

# LAST SHOT

*Four Short Stories...Four Talented Authors*



ALICE BIENIA    DWAYNE CLAYDEN  
WINONA KENT    PETER KINGSMILL

*Foreword by*  
JUDY PENZ SHELUK

Cairn Press



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Contact: [info@alicebienia.com](mailto:info@alicebienia.com)

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## FOREWORD

How far would you go if you knew it was your last shot at redemption? At winning, no matter the cost, either personally or professionally? What if the last shot belonged to the villain instead of the hero? Those are the questions posed to the four authors represented in this collection, and each one offers their answer, complete with the requisite twists and turns we've come to expect from crime fiction.

It all starts with the diabolically clever 'Killer Muse' by Alice Bienia. Nora, a bestselling mystery author, is facing an already extended deadline for her ninth novel. There's just one not-so-small problem: every potential plot in her folder of "Great Story Ideas" has been considered and discarded, and by day twenty-three she's pretty much reached the point of desperation.

Things get even more dire when her longtime agent, Barbara,

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invites her to lunch, only to gush over Ava, her latest author protégée. The subliminal message is all too clear: Nora's failure to produce another bestseller will ultimately be Barbara's failure, and for the legendary "Babs" failure is not an option. Ever.

With every uneaten bite of her lunch, Nora realizes that her days as Barbara's client are numbered. That is, until Barbara confides that Ava has had "a horrifying experience with a stalker" and inspiration strikes. All Nora has to do is learn Ava's side of the stalking story...and then write about it as if it were her own.

It's May 1975 in Calgary, and Constable Brad Coulter and his new partner, Constable Curtis Young, are dispatched to the Earl Grey Elementary School, where eight-year-old boy has been reported missing. So begins 'On the Run' by Dwayne Clayden, a fast-paced police procedural that follows Coulter and Young as they track down a silver cargo van and their prime suspect: a recently released pedophile out on bail.

A former police officer and paramedic, Clayden's knowledge and experience shines through every paragraph, as does his familiarity with the city as it was. But it's in the action-packed scenes along the Elbow River, where five days of rain and the opening of the Glenmore Dam has left the water high and rapidly moving, that things go from fast to furious.

Not every writer can transfer heart-thumping action to the page, but Clayden pulls it off with authenticity, a touch of

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humour, and a multi-dimensional protagonist that leaves the reader ready to follow Constable Brad Coulter to wherever the next call takes him.

Laced with musical references, wit, and an insider's look at London's Underground, Winona Kent's 'Blue Devil Blues' hits all the right notes as we watch jazz musician Jason Davey go for his last shot: an audition for Howard Parfitt, owner of Diamonds, a club in the heart of London's Soho that, in the sixties, had been a rock and roll mecca.

Things aren't quite as rosy for Diamonds in 2016, but Davey is getting desperate. Busking can do that to a man, and he's long past the young, adventurous, and living-off-tinned-beans stage of his life.

His audition over, Davey decides to hang around the foyer to listen to the next group up: a foursome of Beatle Band-wannabes that "collectively look about nineteen." It's there he meets Evie Parfitt, niece of Howard, and an aspiring singer/songwriter whose passion far outweighs her talent. When she takes off with Davey's Lake Placid Blue Strat guitar, his search for her leads him to a murder victim and the search for the truth.

In Peter Kingsmill's 'Where Ordinary People Go To Die,' former Coast Guardsman and OPS auxiliary officer Frank Anderson, and his partner, Marjorie Webster, have just purchased the *Rusty Bee*. Their idyllic plans to boat along Ontario's Trent-Severn Waterway from their home on Anwan

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Lake in Maple Falls quickly evaporate when Marjorie wakes up to discover a dead man hanging off the side of their crew-boat, a man she recognizes as “the idiot” who’d annoyed Frank at the local pub the night before.

Unknown in the Village of Hastings, where they’d moored for the night, and concerned they might be suspects, Franks calls his friend, OPS Staff Sergeant John MacLeod. As MacLeod makes the ninety-minute drive from Maple Falls to check out the scene, he enlists the local OPS.

What follows is a clever cross between amateur sleuth and police procedural, one where the canal system becomes another character. On reading, one can’t help feeling this is a trip you might make. Without the dead body, of course.

There you have it. Four authors. Four opportunities to sample the sort of stories they write. After all, this may be your first shot at reading them, but my guess is, it won’t be your last.

*Judy Penz Sheluk*



KILLER MUSE

ALICE BIENIA





## KILLER MUSE

ALICE BIENIA

I WAS FIVE WHEN DEATH FIRST WORMED ITS WAY INTO MY consciousness. My parents and I were lingering on the steps of my uncle's house, delaying our departure the way people do after a pleasant visit, when my aunt stooped until her cheek rested next to mine. "There." She pointed into the dark forest, her grip crushing my hand. "Do you see it, Nora?" she hissed, her eyes wide as she stared unblinking at the eerie moonlit shapes. The next day she was found dead.

Death came pretty regularly after that, taking family and friends—those who were closest to me. Some were accidents or disease, of course, but there were unexplained disappearances, suicides, and even a murder. So, it wasn't a complete surprise when I started writing mystery novels. I had, after all, a rich portfolio of experience to draw on.

Small dark dots, like fruit flies, floated across the computer screen in front of me. I squeezed my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose, but when I opened my eyes

again the dots were still there. I sighed, picked up my coffee cup, and stared into the black liquid. *Kill me now, why don't you.*

For years I had been telling readers, interviewers, and wannabe authors that the only way to pen a novel is to simply sit down and write. The message I had imparted was clear: placing one's fingers on the keyboard would somehow invoke the muse. But now, three hours after I sat down at the keyboard in my book-lined little office, to work on what was to be my ninth novel, I had nothing. Zippo. Nada. Did I mention this was day twenty-three?

I took a sip of coffee and grimaced, the liquid now tasteless and cold. I set the cup down on my wooden desk, the top too marred to warrant a coaster, and stared at the bare lilac branches scraping against the window as another gust of wind passed.

This wasn't writer's block. This was the bloody Great Wall of China. After missing two major deadlines, my agent, Barbara Hellberg—Babs—had put her own reputation on the line and convinced my publisher to give me a two-month extension. My last shot to turn in something amazing. *Just fifteen-hundred words a day*, I had told myself. Of course, now that twenty-three days had passed without a salvageable paragraph, I'd have to write roughly twenty-three-hundred words a day, which by the end of the month will have climbed to three thousand.

I had already sifted through a folder I kept, labelled "Great Story Ideas." Having considered and discarded each and every plot idea, crossing off each with a fat red marker, or scrawling the word *No* across newspaper clippings about

some crime that at one point had caught my eye, I had turned to my rather extensive collection of thriller and suspense novels.

Growing more desperate, I had spent weeks rereading dozens of books penned by my favourite authors, a vodka bottle at my side. I read quickly, skimming chapters until my brain connected the dots and I could remember the key plot points, the twist at the end, the premise of the story. I jotted notes—what worked, what didn't—underlined brilliant passages, highlighting chapter endings that left me, the reader, wanting more. And in doing so, I convinced myself that every good idea had already been written.

I glanced at my watch and groaned. I really didn't have the energy to meet my agent today. She had been avoiding me lately, so an invite to lunch could only mean one thing. Maybe it was time to tell her I wouldn't be making the extended deadline either.

Dragging myself out of my chair, I headed upstairs to wash my greasy hair and change into something more respectable than fuzzy slippers and an old T-shirt inscribed with the words, *I'm a writer, not a serial killer...same thoughts, different outcome.*

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WE WERE SITTING IN A LITTLE RESTAURANT ON THE EDGE OF DEER Park, but I hardly registered the white tablecloths, soft music, and large windows looking out onto the river.

"Your new protégé sounds charming," I said as I picked up my wine glass for the fifth time in as many minutes.

"She's an absolute delight," Barbara crowed. "I mean, honestly. I love that girl. She's so funny—in that nonobvious way young people are today. She can drop a killer line without cracking a smile. She's writing this hilarious mystery romance. More like a crime caper, actually."

Babs shifted her rather large form on the small chair and brushed a crumb off her chest with long, red-painted talons. *How can she type with those?*

"I like her already," I muttered half-heartedly, working hard to bend the corners of my lips upwards.

Babs flung a curl of red hair back over her shoulder and speared a piece of chicken with her fork. "It's so refreshing to have someone in their twenties to talk to. I mean, she says the darndest things and isn't afraid to just come right out with it. It might be her culture. Did I mention she's African American?"

*Only three times.* "She sounds interesting." I moved a piece of lettuce around on my plate.

I met Babs eleven years ago, at a writer's conference. She had just published her twenty-third novel and had an impressive roster of crime writers on her agent list. I had quit my job as a market research analyst several years earlier and started writing full time—mostly freelance articles, then a few short stories published in crime magazines. I self-published an eBook—a young adult novella about a girl who witnesses a murder. By the time I met Babs, I had moved on to adult mystery and had a manuscript almost finished.

Babs saw something in my writing even in the early days. She swore she had a nose for talent and banked her reputation on it. She made me take the novella down off Amazon

and, after forcing me through a dozen rewrites of the adult mystery I had written, sold it two years later to Random House. It did well. I went on to write five more novels, all to rave reviews. But the last two novels were flops. Babs was even more upset than I was. All her authors were extraordinarily successful, and her reputation as a rainmaker was legendary. Her motto, "Failure is not an option," was emblazoned on her business cards.

My mind drifted back to Babs.

"Let's face it, she has a whole different perspective on the world than you or I have. I think those of us over a certain age"—she fake-coughed into her fist—"are too...how do I say it? Immutable. We overthink things, we fact-check everything, we're bothered by improper grammar and constrained by the very genre tropes we bloody created."

To someone else, it may have sounded like Babs was merely expressing an opinion. But I knew Babs. She was sending me a message. Babs was distancing herself from me. The lunches we once shared, and the phone calls, had dwindled. This was her way of telling me she no longer had room on her roster for an aging woman who was writing herself into obscurity. Time to cull the herd. She would drop me without shedding a tear when the time came.

I watched Babs manoeuvre another piece of chicken and several lettuce leaves into the cavern that opened between ruby-red lips. "You two should meet," she said, chewing around the mouthful as she pointed her fork at me. "It might do you good to see what the new crop of writers are bringing to the table. Not to mention, I mean, the things this girl has gone through." Babs gave her shoulders an exagger-

ated shudder. "It sends chills up my spine just thinking about it."

"Oh?" I pushed the last shrimp on my plate to one side and put my fork down. "What happened to her?"

"She had the most horrifying experience with a stalker. The guy was totally deranged."

*Right. That's a lot worse than having your best friend murdered and losing seventeen loved ones over the years.* I picked up my wine glass and had another swallow. *Calm down.* A somewhat unformed idea floated through my brain.

I put my wine glass down and leaned forward. "How awful. I don't know if I told you, but my current novel is about a woman who's stalked. I've done research online, of course, but it might be useful to talk to someone who personally went through something like that."

"There's nothing like a firsthand account. The internet can only take you so far. You really need to get out of the house more, Nora. Go talk to people. I've been telling you that for years. The problem with your last two books is the characters are flat. Dimensionless. If you can't make your readers care about your characters, they sure as hell aren't going to care about you." Babs picked up her wine glass and drained it. "Speaking of—how *is* that manuscript of yours coming along?" Her eyebrows lifted a notch. I watched her tongue, hidden behind her pursed, ruby lips, sweep across her teeth.

I pulled in a huge breath and let it out slowly. "Good. Great. I'll be done the first draft soon. Should leave me with a few weeks to, you know—tighten it up. Maybe it would be helpful to talk to someone who has been stalked. Do you



think your mentee would be willing to talk to me about her experience?"

Babs tapped a red nail against the edge of her plate. "She might not want to share the details, but I'm sure she'll be able to tell you what it did to her as a person, as a woman of colour. How it's shaped her outlook on life."

"Would you be willing to introduce us? You know...if you think she wouldn't mind?"

Babs took a sip of water and set the glass down, now rimmed with lipstick. She lifted her hand as a waitress went by, signalling for the cheque. "Let me do my magic. Now I really must run. I have a meeting with the head of a film production company." She winked. "Looks like one of my authors is about to get richer."

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BABS HAD COME THROUGH FOR ME AND AFTER EXCHANGING A few messages on Facebook a meeting had been set up with her new mentee. My first meeting with Ava had been at a coffee shop.

Ava was as beautiful as her name. She was tall and lean with the grace of a dancer and skin the colour of a mocha cappuccino. During our first meeting I let her talk. She had wanted to know what it was like to be an accomplished writer. She had all kinds of questions for me and I had played the caring, older writer friend willing to share what I knew.

Today we were meeting over lunch. I searched the street until I spotted the sign for the Heavenly Vegan Café, a place

Ava had suggested. She was already seated at a table for two along the back wall when I got there.

“Hey there.” She stood and gave me a hug. “You’re going to love this place. They serve the best veggie dishes ever. The menu changes from day to day. Whatever they’re offering today is up on the blackboard.” She nodded at a chalkboard at the front of the café.

I pulled out my glasses and peered at the menu. I passed on the tofu roll and ordered a cashew and sweet potato burger, the closest thing I could find to real food. Ava ordered a thistle shot, some sort of vinegar-based concoction that claimed to balance the blood’s pH and cleanse your organs. Her main meal consisted of a nut and mushroom pâté that came with four tiny sunflower seed crackers.

Once our food arrived and the general niceties were behind us, Ava asked me what it was really like to work with Babs. She leaned forward, her soft brown eyes dancing with light, a smile ready on her lips. I didn’t want to spoil her illusion of the caring agent. I painted such a rosy picture I almost bought it myself. I told Ava pretty much the same thing Babs had told me when we first met. That when she found a talented writer, she would do anything to make sure their creative gift was recognized and rewarded. I felt a sharp pain pressing against my ribs as I parroted her words. Let’s face it—writing and publishing is a business. People are eager to help and support you...as long as you make them money. A lot of money. And Babs was ruthless when it came to money.

“I still remember the day I finally got to hold my own book in my hands. I owe Babs a lot. She really is a force to be reckoned with.”

Ava smiled. "I still can't believe my luck, getting her as my mentor." Ava had connected with Babs through pitch wars. Sort of like an online speed dating event but for agents and writers.

"With her in your corner, I'm sure your writing will get the attention and recognition it deserves. And you will, too," I added quickly.

My hands shook as I picked up my burger. I felt like vomiting, but time was running out.

"Umm...ah...Barbara told me you had a frightening experience with a stalker. I'm sorry to hear you went through that. Must have been awful."

Ava stiffened.

"Sorry, I don't mean to pry. Barbara only mentioned it to me because she knows the manuscript I'm working on is about a woman who is stalked. I was cyberstalked after my second book came out."

Ava's eyes widened.

"Yeah. An unfortunate fallout of having one's name out there. It only went on for about a month, but it took me a long time to put it out of my mind."

Ava's shoulders relaxed. "I still don't think I'm over it. It was awful."

I nodded. "I was shocked it affected me like it did. For the character in the novel I'm writing, it shows up as loss. You know? Loss of innocence, loss of control. Loss of trust."

"That's it exactly. It's left me permanently scarred. I'm always looking over my shoulder. I'm afraid to go places alone. I'm suspicious of anyone new I meet. I haven't dated anyone since it happened."

I took a gamble. “He was someone you knew, someone you trusted.”

Ava nodded, her big brown eyes growing moist. I had guessed right. “It makes it worse, doesn’t it? When you know them.”

Slowly, Ava let her story out. Turned out the guy was an English professor at university. He was a big fan of Chris Carter, a former criminal psychologist who writes brilliant serial killer thrillers, as was Ava. At first, they were excited to find out they loved the same authors. He had complimented Ava on her writing and was one of the reasons she put pen to paper. They started to meet more frequently. Ava thought him worldly and handsome and was flattered at the interest he showed her.

“When I met him, he was working on a psychological thriller. He was already published, but all nonfiction. He told me he had written a couple of crime novels when he was just out of university. I asked if I could read them and he laughed—said, thankfully, they’d never been published. I felt myself falling for him. I knew he was married, so we kept it purely platonic...at least for a while.”

I nodded. “Did he talk about the thriller he was writing?”

“Not specifically. But we had the most intense discussions about killers...and authors who write about them.”

“Interesting.”

“It was. At first. We talked about what a writer has to do if they’re going to do a good job of portraying a killer. The author has to somehow put themselves into the mind of the killer.”

I thought back to what Babs said, about talking to

someone who experienced the crime themselves. “How does one do that? I suppose one can talk to someone in prison, but that’s pretty difficult to orchestrate unless you somehow know that person.”

Ava swallowed. “Well, there is one other way.”

---

MY PHONE DINGED, TELLING ME I HAD FIVE MINUTES UNTIL I HAD to leave. It had been a little over a week since Ava told me about her involvement with the professor. About his grand scheme to produce the best psychological thriller ever written.

I had been typing like a madwoman ever since, filling in scenes Ava had mentioned with fictional details. Ava told me that over the weeks and months she and the professor talked about the criminal mind, how that drove outward behaviour, what secrets festered inside. Ava got caught up in the discussions. They drank wine and laughed as they recalled all the stupid mistakes real and fictional criminals make—leading to their capture. They talked about what they would do instead. It felt like a game. Until Ava realized he was serious. He was going to kill someone.

Sometime over the last few weeks, spring had arrived, and today Ava and I were meeting at the park, near the food trucks.

She arrived almost the same time I did, walking briskly from the other direction, wearing the latest fashion gear. A forest-green vest over a cream-coloured long-sleeve shirt and black leggings.

She gave me a little wave and pulled the earbuds from her ears. By the time she reached me, her headphones were tucked away in a small cross-body purse and a big smile lit her face.

"Hi there. What a gorgeous day," I called out.

"I came early. Got my steps in for the day."

"Good for you." I pulled in my gut. "Want anything to eat?"

"No. You go ahead though. I'm on a cleanse."

I veered toward one of the food trucks. "I had a big breakfast—it'll more than do me until dinner. But I really need a coffee."

I didn't need the coffee; my hands were already clammy, and my heart was racing. She waited patiently while I paid.

"So, what's new? How's the writing going?" I asked, checking that the lid on my coffee was set tight.

"I'm done." Her face beamed. "It's only the first draft. I sent it to Barbara last night."

"Good for you! I mean it. You know how many people out there say they want to write a book but never do it? It feels amazing, doesn't it?" I gave her my brightest smile.

"I can't even..." She lifted her hands, palms up, and shook her head. "Of course, it's only the first step but..." She shrugged.

"It is only step one, but you don't get to the next step without it. Congrats! You should celebrate."

"Thanks. Two of my girlfriends are taking me out tonight. I swear, it feels like I haven't been out of the house in months!" She laughed. "How's your novel going? I know you have a tight timeline."

"I just have to write the ending and the wrap up—you know, explain away any loose threads. But I think I'm going to make it. Or at least, I did...until this morning."

She turned concerned eyes toward me. "What happened?"

"Remember that cyber-stalker I told you about? It looks like I've picked up another one."

"Oh no."

Ava and I drifted over to one of the park benches and sat.

"I've been getting some odd messages over the weeks on my socials in addition to the usual slew of Facebook friend requests—which I always accept. This morning I got another Facebook request, but something just didn't look right. I looked over the last seven or eight friend requests I accepted and realized five of them were from the same man."

"The same guy?"

"Same guy all right. He used a different name each time and changed his appearance somewhat, but it's the same guy. I looked back over the comments being made on my posts. The ones from this guy border on being inappropriate."

"What are you going to do?"

"I blocked him, of course, and all his alter egos. But now I'm obsessing again. I could have sworn someone was watching my house this morning. What if he's out there, watching us now?" I nodded at the few dozen people sitting on nearby benches or playing frisbee with their dogs. Ava took the bait.

"Oh god." She clutched a fist to her chest. "That's my worst nightmare. That he'll come back."

"Your stalker?"

She nodded. "I don't know if I told you, but that last spring I was seeing him, a girl on campus died. Someone broke into her apartment, raped, and killed her. Police said there was no sign of a break-in. She either knew the killer and let him in or he somehow got a hold of her key and made a copy."

I shuddered. "That's way too close to home. Did you know her?"

"No. It really creeped me out though. I didn't want to talk about it but the next time I saw him, he dissected the case, like it was his own private crime scene. He said the guy seemed to know what he was doing—like maybe this wasn't his first kill." Ava's face twisted with the memory. "His voice, I still can't get it out of my head. And the look on his face. He sounded like the killer did something he should be admired for. I even considered going to the police. But what would I say?"

"So, what did you do?"

"I wanted to break it off with him, but I was scared to. I became paranoid. Obsessed. I started to think—what if he has already done this? I started scanning the papers, listening to the news morning and night. A man is run over—a hit and run—but I wonder if he could have done it. A homeless man overdoses—was it another opioid death or was he given doctored drugs? What if he's the person behind some of the missing women who were never found, and him discussing a murderer's mind is his way of bragging?"

"Wow! I never would have thought of that. I mean...that's so awful."

"Just seeing him on campus sent me into a panic attack.



What if I was meant to be his victim and he was taking some sort of perverted pleasure in making me a somewhat willing participant.”

“Holy crap. What a nightmare.” My head was already whirling. Truth was indeed stranger than fiction. “I have no idea what I would have done under the circumstances.”

“The week after the girl was murdered on campus, I couldn’t find my house keys. I knew I had them when I left for school that morning—I remembered locking up and dropping the keys in my purse.”

“Oh god, Ava.” My hand flew to my chest. “Were you still seeing him?”

“Yes, although not as often. I had been making up excuses to not see him. The last few times we met, he seemed different. It wasn’t a game anymore. I could see from the way he looked at me that he knew I was afraid of him, that something between us had changed.”

“But you did eventually break up with him.”

“I remember the night I was going to tell him. I met him at a bar. I told a friend of mine I was going to meet him there—to tell him we were done.”

“Did she know what was going on—that he might be a murderer or be planning one?”

“No. I never told anyone about that. How do you say that and then justify staying in the relationship? But I had all the locks changed before I went to meet him—told my friend, who had a key, that I had lost them and needed to make sure some creep hadn’t found them and figured out where I lived.”

"How did he take it? I mean when you told him you didn't want to see him anymore?"

"Not well. I told him I still had feelings for him—that the reason I was ending it was that it wasn't right for either of us. He was married and I had a job lined up at the end of the semester in Vancouver, interning at a magazine. I said we had to be realistic—a long-distance relationship was hard enough to maintain without the added complication of a spouse. That the longer we stayed in the relationship, the harder it would become to end it."

"Smart move." I nodded. "Did you have a job lined up in Vancouver?"

"Yes, but it was still a few months away. He started stalking me. I'd see him outside my apartment at three in the morning. He sent flowers, and chocolates—which, of course, I threw out, certain they were poisoned."

I shuddered. "Oh no."

"Then about a month later a girl died—a girl I knew. He had met her at a party I took him to."

"Holy jeez." My head was spinning. "Did you tell the police?"

"I thought about it. It was all circumstantial evidence—I didn't have a shred of proof." She turned toward me. Her hand gripped the back of the park bench, her knuckles white. "We even discussed it several months earlier—how circumstantial evidence isn't good enough to convict someone."

"That's sick."

"I told him to stop stalking me—that I'd report him to the police if he didn't quit."

"How did he take that?"

“He laughed. He said he’d claim I had become obsessed with *him*—that we did have consensual sex a few times, but I became possessive, jealous. He said he’d turn it around on me and say when he broke up with me, I flipped. That I threatened to kill someone—and said I’d set it up to look like him.”

“Ava. This is beyond sick.” I had no trouble keeping the astonishment out of my voice.

“You’re telling me. After the semester was over, I changed my name and moved here.”

I wondered why I couldn’t find her on social media. “So, Ava Lanelle isn’t your real name?”

“Yes and no. Lanelle is my middle name. It’s been three years and I’m still terrified he’ll find me some day. I worry what will happen if I ever get published.” She laughed bitterly. “Of course, most debut authors don’t get much publicity anyway, so I’m probably worried for nothing.”

“Wow. And you’ve never told anyone this story?”

“No.”

“Not even Barbara?” I took a sip of cold coffee and watched her face closely.

“She knows I was stalked—but she really has no idea how awful it was...still is. I’m so grateful Barbara’s helping me with my writing, but I think if I told her this...she’d see me differently. Our relationship would change.”

“How so?”

Ava looked down at her feet and kicked at a loose pebble. “I’m still horrified when I hear myself say it. I actually planned a perfect murder with this perv. Who does that?” She looked up; her eyes met mine. “You won’t tell her, will you? I’ve never told anyone this before. But you’re so easy to

talk to—maybe because you know what it’s like to be stalked.”

With assurances I wouldn’t tell a soul, I rushed home, eager to get the details of Ava’s nightmare into my computer, while it was still fresh in my mind. I changed some of the details, of course. In my novel, the protagonist is named Lucie and she meets her future stalker in a bar, a cop who seems nice but after seeing so many murders himself, finds his mind slipping into darkness.

The days flew by. I finished the draft and my first pass edits with three days to spare. I had to make up a different ending to the story from Ava’s, of course. I couldn’t have my protagonist just change her name and move somewhere—it would be anticlimactic. And the only way Ava was ever going to find out if her real-life stalker killed someone is if he got caught. So, in my novel I made the protagonist so distraught, so desperate to end the hell she’s in that she kills the guy—even though it means she’ll never know if her worst fears about him were right.

Barbara went apeshit over it. I got a call from her the day after I sent her the manuscript. She must have stayed up all night to read it.

“Nora, my darling. You outdid yourself on this one. I’ve already sent it off to the senior editor at Random House. He’s going to love it.”

I swallowed hard. “Really? What about rewrites?”

“Nora, I told you. It’s outstanding. The plot is fabulous, your characters so real, even your writing and grammar is on point. I mean, there might be a few tweaks here and there,

but it wouldn't surprise me if Random House pushes it into their fall release."

My face was on fire. I could feel the sweat break out on my forehead. "So, it could be out in six months?"

"You know how it is. The bigger the author, the shorter the queue. Way to go, Nora. It wouldn't surprise me to hear they want to start the marketing campaign right away. I'm going to make sure you get a hefty advance on this one. We're going to negotiate the movie rights separately."

"Movie rights?" I reached out a hand to steady myself as the room spun.

Babs gave me one of her throaty laughs. "Don't you see how good your manuscript is? It's bloody brilliant."

I felt excited and sick at the same time. Like when you overeat at a friend's birthday party and then wish you hadn't.

I couldn't sleep that night, or the next few either. The nightmare was back. This time instead of my aunt pointing at some horror she saw in the forest, the night before she died, she was pointing at Ava, who stood in the trees, shadowed by an evil black fog. I tossed and turned, fighting with the sheets all night. The horror of what I did sank into my bones, leaving me with symptoms not unlike lead poisoning. I had been given one last shot to redeem myself as an author and what did I do? I stole Ava's story.

A week later, it was confirmed. The senior editors at Random House loved it. Like Babs predicted, the marketing team was already putting together their publicity campaign. The book cover and trailer would be out in two months. I had a big problem on my hands.

I know the copyright page at the start of every fiction

book starts with a disclaimer: *Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real people or actual events is entirely coincidental.* Who was I kidding? This was Ava's story and she'd recognize it as such. What if it pushed her to do what she should have done all those months and years ago? What if she went to the police? Or worse yet, the press.

I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I couldn't leave the house. Going into my home office, which over the years had become my favourite room in the house, now distressed me. I read and reread pages of my manuscript, searching lines, words, phrases. Maybe I had changed enough of the story so Ava couldn't claim it as hers. The voices in my head continued their deliberation. I'd be all right. No, I'd be sued. I was going to end up going mad—like Virginia Woolf.

Then Ava called me. And things really took a turn for the worse.

"Nora. It's Ava."

"Ava. How are you?"

"Hope you don't mind me calling you. It's not too late, is it?"

"No, no. I was just straightening up my office. Might go for a walk a little bit later." My eyes searched the room frantically until they landed on the microwave clock. 10:15 p.m. I cringed, then laughed—rather hysterically, I thought. "Oh dear, the time has gotten away from me today. Might have to leave that walk until tomorrow."

"I know it's getting late, so I won't keep you. But I just wanted to share my good news."

"Oh?" I pushed a strand of greasy grey-streaked hair back

off my forehead. "Did Barbara like your manuscript? Is she going to pitch it to a publisher?"

"That little piece of fluff? No, no. Of course, writing it taught me a lot. Barbara's edit notes were awesome, too. She said my writing is strong but the story itself isn't compelling enough for the bigger publishers. I guess I never really expected my first manuscript to go anywhere. But I might have a chance with the second one."

"You're writing another one? That's great."

"Just following your advice. I remember you telling me not to make the same mistake a lot of new authors make. Writing just one novel and tying their whole success to that one effort."

"Well, good for you."

"That's why I'm calling you. I wanted to thank you. I really owe book two to you."

I felt the blood drain from my face. My fingers gripped the phone so tightly the muscles in my forearm were starting to seize. "How so?" I tried to add a lilt to my voice, but it fell flat.

"I swore I was going to leave my past behind. But telling you my story was so cathartic. Instead of hiding my experience away, feeling the shame I've been feeling for playing that sick man's game, you made me realize I'm a survivor. He was my professor; I looked up to him. And he took advantage of that. He made me afraid, smaller, diminished me and tainted my outlook on life. I don't want that to be the thing that shapes my actions. I realized I can use that horrible experience to my advantage."

"You're...umm...." My voice cracked. I cleared my throat.

Ava was still talking.

“Barbara says the best writing comes from those writers who can put emotion into their words. I can do that! I’m going to write a book based on my sick, horrifying experience. And if he comes at me again, I’ll point him out to everyone. I won’t be intimidated by that creep anymore.”

I must have muttered the appropriate words because the next thing I remember was waking up on the couch with an empty bottle of Jack Daniels dangling from my hand. The room spun as I sat up, leaving me disoriented for several minutes. Then last night’s phone call from Ava came back. She said she was going to dedicate the book to me—her way to show her thanks.

I staggered to my feet. I was going to be sick. The last thing I needed was my name linked to hers. But now I could see how that was never going to happen. She would be mentioning me in all her interviews, how her writer friend Nora was instrumental in her healing process.

There was no possible way anyone would buy my assertion that the similarities to her story and my fictional one were similar by coincidence. Even if Ava couldn’t categorically prove I had written her story without her permission, the press would ruin me. I had given Ava my word I would never repeat what she told me. I could be sued for libel. I’d never recover from this.

And then I knew what I had to do.



GETTING MY HANDS ON THE ALPRAZOLAM WAS EASY. A FRIEND of mine had given me fifteen tablets from her prescription a few years ago, when I started having panic attacks. I still had ten left. It's a common enough ingredient in many anti-anxiety drugs and Ava had told me she still took Xanax to help her sleep.

I had it all planned out. Ava had shared all the tricks with me: don't leave fingerprints, have a solid alibi, find a witness who can corroborate your story. I would arrange for her to meet me for a walk in the park, maybe by the food trucks where we met before. I could see her in my mind's eye. Her long, flowy hair, pulled into a ponytail, swinging behind her. Heads would turn to admire her stupendous body as she strutted toward me. A stupid little princess with her idiotic grin and fancy water bottle.

I had ordered a water bottle just like the one she always had with her. A rose-coloured metal container with a famous designer's logo outlined with little sparkly crystals. I ordered it using an internet café—there were still a few around. Just to be safe, I paid cash for my computer time and had the water bottle shipped to a friend's house.

I would slip the Alprazolam into her water bottle when she went to use the washroom. With the volume of water she drank each day, a visit to the washroom was guaranteed. We would likely be at the far end of the park when Ava's balance became impaired. She'd feel dizzy and weak. She'd be thirsty, too, and the way that girl guzzled water, her water bottle would be half empty. I'd offer to get her more water from a nearby fountain and leave her sitting on a bench. On the way to the fountain, I would stick Ava's water bottle in my back-

pack and take out the identical one I'd purchased and fill it with water from the fountain.

I was counting on one or two passersby to stop by the bench, to ask Ava if she was okay. I could see myself rushing up to them with the newly filled water bottle.

"Here, Ava. I got you some more water." I said the words out loud, practising my delivery.

By now Ava's breathing would be fast. Her lips might be slowly turning blue. She might vomit and shake.

"Oh my god, Ava. Ava, are you okay?" I tried out the exclamation a few times until I got it right. "Oh god. She's not okay." I would look around frantically, pull out my cell phone and call 911. I was counting on a few witnesses in the usually busy park to see my angst.

It would take a while for the paramedics to get there. We would, after all, be on the opposite side of the park, nowhere near the road or parking lot. I'd tell them we had just been walking when Ava said she didn't feel well. She felt dizzy, nauseous, had started to sweat. I would mention she took Xanax for anxiety and worry out loud about the possibility of a heart attack. By the time they got to the hospital, her heart should have stopped. If it didn't, nothing in the water bottle would tie her condition to anything I did. If tests were run, they might discover she had overdosed on her anti-anxiety medication.

Later that evening, maybe on my way home from the hospital, I would empty and throw Ava's water bottle into a dumpster.

When I had it all down pat, I called Ava. She had to work the next night but agreed to meet me at the park the

following day. Our fates were sealed. I remember getting the vodka out of the fridge and crying.

I woke up on the couch, the vodka bottle now almost empty, cradled to my chest. I squinted. The sun was painfully bright. A woman's voice pierced the fog that surrounded my brain. I rolled over and blinked my eyes. The image on the TV came into focus. Ava's photo was on the screen.

I bolted upright, sending the room spinning.

"A young woman was found late last night at the intersection of McDougal and Thirty-Second Avenue by a passing motorist. The woman has been identified as Ava Lanelle Wilson. Police believe she is the victim of a hit and run. If you have any information about this incident or were in the vicinity last night between midnight and 3 a.m., police would like to talk to you."

I put my head in my hands and my shoulders heaved as huge sobs interspersed with manic laughter overtook me.

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BABS AND I MET FOR LUNCH THE FOLLOWING WEEK. THIS TIME she took me to Alphonso's, an upscale bistro in the historical district.

"I still can't get over Ava dying. I just feel sick about it." I didn't have to fake it. Her death had affected me in ways I never imagined. Sometimes I would start crying for no reason at all. Although I should have felt some sense of relief, I found myself waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Could have knocked me over with a feather, too." Babs

shook back the stacked bracelets she wore on her arm and reached for the breadbasket.

“There was hardly anything in the paper. Someone said they saw a black BMW in the area but didn’t see it hit Ava.”

Babs raised an eyebrow, spread a heavy layer of butter on her bread, took a bite.

“They didn’t make any mention of her manuscript. The paper said she was an actress and worked part time as a salesclerk.”

“You didn’t know that?” Babs asked.

“No. I knew she worked part time at Nighty Nine. She told me the pay was crap, but they gave her a good employee discount on clothes. She never said anything about being an actress.”

“Well, there you go. This bread is marvellous. They bake it fresh here every morning. Aren’t you having any?”

I was still puzzled by the lack of mention of her writing endeavours, but then again, it’s not like she was published. Maybe if I were truthful with myself, I was worried the second manuscript she’d been working on would surface. She couldn’t have gotten very far with it though, could she? It had only been a month since she told me she was going to write it. But I couldn’t seem to let it go.

“Ava told me you didn’t think her first manuscript was enticing enough to pitch to editors. She told me she had decided she would try writing a second one.” I swallowed. “About her stalking experience.”

“Ummhmm. She did mention it to me. She should have stuck with the acting.”

I reached for the bread, then changed my mind. “She told

me you thought her writing was good. That's not the case?" I slumped back against the chair.

Babs used a long talon to remove a piece of bread stuck in her teeth and didn't reply.

"I suppose her manuscripts will end up with whoever inherits her estate."

"Estate?" Babs laughed, a forced, unpleasant laugh. "Nora, my dear, you are losing touch with reality. Poor black girls who are struggling actresses and taking crap jobs to support themselves don't have estates."

This was the Babs I knew. "What I mean is, her computer and files will likely go to her family. Maybe someone will want to pick up the story where Ava left off." I realized I was looking for reassurances from someone who would never give them to me.

"Nora, Nora, Nora. You still don't get it, do you? I thought after writing all those crime novels you'd have figured it out by now."

I sat up. "Figured what out?"

"I've told you over and over, haven't I? Failure is not an option. Not for one of my writers." She picked up her wine glass and tipped it back. "Your failure is my failure. And I can't have that."

I felt myself growing pale. I looked at my hand resting on the table. It looked solid enough, but I felt empty, like a pinata that had just been smashed open.

It was true. Everyone who ever worked with her went on to have a big career. She claimed she would do whatever it took to push her clients up the slope until they reached the pinnacle. My knees grew weak.

“What are you saying?” My voice wavered.

“Figure it out, Nora.”

I shook my head. The publisher loved my book. The cover reveal party at a local bookstore was already scheduled for next week. Babs’ eyes flashed. Her clenched fist lay on the table and I could see the red half-moon crescents her nails were making. Everything was moving around us—servers, customers—and we sat motionless in the middle. I couldn’t get the words out of my mouth to ask.

Babs laughed, her lips twisting grotesquely, exposing lipstick on her teeth. “You think I couldn’t tell that you were stuck—you had nothing. Your last two books were a disaster. I got a call from the publisher himself. They were done with you. I pleaded with him to give you another chance.” She leaned forward, her voice now a hiss. “Do you hear me? I had to beg your publisher for a second chance.” She edged back a bit and glanced around the room. “But you were going to blow it. You were going to miss your deadline. So, I had to go back again, on bended knee. Even with the extension I got you, I could tell you had nothing. But you kept lying to me and saying the manuscript was coming along. I had to do something. I wasn’t going to let a hack writer like you ruin my reputation.”

“But...what...” I couldn’t breathe in nor out. A flash of pain sparked in my head, so sharp I almost dropped to the ground. Babs drove a BMW. *Babs orchestrated Ava’s death.* “What are you...” I managed to choke out, then had to stop to swallow back the bitter acid rising in my throat.

“It’s a shame, really. She was a rather good little actress, wouldn’t you say? But she couldn’t just take my money and

run with it." She leaned forward. I could smell her warm, garlicky breath and her teeth looked enormous between her twisted red lips."

"I...I..." I looked around for the washroom, one hand on my stomach. I was going to be sick.

"Oh, don't seem so shocked. Can you honestly tell me you never entertained the idea of murdering her yourself when she announced she was going to write her stalking story?"

*She killed Ava.* I looked around for a place to vomit. My knees went to rubber. I couldn't leave the table if I wanted to.

"She told me her whole sad story when we first met. Poor little victim." Babs delivered the line in a silly girly voice. "All she had to do was tell you the damn story. I paid her good money. But no. The little bitch recorded all her meetings with you. Then she came to me and threatened to expose the whole thing unless I paid her more. You think she'd stop there? How much would you have paid her to keep quiet once the book was out? How much would I have to pay her?"

I felt my heart skip several beats and a pain shot through my chest. Every molecule in my body was in motion.

I reached out for my water glass, but my hand was shaking so badly, I tucked it back under my thigh. "Oh god. You...oh god. I'm so sorry..." The tears started to fall. "What are you going to do, Babs?"

"Nothing, my dear Nora." She sat back. "The publisher loves our book—this book is going to make all of us a lot of money. Not to mention the social currency that comes with a bestseller. But you owe me, Nora. You owe me big time."

"I do, Babs. I do. I'll do whatever you want. I'm so sorry." I realized she and I were a lot alike. Except she was more

talented. And ruthless. I had planned Ava's death. She just beat me to it. My brain was trying to catch up. Instead of processing what I had just heard, it was playing havoc with my thoughts, my emotions, my body. I deserved it. Babs was right about me. I was a washed-up hack. Ava was dead. And I had just become an accessory to murder.

I excused myself and rushed for the washroom. I threw up but it didn't make me feel any better. I washed my hands and ran a wet paper towel over my face. My eyes looked empty in the mirror. I stood there until another woman came in. She gave me a weak smile and ducked into a cubicle.

I got back to the table just as our food arrived. I couldn't even fathom having a bite. Babs picked up her knife and fork and dug in.

"Chin up, Nora. No use wasting an experience—or good food."

The implications of what had happened were finally sinking in.

"Here's what you're going to do, Nora. Your next novel will be about a pathetic, almost washed-up writer who is desperate for one last shot at fame. She meets a new writer, befriends her and then, under the guise of helping the poor unsuspecting soul, steals her ideas. Should be easy for you to write. Of course, there has to be a murder. I'll let you have some creative freedom with it, and you can decide who kills who."

I walked home after lunch in a daze. For the first time in weeks, the hyenas howling in my head had settled a bit, although a few still circled menacingly. Babs left me flabbergasted, astonished at her...what? Loyalty? Willing complicit-



ity? Greed? It left me both dumbstruck and terrified. Whatever happened now, she owned me. Then I realized she had always owned me. It wasn't just about money and fame for Babs, it was about power.

In some peculiar way, it took the pressure off. A thought zinged through my head, stopping me in my tracks. What else had she done to ensure the success of her other writers?

I might go to hell, but I wasn't going to rot in prison. At least not yet. I continued down the street, my steps quickened. The premise she outlined for the next book was awesome. I'd change things around, of course. I could make the washed-up author a man. Maybe his protégé would be young, handsome. To make matters worse, I'd have the protégé sleep with the author's wife.

Or maybe the protégé would discover the author was really his biological father who abandoned him and his mother the minute he found out she was pregnant and never sent her a nickel of support from the rather sizable fortune he'd made.

I started to hum a tune in my head. I was full of ideas.

Maybe...wait...oh yes! Maybe a few books from now I could write about a literary agent, a psychopath so obsessed with success that she killed anyone standing in her authors' way.

I could hardly wait to get home and sit down at my keyboard. Of course, next time someone asks me where I get my ideas from, I'll have to credit my killer muse.

THE END

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## ALICE BIENIA

**Alice Bienia** is an Alberta crime writer and author of the *Jorja Knight Mystery Series*. Her first novel, *Knight Blind*, was a finalist for the Arthur Ellis award for Best Unpublished Crime Manuscript. Her short fiction is published in *The Dame Was Trouble* and *Crime Wave* anthologies, which feature some of the best female crime writers of Canada.

With a Bachelor of Science degree in geology, Alice spent her early career conducting field exploration programs in remote regions of Canada, where she honed her passion for storytelling, reading, coffee, and adventure. After riding the energy industry rollercoaster for thirty-five years, Alice has finally found a way to put her inherent introversion to use and now writes full time.

Alice is a member of Sisters in Crime, Crime Writers of Canada, and the Writers' Guild of Alberta. When not plotting

ALICE BIENIA

a murder, Alice amuses herself watching foreign flicks, fending off her two aggressively affectionate cats, and exploring Calgary's urban parks and pathways.

Visit Alice at [www.alicebienia.com](http://www.alicebienia.com)

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### **The Jorja Knight Mystery Series**

Knight Blind

Knight Trials

Three Dog Knight (Fall 2021)

ON THE RUN

DWAYNE CLAYDEN





ON THE RUN  
DWAYNE CLAYDEN

MAY 1975

THE WAITRESS DROPPED THEIR BREAKFAST ON THE TABLE. Constable Brad Coulter held out his coffee for a refill. She walked away.

“She doesn’t like us,” Constable Curtis Young said.

“Probably you. I never had this problem before you started working with me.” Brad shoved a full fork of egg and hash browns into his mouth. “I’d be more worried about the cook. He usually spits in the food.”

Curtis slid his eggs to the side of the plate.

Brad and Curtis became friends during the police academy, but for the last four years had worked in different districts. When Curtis transferred in, Brad begged their sergeant to let them work together. Brad was six-one and a fit one hundred and eighty-five pounds with close-cropped

brown hair. Curtis was a couple inches shorter, stockier, with broad shoulders and a quick grin.

"Looks like we'll be able to have breakfast." Curtis calmly applied peanut butter to his brown toast.

Brad's eyes widened. He held out his fork. "Don't even think it."

Curtis laughed. "You and your superstitions."

Brad had been a cop long enough to know better than to utter words like *quiet* or tempt fate by implying it would be an easy shift. Brad shoveled his breakfast into his mouth faster.

"I'm thinking it." Curtis took his first bite of toast.

Their radio came alive. "Delta 411," dispatch said. "Missing child from Earl Grey Elementary School."

Brad's eyes were blazing as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Idiot." Food sprayed onto the table. He grabbed his radio and pressed the transmit button. "411, responding."

"Roger, 411. Eight-year-old boy did not arrive at school. The school secretary called home to see if he was sick. His mother stated he'd left for school on time."

Brad tossed money on the table as he and Curtis raced out the door to their cruiser. Brad had the engine running before Curtis was completely in the car. Brad put the car in gear and accelerated. Curtis' door swung back with a thud.

"Seatbelts," Curtis said.

"Right, mom," Brad replied. He maneuvered the cruiser down back streets, avoiding the last of the morning's rush-hour traffic. He swung onto Royal Avenue and then up Hope Street. The brakes squealed as he stopped at the school's entrance on Hillcrest Avenue.



They sprinted up the sidewalk and into the main office. A mid-fifties lady with brown hair pulled back into a bun, a red face and wringing hands met them. Her eyes were wide and darted back and forth over the office.

"Thank goodness you're here." She was breathing so fast she could barely get a sentence out. "Ryan is a good boy. He's never late. When he didn't arrive, I phoned to see if he was sick. His mom said he wasn't and had left for school."

Curtis put a hand on her shoulder. "You did the right thing. If you are going to help us, I need you to slow down your breathing."

She gasped a few times, then her breathing gradually slowed.

"Good," Curtis said. "Now, when did school start?"

"About fifteen minutes ago."

Curtis glanced at Brad.

Brad turned to a lady on the other side of the office. "I'm Brad."

"Lydia, vice-principal. What do you need me to do?"

"What's his full name and what does he look like?" Brad asked.

"Ryan Jones," Lydia said. "I just caught a glimpse of him before school started. Eight years of age, sandy-brown hair, wearing a blue T-shirt, blue jeans and white runners."

Brad pulled out his radio. "Dispatch, 411. We have a missing child." He described Ryan. "Last seen in front of the Earl Grey school. Can you get units to circulate through the area? Over." Brad turned back to Lydia. "I need a picture. Then, if you can, I need about a hundred copies."

"Sure, I can do that." She stepped to a file cabinet and

pulled out a file which had a photo clipped to the front page. She slid the photo out and placed it in a copier. Brad waited as the copier spit out photos.

They turned at the sound of a female screaming from the front entrance. A woman with blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, puffy red eyes and tears flowing down her face rushed toward them. She was gasping for breath. "Ryan. Oh, my, Ryan. Are you sure he's not here?"

Lydia rushed over and took the lady in her arms and tried to soothe her. "Everything will be okay. The police are searching. Ryan may just be outside."

The mother backed away. "Are you sure? It's not like Ryan to not show up for school. He loves school."

Brad stepped toward the mom. "I'm Constable Brad Coulter. What's your name?"

"I'm Mary Jones. Ryan's mom. I'm so worried."

"We've got every police officer in the area looking for him. If he's wandered off, we will find him."

Brad turned to the vice-principal. "I need to talk to his friends, his classmates, those who might have been with him outside."

"Certainly. Follow me." Lydia headed out of the office and down the hall.

They stopped outside Classroom Twelve. Lydia knocked and stepped into the classroom.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Miss French. This police officer would like to talk to your class." Lydia turned toward Brad and nodded. "Class, this is Constable Brad Coulter. He has some questions to ask you."

Brad stepped into the classroom, moved to the front of the room and leaned against the desk. "Good morning, class."

"Good morning," several students said.

"Are you a real police officer?" a boy at the front asked.

Brad smiled. "Yes. I have something very serious to talk about with you. Please don't be worried, but I have some questions. Ryan Jones didn't show up in school today. We know he left his house and headed this way. He may have been out front of the school. Did any of you see him this morning?"

Brad waited and peered around the room. Some kids openly shook their heads, others stared at him—well, probably at his gun—and there were two who didn't make eye contact.

"This is serious. Please tell me if you saw Ryan. You are not in trouble. Nobody is in trouble. We need to find Ryan. If you know something that will help us, please tell me."

Again he glanced around the room. The same two boys kept their heads down, staring at their hands on the table.

Brad stepped over to Lydia, leaned toward her and whispered, "The two boys in the back of the room. I need to talk to them. Alone."

Lydia stepped to the center of the room. "All right, class. We are going to the gymnasium. Except for Johnny and Billy. If you could stay behind for a few minutes, that would be great. Thank you, boys."

The teacher led the students out of the classroom and the vice-principal followed behind, closing the door.

Brad headed to the back of the classroom. At first, he thought he would sit at a desk. Then he realized that if he

tried, he'd be wedged in and it was unlikely he'd be able to get out. Instead, he took a knee and got down to the boys' level.

"Look, guys, you know something. I need you to tell me. I've already told you you're not in trouble. But I don't have any time to waste. Ryan needs your help."

Johnny glanced at Billy, then turned to Brad. "Ryan was out front of the school with us, playing tag. When the bell rang for the start of classes, Ryan was on the sidewalk, standing at the door of a van. When I got to the school doors and looked back, the van was pulling away. I didn't see Ryan. Then I went to class. That's all I know."

"Tell me about the van. What did it look like?" Brad asked.

Johnny shrugged. "It was like...well, just a van."

Brad nodded. "Okay, what color was it?"

Johnny glanced at Billy. Billy said, "It was like, I guess, silver or gray."

"Yeah, that's what I think, too," Johnny said.

"Did it have any windows?"

"Yeah, it did," Billy said. "The window Ryan was talking through."

Brad suppressed a chuckle. "Right. So, Ryan was talking through the passenger window, to the driver. Now, behind those windows, were there any more windows along the side?"

The boys glanced at each other and shook their heads.

"Great job, boys. Was there any writing on the side of the van?"

Again the boys glanced at each other, then Johnny said, "Nope. I didn't see nothing."

"This is great, guys. One last question. Did either of you see who was driving?"

Johnny shook his head right away. "Nope. I didn't see anybody driving."

"You guys run to the gym. Thank you."

Brad grabbed his portable radio. "Dispatch, this is 411. Please broadcast on all channels we are looking for a silver or gray cargo van with no writing on the side. I don't know make or year. It was last seen twenty to twenty-five minutes ago at Earl Grey school and is a suspect vehicle in the kidnaping of an eight-year-old boy."

Brad jogged down the hall toward the main office. Curtis met him in the hall. Colorful finger paintings papered the walls.

"The photos are being distributed to all cruisers and paramedics. Dispatch arranged for the current recruit class to meet here and do a neighborhood canvass. K9 is on the way, but getting a track at a school might be a challenge. If the kid got into the van, then there'll be no track."

Brad sighed, his eyes landing on a carefree drawing of a dinosaur on a rocket ship. "I know. What haven't we thought of?"

"The kids you talked to. Are they positive Ryan got into the van?"

Brad frowned. "No. He was by the door, then when they looked back, the van was pulling away. Ryan wasn't there."

"413 to 411."

Brad grabbed his portable radio. "Go ahead, 413."

"I need to talk. Give me a phone number."

Brad sprinted into the office. "I need your phone number here."

The principal handed over a card, and Brad read the number to 413.

"What's up?" Curtis asked.

"I'm not sure. Jerry Briscoe wants to talk to me."

"He's a good cop, but he scares the crap out of me."

"Me, too," Brad said.

The phone rang and Brad grabbed the receiver. "Coulter."

"Rookie, it's Briscoe. Look. I had an idea, so I followed up on it."

"Okay. What did you find?"

"You know that guy in Echo 5 that they're watching? Vern Rapp."

Brad's eyes widened. "The pedophile that's out on parole?"

"That's the guy. Conditions are that he can only be at the Chicken Restaurant or at home. It's too early for work, so we checked Rapp's apartment. He ain't there."

"Ah shit," Brad said. "You don't think?"

"There ain't no such thing as coincidence, rookie. Kid missing, Rapp on the run. This ain't good."

Brad had the phone jammed against his head. "He was caught before my time. What was his MO?"

"Rapp grabbed boys between eight and twelve. He used any vehicle he could steal. He took them to a park and assaulted them."

Brad felt his stomach flip, and his breath caught in his chest. "Oh, shit."

"You guys need to head to Stanley Park. That's the closest park to the school. I'll get dispatch to send cruisers from Charlie District."

"Got it." Brad slammed down the receiver. "Curtis, we need to go."

They sprinted to their cruiser.

"What's going on?" Curtis asked as they pulled away from the school.

"There's a pedophile out on bail. Vern Rapp. He's not where he's supposed to be."

"Ah, shit."

"That's what I said." Brad sped up as they raced down Eighth Street.

"Did Briscoe know where this guy would be?"

"Briscoe's guess was Stanley Park. It's the closest."

"The clock is ticking."

"I know." Brad swung the cruiser onto Elbow Drive and raced south along the river. Statistics said they had four hours to find the boy alive.

"The Elbow River is high," Curtis said.

"The past five days of rain filled the Glenmore Dam. Now they're releasing water down the spillway. The river will be high and fast for about a week. Usually it's pretty calm."

"Not today."

They raced past Sifton Boulevard and headed across the bridge over the Elbow River.

Curtis swung in his seat. "Stop!"

Brad hit the brakes. "What?"

"As we crossed the river. I saw a silver van in the bushes."

"Are you sure?"

Curtis circled his hands in the air. "Yes! Turn around."

Brad swung a U-turn.

"I didn't see it from the road, but when I looked back, I could see the rear end."

"There's a small park on this side of the river. Not many people know about it."

"Maybe Vern Rapp does."

Curtis grabbed the mic. "Dispatch, 411. We have a possible sighting of the van at—" He glanced around. "Where the hell are we?"

"Fortieth Avenue between Third and Fourth Streets SW." Brad swung off Elbow Drive at Thirty-Eighth Avenue and wound his way through the residential streets.

Curtis updated dispatch on their location.

Brad parked at Fortieth Avenue and Four A Street. They jumped out of their cruiser, withdrew their revolvers and sprinted across the grass. They slowed as they reached the trees, the sound of the river in front of them. Curtis headed to the right, Brad to the left.

Brad stepped carefully through the undergrowth, ensuring he didn't make a sound. Ten yards ahead he saw the back of the van, but not Ryan or the kidnapper.

Brad called dispatch on his portable radio and gave them the van's license number.

Curtis shouted, "Police, freeze. Let go of the kid and put your hands in the air. Let the kid go."

Brad snuck around the front of the van. A tall man with scraggly black hair and a beard was facing Curtis, crouched, with a boy in front of him.

Ryan's small hands were bound behind his back and a



piece of silver tape was across his mouth. His big brown eyes were open wide and filled with terror. A gun was pointed at the boy's head.

Brad veered left between the trees toward the river to get some separation between him and Curtis. Brad keyed his portable radio. "Dispatch. We have the suspect and the boy in the park about ten yards from the river. Have units come in quiet and let me know when they arrive."

"Roger, 411," dispatch said. "Be advised the van was stolen last night or early this morning in Mission."

Brad double clicked the mic in acknowledgment.

"Back off," Rapp said, his hands shaking. "I'll shoot the kid."

"Vern Rapp." Curtis stepped farther to the right, drawing the man's sight away from Brad. "Drop your gun."

"Back the hell off," Rapp said. "I ain't kidding. I'll kill the kid."

Curtis held his gun in one hand, but raised his other hand up in surrender. "Look, Rapp. I can't drop my gun. We're taught that in training. Let's find another way to settle this."

"I ain't going back to jail." Rapp's eyes were wild as he blinked, his gaze darting side to side. "Do you know what happens to guys like me in there? I ain't going."

"Let the kid go."

Ryan began to snuffle and squirm. Curtis' heart beat faster. The boy's breathing was laboured. His nose was clogging up. With his mouth blocked by the silver tape, he was in danger of suffocating.

"I got a better idea," Rapp said. "You back off and I'll drop the kid off a mile or two from here."

"You aren't leaving with the kid," Curtis said. "Let him go, send him to me, then you can take off."

"I ain't stupid." Rapp moved the gun from Ryan's head to Curtis, then back to Ryan.

"Fine." Curtis slid his revolver into his holster and held out his hands. "Okay. The gun is secured. Now, let the kid go."

"Back off."

"I can't. I'm unarmed. Let the kid go."

Rapp's head and gun swung to his right. Brad was between trees when Rapp shot twice.

Brad dove to the ground and rolled behind one of the trees. One bullet thudded into the dirt beside him, the other into the tree's trunk.

Rapp twisted sideways so Ryan was between him and Brad. The kid provided little coverage for Rapp, but Brad couldn't risk taking a shot.

Curtis had his revolver back in his hand. "Rapp. What the hell was that? No one needs to get hurt."

"Your fucking partner was sneaking up on me."

"What did you think we'd do? This place is going to be swarming with cops in about one minute. Surrender now."

Rapp dragged Ryan backward with him. The heels of Ryan's white sneakers scraped over the packed earth. Rapp glanced over his shoulder. "You two back off or the kid and I go in the water."

Rapp was less than four steps from the raging river. He waved his gun between Curtis and Brad.

Curtis set his gun on the ground, standing, hands wide. "Rapp, let's slow this down." He glanced at Brad. "My

partner is going to tell the other cops to hold back. So, there's no need to rush. That sound okay with you?"

Brad keyed the portable radio and turned away from Rapp. "Dispatch, have all units stay in the perimeter. We have a hostage situation. Weapons involved." He aimed his gun again, his finger on the trigger pulling back to the first action. He keyed the radio. "Dispatch. Notify Fire Department Water Rescue."

Rapp backed toward the river.

"Do you have someone in the water?" dispatch asked.

"Not yet," Brad whispered. *But a body soon.*

He leaned against a tree and stared down the sight of his revolver. Rapp was erratic in his movements and Brad might get lucky—but this was no time to rely on luck. Rapp had Ryan by the shoulders and the kid was shaking. Brad held his revolver steady.

Rapp glanced at Brad. He grabbed Ryan by his shirt collar and tossed him like a ragdoll into the water. Sprinting toward the trees, he fired two shots directly at Brad.

By the time Curtis had retrieved his gun, Rapp had disappeared.

Curtis sprinted to the water's edge. Ryan's small form bobbed in the current for a moment before sinking under. He didn't reappear.

Brad raced along the riverbank. Tossing off his gun belt and shirt, he jumped into the cold water.

He hoped he'd gone far enough downstream. If Ryan was a swimmer, he might get to the surface kicking his legs. But his hands were tied behind his back and he would have to

work hard to keep his head above the water. The tape across his mouth was a whole other issue.

Brad dove deep in the fast-moving river, facing the rushing current. The water wasn't clear, and bits of sand and dirt peppered his eyes. Branches slammed into his body. His lungs were ready to burst.

He pushed off with his legs and broke the surface. He took three gulps of air, then dove again. He'd thought he'd seen Curtis on the riverbank with a couple of other cops.

Again, he peered into the racing water. Just as his lungs were ready to explode, he saw a dark shape racing toward him. He planted his feet in the rocks and sediment. The object plowed into Brad with greater force than he expected.

He was knocked off his feet into the current. The small shape was almost past him when Brad grabbed a piece of cloth and hung on with all his strength.

The river pulled him downstream. He reached out with the other hand and realized he'd got ahold of Ryan's pants. Desperately, he kicked up from the bottom of the river. His vision blurred and he knew he was seconds away from inhaling water.

They broke the surface and Brad gasped for air. Ryan wasn't breathing. With one arm cradling the kid, Brad ripped the tape off his mouth. His lips would be sore later, if he survived.

Brad rolled onto his back and pulled Ryan up onto his chest. He positioned one hand under Ryan's chin. With the other, he tried to swim to the shore, but the current was too strong. They floated feet first down the middle of the channel.

Brad had them in a good position. Their heads were well out of the water, but getting to shore was a non-starter.

In his periphery, Brad saw red-and-blue lights on Elbow Drive keeping pace with them. Well, police cruisers would not help either. Calgary didn't have a coast guard. There were lots of helicopters owned by oil companies, but who the heck would they get to do the rescue? In his mind, he tried to remember the path of the Elbow River. The next bridge crossing was Fourth Street, then Twenty-Fifth Avenue.

The green woods of Stanley Park on the right gave way to expensive homes at the river's edge. Ahead, the river parted. It looked like the right side was narrower, slower. If he could get them on the right side, he'd have a fifty-fifty chance of pulling them to shore or to the small island.

They floated past Thirtieth Avenue. Brad worked furiously to get them to the right. As they approached the river fork, he thought they were lined up perfectly, but the river's current picked up, spun them in a circle, and pushed them down under the waves.

Brad pulled them to the surface. But now they were rapidly floating backward on the left side of the river. It felt like he was riding a bike downhill with the wind blowing in his face. The current was getting worse, too, churning up eddies that trapped them in a never-ending bobbing circle.

Brad gasped for air and fought to keep a tight hold on Ryan. His legs slammed into something under water—a tree or a rock. He thought they were going to be ripped off. Fortunately, the water was icy and his legs were numb.

He realized he was facing another problem. Hypothermia.

The sunny spring day had little effect on water from the snow-capped Rocky Mountains.

The eddies lessened and they slowed. Brad got them facing forward again and tried to figure out where they were. They had to be near the Fourth Street bridge.

He tried to calculate how long they'd been in the water, but he had no clue. Surely there'd been enough time for the fire department to get into position.

It was late morning, so they had to be between morning coffee and cards, and lunch.

They floated faster but swung toward the left bank. Just as he got his hopes up, they spun in circles into the middle of the river. Ahead, he could see the two supports for the bridge. If they keep on track, they'd float right between them.

He spotted cops in the water, but they wouldn't get anywhere close to them. The cops were shouting.

At first, Brad couldn't make out what they were saying. Then it connected. "Rope!"

Where was it? He peered left and right, searching. And then he saw it, hanging from the bridge. Half a dozen cops were leaning over the side, having anticipated Brad and Ryan would come down the middle. But there was only one rope. And only one chance.

The current was racing again. Brad kept his eyes focused on the gently swaying rope, his left arm around Ryan, his right hand ready.

They floated into the shadow of the bridge, the rope gently swaying.

Twenty yards.

Fifteen.

Ten.

Ready.

Five.

He lunged for the rope. It slid through his hand, tearing at the flesh. He grimaced and held tight.

They slowed, then stopped.

A cop leaned over the side. "Nice day for a swim, rookie."

Jerry Briscoe. Brad would rather be rescued by anyone else.

"Coulter," Briscoe yelled. "Loop the rope around the kid and yourself. We'll walk back across the bridge and pull you to shore."

Brad found the loop. He tried to flip it over his shoulder, but he missed—a dozen times. His arm was screaming with exhaustion.

"I can't," he shouted, spitting out a mouthful of water. "I'm putting it on the kid. I'll hold onto him."

"Your call," Briscoe shouted back.

Brad tossed the loop onto his chest and pulled it over Ryan's head, then wiggled it over the kid's chest and under his arms, tightening the loop. The cops were on the move. He felt the slack tighten. They were rotating around toward the shore.

He closed his eyes. He could relax. The kid was resting on his chest and both his hands were around the rope. He listened to the sound of the river slamming into the bridge pillars and the rocks ahead. He thought he heard shouting, but the noise from the current drowned it out. He opened his eyes but couldn't wrench his head around to see the cops.

Suddenly a siren blared. Brad recognized it as the tone the

fire department used to warn its firefighters to abandon a building. He forced himself upright in the water and saw the cops on the bridge pointing frantically behind him. A huge Douglas fir was barreling toward them.

The cops on the rope were pulling furiously but they were too slow. Brad had a split second to decide what to do. He let go of the rope and shoved Ryan at the shore.

Brad turned as the tree swung toward him. He dodged the front of the tree but branches on the side pummeled him, dragging him under the water.

In desperation, he blindly reached out and grabbed a branch with his left hand. He struggled to get both hands on the branch, then hauled himself up. As the tree raced between the pillars, Brad saw cops in the water pulling Ryan onto shore.

The kid was safe.

Brad lay across the large branch and gasped for breath. He didn't have a choice, so he rode the tree down the river. He wondered if they'd put all their rescue resources at the Fourth Street bridge. Nah. They'd have multiple backup plans.

He glanced along the bank. There was no traffic. It made sense that they'd stopped all traffic for the rescue, but where was the rescue team for him? No police cruisers. No fire trucks. Nothing. *Ah. Shit.*

The tree sped along in the river. It was a marvelous adventure. He rounded a corner. Up ahead was the Twenty-Fifth Avenue Bridge—the next logical rescue location. There were no cops in the water. No police cruisers. No fire trucks. No one.

The tree wasn't a bad boat. Brad resigned himself to float-



ing. For now, he'd float around Lindsay Park, then along the Stampede Grounds to the Bow River. He'd eventually end up in the Bow River by Fort Calgary. Hopefully, the fire department rescue boat was on its way up the Elbow River to meet him.

He wondered how Ryan was doing.

Brad thought about Rapp and imagined finding him—Rapp running and Brad giving chase. Rapp would be no match for him. He'd use one of his most vicious football tackles. Maybe Rapp would resist. Nah, that was too much to hope for. Rapp was a coward.

As he came out the other side, he was blinded by brilliant sunshine.

Brad thought he saw movement on the riverbank. And the sound of neighing horses.

He hauled himself onto the trunk of the tree for a better look. Sure enough, ahead were half a dozen cowboys on horseback, wading into the river. And as Brad and the tree approached, the cowboys began to swing their lariats.

One at a time, they tossed their ropes at the tree. Every loop slipped over a branch. The cowboys tightened their nooses and guided their horses to pull backward.

The tree was enormous and put up a good fight, but those six horses were more powerful. Slowly, they dragged it to the riverbank. When it was safe, Brad clambered off the trunk and waded ashore.

One of the cowboys leaned on his saddle horn, his white cowboy hat shading his clear blue eyes. "Can't say we've ever done this before. I'm Reg Kesler."

Brad extended his dripping hand. "Brad Coulter."

"Heard you were a cop."

"Yup. How'd you hear that?"

"Oh, hell, we always got cops hanging around the barns drinking our coffee," Kesler said. He patted his horse's neck, the speckled brown coat gleaming in the sunlight. "When you first got in trouble, Mal and his partner Darrell bolted out of the barn like it was on fire. Fifteen minutes later, Mal called me and said you were in trouble. We thought we'd meander over here just in case."

"Glad you did," Brad said.

Kesler leaned forward and looked down. "You lost your gun."

Brad shifted from foot to foot, water squelching in his boots. "I tossed it off before I jumped into the river."

Kesler shook his head. "And here I thought you'd make a good cowboy. But losing your gun—"

"I didn't lose it. I didn't want to get it wet."

"Son, you don't have it, so that's the same as losing it." Kesler glanced over his shoulder. "What if you came across six cattle rustlers?"

"No problem." Brad tipped his chin up. "I don't need a gun. I hang cattle rustlers. Lots of splendid trees here and you supplied the ropes."

Kesler laughed. He extended his hand. Brad grabbed it. Kesler yanked. Brad jumped and found himself on the back of the horse.

SEVERAL POLICE CRUISERS AND FIRE TRUCKS WERE PARKED AT ALL angles on the Twenty-Fifth Street Bridge. Cops and fire-fighters were hanging over the side, peering into the water.

Kesler and his posse headed over to them.

"What the hell?" Briscoe asked, as he and Curtis spotted Brad, in his sopping wet clothes, on the back of Kesler's horse.

"We found one of your boys in the river," Kesler said. "Thought you might want him back."

Briscoe folded his arms. "Not really."

Brad swung off the back of the horse and Curtis handed him his gun belt.

"Thanks, Reg," he said, winking at Kesler as he slipped his revolver back into its holster.

Kesler tipped his cowboy hat. "You owe us coffee, Coulter."

"Deal. I'll bring donuts, too."

Kesler swung his horse around and trotted back down the riverbank.

"Fire department rescue boat will be here in a minute," Curtis said. "They were searching for you as they came up the river."

"Day late and a dollar short, as always." Brad rubbed the back of his neck. "How's the kid?"

"Paramedics said he was breathing when we got him to shore."

Brad closed his eyes, tilted his head back and whispered, "Thank you."

"They think he was breathing the entire time."

“Great, I wasn’t sure.” Brad squeezed the water out of his pants. “You got my shirt?”

Curtis nodded toward a cruiser. “In the back. I got city stores to bring pants, socks and boots.”

“No underwear?” Briscoe asked.

“Going commando.” Brad raced to the car and called over his shoulder, “What about Rapp?”

“He’s still on the run,” Curtis said.

Briscoe ambled toward his own cruiser. “I think the chicken shit asshole is hiding in the park.”

Brad’s jaw clenched. He broke into a run. “It’s time to get him! Let’s go!”

Curtis sprinted to catch up. “Dry clothes in the back,” he said.

“Screw that.” Brad slid into the passenger seat. “No time. I want that ass hat.”

Curtis started the engine and pulled the cruiser onto Twenty-Fifth Avenue and headed south. When Twenty-Fifth merged into Elbow Drive, he activated the lights, triggered the siren and hit the gas.

“Where is he?” Brad said, searching.

“K9 is waiting for us at the park where we last spotted him,” Curtis said. “We can meet up and follow the dog.”

“Little late for the dog to be getting a track, isn’t it?”

“This is the best one we’ve got,” Curtis said. “We think Rapp went into hiding while you were swimming, waiting for darkness to make his escape. He’s also made use of the river, so it’s been hard to find a good track. But since we’ve had the park shut down for the last two hours, it should be a little easier. What have we got to lose?”

“Nothing to lose, but you put too much faith in the dogs. They’re shit and drool monsters. Watch where you step.”

“They’re well trained. I have faith.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’d rather have a dog for a partner instead of me.”

Curtis snickered. “They whine less.”

“You’re an ass.”

Curtis raced through the red light at Thirtieth Avenue. “You’d miss me.”

“Like an itchy rash. I hope we find the asshat.”

“Asshat?” Curtis asked. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Well, it’s like he’s an asshole, but everybody uses that word. So, I made up a new one. His head’s so far up his ass he’s wearing it as a hat.”

Curtis nodded his head. “Yeah, okay. I can see that.”

Brad grabbed the cruiser’s microphone. “Dispatch 411, we’re heading back to Stanley Park to meet up with K9. ETA approximately two minutes.”

“You think we’ll find him?” Curtis asked.

“Oh, I sure hope so. He’s scum. Bad enough he’s a pedophile, but he tossed the kid in the river—hands tied and mouth covered. The kid almost died. Whatever happens, Rapp has it coming.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is his last shot.”

Curtis glanced over at Brad. “Last shot? Like this is his last chance to stay alive, or it’s his last shot to surrender?”

“You know, I don’t care. But I hope he draws on me. Last time he held the gun on the two of us, I could have taken a shot, but I didn’t. I was worried about the kid. Which is crazy, the kid

was small. I had Rapp's upper chest and his head lined up. I should have taken the shot. No way I would have missed."

Curtis smirked. "Your ego used its outside voice."

"Come on, you know I'd have made the shot."

"Why didn't you?"

Brad sighed and frowned. "It was a split-second decision. It's hard pulling the trigger when it's human, not a target. I won't make that mistake again, ever."

"Rapp is a chicken. You know that. He'll take the easy way out."

"Well, I hope he points the gun at me. I'll make things really easy for him."

"So, you're going to get the last shot?"

Brad twisted in his seat and glared at Curtis. "Whoever he points the gun at, takes the shot. Got it?"

Curtis turned off Elbow onto Lansdowne Avenue. A quarter mile later they pulled in behind the K9 unit. They jumped out and walked up to the K9 officer leaning against his car. His dog, a black-and-tan German shepherd, sat tucked tight against the officer's leg.

"You're Ross MacInnes, right?" Brad asked.

The stocky man with the drooping mustache grinned. "That I am. He's my partner, Pax."

"I'm Coulter. This is Young. D411," Brad said.

MacInnes nodded and glanced from Curtis back to Brad. "Yeah, I know about you, Coulter."

Brad wasn't sure how to take that.

Curtis stood fixed to the spot. He glanced at MacInnes, down to Pax, and back to MacInnes. "Do you like K9?"

"I love it," MacInnes said. "You've applied to quarry for us."

"Yeah. I've heard nothing."

"Let's see how you do today," MacInnes said.

Brad glanced from one to the other. "So, now that the K9 mutual admiration society meeting is over, can we find this asshat?"

MacInnes cocked his head.

"Don't ask," Curtis said.

MacInnes knelt next to Pax, who had his nose on Ryan's backpack. His paws were trying to rip the bag open. "Must be a samich in there," MacInnes said. "He loves samiches."

MacInnes dragged Pax away from his potential lunch. Curtis pointed to the last location he'd seen Rapp. Pax sniffed at the spot, peered toward the river, then bolted toward the trees, almost yanking the leash out of MacInnes' hand. "He's got a good track."

"Or the scent of Subway," Brad said.

MacInnes turned to Curtis. "You want to handle Pax?"

Curtis' eyes widened. "Are you kidding?" He reached for the leash.

Pax hunched low to the ground, dragging Curtis behind. They wound through the trees before looping back to the river. Pax stopped, his head high in the air. He circled in about a ten-foot radius, then raised his head again. He made up his mind and ran about thirty feet along the river. Again, he circled and lifted his head.

"He lost the track at the river," MacInnes said, "but could pick up his scent in the air."

Pax was off along the riverbank, then back into the trees. He stopped at thick shrubbery, sat and growled.

MacInnes stepped to one side and Brad to the other, guns drawn.

Brad licked his lips. "Rapp. Police. Come out with your hands up."

Silence.

"Rapp. Police. We have a K9 here who is starving. Come out now."

Silence.

Brad glanced at MacInnes and cocked his head.

"Slowly release the leash," MacInnes said to Curtis. "Then command: *take him.*"

Curtis leaned down and released the leash. "Take him. Take him."

Pax bolted into the thicket, growling. There was the snapping of branches, then a few barks. Two rabbits bolted out of the thicket. Brad swung with them, gun aimed and almost fired.

MacInnes laughed. Pax trotted out, tongue lolling, eyes roving for the rabbits.

MacInnes pulled back branches and peered into the thicket. "Good probability he hid here waiting for darkness but heard us coming and snuck out ahead of us. He can't be far. Curtis, hook him up and let him find the track."

Curtis called Pax, hooked up the leash, and gave him some lead. Pax headed on the path of the rabbits.

MacInnes growled, "Pax."

He glanced over his shoulder at MacInnes, bared his teeth, then nose to the ground set a different path.



MacInnes flanked to the right and Brad to the left. If you were a rabbit, movement was simple. If you were six-one, well, he was slapped by a branch every five seconds.

Brad searched in vain for a path and pushed through the dense brush. He heard something to his right and stopped. All was quiet.

He heard a branch snap, then another.

Curtis and MacInnes were a hundred yards to the right, but Brad was sure the sounds were closer. He headed farther left. He couldn't hear branches snapping because of the roar of the racing river.

Brad stopped behind a stand of trees and peered across the grass toward the river. Nothing was moving. He scrutinized the riverbank and the trees farther south. He wondered if Rapp had backtracked, but Brad was sure the branches snapping had been ahead. He slipped around the trees and headed south, stepping cautiously on the grass and close to the trees. Every ten feet he stopped and listened. Only the sound of racing water. The river swung to the right.

Brad reached the corner and peered down the riverbank. He stepped around the corner. Clear.

He jogged along the grass and was halfway to the next bend in the river when bark from a tree stung his face and he heard a gunshot.

Brad dove to the ground and tried to roll toward the trees, but it was like rolling into a wall. Instead, he rolled several times toward the river then peered toward the sound of the shots.

Another bullet thudded into the grass to his right, dirt and grass peppering his face. He wiped the grime from his eyes.

Rapp was wading into the river.

“Rapp! Police!” Brad raised to a knee.

Rapp turned back to Brad, lifted his gun, and fired.

Brad fired twice.

Rapp staggered backward into the river, blood staining his chest. He collapsed to his knees then fired another gunshot harmlessly into the water. The rapid current swept him off his feet and the raging river pulled him under.

Curtis and MacInnes sprinted out of the trees. Pax raced past them and plunged into the river.

“Pax, no,” MacInnes shouted. “Pax, come!”

Pax dogpaddled frantically, fighting the current, but the river was too strong. He was being sept away.

“Ah shit,” Brad said for what felt like the hundredth time that day. “Not again.”

He jumped to his feet and sprinted down the riverbank downstream from Pax. He waded into the river as far as he dared. Pax headed toward him, but he was just out of reach.

Curtis splashed into the river beside Brad and grabbed his belt. That gave Brad some extra reach. As Pax drifted past, Brad snagged him by the collar with one hand.

But he’d grossly underestimated the force of a one-hundred-pound dog and a raging river. His hand was still firmly attached to Pax’s collar as the dog continued to be swept down the river.

He was about to let go—but was suddenly jerked back toward the shore.

MacInnes was behind Curtis, who held onto Brad, who kept a grip on Pax.

On shore, Brad lay gasping for air, massaging his right shoulder.

"You okay?" Curtis asked.

"Oh, yeah," Brad gasped, staring at the blue sky. *I hate swimming.* "My right arm is about a foot longer than my left now."

Pax crawled over to Brad, placed both paws on his chest and gave Brad dozens of wet kisses.

"Dog slobber," Brad muttered, wiping his arm across his face.

Curtis extended a hand and pulled Brad to his feet. With Pax strutting happily at his side, Brad stumbled back to their cruiser.

"You have a new friend," MacInnes said. "Maybe you should come with Young to K9 training."

Brad glared at him.

Curtis laughed.

At their cruiser, Brad changed into the dry uniform and they headed back toward the Fourth Street bridge. As they arrived, they saw cops dragging Rapp to shore and lifting him onto the ambulance stretcher.

The paramedics did an assessment, then glanced at Curtis and Brad. They shook their heads and pulled a sheet over Rapp's face.

"Working with you is certainly not dull," Curtis said. "I hope it's not always like this. For a day that started *quiet*, it got crazy for a while."

Brad glared at Curtis. "Why would you use that word!"

THE END

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## DWAYNE CLAYDEN

**Dwayne Clayden** is a Calgary crime writer and author of the *Brad Coulter Thriller Series* and the *Speargrass Series*. He uses his knowledge and experience as a former police officer and paramedic to bring realism and tension to his novels.

*Crisis Point*, the first novel in the Brad Coulter Thriller Series, was a finalist for the 2015 Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Award. His short story, "Hell Hath No Fury," was published in *AB Negative*, an anthology of short stories from Alberta crime writers.

Dwayne's forty-two year career in emergency services includes work as a police officer, paramedic, tactical paramedic, firefighter, emergency medical services (EMS) chief, educator, and academic chair. He is the co-author of four paramedic textbooks and has spoken at EMS conferences across North America.

DWAYNE CLAYDEN

Dwayne is a past member of the boards of the Crime Writers of Canada, and Alexandra Writers Centre Society and leads the Calgary Crime Writers. Dwayne is a popular speaker with writing groups and conferences.

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13 Days of Terror

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Bonded Justice (Spring 2022)

**The Speargrass Series**

Speargrass Opioid

Speargrass-Vengeance (Winter 2022)

BLUE DEVIL BLUES

WINONA KENT







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“CAN YOU SING?” THE MAN ASKED.

His name was Howard Parfitt and he was wearing a wig. Not a toupee or a topper. A full wig—the sort of thing older men put on their heads when the Beatles were just starting to make it big in the early 1960s and they wanted to be “with it” and “trendy” but they didn’t have enough hair of their own to pull off the classic mop top with a fringe.

It was a black wig. It made him look ridiculous, quite frankly, but it was his club—Diamonds—and Diamonds featured vintage rock and roll, with a special emphasis on the Swinging Sixties, and he was legendary for looking the part.

Howard Parfitt was about 70 years old and he’d been running Diamonds since 1990, when he’d taken it over from his dad. Peter Parfitt had opened the club in 1965, a rock and roll mecca in the heart of London’s Soho, three minutes from Carnaby Street and *the* place to mingle (if you could get in) for any number of years.

Those heady days were long gone, however. And Diamonds was struggling. I knew it was struggling when I turned up for the audition. I was struggling too. It was 2016 and I'd come back to England after a couple of years abroad and I needed the work. I'd done the rounds. I'd approached managers and agents and record producers and the owners of other clubs. I'd even resorted to busking. I was losing faith in my talent and I was scared to death I was going to end up a sad guitar-player in a tunnel somewhere, playing "Smoke on the Water" for spare change.

This was my very last shot.

"I can sing," I confirmed.

Howard Parfitt sat back in his chair and waited.

I'd brought along three of my mates who were also musicians. Like Harry in "Sultans of Swing" (and unlike me) they had daytime jobs and they were doing all right.

They usually played jazz.

I usually played jazz.

We'd run through our collection of rock and roll instrumentals. "FBI"—made famous by The Shadows, but I preferred a lesser-known arrangement by The Apaches—it rocks and has lots of cheeky key changes; "Short Trip", by Little Louie, from 1964—which nobody's ever heard of except me; "Hall of the Mountain King"—a sax-drenched favourite, a classic by Grieg made famous by Sounds Incorporated, who used to open for The Beatles when they went on tour; "Side Winder"—the signature tune of a Canadian band, Wes Dakus and The Rebels, which was Keith Hampshire's theme when he was a DJ aboard the pirate ship Radio Caroline; and "Because They're Young", the Duane Eddy hit I've always

really loved because of its solid twangy lead guitar and its full orchestra backing—which Dave emulated magnificently on his portable keyboard.

“Please,” said Howard Parfitt, gesturing with his hands. “Sing.”

We’d considered the possibility that this might happen and, fortunately, we’d rehearsed a party piece. Rudy, Ken and Dave played me in and I launched into my absolutely stonking rendition of “Fireball XL5”.

Howard Parfitt burst into delighted laughter.

*Fireball XL5* was a Gerry and Sylvia Anderson-produced Supermarionation kids’ show that aired on British tv in the early 1960s. I shared Neil Gaiman’s fond recollection of a childhood informed by “bad puppet science fiction.” And I loved its closing theme, which was sung by Don Spencer, an Australian who’d gone on to accomplish great things in children’s television and whose daughter had grown up to marry Russell Crowe.

“Thank you,” Howard said, still grinning, as we finished. “You’re not very good, are you?”

This, coming from a 70-year-old man wearing a black Beetle wig, an egg-stained blue paisley tie and scuffed brown suede boots with Cuban heels and pointy toes that my mum used to refer to as “winkle pickers.”

He was shortly going to turn up dead—still wearing his wig, the winkle pickers and his blue paisley tie. But of course, I had no inkling about that.

I glanced doubtfully at Ken, Rudy and Dave.

“I mean,” Howard said, looking at me, “you’re good.”

Then he nodded at my band.

"You aren't."

"They are good," I objected, "but they'd really rather be playing jazz."

"Not my thing, unfortunately," Howard replied. "My brother Harry's quite a fan though."

If I'd known then what I found out later, I'd have warned him about his brother's branch of the family. But, hindsight.

"Does Harry have a nightclub?" Ken asked.

Howard laughed again. "Sorry. No. He's my accountant."

"Could we play some jazz for you?" Dave tried.

Howard checked his watch.

"Oh all right. Go on, then."

We did an old standard from 1929, "Blue Devil Blues". As originally written it's in C minor and has a slow rhythm, but we'd perked it up and given it a catchy beat and whenever we played it (in pubs and the odd club gig) the punters loved it.

I like to think Howard was appreciative. Last impressions and all that.

"Much better," he said, when we were done. "Thanks."

Dave looked happier.

"Anyway—thanks for coming."

And that was that. We unplugged our instruments from the club's sound system. Rudy packed up his drum kit and we helped him carry all his cases out. I remember feeling particularly deflated. I really wasn't looking forward to setting up my pitch in Covent Garden again. You can take in a decent amount of money on a good weekend when there are lots of tourists around and you're playing tunes they recognize. But it's not a steady income and sometimes it rains

and I was well past the young and adventurous and living-off-tinned-beans stage in my life.

Another band was waiting in the foyer. They were dressed identically in collarless grey suit jackets and tightly-knotted ties and trousers with drainpipe legs and collectively they looked about 19 years old. I held the door open for them as they trekked into the venue with all their gear.

Rudy, Ken and Dave took their leave, but I decided to stay. I wanted to hear if the Beatle boys were any better than we were.

I sat down in a comfy chair in the foyer to listen to their version of "Love Me Do". Their grandparents hadn't even been born when that song had charted in 1962.

They were in the middle of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" when a woman came into the foyer from the street. She had an old acoustic guitar with her—not in a case—and she was wearing a leather vest with fringes on it, a blue t-shirt that advertised the 2012 London Olympics, a pair of jeans with the knees frayed out and torn and a blue Zorro hat. She had short straight blonde hair. I reckoned she was in her mid-twenties.

"You waiting too?" she asked, sitting in the chair beside me.

"Just finished," I replied. "Don't call us, we'll call you."

"Sounds familiar." She stuck out her hand. "Evie Parfitt."

"Jason Davey," I said. "You related to Howard?"

"His niece," she said. "My dad's Harry Parfitt. The accountant."

"And your uncle's making you audition?"

"Sadly. But he's keen to save me from ending up as a rootless, aimless person with no purpose in life."

I had to admire Howard's sense of fair play. I hate nepotism. I've spent my life consciously trying to avoid it. I was certain if I'd mentioned my musical pedigree and my real name to Howard, he'd have bent over backwards to accommodate me. But that's not how I roll. Or rock.

"Show me your guitar?" Evie asked.

I unlatched my case and let her have a look.

"Very nice," she said. "It looks old. An original?"

"Very much an original," I replied. And I told her about its history. The fact that my dad and mum were the founding members of Figgis Green, a folky pop band who were big in the 1960s and 1970s. My dad, Tony Figgis, had died in 1995 and my mum had given me two of his guitars. One of them—a Sunburst Strat—went to the bottom of the Gulf of Alaska in 2012 when the cruise ship I was working on caught fire and sank. This was the other—a Lake Placid Blue Strat. I was glad I hadn't taken it to sea. I was counting on it to bring me some luck.

"Worth a few bob, I imagine," Evie said.

"I could never sell it."

Evie, in turn, told me her story. All her life she'd wanted to be a singer. But she hadn't been very successful. The Parfitt name had opened doors...but she hadn't managed to make any headway once she'd stepped over the threshold. She'd performed in pubs and clubs, at farmer's markets and store openings. She was passionate about her craft.

She was passionate about the London Underground, too.

"I write all my own songs," she said. "A lot of them are about the tube."

She sang one of them for me, accompanying herself on her

old battered acoustic guitar. It was about an out-of-work musician riding around all day on an Underground train.

It wasn't very good.

She sang me a second song. It sort-of reminded me of something from *Starlight Express*. It was about an Underground train as well.

And it wasn't very good either.

"You do know that your Uncle Howard's looking for a rock and roll act," I said.

"Of course," Evie replied.

And then she sang "Love of the Loved". The one written by Paul McCartney that Cilla Black recorded for her debut single in 1963. It was dreadful. But at least it wasn't about an Underground train.

The band that was auditioning inside the main venue for Evie's Uncle Howard had fallen silent. They'd been playing "Yellow Submarine." I wondered if they were undergoing an existential crisis and were looking for a handy Maharishi and the opportunity to play on a nearby roof.

And I needed to use the loo.

"Any idea where the Gent's is?" I asked.

"In the cellar," Evie said, nodding at a staircase at the end of the foyer. "Turn right at the bottom."

She was obviously well-acquainted with Uncle Howard's club.

I left my guitar in its case beside my chair and went downstairs in search of the toilets. The cellar wasn't all that inviting. It was dark and it smelled like mildew. There were lit-up emergency Way Out signs, but that was it for the corridor.

And the toilets had seen much better days. Fluorescents flickered in the ceiling and the walls were covered with shiny white fired clay tiles, but a lot of them had been chipped and cracked by the passage of time and many had simply come loose and fallen away.

I relieved myself and went back upstairs. The band still weren't playing—but I could hear them chatting and laughing on the other side of the closed doors. They'd probably got the gig. Bastards.

I didn't see Evie.

She'd disappeared.

And so had my dad's Lake Placid Blue Strat.

I really hoped she'd just popped in to chat with the guys in the Beatle suits. I opened the door. They were lounging around the stage. One of them was smoking, in spite of the signs prohibiting it.

But she was not there.

"Haven't seen her, mate," Ringo said, in answer to my question.

I ran outside but I knew it was hopeless. She had a five-minute head start on me and it was mid-afternoon, it was July, and Soho was teeming with tourists.

To say I was devastated would be an understatement. That was my dad's guitar. He'd loved it and nurtured it and I'd kept it safe all those years since he'd died...and now I'd lost it.

My plummeting mood was replaced by rising anger. I knew who Evie was—she'd given me her name. Howard Parfitt was her uncle.

I ran back to the venue.



“He went that way,” Paul said, pointing at a door that I guessed led to backstage storage and dressing rooms.

I wasn’t wrong. The main lounge was a bit tatty-looking and in dire need of some renovations. Its backstage area, which the punters never saw, was even worse: a narrow hallway scattered with microphone stands and lights and bundled electrical cords, broken chairs and three-legged tables, stuff from behind the bar, cardboard boxes, wooden crates.

I didn’t hear any voices and I wasn’t sure where Howard had gone, so I went looking for him. I checked all the doors. Storage. Dressing room. Dressing room and storage. Toilet. I was down to the last door on the right. I opened it.

It was another dressing room and the lights were on. It was very small. There was a counter against the wall and above it a big mirror and below it a chair. There were pictures on two of the other walls of some of the big-name British performers who’d played at Diamonds in its heyday. Adam Faith. Marty Wilde. Tommy Steele.

Howard Parfitt was lying on the floor.

He had a very large knife wound in his chest roundabout where his heart was. Quite a lot of blood had exited his body and pooled on the floor around him.

I rang 999 on my mobile and told them what I was looking at.

They asked me to check if he was breathing.

He wasn’t.

They asked me to check his neck for a pulse. I did. Very carefully. Mindful of the need not to interfere with the scene of the crime.

There was no pulse.

I really hoped they weren't going to ask me to start CPR while we waited for the ambulance and the police to arrive. I knew how to do it. I'd done lifesaving training as part of the stuff I needed to know when I was working as an entertainer aboard the *Star Sapphire*. How to launch an inflatable life raft. How to leap off a sinking ship (fold your arms across the front of your lifejacket and hold your nose). How to revive someone who's drowned.

Not stabbed through the heart, though, and missing most of his blood.

"Are you in a safe place?" the woman asked.

It hadn't occurred to me but there was always the possibility that Howard's killer was still in the building. I might have put myself in terrible danger.

I looked up. There was nowhere for anyone to hide in the dressing room. There were no cupboards or concealed spaces.

"I'm in the room with the victim," I said.

"If you wouldn't mind waiting outside," the woman said. "Try not to disturb anything. The police and the ambulance will be there shortly."

I gave my statement to Detective Sgt. Hensler. I told her what I was doing there, took her through the audition and what I'd seen and done afterwards. I told her about the band in the Beatle suits and how they'd stopped playing. I told her the approximate time I went to the loo and what time I came back. And I told her about Evie Parfitt and how she'd disappeared along with my dad's guitar.

I could see the little cogs whirring around. Well, they were whirring around in my head, anyway. Could any of the

Beatle boys have done it? Not likely. They were all sitting on the stage when I saw them, and none of them really looked like murderers. Ringo had come back to talk to me while we were waiting for the police. He told me Howard's mobile had rung while they were in the middle of "Yellow Submarine". Howard had taken the call, said a few words, waited for them to finish and had told them to take a quick break. And then he'd excused himself, leaving by way of the service door to the backstage area where I'd found him.

I dutifully told Detective Sgt. Hensler what Ringo had told me, mindful of the fact that in her notes, it would be classed as hearsay. But I thought it might be useful. I was sure she'd be taking statements from John, Paul, George and Ringo next anyway.

"And what about the woman you were talking to?" Detective Sgt. Hensler checked her notes. "Evie Parfitt."

"I was sitting with her the entire time," I said.

"Except when you went to use the toilet."

"Yes."

"And when you came back, she was gone."

"Yes," I said. "Along with my guitar."

"And she didn't make any calls on her mobile while you were sitting with her."

"None at all. The band was playing 'Yellow Submarine'. They stopped. I went to the loo."

Those little cogwheels were whirring again. Howard's mobile had rung, he'd taken the call, and then disappeared into the back of the club. Perhaps the call had nothing to do with his murder. Perhaps Evie was upset that her uncle had forced her to audition. She was familiar with the layout of the

club. She knew about the doorways and corridors. Perhaps she had a large knife concealed inside the body of her guitar—although I was certain I'd have heard it rattle when she played her Underground songs for me.

"And did anybody else see you when you went down to the Gent's?" Detective Sgt. Hensler inquired, looking at me very directly.

"No," I said. "Just Evie."

Cogwheels.

"Am I a suspect?" I asked.

"You are not," said Detective Sgt. Hensler. "I haven't cautioned you and you are, at this point, simply assisting us with our inquiries."

She took my name and my address and my mobile number.

"Can I report the theft of my Strat?"

"We're the Murder Investigation Team," Detective Sgt. Hensler replied. "Fill out the online form." She gave me a card for the City of London Police's crime report website.

"Thank you," I said, putting it in my pocket.

"Please don't discuss this matter with any other witnesses," Detective Sgt. Hensler replied, pleasantly. "Goodbye."

I knew the chances of the police finding my dad's guitar were next to none. I had photos of it back at my flat and I knew I could get the serial number from my mum and a list of all the modifications my dad had made to it over the years. I also knew I'd have to fill out the online form, if only to get a report filed so that if the Strat ever did surface, they'd have a record of my claim and proof of ownership.

In the meantime, I had some heavy-duty footwork ahead

of me. I needed to visit music shops and haunt the websites that bought and sold used musical instruments.

I reckoned I'd have better luck just trying to find Evie.

Her father, the accountant, was easy to locate. His firm had a website. I rang the number and my call was answered by a very efficient-sounding receptionist named Pamela.

"My name's Jason Davey," I said. "Harry's daughter, Evie, was at an audition today and, sadly, I seem to have written her number down wrong. I was wondering if Harry was there and, if he is, whether I might trouble him for Evie's contact info."

"I'm terribly sorry," Pamela replied, "but he's not. In fact, the police have just been here looking for him. Something dreadful's happened to his brother."

"My timing's not very good, is it?" I said. "I hope Howard's all right."

"No—he isn't," said Pamela, her voice sounding a little shaky, "In fact he's been killed. And Harry had only just talked to him this morning on the phone. They were having an argument."

"Was it about Diamonds?" I asked, pushing my luck.

"I think it was. Harry told me Howard had hung up on him! He was in such a mood!"

"I know the club," I said. "It's been losing money for years."

"You're telling me," Pamela replied. "Harry's been trying to convince his brother to cut his losses and shut it down. But Howard wouldn't. And now look what's happened!"

"Indeed," I said, checking the website to see where HL

Parfitt Accounting was located. In Soho, about two minutes away from where I was standing.

Had Harry been motivated by profit and loss and done away with his most troublesome client? The phone call Pamela mentioned was in the morning. Harry could have walked around in the afternoon...called his brother again...

"I don't suppose you have Evie's mobile number handy," I said.

"I'm sorry, I don't. But if you can reach Harry perhaps he can help."

She gave me two numbers. The first was for his mobile—which went straight to messaging. The other was for his land-line at home, which was answered by a woman who sounded much younger than Pamela.

"I'm afraid Harry's not here at the moment," said the woman, whose name, it transpired, was Rosalind. "May I take a message?"

I told her who I was, and that Harry hadn't answered my call and I was actually trying to find Evie.

"I've no idea where Evie is," Rosalind said, the tone in her voice changing to something bordering on frosty. "She doesn't live here and I rarely speak to her."

"You're not her mother," I guessed.

"Harry divorced Evie's mother ten years ago," Rosalind replied. "I have as little to do with them as possible. Quite frankly, Evie can't stand the sight of me. The feeling's entirely mutual."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. I was pushing my luck again. "Would you happen to have a number for Evie...?"

"I would not. Try Harry's brother."

"Howard?" I said.

"Yes, Howard. The girl's deluded into thinking she has some sort of musical gift. It's all nonsense, of course. But that foolish man encourages it."

"You know he's dead," I said.

There was silence. Then:

"When did this happen?"

"Today."

There was another long silence.

"I must go," Rosalind said, quickly. "I'm sorry. I must make some calls."

Not, *how do you know this? Or how did he die? Or where was his body found?* All of the curious questions one might ordinarily think would be forthcoming from a murder victim's sister-in-law.

She didn't wait for me to say goodbye.

If I didn't know better, I'd have thought Rosalind wasn't in the least surprised by my news.

There are a number of ways you can try to find people in the UK. Some of them are free but require a lot of searching. Others require the outlay of money—but they save you the search time.

All I wanted was an address and a phone number.

I started with the obvious—the online BT phonebook. It used to be a great resource but these days a lot of people just don't have landlines anymore or they've opted out of being listed. I had to supply a town, so I guessed Evie was living in London. There weren't that many Parfitts that came back as a result of my search. And none of them were "E". I rang them all anyway, just in case. No luck.

Then I checked Facebook. Sometimes people forget to make their contact info private. Evie wasn't one of them, though she did have a fairly robust presence and a lot of her posts were public. They were mostly showcasing her performances or promoting her upcoming gigs. And celebrating her overriding passion, the London Underground. Specifically, London Underground stations, and even more specifically, London Underground stations which were no longer operational and had been abandoned.

She wasn't a bad prose writer and she definitely had the knack of persuasion. She just couldn't write songs. Or sing.

Her Facebook page made for fascinating reading. But it didn't give me her phone number. Or her email address.

I reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that I was going to have to resort to the outlay of money.

I logged onto 192.com and for £14.99 + VAT I was able to generate a background report for Evie Genevieve Parfitt who, it turned out, shared a flat with three other young ladies in Clapham, across the river in SW4.

I was also able to determine her age (25), her mortality (not dead), whether or not she had ever been insolvent or bankrupt (she hadn't), whether she'd ever been listed as a disqualified company director (she hadn't), if she'd ever had any County Court Judgements against her (she hadn't), whether or not she was a property owner (she wasn't), the identities of the co-occupants of the flat where she was living (particularly helpful), but not, however, her telephone number (particularly unhelpful).

But her address, if it was current, was enough.

There are only two deep-level Underground stations that



still have island platforms. One of them is Clapham North. The other is Clapham Common. The platform in question is only about 12 feet wide, and it's a truly frightening place at 5pm in the middle of rush hour.

I was in the last carriage of the southbound train, so when I got off I had to trek down the length of the narrow little platform to reach the stairs at the opposite end. It seemed like I was in the company of the entire population of Clapham. And my claustrophobia wasn't helped by the simultaneous arrival of two more trains—one in each direction—accompanied by a hurricane wind that threatened to blast all of us directly into their paths.

Perhaps Evie would have appreciated it for what it was—an original museum piece of Underground railway design, dating from the earliest years of the 20th century. All I could think of was how quickly I could get out of there.

Once I was up on the surface and my racing heart calmed, I found Evie's road and then the building where her flat was. It appeared to be the top floor of a red brick period conversion, one in a row of late-Victorian terraced houses. I rang the bell, and it was answered (I assumed) by one of the three ladies listed in my background report.

I wasn't sure if it was Evie. And I didn't want her bolting down the back stairs and disappearing into the night with my dad's Strat.

"Meals in a Minute," I said, into the intercom. "Delivery for Evie Parfitt."

"She's not here," said the voice.

"Well she's ordered a Curry with Naan and extra Mango Chutney," I said, "and I'm owed 32 quid."

"She's not here," the voice said again. "And she hasn't been here since this morning."

I repeated the address.

"That's right. But there must be some mistake. Ring her up and sort it out."

"Have you got her number?" I said.

The voice on the other end of the intercom gave it to me, without hesitation.

"Thanks," I said. "Have a good evening."

"Yeah, you too."

I dialled her number as I was walking back to Clapham Common. She let it ring a long time before she answered.

"Evie," I said.

She could see who I was on her phone. I don't shield my ID.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I was going to call you."

"Were you," I said, unimpressed. "Before or after you sold my Strat?"

"I had to get away. Quickly."

"Just give me back my guitar," I said, "and I won't involve the police."

"Please believe me, Jason. Can we meet?"

She sounded desperate.

"Where?" I said.

"Do you know where Romilly Square is?"

I had to think. "Near Cambridge Circus."

"That's it. Number 84. Half an hour?"

"84 Romilly Square," I repeated, keying it into my phone so I could look it up on the map.

Number 84 Romilly Square was up where Charing Cross

Road intersected with Shaftesbury Avenue in a giant X in the heart of London's West End.

The building itself was two storeys high and clad entirely in dark red glazed tiles. The top floor had a flat roof and a row of three large arched windows. I could see that the bottom floor, at street level, used to have three large openings. But the one on the left had been completely bricked in.

The opening on the right led to a construction site: scaffolding and mud and bricks bordering on a tiny park with grass and shrubs.

The opening in the middle was occupied by a shop selling used books.

I stood on the pavement looking for Evie, mostly believing that she wasn't going to turn up.

I was wrong.

She appeared from the opening on the right, still wearing her fringed leather vest, her London Olympics t-shirt and jeans. She'd taken off the blue Zorro hat. And her clothes weren't covered in blood, which was a great relief.

"Where's my guitar?" I said.

"Back there," she said, gesturing towards the rear of the red-tiled building.

I followed her through the roofed passageway and she pulled open a grey metal door.

"It's downstairs," she said.

"I'll wait here," I replied. "You can bring it up to me."

"It's 122 steps," she said. She looked around nervously. "And your guitar's really heavy."

"You should have thought of that before you took it," I said.

But she wasn't wrong. Solid body electrics aren't light-weight like wooden acoustics. I reckoned my dad's Strat weighed about nine pounds, and that was without its hard travel case.

"Please come down with me. It's the only place I feel really safe."

It's never a good idea to go into an isolated location with a stranger. Especially someone who might have had something to do with the murder of her uncle. How many victims in horror films have you shouted at for doing just that sort of stupid thing?

But she had my dad's Strat. And I wanted it back.

I followed her inside.

She made sure the door was locked behind me.

"I'll take that," I said, relieving her of the key. "If you don't mind."

She didn't object. Which was reassuring. But only slightly.

We were standing on a concrete platform which had a set of spiral steps leading away from it and down. The platform and the steps were lit by a single functional bulb encased in a steel cage.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"It's an abandoned Underground station," Evie said.

I should have known. "Of course."

She picked up an industrial-sized flashlight from the landing.

"And how did you get the key?" I asked.

"Five years ago they filmed a tv series down here. *Tunnel Land*. One of those weird dark fantasy things. I'm not really a fan, but my boyfriend at the time was working on the

production. We used to come back when they weren't filming and explore." She switched on the flashlight. "He's not my boyfriend anymore. But I still have his key."

"After you," I said, following her down the steps, which snaked around a hollow central core. Against the wall I could see white ceramic tiles topped off by repeating green and black lines. There was a handrail, but it didn't look all that reliable.

"These are the old emergency stairs," Evie said, over her shoulder. "They're not in very good shape. Mind how you go."

Going down was going to be a hell of a lot easier than coming back up again, I thought.

"Why was the station abandoned?" I asked.

"That little park outside is right over where the old north-bound platform used to be. It was hit by a stray bomb during the Blitz. The bomb burst through the station tunnel and destroyed the platform and killed 23 people. The line was eventually reopened but the station wasn't. They decided they really didn't need an intermediate stop between Leicester Square and Tottenham Court Road."

"You should go on one of those guided tours where they take people down into the old disused stations and show them all how it used to look."

"I've been on all of them," Evie said. "But this station's never been opened to the public. In fact, it's on a list of buildings shortly to be demolished. It's so sad. It's not even protected. If it was, they wouldn't be able to tear it down." She glanced back at me. "That was another reason why I was waiting to see Uncle Howard this morning. The audition was really just his way of

humouring me. I was going to ask him if he could put me in touch with some of his more influential friends. I was trying to think of a way to mount a campaign to save the station. My father and Rosalind have no interest in it at all."

"I spoke to Rosalind," I said, deciding against mentioning Howard's unfortunate death. At least until I'd got my guitar back and I was safely outside again. "I was trying to find you."

"I'm sure she was helpful," Evie said. I noted the sarcasm in her voice. "She can't stand me."

"I did notice."

"I'm not scared of Rosalind but Thomas is insane."

"Thomas...?"

"Her son. He came with the package when my dad got married again." Evie stopped on the stairs. "He has...issues. He's been in and out of prison for violence. Destroying things. Vandalism. Hitting people. He's threatened me—more than once. And he's actually attacked my dad."

She continued down the steps.

"He doesn't know about this place," she added. "It's my refuge."

I think we were probably about three-quarters of the way down when I felt a small breeze and heard a distant rumble. Evie stopped and turned around.

"Stand with your back to it," she said. "And hang onto the handrail."

Common sense told me to take her advice.

The breeze grew into a wind, and the rumble turned into a roar.

“When the trains travel through the tunnels they push the air in front of them like a piston!” Evie shouted.

That had been one of the things which had made the island platform at Clapham Common so terrifying.

As the train hurtled along its tracks in the distance, the piston-wind became a blast that roared through every disused passage and connecting tunnel until it reached the stairs.

“Romilly Square’s not a working station anymore so the trains speed through it without slowing down or stopping!” Evie shouted, as the wind pummelled our backs, whipping up 75 years of dust and grime.

I heard the last cars of the train clearing the old station tunnel.

“Turn around now!” Evie advised. “And keep your hand on the railing!”

I hung on as the back-end of the piston sucked the wind out again—this time trying to blow us down the rest of the stairs.

It was over a few seconds later.

“Some refuge,” I said.

“You get used to it,” Evie replied, shining her torch into the darkness. “This way.”

At the bottom of the steps, I followed her into a rounded passageway lined with the tattered remnants of posters in framed squares. Old ads for Wright’s Coal Tar Soap and Oxo cubes and wartime messages from the government: *Careless Talk Costs Lives. Volunteer for Flying Duties. Is Your Journey Really Necessary?*

The rounded passage widened out and I could see two large openings in the tiled wall.

“Lift shaft,” Evie said. “Those would have been where the doors opened for the two lifts. This side is where the passengers got off after coming down from the surface.”

She aimed her light through one of the large openings and I could see a similar opening on the other side of a very large gap.

“They’d go into the lifts on that side for the ride up. There used to be two lifts in here—the old Otis ones that were still being used in 1941. But they took them out. So the lift shaft’s empty.”

She shone her torch through the nearest opening and I followed her down a short flight of concrete steps into the very bottom of the shaft. She paused and I heard a click, and suddenly, there was light.

I blinked. My eyes had got used to the near-total blackout.

“They never bothered to cut off the electricity after the film crew left. I imagine the lights still work out in the station tunnels as well but I’ve never been able to find the switches. What do you think?”

What did I think? I was standing at the bottom of an immense cylinder. If I looked up, I could see all the way to the top, where the shaft had been concreted over to form the floor of the bookshop at street level.

And where I was standing had been turned into a kind of rudimentary living space. There was a chair, a couple of pillows, two candles. A rug. Some blankets. There was Evie’s acoustic guitar, propped against the steps. And there was my guitar case, beside it.



I checked to make sure my dad's Strat was still inside.

"It can get a bit crowded at my flat when all of us are at home at the same time," Evie said. "And it's not a good place to be when Thomas gets into one of his moods and turns up in a rage. This is where I write my songs. This is where I can get some peace and quiet."

The peace and quiet part was debatable.

I heard the dull hum of another train approaching the station. I felt the first stirrings of the wind. I looked for something to hang onto but Evie simply sat down on the floor and suggested that I do the same.

I did.

The wind grew into the familiar roaring hurricane as the piston-driven air flooded into the circular shaft and blew upwards over our heads. The train rattled through the station at full speed, sucking the air behind it, and the hurricane raged again, this time down and out through the four openings, but barely ruffling my hair.

"It's actually very quiet once the trains stop running. That's why they filmed the tv series at night. I find it comforting, really."

It was true. Before the Night Tube service was launched, everything really did shut down at midnight. I also had first-hand knowledge of that—I'd been caught out too many times after I'd missed the last train home.

"Where will you go when they tear down the station?" I asked.

"I don't even want to think about that. It'll be like losing my very best friend in the world."

She looked so unhappy.

I remembered watching the *Tunnel Land* tv series on DVD while I was at sea. I remembered the stunningly peculiar scenes and I remembered wondering if they'd constructed a special set or if the series had been shot on location somewhere.

And now I knew.

I studied the lift shaft's circular wall, and then let my eyes roam up again, to the sealed-off ceiling 80 feet over my head.

"I wonder if my mum might be able to help," I said.

I brought my eyes down to earth again.

"She does know some very influential people. And some of them are quite fond of the Underground."

Evie smiled. "Are you going to turn into my secret angel? I'll have to put you in touch with Uncle Howard."

I had to tell her. I felt awful.

"Evie," I said. "Your Uncle Howard's dead. I'm so sorry."

"No," she said, looking at me. "He can't be...how do you know?"

"I was there," I said, gently. "I found his body. Backstage. Someone stabbed him."

Evie shuddered. "Oh my God," she said. "He was there. Thomas was there. That's why I ran. I saw him. He came out through a door and he saw me. He had that look on his face. I've seen it before. He had a knife...I was so frightened, Jason. I just picked up everything and ran. Including your guitar. He'd have used it to smash something. Me."

"I expect the police have been trying to contact you," I said.

"I was down here. I only went upstairs for something to

eat. I didn't check my messages. And then you rang." She looked at me. "Thomas."

"I think you may be right," I said.

"No," said a voice behind me—male. "She means...hello Thomas."

I spun around. He was taller than me—about six foot two, I'd say—and twice as heavy. He looked about Evie's age. He had a shaved head. He was wearing a leather jacket. The jacket was unzipped and I could see dark stains that looked like blood on his t-shirt. He was holding a very large knife.

I glanced back at Evie. She looked terrified.

"I went to your flat," Thomas said. "But of course, you weren't there. And then I saw him." He nodded at me. "He was asking about you. So, I followed him. Heard him say 84 Romilly Square. Got in my car and drove here and parked 'round the corner and waited in that courtyard where all the building's going on. I saw where you came out. And while you were meeting him..." He nodded at me again. "...I opened the door and came downstairs. And here I am."

Neither Evie nor I dared to say anything.

"Surprise," Thomas added.

"Did you kill Howard?" I asked.

"I don't believe I'll give you the satisfaction of answering that," Thomas replied. "I didn't like him. I don't like her, either. And I don't like you. But I do like this place. I think I'll stay after I rid myself of you two."

I could hear the hum of another train approaching. Thomas took a step forward, waving his knife at Evie and me, slowly, menacingly. He was blocking our escape out of the bottom of the shaft.

I felt the first tiny whispers of the wind and then the hurricane roar as the piston-blast gusted in through the openings, knocking Thomas off balance. Grabbing the neck of my guitar's travel case, I swung with all my might at Thomas's head—and missed.

He was laughing at me as I whirled all the way around and used my momentum to crack the case's body into his knees, sending him crashing to the concrete floor.

"Go!" I shouted to Evie. "Go! Go!"

She raced up the steps ahead of me. I grabbed the flashlight and ran after her as the roar of the passing train faded and the howling wind reversed direction and blew us both into the darkened passage.

Thomas must have got to his feet because I could hear him behind us, swearing. We ran for our lives, through the connecting passage and up the spiral staircase, up and up, my lungs and legs aching. At the top I fumbled for the key, shoved it into Evie's hand and spun around as Thomas lunged at me. I kicked him in the chest as Evie got the door open. He tumbled backwards, crashing head-first down the steps, the knife clattering loose beside him, as we staggered outside.

I thought we were safe—but Thomas's rage had fuelled him and driven his adrenalin and he was behind us again, chasing us through the construction site and the little park and out into the rushing night-time traffic on Shaftesbury Avenue.

I heard him swearing at us as we raced across the road, dodging the cars. I heard the shriek of skidding tires on pavement and then a thud as he was struck by a Lamborghini

going well over the speed limit, driven by an 18-year-old with a suspended license.

The impact knocked Thomas out of his shoes.

He crashed head-first into the road ten feet north of us and was dead in seconds.

Evie and I had to give statements to the police. I'd like to say we told the complete truth...but we were economical with some of the details. Not the ones that mattered. Only the ones that would have made little difference to the outcome.

Howard Parfitt's blood matched the blood on Thomas's t-shirt and under his fingernails where he'd been unable to wash it completely away. The police hunted for the murder weapon, and a few days later it was located in the undergrowth in the little park behind Number 84 Romilly Square. The only fingerprints on the knife were those belonging to Thomas. Most of Howard's blood had been wiped off, but the forensics people discovered enough to make a definite match.

Howard himself had an amazing send-off...a celebration of life which a huge number of showbiz people attended, well-known and otherwise.

A few months later, I went back to Diamonds to audition with my band. Evie had talked her dad out of closing it down, and Harry had taken over the day-to-day running of the club. Evie'd made a few other suggestions, too—which was why I was there with Rudy, Ken and Dave. And this time, we were playing jazz.

That night, we went back to Romilly Square.

Some further ideas had been floated. Some strings had been pulled. Safety concerns had been met, the electricity had been checked and waivers had been signed. I'd kept my

promise to recruit my mum—who, in turn, had contacted a number of her friends. Many of them were the same people who'd been at Howard Parfitt's funeral. And one of them, as luck would have it, was the producer of the *Tunnel Land* series.

It was two o'clock in the morning and the grey metal door at the rear of Number 84 was propped wide open and decorated with lights. Signs welcomed everyone to the *SAVE ROMILLY SQUARE FUNDRAISER* and pointed the way in and down. The spiral staircase had been made safe and lit with bright LEDs, as had the passageway that led to the lift shaft.

Inside the lift shaft, seats were set out in rows facing a small makeshift stage we'd erected in front of one of the openings. We'd hung sound baffles on the walls and overhead to improve the acoustics and we'd run cables into the station's electrical supply.

Rudy, Ken, Dave and I took our places, and we played to a packed house.

Evie had asked if she could sing a solo just before the interval but, sadly, her guitar went missing just before she planned to go on.

Our encores were "Last Train Home", the Pat Metheny standard, and "The Train Song" by Acker Bilk.

Evie made a lovely, impassioned speech at the end of the show, detailing the station's history, its importance as a wartime shelter for performers and audiences and its later reincarnation as a set for *Tunnel Land*, which—it transpired—had quite a cult following.

We finished the gig with *Tunnel Land's* theme song—

which wasn't a huge stretch from "Fireball XL5", if I'm honest.

Evie's guitar was eventually found outside in the little park behind the station, very near to where Thomas's knife had been discovered in the bushes. But by then, of course, the show was over and everyone had gone home.

And in the end...

In the end, Romilly Square *was* saved from the wrecker's ball. Tours of its subterranean tunnels were organized to show off *Tunnel Land's* locations, and Evie was hired as a guide. She's still doing it, if you're ever in London and you have a few spare hours and you're fit enough to climb down 122 steps and then up again.

Oh, and we got the gig at the club. Harry Parfitt changed its name to The Blue Devil and that proved to be an extremely popular decision. We support the main show and the one afterhours, and from time to time we're part of the headliner's line-up.

Come and see us if you're ever in Soho. Smooth and accessible jazz. I know you'll like it.

**THE END**

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## WINONA KENT

**Winona Kent** is an award-winning, British-born author, with eight novels to her credit. She is the creator of the *Jason Davey* cozy mystery series, the *Evan Harris* Spy Series, and three time-travel historical romances.

Her short stories have been featured in *Flare Magazine*, *Cross-Canada Writers Quarterly*, broadcast on the CBC Radio program, *Ambience*, and can also be found in notable anthologies such as *Pure Fiction* and *Crime Wave*.

Winona has a BA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing and a diploma in Writing for Screen and TV from Vancouver Film School. She has worked as a secretary, a travel agent, the Managing Editor of a literary magazine and a Program Assistant at the University of British Columbia's School of Population and Public Health. She is the BC/YT/NWT rep for the Crime Writers of Canada and is an active member of

WINONA KENT

Sisters in Crime-Canada West. Winona lives in New Westminster, BC and is happily embracing life as a full-time author.

To learn more about Winona and what she writes, visit her at:  
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WHERE ORDINARY  
PEOPLE GO TO DIE

PETER KINGSMILL





WHERE ORDINARY PEOPLE GO  
TO DIE

PETER KINGSMILL

MAY 24, 2018 HASTINGS, ON, 0745 HOURS

"FRANK!" MARJORIE SHOUTED. "DO YOU REMEMBER THAT IDIOT in the bar last night? The one wearing the yellow jacket? Did you hit him over the head and throw him into the canal while I was sleeping?"

In the cabin, Frank Anderson did a rough job of tucking in his shirt, stabbed his feet into his shoes without tying them up, and stumbled out on deck. "Ah...no. Why do you ask?"

"Take a look." Marjorie Webster stepped back from the rail of the 32-foot motorboat and pointed down into the water between the boat and the dock where it was tied up.

Anderson looked down where she was pointing. "Geez. That's not a pretty sight. And yes, that does look like the same idiot. He did have me kind of annoyed in the pub, but not so annoyed I'd have jumped out of a sound sleep and

killed him. I wonder what the hell happened here last night... had to have been after we got home from the pub and went to bed, but how come we didn't hear something?"

"Thunderstorm," Marjorie reminded him. "That was a noisy one last night and it rattled on for a long time. And let alone the thunder, the noise of the rain pounding on this uninsulated steel roof was like being trapped in a snare drum when the band is playing a polka."

"True," Anderson said. "I forgot about the thunderstorm."

"After four pints of India Pale Ale, you may not have heard it at all."

"Did I drink that much? Geesh, sorry about that! You know, we'd better call the cops right away. We're gonna be stuck answering questions for a long time this morning so the sooner we start, the sooner it'll be over."

"How about calling Sergeant John MacLeod up at Maple Falls?" Marjorie said. "We could ask him to call the locals. Nobody knows us down here, so it would sure be good to have an ally with a badge and some rank."

"Great idea." Anderson went back into the cabin to grab his cellphone.

The boat's interior bore a remarkable resemblance to a school bus—just three sets of four front-facing seats, two on each side—but although there were no cooking facilities, it did have a generator running off the main engine under the deck and that gave them some electricity.

Marjorie had been up for half an hour and had already started the engine and the generator so she could make coffee. With a little time and the additional help of a frying pan, bacon and eggs would be do-able.

They had brought the *Rusty Bee* upstream through Lock 18 at the Village of Hastings late yesterday afternoon, where they decided to quit travelling for the day and have dinner at the pub beside the canal where they had tied up. Breakfast would be their first meal onboard since they had picked up the re-furbished crew-boat at Trenton.

Anderson hung up and pocketed his phone, then stood up from the bench seat near the cabin door and took the cup of black coffee Marjorie had brought him.

“Okay, Sergeant John insists that he is on his way here to help, and the only nearby OPS cop he could reach is a constable who is now driving down from early-morning coffee in Asphodel/Norwood.”

“Where is that?” Marjorie asked.

“The next town north of here. That’s a short ten miles away on a paved highway, so she should be here in just a few minutes. For John, it’s about an hour and a half to get here from Maple Falls so we won’t see him for awhile. He did say he threw his Staff Sergeant rank at the officer who is on her way here, so she should behave herself.”

“That’s somewhat of a relief,” Marjorie said. “I was beginning to worry that our plea of innocence might look a little shaky to a young constable, especially when she learns you had an argument with our dead guy a scant ten hours ago. After all, the corpse is, apparently, attached to our boat.”

“Yeah. That is a good point, like how come the body is still at the surface when drowning victims usually sink right away and stay underwater for several days. I’m going to go and take another look before the cop gets here...”

Anderson walked out the cabin door and back over to the starboard side along the dock.

"Maybe don't touch anything?" Marjorie suggested.

"Good point, but I sure do wonder why it hasn't sunk. We should at least secure the body in position until the forensics folks get here. I expect they are at least an hour away...ah ha...here she comes now."

The standard-issue Ford Taurus skidded to a stop on the gravel across from the dock and gave one "whoop" from the siren as the constable climbed out, leaving the lights flashing. "Mr. Anderson?"

"You bet. Frank Anderson." He stepped onto the dock and shook her hand. "This is my partner Marjorie Wilson," he added, motioning to where she stood at the cabin door.

"Hi. I'm Constable Reneille Belanger from Asphodel/Norwood. Staff Sergeant MacLeod tells me you have a problem." She glanced over the side of the dock into the water. "Actually, I can see you have a problem. We need to talk."

"We do, and I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but maybe first we should consider taking some photos, calling forensics and the coroner and above all, securing the body before it sinks. I have no idea why it's still there, mostly submerged but head up."

"Your friend Staff Sergeant MacLeod told me I should listen to you," Cst. Belanger replied. "Guess he was right. I'll start with the phone call—it will take forensics at least an hour to get here." She pulled her phone out of the pocket in her vest.



“Do you have some yellow tape?” It was Marjorie. “I can string some out from the boat to the picnic benches and light poles over there. Your flashing lights are beginning to attract the attention of the other boaters.”

“Thank you Ma’am. Your help is appreciated. I’ll get the tape and shut off the flashers while I’m at it.”

An hour and a half later, the forensics investigators and the coroner had arrived and were busy making measurements, taking water samples, and recovering the body from the canal.

Before they arrived, Cst. Belanger and Anderson had slipped a light strap around the body and tied it off to the boat’s railing. It appeared the man had tried to board the boat, slipped on the wet deck, and had caught his left arm in a tangled mooring rope while he struggled for consciousness—and his life.

Anderson had walked along the dock to the Lockmaster’s office as soon as they saw him arrive to start his shift, to assure him that their boat—and the police—were going to clear the area by the time he needed to start operating the locks at ten that morning. There was room for vessels to pass, but any inexperienced pleasure boat operators would probably find the area narrow, especially when dealing with the distraction of police vehicles and uniformed personnel.

By 0945 the coroner’s and forensics team’s vans were gone and Anderson and Marjorie had started up the engine and moved their boat to where the canal expanded slightly so it would be out of the way.

Cst. Belanger was preparing to head back to her detach-

ment with her notes and photographs to begin the inevitable paperwork that would fill the rest of her shift when Staff Sergeant MacLeod arrived.

They had a friendly conversation, and Cst. Belanger thanked him for his advice and “for having good friends”.

“Did you know Frank Anderson was a senior OPS auxiliary officer and a former Coast Guard officer?” Sergeant MacLeod asked.

Cst. Belanger smiled thoughtfully. “No, but I guess I’m not surprised.”

The Sergeant nodded knowingly. “That’s like him. Frank and Marjorie are very modest and quiet people. Thanks for your help here, Constable. I don’t envy the long day you have ahead of you!”

“Thank you, Sir. Yup, lots of paperwork before I’m done.”

## RICE LAKE, ON, 1330 HOURS

A stiff wind out of the southwest made for a bumpy ride for Anderson, Marjorie and the Sergeant as they travelled along the last of the long reach of Rice Lake before heading up the Otonabee River going north to Locks 19, 20, and then 21, the famous hydraulic lift lock at Peterborough. Staff Sergeant MacLeod had opted to join them onboard for the next leg of their journey upriver, and would catch a ride back to his cruiser later that day or the next morning.

“So this is Awan Lake’s new water taxi,” the Sergeant

remarked. He was standing with Anderson near the open doorway to the small afterdeck while Marjorie was taking a turn at the wheel. "It's nice to be out of the wind and weather instead of on that open-decked party barge that Jim used to use."

"Yeah, I couldn't bear to drive that thing of Jim's. It was easy to sell, and now at least visitors will get a better impression of our lake, our community and our business. Besides, I'm getting too old and lazy to enjoy freezing my ass off in cool weather."

"Running the marina will be a big change from your construction business—to say nothing of helping to solve crimes in your free time. Some days I wonder about you, Frank. I've known you for less than a year, and for some reason you wind up involved in every murder that comes across my desk!"

Anderson chuckled: "Give credit where credit is due, Sergeant. This one didn't just come across your desk...I had to bring it to you. By the way, do you suppose the folks back there have identified our friendly corpse yet?"

"Yeah, sorry, I forgot to say. That call I got half an hour ago said they had a name—Justin Martinson—and the fact that he lived with his mother in Norwood. He was arrested for causing a disturbance four days ago at a homecoming concert in Norwood for the local band, Three Days Grace. He was released later that evening...seems like he had a reputation as a hot-head, so nobody is surprised he got into it with someone in Hastings—meaning you I guess."

"So I wonder what the Martinson kid did for a living

except sponge off Mom and watch porno in her basement?" Anderson said. "He couldn't have been any more than twenty-five."

"I wound up talking to Constable Belanger's boss for a few minutes. He was still officially off-duty for the day but he had stopped in at the detachment to give Reneille a hand with her report. He figures Martinson might have been tied up with a suspected chop-shop operation at a farmyard west of the village and south of Highway 7, closer to Peterborough maybe."

"I can already hear his Mama crying, 'but he was such a good boy!'"

"Exactly!" said the Sergeant. "He had already accumulated a bunch of car-theft, break-in and assault charges and had spent time in juvie and more recently at the SuperJail in Lindsay."

"So," said Anderson. "I wonder about two things: first, why did he follow us down to our boat at night in a rain-storm, and second, who was coming along behind him and beat him over the head so he went into the water and drowned. When we left the bar, he had long since left us alone and was playing pool with some guys on the other side of the room."

"Well," the Sergeant said, "we are still only assuming that he had been followed to the dock by someone and that the someone had clubbed him. It is still just as feasible that he simply made for the boat to get back at you, slipped as he climbed up, grabbed the rope and banged his head on the way down. It will help to have the autopsy report to settle some of that stuff for us."

“Yeah, I suppose it will be a couple of days before we get the results. And John, maybe that young constable should stop in at the pub first chance she gets and ask if the guy got into any more trouble last night, or maybe left with someone. I wonder if she could do that tonight when there’s a chance the same staff will be working as last night.”

They had been talking together on the afterdeck when Marjorie called back from the controls: “Frank, could you come and look at the chart, and our position? I think we’re close to the Okefinokee river, or whatever it’s called.”

As they strolled forward to where Marjorie was seated at the helm, the Sergeant chuckled: “I suppose now you’re going to be looking for Pogo the Possum and Albert the Alligator! It’s not the Okefinokee Swamp, Marj, it’s the Otonabee River. No possums.”

“No alligators either, at least not until Canada Day weekend.” Anderson took a quick look at the Trent-Severn Waterway chart which they had purchased at Lock #1 at Trenton, then glanced ahead. “There—sure enough, that’s the channel marker there. Maybe cut the throttle back to half, hook around that mark and head on up the river. I have no idea about speed limits near here but watch out for speed zone signs posted along the route. You may need to cut back your cruising speed to avoid creating too much of a wake.” He paused a moment, then: “However, having said that, it would be nice if we could get through Lock 19 before it closes, and then over to the marina to fuel up and spend the night.”

The Sergeant had strolled back out onto the little deck and lit a cigarette, then glanced above his head as the smoke

spiralled up. There was something of interest on the cabin bulkhead under the roof overhang. He poked his head back in the door. "Frank, do boats like this usually carry tracking units?"

"Huh? No, not that I know of although I suppose a fleet owner might install one. Why?"

"Well, you've got one on this boat, self-enclosed with its own battery, and it's operating."

"Where the hell..." Anderson went back out on deck and looked up to where the Sergeant was pointing. "I'll be damned..." As he reached for it the Sergeant put his hand on his arm and stopped him.

"I've seen these things before. You don't want to break the magnetic contact between it and the boat, or you turn it off. It has a 100-day-plus battery and as we speak it is sending out its signal. Someone is tracking your boat, and that's not legal. We'd better do some quick thinking about why, and what we should do next before we break the connection, because that will almost certainly alert someone, somewhere."

"Yeah, good point, John. I guess if we could figure out why the boat is being tracked, we might learn about who. After all, it's not like this thing zips around the country at highway speeds making deliveries in distant cities. It just, well, floats on frog ponds and moves rather slowly."

"Y'know," said the Sergeant, "obviously the first thing that comes to mind is that your dead visitor last night may have had something to do with this. The unit has been placed right above where he tried to board last night and went into the water."

"So you figure the slip, fall and drown may indeed have

been an accident, but that he had been there for a reason beyond being a drunken idiot? Makes sense, in a weird way, but still I wonder why someone would want to track this old boat."

"When was the last time you were under the deck, except to check the engine?"

"Months ago," Anderson replied. "When we bought her. Transport Canada wanted some extra foam flotation in the middle compartment to provide better damage stability, so I was down there with the boatyard guy and the naval architect's drawings, planning where to put it. We needed to cut through the compartment bulkhead and make an access hatch."

He paused and tilted his head to one side.

"Mmmm. Where you could place plastic bags of foam blocks, you might just be able to place plastic bags of lots of things, right? Something like drugs, for example?"

"Yup, sure could."

"I'm going to ask Marj to throttle back to just a little more than idle and I'll grab a flashlight, open the engine hatch and go forward to take a look at that so-called safety upgrade."

Half an hour later, Anderson handed the Sergeant his cell-phone with several photos he had taken under the deck.

The boat itself was back at a modest cruising speed and the Sergeant and Anderson had joined Marjorie at the wheel where the three of them could talk together above the engine noise.

"I really have no clue how much stuff is really in there, John. Any idea from the photos?"

"Well, it's hard to do anything but guess at the moment,

but from what I see in your photos I'm pretty sure there are many tens of thousands of dollars worth. Right now, we have no way of knowing what else could be there—the oxy you photographed, of course, but there could be all kinds of things, including heroin or pot or cash or even weapons. Won't know until we clean her out. I'm going to call the office in a moment but let's run through some scenarios first. You two always help me clear my mind."

It was Marjorie's turn to chuckle. "I thought I heard your Superintendent complain last summer that all Frank and I did was just mess up your head!"

"True, true, but that's what we need right now! Super Dave will be disappointed if we don't figure it out before we call him! Frank, where had you planned on docking and tying up for the night? I have a feeling that—if indeed this tracker was placed and turned on last night—the owner of all these goodies isn't going to want them travelling around Ontario's lakes and canals one minute longer than necessary."

"I expect they've been keeping track of us since we left Trenton," Anderson said, thoughtfully, "and that by now they are panicking big-time. They must have borrowed or rented this boat for the weekend, taken her to somewhere on the American side to load all this stuff up and then returned the boat, not knowing we were coming to pick her up a week sooner than expected. I'd be very surprised if that guy in Trenton who owns the boat yard isn't in on this. He has to be aware of what's going on, to some extent. After all, it was his welders and other staff who made the compartment modifications."



“Yes, I’ll need his name and details. I expect you’re exactly right, and I also expect he may be beginning to panic, no matter how deep his involvement is. He’ll already be worrying if you’ve begun to realize that someone ‘borrowed’ the boat and took it out for a long cruise.”

“I wonder,” said Marjorie. She reached over the steering wheel and tapped an instrument mounted on top of the dashboard. “This GPS unit came with the boat, didn’t it, Frank?”

“Yup. It’s an old Garmin 492, at least ten years old.”

“So it has a memory, right? If they turned it on to cross the lake, and if they were dumb enough to forget to erase the memory, it might tell us exactly where they went and likely even when.”

Anderson was already punching buttons. “Yup, there is a data log showing a trip out on what must be Lake Ontario. John, we’ll have to give your tech geniuses this thing so they can extract the archived data. I have a Garmin similar to this one on the Beaver, but I just turn it on when I leave the dock and turn it off when I quit. I’ve no idea how to use all the bells and whistles that are built into it.”

“Like I was saying,” laughed the Sergeant, “that’s why Super Dave pays you two the big bucks! Now we have a pile of information that will be really important once we get into the investigation and court cases. But for now, what’s our plan once we get to Peterborough?”

“The plan is to get through Lock 19 and over to the Peterborough Marina, where we can re-fuel, tie-up for the night and grab a steak at the Lighthouse, which is right there overlooking where we will be tying up. I’ve only been through the city once or twice, and that was in a vehicle not a boat, but as

I recall that area is really touristy with shops and restaurants and stuff. In any case, that's where I booked a slip for tonight and a table for two. I got the impression when I called they are not excruciatingly busy, so I suspect they will accept three of us instead of two."

The Sergeant watched a small but old-fashioned cruiser pass them, headed downriver. "Nice boat, that—I want one. Varnished woodwork and all!" He paused, then mused aloud: "I'm guessing at least two of the bad guys are following the tracker and watching where we go, and will know when and where we stop. If they had their way, I'm pretty sure they would try to recover their goodies tonight, but we can't let them do that—setting a trap for them at the marina is way too dangerous. But I don't think they'll get worried unless we turn off the tracker, so we can use tonight to set up tomorrow's trap, somewhere further up the river. We need to get them to believe that they are in the driver's seat, so they are determined to keep up with us until we catch 'em!"

"Well," said Anderson, "since they're going to know where and when we stop, there's stuff we gotta do tonight. First, we need them to think we don't know we're being tracked. But at the same time, we need to have enough of a police presence around the marina that they don't dare make a move on us in the middle of the night. Any thoughts?"

"Yeah," said the Sergeant. "One really simple one actually. I think one of our cutters was on this part of the Trent-Severn over the May long weekend when the locks opened, and it's hanging around Peterborough this week. In fact, last week I think I got Super Dave convinced to send the cutter up our

way for a couple of days—as you know, they are never around our part of the world when we need them. Ever since the McKinney Island blow-up last fall, Dave figures they should at least fly the flag on the lake and the canal and locks at Maple Falls for a few days at the start of the season.”

“No offense to the water guys at the OPS,” Anderson said, “but those guys are usually too busy writing liquor tickets for overweight old men in fishing boats to concern themselves with fighting crime. However, it would work really well if we could get them to park beside us tonight, and then early in the morning we could sneak a couple of the crew onto this boat so we have some armed reinforcements for when we head upstream. Can you make the phone call?”

The Sergeant already had his phone to his ear. He tapped it and grinned at Anderson. “I’m on hold for Super Dave.”

#### PETERBOROUGH, ON, 2025 HOURS

All things considered, the afternoon had ended peacefully. The boat was moored comfortably in Slip 8, and the OPS cutter *Oliver Mowat* had just docked in Slip 9.

The fuel dock had been closed but was opened for both boats so they could take on diesel, and the OPS wizards had arranged for personnel and supplies on the cutter. And to make the police presence more obvious, the two constables who would join them the next day would be parking their fully-marked Chevy Tahoe right near the main dock, where it would spend the night.

The first beers of the day were on the table in the dining lounge overlooking the marina, and the orders for two rare

prime rib dinners and one medium 12-ounce New York steak were in the kitchen. The Sergeant took a drink from his mug. "What time do you suppose we should get underway tomorrow? They're going to run two watches on the cutter, so I can grab a berth there for the night."

Anderson finished his drink. "The locks don't open until 1000 hours, and it'll only take a few minutes to get there from the dock, so we could grab an 0830 breakfast and get there in lots of time. Let's meet on our boat at around 0800 for coffee, head over here for breakfast, then be on our way."

MAY 25, 2018 PETERBOROUGH, ON, 2025 HOURS

The hydraulic lift-lock at the small city of Peterborough, Ontario opened in 1904 as lock number 21 on the Trent-Severn Waterway. It's a classic piece of engineering, and for many years was the highest hydraulic boat lift in the world, raising boats 65 feet. It was designated as a National Historic Site in 1979 and named a historic engineering landmark by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1987.

And, on the morning of May 25, 2018, it took fewer than five minutes for Frank, Marjorie, their 32-foot boat, three cops and a whole bunch of illegal drugs to rise 65 feet higher on their trip to Awan Lake. From there, it took about an hour to clear the Trent Canal at the University and re-join the Otonabee River upstream of Lock 22, after which they would be headed toward the village of Lakefield, then through the Katchewanooka and Clear Lakes.

There are much faster ways to get from Trenton to Maple Falls and Awan Lake. Even though the highways are not the

world's finest, they are quite usable. Navigating the canal system, with its narrow rivers, tiny lakes and lift-locks, takes time. And there's a peaceful, even dreamy, quality to traveling on these rivers and canals.

So, by the time they had transited two locks, waited over an hour for a big American-registered pleasure-palace with an inexperienced octogenarian at the helm to figure out how to manage his way through Lock 26, half the onboard population of Frank and Marjorie's boat was sprawled out on the deck and a couple of benches, catching up on their sleep.

Once they cleared the lock, it was close to 1300, so they tied up alongside the canal in Lakefield and arranged for a lift to McDonald's to pick up lunch: burgers, fries and carrot muffins for everyone.

After lunch, Marjorie cranked up the coffee maker for the third time that day.

"Anybody notice the two black SUVs in the church parking lot beside the bridge?" the Sergeant inquired.

Anderson was at the wheel. "I did see them, but they were big and black and side-by-side in a church yard, so my mind went immediately to 'funeral this afternoon' and I ignored them."

"Actually, I did notice the guys." It was the young constable from Asphodel/Norwood, Reneille Belanger, who'd been asked to follow through on the case because of her involvement with the discovery of the corpse. She'd been dropped off at the boat that morning in Peterborough. "They were a long ways off, but I think I've seen a couple of those guys—and those big SUVs—around Norwood. So, probably

not a Lakefield funeral, and I'm pretty sure one of the guys sort of dates a friend of mine."

"Sort of?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, sort of. I wish she didn't...I can tell that the guy she goes with is bad news, or at least he has bad-news friends. And she knows I'm a cop, so things could get awkward."

"Would he have recognized you today?"

"Nah. I doubt it. I only ever met him once, like for less than a minute. I was sitting with a couple of other chicks in my girlfriend's car—in the backseat—and in any case I never wear my hair down in a braid like this around Norwood or Hastings."

"Okay," the Sergeant replied. "My instinct says you are right, and the folks we're looking for are the ones in the SUVs by the church. That's not a surprise...they're just keeping track of us to see where we're going to spend the night. I will feel better if we can avoid any action until we are well on our way up the Spirit River and—better yet—right at Maple Falls, where I have excellent staff and equipment already organized to pounce. I've been in touch of course, and have already filled them in on our plan. I mean, as much as we can say this is planned. Sort of."

"Frank," Marj said, "I haven't been paying too close attention, but I don't think we'll make it to Maple Falls in time to get through the locks, do you?"

"You're right. I don't think there's a chance. It's Friday, so the locks will close at 1830. We'll need to dock at the lower entrance, which is probably not a bad place to be. Lots of

grass, hardly any trees and no houses close by. And it's within plain view of The Lockmaster's House."

"What's important about The Lockmaster's House?" Cst. Belanger asked, confused.

"The lockmaster himself lives in a bungalow just outside of town," Anderson replied "but the former lockmaster's house overlooking the locks is now a restaurant that has the best food in Ontario, if not Canada."

"Well! Okay then."

#### BURLEIGH FALLS, ON, 1735

Two black 2017 Escalades sat idling by a small cluster of mobile homes along Highway 28 just south of where the road crosses over the canal and the Burleigh Falls lock station. Two men stood leaning on the hood of one of the Escalades, talking quietly. Another two men were restless, chain-smoking and kicking the roadside gravel nearby.

"I have no idea how that idiot friend of yours managed to screw things up so badly," said the older of the two men leaning on the hood. "All he had to do was find somewhere to stick the tracker out of sight on the boat and fuck off back to the bar...instead he drowned himself and started the third world war out here. I'd hoped this would all be over at Peterborough last night but now, here we are, banging around these crappy roads following the canal system north, watching the ass end of that fucking boat disappear down another lake."

"So now what are we going to do?" the younger man

asked. "There are no more towns and no more locks until Maple Falls. Only assholes would go there."

"Yeah, and you're gonna be permanently one of them if you don't smarten up. We'll keep going north up this road about two miles, where there's a little resort along the river. We can watch from there to make sure the boat is still going north, then we can drive up the highway to Maple Falls. We know they're headed for Spirit River, that small village on Awan Lake, maybe fifteen miles past Maple Falls. They're going to have to stop there because the locks will be closed for the night. We have to finish this thing tonight."

"Where's the boss?"

"Geezus, man, where the fuck do you think he is? He's in Belleville where he always is. He ain't never coming anywhere near this mess. You better just hope he never does 'cause it'll be the last time you see anyone. Keep your eyes open, your mouth shut and your trigger finger ready. Remember, whatever we do we can't leave any eyes behind. Only ghosts, got it?"

"And my money?" the younger man said.

"You'll get your fucking money when this is done. And then you'd better get lost for a little while. Maybe a long while. You might even have enough money to settle down in New York for awhile and get laid once a month, ya little creep, but just remember that right now he'd as soon shoot you between the eyes as pay you."

"So what are we gonna do tonight?"

"Listen to me is what you're gonna do, ya dumb fuck!"



MAPLE FALLS, ON, 20:37

The sun had dipped below the horizon and Staff Sergeant John MacLeod had finished meeting with his detachment staff members, dispatching them to the positions where they would wait for the drug smugglers to make their play.

Now, the Sergeant was sitting in the front dining room of The Lockmaster's House with Marjorie Wilson and Frank Anderson, each of whom was enjoying a cold beer. The Sergeant was not. "You two go ahead. You can't lose your pension for killing someone when you've been drinking."

The dining-room window of The Lockmaster's House was directly opposite the upstream lock. Upstream to the right, the canal-side docks were empty. Downstream, nearly 200 feet from the first lock, was the last of three lock-gates, which—tonight—was closed at the same water level as the Spirit River downstream, ready to accept upstream-bound traffic.

About fifty feet beyond the gate was the *Rusty Bee*. She was tied up starboard side to the dock with the usual four mooring lines—plus her anchor on a chain hanging out of sight on the port side just in case someone slipped her mooring lines in the night.

"Who named her the *Rusty Bee*?" the Sergeant asked.

"Who do you suppose?" Anderson replied.

"Figures."

Marjorie took a sip of beer and smiled demurely: "Got a better suggestion?"

"Nope."

The Sergeant's radio popped and crackled: "Constable

Malik here. Settled in the chain shed on the north side, looking through a broken plank about four feet off the floor."

Now Corporal Beauchemin's voice crackled with static: "Roger that, Salim. Everyone update your locations please."

Three other OPS officers called in. One detachment constable was in an unmarked old beater on the highway, and had been joined by Cst. Belanger; specifically because she might recognize one of the gang members. The other two officers were well hidden within fifty yards of the boat.

"OK," said the Sergeant into his radio. "Confirming that Auxiliary members Sergeant Anderson and Marjorie Wilson are with me in the restaurant. We're watching out the window." He grinned at his two companions. "And we have fresh coffee and donuts."

He clicked off his radio.

"Just so you know," he said quietly to Frank and Marjorie, "our people are all wearing body armour with helmets and they're carrying C8 Carbines as well as their regular Glocks. Same as us. Marj too, if she remembers to put on that vest when she stands up, please."

Marj gave the Sergeant a thumbs-up.

"I had our gang alerted while we were back at Lock 30 on Lovesick Lake, but they were fully briefed by me when we landed here. They know to expect a firefight...I do not expect these crooked little bastards to give up right away. Those drugs are way too valuable to send amateurs to pick them up. They'll be tough."

MAPLE FALLS, ON, 21:58

Except for Sergeant MacLeod, Frank Anderson and Marjorie Wilson, the restaurant was empty of customers. The Sergeant had asked Paul, the restaurant owner, to close the doors and go about their evening chores. Paul thought they might be hungry, though, so he'd brought them each a smoked meat sandwich "prepared like they used to at Ben's in Montreal."

The Sergeant's radio crackled again. "This is Constable Belanger. Those two black SUVs just cruised by and turned north off the highway into town. We didn't get a look at the drivers or passengers though."

Anderson took a last mouthful of sandwich, stood up and buckled his vest. Marjorie quickly put on her vest as well and snugged the buckles, then took the Glock out of her handbag and set it on the table beside her unfinished sandwich. Then she sat down again and resumed eating.

The Sergeant was talking sporadically to his left shoulder. He turned to Frank and Marjorie: "They've split up and driven into town toward the river. I'm going to watch out the back door across the parking lot, if you two would watch the canal side. I've warned Paul and Richard to stay inside but go about their business unless I yell 'floor', in which case hit the deck. I expect the bad guys will find where the boat is soon enough, and then they'll drive back a block or two and do a little planning."

He left, but wasn't gone very long. "The two Escalades met each other in the parking lot. They found the boat. That was a good idea to turn on the anchor light and the wheel

station safety light, Marj. In any case, though, I think they're staying put."

Anderson was checking the window. "Yup, I can just see now that they've parked their SUVs beside each other and right back against the parking lot curb opposite the boat's afterdeck hatch. They either think they are so clever or we are so dumb..."

"Not sure about that, Frank," the Sergeant said. "Remember, they may still be convinced we have no idea what's under that hatch and that they are home free to just crawl in there and pull the stuff out."

"How soon do we pounce?" Anderson checked.

"Let's just wait until they clip that chain and padlock, open the compartment and start moving armfuls of plastic bags from the deck to their Escalades. Then we go...I'll radio the others. Tell Paul and Richard not to go outside."

Anderson crouched down and walked carefully onto the dockside verandah where he knew he would be well-hidden. Marjorie went to the kitchen to talk to Paul and his husband.

Anderson could see that there were four men with the SUVs and that they, too, were wearing body armour, with AR-15s slung over their shoulders and sidearms on their belts. They had come ready to do business. One man dragged an electric bolt cutter from behind the front seat of one of the Escalades, which he used to cut the lock off the hatch cover. Another carried a couple of lights as the two of them entered the hatchway. The third man, who was younger and wearing a toque, waited at the hatch, while the fourth laid his rifle out of sight against the curb and leaned casually against one of the SUVs.

As the Sergeant had assumed, it wasn't long before a pile of plastic-wrapped packages, each about the size of a loaf of bread, began to grow on the deck. Within a few minutes, the man leaning against one of the SUVs in the parking lot straightened out, opened the back lift gate, then headed across to the boat and began transferring packages back to the vehicle and loading them in.

Anderson was aware of that tightening in his groin that always preceded a call to action, and so was not surprised to see the area where he had been staring suddenly flooded with light and the air filled with the sound of sirens and shouts of command. He picked up his C8 and moved quickly and sharp-eyed down the dock, just as the Sergeant stepped forward out of the shadows to his left.

The young man on the deck was the first to grab his AR-15, which he promptly spent about ten seconds emptying in the general direction of the parking lot before hunting around for a second magazine. The men under the deck stayed there, and the one carrying packages to the Escalade retrieved his rifle from the curb, pointed it directly at Sergeant MacLeod and died, face-down on the blacktop. Corporal Marie Beauchemin took the legs out from under the man who was trying to figure out how to change 30-shot magazines and Frank Anderson jumped on deck, kicked away the rifles left outside by the men in the hatch, and took a small-bore round through his thigh from one of them in the process. He returned two deadly rounds to the man's chest and ordered the second man out of the hatch with his hands up before saying "ow, crap!" to whoever was listening. It was the Sergeant who

came to his side, fishing the second man out of the hatch and cuffing him.

At the end of the 30-second exchange of gunfire, Marjorie pocketed her sidearm and fussed over Anderson and his leg, which was now soaking his blue jeans a deep red.

The young constable from *Asphodel/Norwood* lay unmoving on the concrete path along the side of the canal. Just one of the thirty rounds fired in such a hurry by Gerald Westerby of *Norwood* had caught Renielle Belanger precisely in the center of her forehead. She had been murdered by her cousin, whom she barely knew.

MAY 27, 2018 SPIRIT RIVER, ON, 0815

Frank Anderson rolled over, rested for a moment on one elbow and gazed down at the lady he had fallen in love with less than a year earlier. He smiled, kissed her on the right temple, slithered painfully out of bed and limped slowly across to the window overlooking the little harbour where the *Rusty Bee* and *The Beaver* were tied up.

A quiet voice from the bed wished Anderson a good morning. "You shouldn't be walking on that," Marj said. "I was thinking last night about the word *asphodel*. It's an odd word, I thought, so I looked it up. Turns out it's a flower, a kind of lily, and as I remember, *Asphodel* is also the other name of *Norwood*, where the first idiot at *Hastings* was from, along with his two cousins—one of whom was a nice young lady cop—who were both killed in *Maple Falls* two nights ago."

"Ah, yes, I suppose..." Anderson said, thoughtfully.

"Idiot number one being the twit who died attaching the tracker to our boat three nights ago. So...where is this going?"

"Well, in Greek mythology, Asphodel is the place where ordinary people go when they die. Its population has therefore grown by three over the last week, even though Norwood lost three. Strange, isn't it?"

"Not, my love, even half as strange as you." Anderson sat down on the edge of the bed. "Let's fix that with breakfast at the Zoo."

THE END

THANKS FOR READING!

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## PETER KINGSMILL

**Peter Kingsmill** is the author of the Awan Lake mystery series. He is a recipient of the Governor General's Conservation Award (Canada) and the founder of the Redberry Lake (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve in Saskatchewan.

When he is not writing novels, he serves as publications editor with the Alberta Society of Professional Biologists and works as a consultant on regional development projects. He is a member of Crime Writers of Canada and currently serves as the Prairie Region Representative.

Peter has worked as both a writer and editor since leaving high school in Montreal and college in Vermont. He has worked at an eclectic mix of tasks which include logger, trucker and cattle farmer. He recently retired from many years as a riverboat captain and owner of a small-waters marine services business.

PETER KINGSMILL

Peter is passionate about Canada's rural spaces and has served two terms as Mayor in his home community of Hafford, where he lives with his wife Valerie, an artist and the author/illustrator of the *Redberry Tales* series of gentle children's books.

To learn more about Peter and the books he writes visit him at:

[www.peterkingsmill.ca](http://www.peterkingsmill.ca)

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