that Caroline was furious.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she snarled. "You don't live here anymore. What gives you the right to make decisions about how I live?"

Now it was his turn to be angry. "The fact that a psychopath probably has the key to your goddamned front door gives me the right!"

Jack reached over and squeezed his arm. "Calm down, man."

"Fuck that," he jerked away from Jack's grip. "You saw those bodies. And now I find out the killer might have a key to this condo? I want the locks changed and I want them changed, now." He turned back to Caroline. "In fact, you shouldn't stay here for a few days. Call your mom and tell her you're coming over for the night."

"I will not," Caroline shouted. "I'm staying right here. And you don't get to tell me what to do. We're not engaged anymore and you sure as hell aren't my father."

He took a deep breath and when he spoke he kept his voice slow and quiet.

"Listen," he said, "Susan wasn't hit by a car. She wasn't shot during a robbery. She was cut to pieces. And I don't mean stabbed. She was taken apart like a jigsaw puzzle. The guy who did this makes Jeffrey Dahmer look squeamish. And he has a key to your house. He probably doesn't know where you live, but do you want to take that chance? How well are you going to sleep tonight, Caroline?"

She stared at him with anger and horror fighting for control of her face. "She was cut up?" she asked.

He nodded.

The blood drained from her cheeks leaving her skin as white as a porcelain angel's.

"All right," she said as she returned to her seat. "I'll let your friend change the locks. But right now, I want to know what happened to Susan."

Jack took the opportunity to regain control of the conversation. "That's what we're trying to find out. Did you know anyone who wanted to kill Ms. Powers?"

"Lots of people. You may have noticed that feminists aren't all that popular. Susan got death threats all the time."

"So you think her death might have been related to her activities as a feminist?"

Caroline blew air out of her nose in a tiny explosion of amusement. "I'd be surprised if it wasn't. She stirred up a lot of hate. She said the angrier they got, the better she liked it."

Jack took a long, slow sip of his coffee. "I don't think male chauvinists killed her, Caroline. The guy who did this has already murdered two other women. Susan was probably just a target of opportunity."

"Are you saying she was killed by some kind of serial killer?"

"That's our best guess."

"Why haven't I heard about this before? Sue might have been more careful if she knew there was someone dangerous out there."

"We weren't sure until he killed Ms. Powers. The second murder was very different from the first. When your friend showed up in a garbage bag, like the other two, we figured it was more than a coincidence."

"The other women were cut up?"

"The first one was. She was taken apart at the joints exactly the same way your friend was killed."

Caroline pulled her feet onto her chair and hugged her knees to her chest. "And the other?" she asked.

"Acid, we think. We found her body intact and curled up in a fetal position. But it was red and gooey. The guy poured acid all over her body. She looked kind of like a candy apple that was left out in the sun."

"Oh my God." Caroline turned to Elliot. "And you're going to write about this?" she said. "Warn people?"

He nodded. "That's what I'm here for."

"So you don't think this guy was after Susan in particular? She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"We don't know," Elliot admitted. "Most serial killers are sexually deviant. They go after a certain type trying to fill a need that can't be satisfied. But from what we know, the three dead women were totally different. One was 18, one was married, and Susan was neither. I suppose it could be a man who just hates women. Some spree killers are like that. Do you remember the nut that drove a pick-up truck into a McDonalds in Texas?"

Caroline shook her head.

“His victims were mostly women. He kept yelling ‘die bitch’ as he shot them.” Elliot frowned. “Some were little girls. Others were grandmothers. The only thing they had in common was that they were all female. Our murderer here might be somewhere between the normal serial killer, if there is such a thing, and that guy in Texas.”

Caroline slid her feet back down to the gleaming maple floor and leaned forward. “So maybe he did kill Susan on purpose. If he really hates women like you say, then a feminist would have been a perfect target.”

Jack cleared his throat. “We really don’t know anything yet,” he said. “Maybe this guy always planned on killing Ms. Powers and just killed the other two to throw us off his scent. I know that sounds crazy, but I’ve seen things that are a lot nuttier. Is there anything else you can tell us? Anything at all?”

She stared at the exposed wood boards of the ceiling for a long moment. “I just don’t think it could have been personal. She didn’t really know anyone here in Milwaukee except for me and a few other folks in the pro-choice movement.”

“Did she mention being scared lately?” Elliot asked. “Had she seen anyone following her around?”

“No, nothing like that.”

Jack sighed like a man who’d been up all night and just discovered that he wouldn’t be able to go to bed for a couple more hours. “All right. That’s enough for now.” He folded his notebook and stuffed it back into his coat pocket. “If you think of anything that might help, give me a call at the precinct. You still have the number, right?”

“Memorized.” Caroline looked at Elliot and he knew they were both remembering when she used to call the station and pretend to be swearing out a complaint just so they could talk.

He wheeled his chair a foot closer to where Caroline was sitting. “Please call Peter and let him know when to come over. Just hit re-dial on the bedroom phone. It’s really important. This guy could have made Sue tell him your address. She would have told him anything after he started cutting. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

She snorted bitterly. “That sounds funny coming from you.”

Elliot held her eyes with his a moment longer. “Let’s talk about this later. I’ll call you tomorrow to make sure Pete made it over. And Caroline? I really am sorry about Susan.”

He thought he could see tears, like liquid contact lenses, forming in her eyes. She nodded brusquely and turned to Jack. “Thanks for coming,” she said.

"No problem," Jack said. "I'll check in later to see how you're doing."

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When they reached the RX-8, Jack helped Elliot store his chair in the back.

"Just go ahead and drop me off at my car," Jack said. "I need to call the station and get the lab guys out here to check out those streetlights. Maybe our boy got careless and left a little evidence lying around."

"I doubt it," Elliot said. "I've got a real bad feeling about this guy. How often is he killing?"

"The first murder was at the end of May. Tracy Wong was found around the 15th of this month and Powers was killed last night, about a week later."

"He's escalating. And this MO he's got going is really bizarre. Most serials don't vary their methods that much from killing to killing. Plus, the way he's doing these women seems familiar somehow."

"Are you saying the methods are related?"

"I don't know. I just don't have a feel for him yet."

"Yeah, we're spinning our wheels." Jack reached into the back seat and ran his hand over the spokes on Elliot's chair. "Tell you what, if you'll start working on your first post, I'll take you along with me to roust Wong's boyfriend tomorrow. His alibi is a little shaky. He claims to have been at Mad Planet all night, but no one remembers him being there when he says he was."

"You got a deal."

They rode in silence as Elliot made a series of right turns onto one-way streets to head back to the highway. Jack seemed moody; after a few minutes Elliot asked what was bothering him.

Jack frowned. "I know it's none of my business El, but why don't you get back with Caroline? You guys just seemed to fit together. Seeing you without her is like seeing a coffee mug with a broken handle."

"How poetic. And I thought I was the writer."

"OK, skip it. It's just that I don't think you should let her get away. She's a fine woman, maybe as good as my wife. A man needs a good woman, Elliot. He needs a family. If you died tomorrow, who'd miss you? Who'd give a damn?"

Elliot squeezed the steering wheel so hard it creaked beneath his hands. "I know you mean well, but things happened between us that you just can't understand."

"I understand that being in the wheelchair made you afraid."

Elliot's voice was dangerously without inflection. "Afraid of what?"

"Afraid of being happy. Of letting yourself be happy."

"Just drop it, Jack. I'm glad you're happy with your wife and your three point five kids. But that's just not how it's turning out for me, all right?" Elliot shook his head. "Let it lie, man. Just let it lie."

## CHAPTER 2

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**I**T WAS DARK BY THE TIME ELLIOT BOUNCED HIS RX-8 UP THE DRIVEWAY of his two-story, Lannon Stone duplex. Instead of steering into the garage, he turned left onto a small concrete apron behind the house. He let the young couple that rented the upstairs apartment use both spaces in the garage. The one time he tried parking in it, he quickly discovered that he was unable to fit his wheelchair between his car and the wall.

He bought the house as an investment property nearly four years earlier. When he was still living with Caroline, he rented out both the first and second floors. But after he moved out of her place, he politely asked the tenants in the downstairs apartment to relocate. Before moving in, he retrofitted the entire first floor to make life in a wheelchair a little more bearable. He replaced the front steps with a concrete ramp. He also gutted the bathroom and put in steel handrails like the ones used in public restrooms.

After locking the car, he rolled his chair down the cement driveway, and then worked his way up the ramp to his front door. He paused after unlocking the deadbolt. He knew 85 pounds of German shepherd was crouching on the other side of the door waiting for someone to do something foolish like walk into the house without calling him off.

“Ripley, curb,” he shouted through the thick maple. When he swung the door open, the giant German shepherd was sitting on his haunches, tongue lolling.

“Good boy.” He ruffled the black and tan fur on top of the dog’s massive head. “How was your day, buddy? Catch any bad guys? Make any hot dates?”

Ripley barked and cocked his head to one side.

“No? Me, neither.” He bent forward and kissed the dog’s muzzle.

Ripley licked his face and waddled off to lie down in a wire cage in one corner of the living room. The smell of dog fur and gun oil lingered in the air behind him. The dog’s crate was nearly as large as the big-screen TV that dominated the rest of the room. The only other furniture was an inexpensive oak coffee table, a stereo cabinet flanked by two massive JBL speakers, and three haphazardly arranged wheelchairs.

Elliot started collecting the chairs after he came home from the hospital. An antique wood and wicker chair was parked next to the table. A Vietnam-era steel and rubber monster sat facing the TV. The compact electric wheelchair the department provided him when he first went on permanent disability sat beside it. After he was strong enough, he had switched from the electric to the ultra lightweight chair he spent most of his time in. In fact, he never sat in any of the chairs in this room. They were for the exclusive use of visitors. Everyone who spent any time in his apartment would eventually sit in one of those chairs and be brought cheek-to-cheek with the reality of his everyday existence. Some people never came back. Others, like Jack, loved to visit and tool around the apartment in one of the chairs.

“Hungry, Rip?” he asked the dog. Ripley gave a low growl of acknowledgement. “OK, come on.”

The dog eased himself from the cage and padded down the polished wood of the hallway towards the kitchen in the back of the house. Elliot followed him through a small dining room containing a table and chairs, past the doors to the two bedrooms and the bath, and onto the yellow linoleum tiled floor of the kitchen. Ripley sat down in front of his stainless steel dog dishes and waited patiently.

Elliot rinsed one bowl out and refilled it with fresh water from the tap. Then he took a leftover chicken breast from a fast-food take home bucket in the refrigerator, shredded it with his hands, and tossed the pieces into Ripley’s supper dish. The dog studiously avoided looking at the meat. He’d been trained to eat only when Elliot gave him the right signal. It wasn’t a trick, like teaching a dog to balance a biscuit on his nose. When he was a cop, he’d seen how easy it is to poison a guard dog with free food. That wasn’t going to happen to his dog. After a few seconds, he gave Ripley permission to eat by slapping his thigh with his palm. The dog snuffled at the meat and tore into it.

Elliot reopened the refrigerator. He rested the fried chicken bucket on his lap, grabbed a bottle of Sprecher root beer, and rolled into the back bedroom.

In place of a bed, the room was occupied by an antique roll-top desk

and a few inexpensive, ready-to-assemble bookshelves. The desk overflowed with papers, letters, bills, and paperbacks. A banker's brass desk lamp sat on the right side of the desktop and an Apple laptop was open in the center of the cluttered space.

Elliot parked his chair in front of the desk and balanced the bucket of chicken on a pile of paper. He touched the space bar to wake up the laptop, then took a bite of the Colonel's special recipe and twisted the cap off the bottle. By the time he washed down his first mouthful of chicken with a swallow of root beer, the computer was up and running.

He logged onto his blog and stared at the blank page on the computer screen. He supposed he should start with the facts of Susan's murder, but a beat reporter at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* was probably already working on a front-page story about the killing. It wasn't his job to do breaking news anyway. He made his living by satisfying people's curiosity, by getting inside a criminal's head and making some sense of the madness and disarray he found there. The problem was, this story made no sense to him. What could these three women possibly have in common? Worse, he wasn't even sure he agreed with Jack that all three murders were related. Wong's was just too different from Powers' and Shriver's. The garbage bags and the dumpster could have been the result of the person who killed Wong copycatting the first murder. But he had to admit the three homicides felt alike. They all had that same sense of magical thinking you often found in serial killers. There was something ritualistic about disposing of the bodies in the black plastic bags; it was like the killer had wrapped each woman in her own non-biodegradable shroud.

He rested his face on the fingers of his right hand and sat staring at the blinking cursor. Watching the thin vertical line pulse in and out of existence was hypnotic. Too bad people couldn't reappear as effortlessly as that cursor, he thought—though they certainly could vanish as easily.

He considered Susan, a woman he had disliked intensely. Thinking of Susan inevitably lead to thoughts of Caroline and he wondered if she had allowed Peter to put in the locks. On impulse, he picked up the phone and punched in a number he hadn't called in a year. He could hear the chattering tone that meant the phone on the other end was ringing.

What the hell am I doing, he asked himself as the tone sounded a second time. He was about to hang up when Caroline answered.

"Hello," Her voice was like fingers slipping over a silk sheet.

"Care? It's me...Elliot." The phone was full of silence. "I was just wondering if Pete came over. Are the new locks in?" Still no answer, although he could hear her soft breath whispering through the receiver. At least she hadn't hung up. Yet.

“Caroline, you have a right to be angry at me. What I did was unforgivable. And if you never want to talk to me again, I’ll understand. But... I’ve missed you. I didn’t realize how much until I saw you today. I guess what I’m saying is I’d like to get together sometime and talk about it.” He was surprised at himself. He hadn’t meant to ask her out, but the words were spoken even as he thought them. And now that he’d said it, he couldn’t think of anything he wanted more.

“When?” she asked. The single word trembled in his ear.

“Friday?”

“Pick me up at seven. I’ll be waiting at the curb.” And then she hung up.

Elliot clicked the button to disconnect the phone and sat looking at the slim white receiver. It was only then that he remembered she hadn’t answered his question about the locks. He could call her back, but he decided he didn’t want to push his luck. Instead, he opened the address book program on his computer and looked up Peter’s home number. Seven button pushes later, he was talking to the locksmith.

“Yeah, she let me put the locks in, but she was by no means enthusiastic.”

“She gave you a hard time?”

“Nah, I got the impression she was a little scared and the locks just reminded her of whatever it was she was worrying about. By the way, I added new locks to the windows. Those old latches she had wouldn’t keep out a blue jay.”

“Thanks, Pete. Send me the bill.”

“No-can-do, friend, the lady already paid. Cash on the barrel head.”

Elliot nodded slightly. “OK. Maybe we’ll get together for a beer sometime next week, huh?”

“I’d love to, Elliot. Goodnight.”

“Night.” Elliot placed the phone on its cradle and turned back to his gently humming computer. He took another sip of Sprecher, wiped his greasy fingers on his pants and started typing a new post<sup>\*</sup> on his blog.

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\* [www.fromwhereisit.org/?p=7](http://www.fromwhereisit.org/?p=7)

## CHAPTER 3

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**I**T WAS QUARTER TO NINE IN THE MORNING WHEN ELLIOT EASED HIS car into a handicapped parking space in front of the Harley-Davidson motor assembly plant on Capitol Drive. The factory was a mile-long rectangular box of brick and glass surrounded by 50 acres of asphalt. The parking lot was crowded with pickup trucks sporting gun racks and winged Harley logos staring out rear windows like carsick angels. Jack wasn't due to meet him until nine, which Elliot automatically translated to 9:15. But as much as Jack was constitutionally unable to make it to an appointment on time, Elliot was just as unable to resist showing up ten or fifteen minutes early.

Resigned to waiting at least a half an hour before Jack wandered into the lot, Elliot switched on the stereo and slid The Police's *Synchronicity* into the CD player. Sting was just starting to wail about the pleasures of surveillance in "Every Breath You Take" when Elliot found himself thinking about the first time he'd kissed Caroline. They were strolling through Cathedral Square Park late on a cold January night. It was snowing and icy flakes glittered in her hair like melting diamonds. It was the evening of their first date and, as they walked hand-in-hand from the restaurant to his car, he spun her into his arms. He was watching the snow settle on her blonde lashes when she lifted up on her toes and touched her lips to his. She had probably only meant it as a peck, but the kiss had deepened unexpectedly. When their lips finally parted, they were both trembling.

Now, sitting in the summer heat, he wondered if it was too late to recapture that moment. He wanted to hold her again. He wanted to trace his fingers along the soft curve of her neck. He wanted to make love with her.

After the accident, the doctors told him sex would never be the same. The best he could hope for was some distant feeling of relief and his erections would come erratically, with no connection to his desire.

He and Caroline had tried to make love a few times after he returned from the hospital, but each effort left him sad and empty. He hated lying in their bed helpless and withering before her. The entry wound from the bullet that crippled him was an angry red pucker on his abdomen. His lifeless legs anchored him to the bed like two concrete blocks. She would touch him and stroke his body with loving fingers, but the image of a mother with her helpless infant would float to the surface of his mind like a dead body rising to the top of a pond.

In the year since he had last seen Caroline, he'd learned that his most important sexual organ, his brain, was still intact. As he rejoined the world, his need to feel like a whole man diminished until it was no more substantial than the occasional phantom itch on his dead legs. Now he hoped it wasn't too late to try to rekindle what they had, although he wouldn't blame her if she had just agreed to see him one last time so that she could tell him to go to hell in person.

Forty minutes after he pulled into the lot, he watched Jack's unmarked Crown Victoria coast into the handicapped spot next to him. Elliot creased his lips in irritation as he unpacked his wheelchair.

Jack levered himself out of his car with a grunt. Then, noticing Elliot's uncharacteristic grimace, he asked. "What's your problem? Got boils on your butt again?"

Elliot locked the wheelchair in place and shifted his weight from the car to the black padded leather seat. "Being a cop means you can park just about anywhere," he said, slamming the car door. "So why do you feel like you have to take the last handicapped spot in the lot?"

Jack glanced at the little man on the blue sign in front of his car and shrugged. "You want me to move?"

"No, I want you to change your attitude. Considering your best friend is in a wheelchair, I'd think you'd be ticketing guys who parked in handicapped spots, not commandeering them for yourself."

"Like I said, you want me to move?"

Elliot shook his head, unlocked his wheels and pushed away. "Let's just get in there and ask this guy a few questions. We're already fifteen minutes late as it is."

"Hey, I was busy," Jack trotted to catch up with him. "Crime waits for no man. Although it will hang around all night for a good-looking chick."

"Very politically incorrect."

Jack grinned, "If all goes well, we're gonna hassle a white trash scumbag

who might have killed his Chinese chick. Sounds like a major social fox paw to me.”

“I think you mean *faux pas*.”

“Mea culpa,” Jack raised his hands and face to the heavens. “Nissan maxima culpa.”

Elliot let his chair coast to a stop. “No one would ever guess you majored in history.”

“I studied it, now I make it.” Jack held his hand up as if it were a gun and blew imaginary smoke from the tip of his finger.

Elliot grunted and went back to wheeling himself across the hot asphalt.

When they reached the curb, there was no easy access ramp, so Elliot popped his front wheels up and muscled himself onto the sidewalk. They moved side-by-side towards the double glass doors that lead into the factory.

“I read your post this morning,” Jack said. “Why didn’t you talk more about Wong?”

“I haven’t made sense of that one yet. It doesn’t fit the pattern. And I was more concerned with getting the idea of a serial killer out than trying to explain the anomalies of Wong’s murder.”

Jack nodded and held the door while Elliot slipped through.

A security station was just inside the entrance, and a weathered, middle-aged guard stood to greet them as they came through. “Morning, gentlemen,” he said. “May I help you?”

Jack took his shield and ID out of his coat pocket and laid the leather holder on the desk in front of the guard.

The man picked up the ID and examined it. “Homicide, huh? Who died?”

“So far, everyone,” Jack said as he plucked his ID out of the guard’s nicotine-stained fingers. “We’re here to see Ron Wyrmer.”

“Is he expecting you?”

Jack shook his head and said, “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition.”

“What?”

Elliot said, “It’s a line from Monty Python. You know, the guys who did *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*?”

The guard kept staring.

Jack leaned his elbows on top of the security station counter. “Just send him on out. Is there anywhere we can talk to him, private-like?”

“About the best we can do is the company cafeteria. It’s too early for lunch, so you’ll probably only have to share it with some guys taking a

coffee break. It's down that corridor—the first door to the left. If you gentlemen will take a seat, I'll send Mr. Wyrmer on in."

"*Danke schoen.*" Jack strolled to the indicated door and held it while Elliot wheeled through.

The room was done in Early American Cafeteria. A metal and glass showcase of food stretched the entire length of the left side of the space. Women and men in hairnets and baggy white clothing stood behind the counter lethargically preparing for the lunch rush. The rest of the room was divided into rows of Formica-topped tables. Here and there a few workers sat sipping coffee and chewing half-heartedly on pastries and apple Kringles. Elliot thought the food, sealed in wrinkled cellophane and slowly congealing beneath the sterile glare of infrared heat lamps, looked about as appetizing as the oily puddles on the floor of his garage.

"Mmmm. Yummy," Jack patted his stomach where his tie rested like a cat lying on an overstuffed couch. "Want a donut?"

"You're just determined to hit all the clichés today, aren't you, detective?"

"What's the use of being a cop, if you can't con someone out of an occasional goody?" Jack walked over to one of the ladies working on the food line. Elliot was too far away to hear what he was saying to the woman, but after a moment she giggled and he knew Jack had scored his first freebie of the day.

"So the Milwaukee PD is sending gimps to interview people now, huh? Who you supposed to be, anyway? Ironside?"

Elliot turned his chair and looked up into a face of brutal ugliness. Acne had scarred and seared every inch of skin that wasn't covered by long, greasy, blonde hair. Eyes the color of rusty water glared down into his.

"Mr. Wyrmer?" Elliot offered his hand, but the man just stared until Elliot withdrew it.

"A fucking cripple? Can you believe it?" Wyrmer muttered to himself. "My girl gets herself killed and they send me this piece of shit."

"Technically, I'm not with the police force anymore, Mr. Wyrmer." Elliot clenched his hands, but kept his voice steady. "Detective Hartman over there will be the one taking your statement."

Jack was still chatting with the serving girl and it appeared that he had worked his way up to a free piece of pie and a can of Diet Coke.

"Well, if you ain't a cop, what the hell are you doing here?" Wyrmer asked.

"I'm a writer," Elliot said. "I sometimes work with the police. I was in homicide until a few years ago."

"I've already talked to the cops three times. Why aren't they out finding the guy who did my girl, instead of hassling me?"

"I suspect it's because your alibi hasn't held up."

"Hey man," he leaned over Elliot, "I said I was with my buddies all night."

"But the bartenders at Mad Planet don't remember you being there and neither do any of the waitresses."

"Those bitches wouldn't remember their pussies if they weren't attached."

Elliot tilted his head. "Do you have a problem with women, Mr. Wyrmer? You sound a little hostile. Almost serial killer hostile, if you know what I mean."

Wyrmer's brow shriveled with anger. He reached down and grabbed the front of Elliot's white button-down shirt. "I'll show you hostile, you little shit."

Elliot wrapped his fingers around Wyrmer's wrist and levered the man's hand backwards. Wyrmer shrieked and dropped to his knees trying to escape the pain that shot up his arm.

"Let go, man," he shouted. "C'mon, let go. You're breaking it. You're breaking it."

Elliot stared into Wyrmer's eyes. "Next time you try to touch me, you'll be riding in one of these chairs for the rest of your life. Now, are you going to be a good little boy and cooperate?"

"Yeah, man," Wyrmer whimpered. "Just let go."

Elliot released his grip, and thrust Wyrmer away from him. Wyrmer fell to the floor where he cradled his wrist with his left hand. "I think you broke it, you son of a bitch. I think you broke my fucking wrist."

"If I wanted to break it there'd be a bone sticking out of your arm. Now why don't you take a seat, and we'll discuss things like grownups."

Wyrmer looked around the suddenly silent cafeteria. His co-workers were looking at him with an unpleasant mixture of pity and amusement.

"I have a better idea, why don't I just kick your ass?" He surged to his feet, but before he could stand all the way up, he found himself sitting on the linoleum again, this time courtesy of a nonchalant sweep of Jack Hartman's size 14 shoes.

"C'mon boys, let's play nice, or there will be no milk and cookies for either one of you." Jack gestured with the pie he held in his left hand.

Wyrmer was incensed. "Arrest this guy," he shouted, pointing at Elliot. "I want him arrested for assault."

"Get off it, Ron." Jack squeezed his bulk into the space between the

table and the attached bench. “Who’s going to believe a guy in a wheelchair whipped your ass?”

The men at the table nearest the trio snickered into their coffee.

Wyrmer used his good hand to push himself up off the floor and then took a seat across from Jack and Elliot.

“I thought you came here to ask me about my girl, not beat the crap out of me,” he said.

“It’s just that your alibi didn’t really pan out, Ronald.” Jack plunged his fork into the cherry pie and lifted a morsel to his mouth. “We thought you’d like to take another shot at it.”

“I told you, I was out drinking with my buddies.”

“From 7 p.m. until one in the morning. We figure Tracy was killed sometime after two. You don’t have an alibi for then.”

“I was fuckin’ passed out, OK? I was so hammered I couldn’t have pissed standing up, let alone killed my girl. Besides, the bitch wasn’t even home when I got there. The door was wide open. The TV was on, but the house was empty.”

Jack forked another bite of pie into his mouth. He worked his jaws like a four-year-old eating peanut butter, obviously savoring the industrial-strength cherry filling. “So, if you didn’t kill her, who did?”

“How the hell should I know?” Wyrmer leaned forward with his arms on the table. “Maybe it was her old man. They hated her for taking up with me. Those old chinks couldn’t stand the thought of me teaching their little girl to be an American. You know what I mean?”

Elliot had a pretty good idea what he meant, and he figured this maggot took as much pleasure from the pain he caused Tracy’s parents as he did from Tracy herself.

“You know,” he said, “we haven’t gotten off to the best of starts, but if you keep calling people bitches or chinks, I’m going to give you the opportunity to see how white your bones really are.”

Wyrmer leaned back in his plastic cafeteria chair and sneered.

“So,” Jack paused while he cleaned some tenacious cherry filling off his front teeth with his tongue. “Tracy had no enemies? No old boyfriends who might have taken unkindly to her sleeping with you?”

“Nah. Hell, she was only 16 when I popped her cherry.”

Jack looked at the remains of his pie. Elliot thought he had probably been caught by the metaphor unwillingly. This interview was not working out the way they had anticipated. Wyrmer should be much more cooperative. His girlfriend was found chemically burned beyond recognition in an alley. He should be more anxious to help the investigation; falling all over

himself to offer suspects, real and imaginary. Instead, he was belligerent and obstructive.

“Well, Ronald,” Jack lifted another fork load of pie to his lips and held it there while he talked. “I guess this just isn’t a very good day for a chat, huh? You seem kind of uptight. I think we’ll just let you get back to work.” He inserted the pie into his mouth and started working it like a mouthful of chewing gum.

Elliot was dumbfounded. He had never seen Jack give up so quickly on an interview.

Wyrmer looked at them for a long moment. “Sure thing,” he snarled as he pushed his chair away from the table. “Any time.”

Wyrmer strutted out the cafeteria’s door and Elliot turned to Jack. “They teaching you guys some sort of New Age interrogation techniques? Ones that encourage you to let a suspect talk bad and then walk?”

Jack stuffed the last of the pie into his mouth.

“He didn’t do it,” he said, the words muffled by the food.

“Oh, you’re a psychic now! Want to read my palm?”

“He doesn’t have the brains to be the killer. Look what he does for a living.”

“Dahmer worked in a chocolate factory.”

Jack stood, gathered his dirty dishes and placed them on a nearby cart. “I thought that was Willy Wonka.”

“Yeah, and maybe Oompah-Loompahs killed Tracy Wong and Susan Powers.”

“Maybe. I never trusted them after they rolled that blueberry girl down to the squeezing rooms. These murders would definitely fit their MO.”

Elliot wheeled his chair toward the exit. “Are you really going to let that asshole walk?”

Jack held the door open and followed him after he rolled through.

“I’ll drag his ass downtown later this week. A break room doesn’t provide the right atmosphere to really sweat a guy like him. I didn’t bother bringing him down today because I thought he’d be a lot more cooperative. I can’t tell you how disappointed I am that he turned out to be such a rascal.”

“Well, Jack, it’s been fun, but it’s not really helping me with my story. I think I’m going to go over and talk to that priest that Susan had her last argument with. Did your guys find anything out when they talked to him?”

“Nada, bupkis. He could have done it. We only have the word of his faithful bodyguard that he never left his room the night of Powers’ murder. Hell, his bodyguard might have done it. Regardless, we don’t have anything

on either of them. And if it was a political killing, what reason would the priest have to kill the other two women?”

“Maybe he always wanted to be a ‘mass’ murderer.”

Jack groaned. “Man, you’re going to have to say three or four ‘Hail Marys’ to get out of that one, bucko.”

“Luckily, I’m off to see a priest.”

“Yeah, maybe you’ll get to hear *him* confess.”

It was Elliot’s turn to groan. “You win. I’ll call you later and we’ll compare notes.”

## CHAPTER 4

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ELLIOT WHEELED HIMSELF DOWN THE MOTEL'S NARROW HALLWAY. BEIGE carpet and dingy white walls stretched into the distance until they seemed to meet in a dot of pale light. Far down the corridor, a man sat in a folding chair reading a newspaper. Although Elliot suspected the man marked his destination, he looked at the numbers on the doors as he glided down the hallway. When he was ten feet away, the man slowly rose from his seat like an untethered zeppelin. He was enormous. Elliot figured the man stood six and a half feet tall and weighed more than 300 pounds. He looked like a sumo wrestler, bulging muscle swaddled in fat. His head was bald, but it looked shaved rather than the result of a bad toss of the genetic dice.

"Hi." Elliot offered his hand. He almost expected the man to crush it, but instead he folded his newspaper, set it on the seat of the chair, and gently took Elliot's hand in his. Bowing his head, the man spoke in a surprisingly quiet voice. "Peace be with you."

"And also with you," Elliot returned, a childhood of Catholicism spilling from his mouth.

The giant's face lit up and he shook Elliot's hand more enthusiastically. "Are you a Catholic, friend?"

"I was raised Catholic. My mom and dad were devout. I'm afraid I just dabble." Actually, it had been ten years since he'd last seen the inside of a church, but he didn't think the man would appreciate the subtleties of his belief system; a sin of omission, but not a deadly one.

The man released his grip. "That's all right. It's never too late to return to the Church. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic."

Elliot smiled and nodded. "Is Father Moore in? I have an appointment to see him. My name is Elliot Stearns."

The man's face twisted into a grimace. His eyes were hooded and suspicious. "You're the reporter?"

"Not exactly. I'm a columnist and blogger. I write a syndicated column about crime. This week, I'm working on something that might concern Father Moore."

"You mean that woman being killed." The man's tone was so flat Elliot could tell he was trying to keep some emotion out of his voice.

"So you heard?"

The man clenched his teeth and rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "The police were here yesterday and this morning. They questioned Father Moore for hours. He and that woman had an argument at an abortion clinic the other night. It got pretty heated and the cops wanted to know where Father was on the night of the killing."

Elliot thought the man looked angry and bewildered as if the idea of a Catholic priest committing murder made as much sense as the Pope becoming a Lutheran.

"Where was Father Moore?" Elliot tried to sound curious rather than questioning.

"Here all night. That's what I told the police and I'm willing to swear to it on a stack of bibles."

"I'm sure you would. Would you mind telling Father Moore I'm here?"

"Of course." The guard opened the door a crack and tried to slide through it without letting Elliot see into the room—a sight that reminded him of an aircraft carrier squeezing through the Panama Canal.

He picked up the newspaper from the seat of the man's chair. A photo of Susan Powers dominated the front page. Shirley DiPagio wrote the story that accompanied it. She was a competent reporter, but he figured she had been assigned the piece because she was a woman. Almost any story that could be considered a women's issue was assigned to a female reporter. It was an unwritten rule, but like most unwritten rules, it had the force of law.

He scanned the lead paragraph:

*Susan Powers, noted feminist author and activist, was found dead and mutilated yesterday in a Milwaukee alley. She may have been the third victim of Milwaukee's first serial killer since Jeffrey Dahmer.*

He was impressed. Shirley had delayed mentioning Dahmer until the second sentence. With a possible serial killer on the loose, most local journalists would have put Dahmer's name before the victim's. The rest of

the story told him nothing new. It recapped the two earlier murders and quoted the police chief as saying there was no confirmed link between the crimes. At the bottom of the column the story jumped inside to page three. When he turned the page he found his own column, which was basically just his blog post reprinted in the paper, next to the end of Shirley's story. He scanned his column quickly to see if the editors had made any changes, and when he saw none, he folded the paper and replaced it on the chair's tan vinyl cushion.

The door cracked open, and the Catholic parade float drifted back into the hallway. "Father will see you now," he said.

"Thank you." Elliot wheeled past the guard and into the room. Father Moore was sitting at a counter that served as the room's desk. He stood quickly when Elliot entered. Elliot was surprised to see that Moore was wearing a clerical collar. Most modern priests rarely appeared in public in anything more formal than jeans and a polo shirt, though he had to admit that Moore looked good in the traditional uniform. The white of his collar complimented the streaks of grey in his black hair. The black shirt and pants made him seem taller and thinner.

"Hello, Mr. Stearns. I've read your work. Often grisly, but always fascinating." Moore's voice was deep and strong like an organ.

"Thank you, Father. I'm familiar with your work, too. Is that why you're in town?" Elliot twisted around and took a reporter's notebook and a digital recorder from a black leather pouch fixed to the back of his chair.

Moore returned to his seat, and dragged it a few inches across the blue shag carpet so that he faced Elliot. "Yes. I'm here because of my work. Sometimes it seems like everything I do is because of my work. Every breath. Every word. It can be exhausting."

"I'm sure it is. Susan Powers probably felt the same about her job. People on crusades share similar difficulties, even if they don't share sides."

"I grieve for Miss Powers," Moore emphasized the word grieve. "I didn't agree with her politics, but no one should suffer the way she suffered."

Elliot held up the recorder. "Would you mind if I tape the interview, Father? I'm less likely to misquote you if I have it on disk."

"No problem, Mr. Stearns." Moore waved his hand almost as if giving Elliot his blessing.

He set the recorder on the counter top, and flipped open his note pad. "You were probably one of the last people to see Susan alive. What did you talk about?"

"What we always talked about—abortion."

"One of the local news stations has footage of the two of you making

quite a scene in front of an abortion clinic the other day. Would you mind telling me what you were arguing about?”

“Miss Powers had just pushed a few activists off the sidewalk. When I intervened, she told me that we had no business infringing on the rights of women who wanted to have an abortion. I told her no one has the right to kill.”

“And what did she say?”

“That abortion wasn’t about murder, it was about power.”

Sounds like Susan, he thought. She was always wrestling every argument back to women’s rights. To Susan, everything was black or white or, more specifically, male or female. “What happened after you argued?”

“Miss Powers went back to her side of the lines, and I withdrew to mine.”

He smiled, “‘Lines?’ You talk as though it was a war zone.”

Father Moore ran a wrinkled hand through the grey stripe in his hair. “Have you ever covered the abortion issue, Mr. Stearns?”

“Not really.”

“The fight over abortion is a war. Some people think it’s a holy war. There are fanatics on both sides. And the language isn’t the only thing that gets ugly. Some of the people on my side, I’m unhappy to say, are the worst offenders. They carry aborted fetuses around in jars. They burn clinics. And they’ve killed: first, that abortionist in Florida, then the copycat killings. Just last month, those radicals blew up a warehouse of RU 486 in New York and killed two watchmen. In their defense, I will say that we believe that abortionists in this country kill over a million human beings a year. Sometimes it’s hard for some pro-lifers to feel bad about the few people who have been killed on the other side. They see it as retribution. It’s like killing a concentration camp guard. Where’s the crime in that?”

“I’m not really hearing a Catholic priest justifying murder, am I?”

Moore pursed his lips and shook his head. “No. The Sixth Commandment is still intact in my heart. Although some of my colleagues have likened the crusade against abortion to a righteous war. Killing is allowable, even praiseworthy, in a just cause.”

“Do you think Ms. Powers was killed in a just cause?”

The priest looked as if Elliot had just ripped the crucifix from his neck. “Are you saying Miss Powers was killed by pro-lifers?”

Elliot ran his fingers along the back of his head and tugged on the hair that he found there. He hadn’t really thought about it until the question had appeared fully formed in his mind. “I don’t know. Do you think it’s a possibility?”

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"Hasn't there been a series of these murders? Surely not all the victims were pro-choice activists?"

"I don't know what their opinions on abortion were. Certainly, neither of the other two was as well known as Susan. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure where that question came from."

"Maybe it was divinely sent?"

Elliot wasn't so sure. The only divinity he acknowledged was a certain strawberry schaum torte made in a little restaurant in Appleton.

"I read that Miss Powers was mutilated?" The priest's face was as open and curious as a five-year-old's.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Moore squeezed his nose between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "I just had a thought. The paper says that the three murders differ in several respects. I know you can't tell me the details, but I want to describe a few things to you and see if they match any of the crimes."

Elliot was curious. "Go ahead."

"In your post today you said Miss Powers was mutilated. Her body was severed at all the major joints?" Elliot nodded and Moore stood up and began pacing around the room. "I also suspect that the other murder you mentioned, but did not talk about, exhibited either a ground up body or one that seemed burned, flayed, or maybe destroyed as if it had been dipped in acid."

"Jesus Christ," Elliot leaned so far forward in his chair that he seemed about to fall out. "Who told you all this? Do you have a connection at the paper or the police department?"

"Neither, I assure you." Moore sat on the countertop next to Elliot's chair and leaned towards him. "But I am right, aren't I?"

"So goddamned right I should have you arrested on the suspicion of murder."

"I didn't attack anyone, Mr. Stearns. But I think I can tell you why those people were killed. They were murdered to make a point. A gruesome, horrible point." Moore's voice trembled. "They were aborted, Mr. Stearns. Somebody aborted them."