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Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.
~ Confucius

Chapter 1

Warton, Ontario, Canada. May 21st

Swirls of mist rose off the infinity pool. The water was royal blue, the colour of Adriatic tiles. Rollo Novak shed his robe, dove in and surfaced two-thirds of the way along the pool. New Blue, he called it, the first outdoor swim of the year. He plunged underwater, scissor-kicked to the shallow end and came up for breath. Beyond the pool, the sun crested the horizon.

He slipped underwater and headed for the deep end, this time reaching the wall. Surfacing, he saw his wife Katrina on the deck. “Jump, ljubezen,” he called. *Jump, my love.*

She grinned at him, dropped her robe and jumped in naked, cannonball style. The waves splashed over his head. Giggling, she grabbed his hand and led him to the shallow end. He heard a click at the back gate, and then another one.

Katrina pulled his swimsuit down. Forget about the gate.

Chapter 2

DAY ONE: Wiarton. Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), Bruce Peninsula. May 21st

Detective Eva Naslund roared up a long narrow driveway. Thick stands of black spruce shut out the sun. Her radio crackled, reporting another officer on the way. Half a kilometre later, the spruce finally receded and the forest revealed a gargantuan house. The white stone hulk featured a colossal central turret. The roof was cerulean blue. It melded perfectly with the sky. Rollo Novak, originally from Slovenia, had finished the faux Adriatic castle a year ago. Another example of big money coming into the Bruce Peninsula. While big money was often entwined with big egos, by all accounts, Novak was a true gentleman. He'd built the castle for his new wife. Naslund was more than happy with her man, but a gentleman *and* a castle, that could be a fairy tale come true.

She stepped out of her unmarked car. The grounds were eerily silent. The sun peered over the turret like a giant red eye. The front door swung open. Police Constable Chandler walked toward her, sidearm holstered.

"Two hangers," he gruffly said. "Never fails. The larger the fortune, the greater the misfortune."

She nodded. "You can't win. Anyone here?"

"One man, unarmed." Chandler grinned. "Unless you count his stare."

"Lethal weapon?" she joked.

"Oh yeah, loaded with attitude."

She chuckled. "I'll lend you my sunglasses."

“Better be bulletproof,” he kidded. “By the way, I viewed the bodies from a distance. Didn’t contaminate the scene.”

Good, she thought. The forensic training for police constables was finally paying off. She followed Chandler up the stairs, detecting no signs of a break-in. Inside, a vast foyer underscored the castle theme: gold-leaf paint, cognac-coloured wood, Old World tapestries. A few metres away, she saw a painting that looked like a medieval masterpiece. It could be an original. Novak was that rich.

Chandler gestured toward a man sitting in a throne-like chair, guarded by PC Derlago. The man’s face projected haughtiness. She pegged him at forty-plus: olive complexion, black hair, heavy crow’s feet around the eyes.

“Detective Sergeant Naslund, OPP. What’s your name, sir?”

He stood. “Damijan Zupan. I am House Manager. Butler, you can say.”

The name sounded Slavic. Slovenian? she speculated. He wore an expensive blue-serge suit. With his wide shoulders and stony face, he looked to be cut from the mold of bodyguard *cum* butler. His slicked-back hair was shiny and duck-tailed. She pressed the recording button on her duty phone, preparing to watch forensically, to capture every tick. “Did you call the police?” she asked.

“Yes, I call.” He didn’t seem distressed.

“Why?” An obvious question, but she wanted to hear his story.

“Mr. Novak, he is dead. Wife as well.”

Naslund waited. A man of few words.

“He didn’t come for breakfast,” Zupan eventually said, “nor wife. I went to look for him. I know he swims. I went to pool. Outdoor pool. There is indoor pool as well, but I know Mr. Rollo

swims outside today.” Zupan stopped and hung his head, seemingly overwhelmed. “I then feel something ...” He looked up. “I feel something is wrong.”

“Did you see anyone?” she asked.

“No. Killers, they are gone.”

“How do you know?”

Zupan’s dark eyes were empty. He’d called in the deaths, but levelheaded murderers sometimes did that. “I did not see them when I find Mr. Rollo dead. They are gone.”

“How do you know there’s more than one?”

He shrugged. “It is likely.”

“Where did you find the bodies?”

“Outdoor pool. Shallow end.”

“When?”

“Half an hour ago. No, less.” He pulled out a smartphone and aloofly showed her the call list. “I make nine-one-one at four minutes after eight.”

Naslund glanced at her watch: 0823 hours. She’d been dispatched at 0807. Zupan’s timeline seemed right. “Who else is in the house?”

“No one. It is quiet season. I look after whole house myself.”

“Cooking, cleaning, serving meals. Everything?”

He nodded abruptly, his eyes suddenly indignant. They flashed like lightning, only black. *Do not doubt me*, they ordered.

A reticent man with a temper. “Are there any groundskeepers?” she asked.

“No. They come in June. Wife, she is gardener. Mr. Rollo, he cuts lawn yesterday with rider mower.”

Strange, Naslund thought. A billionaire on a rider mower. “Did you touch either body?”

“No.”

“How did you know they were dead?”

“I was soldier.” Zupan’s eyes were emotionless again. “I know death.”

“Did you see or hear any vehicles on the property this morning? Any people?”

“No one comes until your policemen,” Zupan asserted and then continued, apparently feeling more forthcoming. “Mr. Rollo, he usually eats at seven-thirty. I do not worry until fifteen minutes later. Then I start to look. I find him hanging beside wife, like from a tree.” Zupan paused. “I am thinking. Who would do this? Šef, I mean, boss, he is good man.”

She remained silent, hoping for more details.

Zupan obliged her. “Mr. Rollo, he is happy man. Always content. Always, I tell you.”

She waited again, but Zupan was done. *Always?* Was he overstating things? Trying to snow her?

She’d send his footwear and clothes to the lab. He could be the killer. On the other hand, he might simply be a person of interest, a POI. “I have to get some equipment,” she said. “Then you can take me to the pool. You’ll remain with a police officer. I’ll need to speak with you again.”

“Yes, yes. Good.”

She motioned for Derlago to cover Zupan. Leaving the castle, she gave the interior her full attention, taking in the rooms closest to the foyer: a great-room, a study, two sitting-rooms. More heavy furniture. In her experience, victims’ houses were often useful clues. This one felt tired and stale, which was incongruous. From what she knew of the Novaks, they were a gregarious couple.

As she walked to her car, she replayed the butler’s words and actions in her head. His timeline checked out. His original reticence was followed by a more cooperative stance. For the moment,

she'd treat him as a POI. If she was wrong, she'd wear it. That was the job. You made snap decisions and you lived with them.

According to Zupan, no one had driven onto the property, but the perps could have travelled by foot. The Bruce Trail bordered the eastern edge of the Novak estate. Beyond that was Colpoys Bay, so the perps could have come and gone by boat. In any case, almost half-an-hour had passed since Zupan's call-in. The killer or killers were likely gone.

As Naslund grabbed her crime scene bag, PC Sandhu arrived in a cruiser. Naslund waved him over and called Chandler out, then pulled up Google Earth on her phone. The Novak property was 14.2 acres. Using Street View, she showed the constables the acreage. "There's a front gate," she began, "and two side access roads with closed barricades." She couldn't tell if they were locked. "Officer Sandhu, guard the front gate. Don't let anyone through without signing in or out."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Officer Chandler, check the two sideroads. Find out if the barricades are locked. Look for fresh tire prints, anything suspicious." She considered another tradeoff. If she set Chandler loose to hunt for perps, he might trample a lot of evidence. No PC hunt this time, she decided. She'd leave the grounds to the whitecoats, the forensic experts.

Derlago in tow, Naslund followed Zupan to the pool, saying nothing, letting Zupan hang on the hook. He didn't seem to mind. In fact, he seemed to welcome the silence.

Leaving him with Derlago, she donned her crime scene gear: shoe covers, gloves, and a hooded clean-suit. Instantly, she felt confined yet twice as big. She stepped through a sliding glass door and entered the pool area.

The setting surprised her. Compared to the Old-World interior—cluttered and ornate—the pool was ultra-modern and utilitarian, about twenty metres long. The only common denominator with the house was the deck, blue-bordered white tiles that matched the hall floors. The area resembled a cloister—windowless, high stone walls—with one exception: the pool’s infinity feature opened half the eastern wall. She scanned the deck. No blood stains. No signs of bodies being dragged or scuffles. Then she saw the bodies, two corpses hanging by the neck from a pool stair rail, about a metre above the water.

She approached methodically, mentally recording the details. The corpses were submerged from the mid-thigh down, suspended side by side, with absolutely no space between them. Their position seemed unnatural—too uniform, too perfect—as if the scene had been staged. Both were naked, except for the man’s shorts, which were caught on one foot.

She recognized his face instantly: Rollo Novak, billionaire businessman, TV celebrity, a star on *Angels or Devils*, the hit show featuring financiers who funded startups, sometimes to the detriment of the startups. Angel investors often became devils, executing hostile takeovers. As for the woman, Naslund had seen her on TV as well, a glamour puss who’d hooked Novak two years ago and snagged him from his first wife. Naslund knew her name: Katrina Hayden. She’d been born in the Bruce. Locals said she made Novak build the castle in Wiarton instead of the Muskokas, the usual summer playground of the rich. She was a former Miss Canada, a dancer, about thirty years old. If Naslund remembered correctly, she was fifteen years younger than her new hubbie.

The former Miss Canada was closest to Naslund. To say Hayden’s body was perfect was an understatement. She sported an almost hairless bikini wax. Naslund had tried a few but hadn’t stuck with them. She couldn’t find time for beach holidays. She took in Hayden’s face.

Absolutely blemish-free. Even in death, she looked exquisite, and with no make-up. Although her blonde hair hung lankly, it was clearly expensively cut. Her large brown eyes looked like marble.

Naslund surveyed Hayden's body. Rigor hadn't begun. Her bowels had loosened. Shutting out the excrement, Naslund moved closer. No whiff of decomposition. The victims hadn't been dead long. She saw a milky fluid glistening on the inside of Hayden's upper thighs. Was it semen? She made a mental note and re-examined the torso, letting her eyes travel upward from feet to neck. Muscular legs, strong arms. No signs of trauma. Although Hayden's head hair was blonde, her pubic hair was brown. Naslund looked again. A head dye job, she decided. Gentlemen preferred blondes, or was it that blondes preferred gentlemen?

Hayden had joined the ink club. She had a collection of 'bedroom' tattoos, visible only when naked. The most noticeable tat was above her pubic bone: a signpost about two centimetres long, pointing south, with a 'G' on it. Nice one, Naslund thought. *To the G-spot, Jeeves*. Two small G-signs adorned each breast, just below the nipples, pointing down. Naslund chuckled privately. Maybe Hayden had some directionally-challenged lovers. Nothing new there.

Naslund's gaze reached the victim's neck. It was lassoed by the broad end of a dark red necktie, about five centimetres wide. There was something under the tie. It looked like a filigreed silver necklace.

She leaned closer. Wrong. It was a thin wire ligature, cutting deeply into the skin. She shifted to the side, carefully moved Hayden's hair, and inspected the back of her neck. The wire was crossed just below the top spinal vertebra and twisted five times, very neatly.

Naslund's mind quickened. The victim couldn't have pulled the wire that deep herself and then twisted it, certainly not so neatly. Whoever twisted it was meticulous. Despite her decision to

consider Zupan a POI, she immediately thought of him. A meticulous man. Those remote eyes. The eyes of a killer?

She resumed her scrutiny, focusing on the wire. Each end was about twenty centimetres long—not long enough to hang someone. From what she could tell, the wire was the murder weapon, not the necktie. Why the necktie then? She let that question sit.

Moving on to Novak, she found similar indications, but the MO was different. There was only one ligature: the broad end of a dark red necktie, again about five centimetres wide. No wire. Perhaps Novak hadn't been murdered. She assessed the whole scene. Maybe he strangled Hayden and then hanged himself? Possible. More questions surfaced, buzzing her mind like bees. Did the twin red neckties signify anything? If so, what? If suicide was in play, why didn't Novak just weigh himself down and jump in the pool? It'd be easier than hanging himself. Was he making a statement?

Slow down, she ordered herself. Let the crime scene reveal itself. She inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, and then repeated the cycle. It stilled her mind. She continued her examination, moving on to Novak's body. For a middle-aged man, he was very fit. Well-muscled yet slim. As with Hayden, rigor hadn't begun and his bowels had loosened. He'd eaten more than his wife recently. Blowflies swarmed his backside.

Her eyes returned to the necktie. The end tied to the stair rail was about a metre long—long enough to enable suicide by hanging. Then again, someone could have used it to strangle him. The noose knot was at the back of his neck. She knew most male strangulation assaults occurred from behind. A frontal assault gave a fit man like Novak a chance to fight back. A rear assault pointed to murder. However, there was no throttling wire. Given the Hayden MO, that seemed to rule out homicide. So, his death could be a suicide.

Naslund stepped back. She couldn't offer the victims any dignity. They had to remain hanging until the whitecoats were finished with them. Either she was looking at two murders, or a murder-suicide. She didn't know which. She exhaled noisily. Her job wasn't to pronounce the cause of death. That was up to the coroner and pathologist. Her job was to study the scene, to find details that could reconstruct events and solve the crime.

Pulling out her phone, she called the detachment chief, Staff Sergeant Bickell. The old boy favoured radiophones, but eavesdroppers might be scanning the police frequency. Although encrypted, hackers could unscramble it.

"Naslund here," she said. "Two fatalities confirmed."

"Identities?" Bickell asked.

"Rollo Novak and his wife. Could be two murders. Or a murder and a suicide."

"Suicide?"

"Could be."

"Damn. Messy."

Naslund didn't respond. Bickell preferred murder over suicide. In the public eye, suicides were sad stories. In Bickell's, they were resource burners. Suicide was just another type of murder: premeditated and self-inflicted. His staff would need to probe for motive and opportunity.

"All right," he grudgingly said. "I'll call the coroner. Do you need more PCs?"

"No." He'd like that. It was Victoria Day Monday. Calling for more PCs would create overtime.

"I'm bringing in the whitecoats from Central," she said. Homicide specialists never had holidays.

"Moore too?" Bickell asked.

“That’s Central’s decision,” she replied. Bickell despised Moore: Detective Inspector Lewis Moore, regarded as one of the best homicide detectives in Ontario. The two had butted heads on the last set of murders to hit the Bruce, now known as the Tyler Triple.

“Okay, Detective. I don’t suppose you’ll be back in the office today. You know, to register your investigation.”

“Correct. I won’t be.” She disconnected. Bickell and his protocols.

Chapter 3

Naslund turned away from the crime scene, but the hanging bodies were burned into her mind. Whenever she encountered murder, she plunged into work mode—secure the scene and collect evidence; search for perps; round up POIs—and then later, when her duties stabilized, the corpses flooded her consciousness and became people: husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. It was always like that. After summoning the whitecoats, she examined the deck area. Nothing except for two plush red robes, which she left to the experts. She stepped close to the infinity pool ledge, leaned out, and looked down. A sheer, smooth wall; a five-metre drop to the ground. The perps could have climbed it using grappling hooks or a ladder, but she didn't detect any scrapes or indentations. Looking up, she noted it was clear all the way to the horizon. She saw no buildings or trees, no apparent sightlines for surveillance. However, a drone operator could have sent up a camera. Returning to the shallow end, she strode to a backwall gate and turned the handle. It clicked open. Was it usually open?

She walked outside. A Canada jay kamikazed her from the roof, squawking proprietorially. She ducked. Another jay joined the fray. It was slightly smaller. A nesting pair, she figured, a male and female.

Knowing her presence signified an intrusion, she stood completely still, taking in the surroundings. If not for the murders, it'd be a hell of a morning. The dew-laden grass glittered with tiny diamonds. The cliffs ringing Colpoys Bay magnified the sun, shining like mini suns

themselves. A line of nearby cedars was twisted helter-skelter, distorted by gales. With its two moods—one refined, one untamed—the Bruce was as lovely as a lady and drunk as a lord.

In due course, the jays resettled and she began surveying the gate area. No signs of forced entry. Manicured shrubbery, a path leading east, toward the bay. She walked beside the path, leaving it untrammelled.

As she paced, her senses logged the grounds. A wide swathe of lawn. The smell of freshly-mown grass. Outcrops of the area's famed white limestone. Deciduous trees to the south, just coming into leaf. Not much cover for intruders. Thirty paces later, she turned back. No recent prints or obvious DNA carriers, like bottles or cans. However, considering the dearth of evidence in the pool area, the back gate and grounds were a prime zone for the whitecoats.

Preliminary inspection complete, she returned to the house and shed her CS gear, glad to be back in civvies—dark green slacks and a jean jacket—one bonus of being a non-uniformed officer.

Another was not wearing a cop hat. Her long auburn hair wasn't exactly regulation. It was wavy and loose and free. Some called it unprofessional. She called it ideal. When Bickell got bothered, she pulled it into a ponytail.

Walking toward Derlago, her duty phone crooned Elvis Costello. She'd recently changed the default OPP ringtone, which sounded like a submarine claxon, to *Watching the Detectives*.

"Watching the detectives," Costello sang. "Watching the detectives—"

She fished out the phone. "Sergeant Naslund, OPP."

"Hello, Sergeant. Inspector Moore here."

"Good day."

"They're parachuting me into your territory again. Hope you don't mind."

“Not at all,” she said, and meant it. She liked working with Moore. Although she didn't consider him a friend, the man was a good detective. He had an eighty-six percent solve rate, which made him the envy of every homicide detective in the country, especially Toronto, where they rarely cracked sixty percent these days. Over the past year, he'd been mentoring her, mostly from afar. They'd met for lunch a few times when their paths crossed at Central. He wanted her to start on the road to detective inspector, a career journey that could take years. While she admired his tenacity and work ethic, he had a dominant trait she didn't like. He was too old-school.

“What's your two-minute synopsis?” he asked.

She had a one-minute version. He'd approve of that. “Two dead, either a double murder or a murder-suicide. Strangulations.”

“What's your feeling, Double-M or M-S? Your intuition, that is.”

Intuition? This was a new Moore. On the Tyler Triple case, it'd been months before he spoke of intuition. “Can't say yet. Too close to call.”

“Understood. I'm in my car now. See you in two hours. Likely less.”

That was fast. Bickell wouldn't like Moore's speeding, not to mention his return to Wiaraton. The inspector would be in town for a while. Murder investigations regularly took weeks, if not months.

Pocketing her phone, Naslund motioned for Derlago and Zupan to follow her. After leading them to a set of wing-back chairs she'd seen in the foyer, she began recording the butler's second interview. “Mr. Zupan, please tell me again. When did you find the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Novak?”

Zupan appeared to be affronted. He raised his large chin. The man had a Mulroney-like jut. “I tell you,” he said. “Okay. No problem.” He stopped.

“Go ahead,” she prodded.

“I am thinking. I want to tell exactly.”

She waited, reflecting on Zupan’s odd voice. It wasn’t only his accent. It sounded like he was swallowing his words, holding them back, as if speaking English offended him. She took in his gelled hair. The comb lines were perfectly straight. He might be tough, but he was also vain. You didn’t get hair like that without spending time in front of a mirror.

He studied the ceiling before speaking. “All right, Sergeant. I know nine-one-one call was four after eight. I found bodies three minutes before that, maybe four. Not more, this I can say. I am officer in Serbian army. Artillery captain. I know how to be exact. You police need precise and my time is precise to within a minute.”

Too precise, she thought. “When did you last see Mr. Novak or his wife?”

“Last night, maybe eleven p.m.”

“Who was in the house last night?”

“Mr. Rollo and wife, and also Mr. Rollo’s friend. I serve dinner to those three at eight p.m.”

“What’s the friend’s name?”

Zupan’s lips curled into a partial sneer. “Karlos Vega.”

Naslund knew that name. Vega, another bigshot on *Angels or Devils*—for many viewers, the face of the devil. “The billionaire?”

Zupan nodded.

“Was Mr. Vega here this morning?”

“No. He goes last night, about quarter after eleven. I see his car leave from my suite over garage.”

“You were still awake?”

“I was watching football match, Barcelona v Real.” He snorted. “‘Soccer’ you call it.”

She ignored his disdain. Having a Swedish father, she also called it football. “How do you know Mr. Vega actually left?”

“I hear. His car reached main road and turned left, to direction of Wiarton. I have window open. I can hear this.”

“Why was your window open?”

“I sleep like that.” Zupan unleashed the first smile Naslund had seen from him. “The air here, it is perfect, like in Slovenian mountains. I love to sleep here.”

She smiled back, switching to good cop mode. “Are you from Slovenia?”

“Yes. I am born there. Northwest of Ljubljana. Jesenice, very fine place, I tell you. Especially now, in spring. Trees come to life. Apple, pear, plum. Many blossoms.”

“Sounds very nice,” she said. Despite his new volubility, she wondered about the open window. Although late May, it had been very cold at night. The heat in her house was still on. However, she let it pass. She didn’t want Zupan to realize how much she doubted him. “When did you come to Canada?”

“Four years ago. I leave Serbian Army.”

She’d check his past. “When did you start working for Mr. Novak?”

Zupan smiled fondly. “It is two years next month.”

“You mentioned Mr. Novak was always content. Did he have any enemies?”

Zupan's face hardened. "Mr. Rollo is very fair man, but not simple man. Some people think so. They *misjudge* him, I hear him say. But he is not easy to fool or cheat. Sometimes he gives money, sometimes he takes. I am not business man," Zupan confided, "but I hear. Many dollars. Millions."

"How about personal enemies?"

"He does not have."

She took that with a grain. Everyone except angels had personal enemies. Probably even angels.

"How about his family?"

"Older son, Rollo Junior, he does not like his father." Zupan's face hardened again. "Of this I am sure. This son wants to run all of Šef's business. He wants to takeover, you call it."

"What about the rest of Mr. Novak's family?"

"There is ex-wife and another son, Atlas."

"Tell me about him."

"He is soft." Zupan shook his head in disgust. "A young man who does not care to fight. Point of fact, he does not know how." Zupan snorted as if to say such a thing was ludicrous. "But he does not like Rollo Junior. They are certainly not best friends."

"What about Mr. Novak's ex-wife?"

"I never meet her."

"Do you know anything about her?"

He shrugged. "A little. Mr. Rollo, he still gives her money. She has none of her own."

"How do you know?"

"I hear it from Mr. Rollo."

Naslund wondered about that. Either Zupan overheard a lot, or Novak told him a lot. When she'd learned more, she'd question him about the unlocked back gate and the house alarm system.

“Did you hear any birds this morning?”

He eyed her quickly: *You know?* “Yes, yes. Those gray ones. Complainers. Screechers, you say.”

“Where?”

“Near back of house.”

The pool area, she thought. “When?”

“About six-thirty.”

“For how long?”

“Many minutes. Fifteen or twenty, on and off.”

Given the ruckus, she suspected more than one person had been outside the pool gate. Canada jays were very territorial. “Did you go to take a look?” she asked.

“No. They are always screeching.”

Naslund decided to detain the butler, without arresting him. Always a tricky dance, but she didn't have anything concrete against him. “Thank you, Mr. Zupan. You've been very helpful. You'll remain at the house for the time being, for your security. You can stay in your suite. I'm posting Officer Derlago to secure your safety.”

“I do not need,” he boomed. “I look after myself!”

“Of course,” she replied, “but we're going to err on the side of safety.” He brought to mind a human stormfront: thunderous voice, lightning eyes, body barely controlled. She sensed he could unleash it in a flash.

Derlago had just passed his one-year anniversary, but he often seemed like a teenager. The less time Kid Constable D spent with Zupan, the better. As soon as Chandler was free, he'd take

over. A grin was never far from his face, but people didn't mess with him. It wasn't only his size. When he was serious, one word from him convinced you to do what he decreed.

As Derlago escorted Zupan to his suite, Naslund heard a car in the drive. Looking out a window, she saw Dr. Rudi Kapanen, the local coroner, slowly exit his car. He was getting chubbier by the month. According to Chandler, Kapanen's weight stemmed from his booze intake. He had a love affair with Finnish vodka.

Naslund strode to the front door and opened it. Kapanen huffed up the entrance stairs. His face was red; his nose, redder. As usual, he wore a tight three-piece suit. His head looked like Humpty Dumpty's, shiny and comically wide. The lobes of his large ears extended below his mouth. "Detective Naslund," he said. "Who else?"

She bowed facetiously. "The only Bruce detective meets the one and only Bruce coroner."

"Take me to the bodies, Detective."

"Bodies?"

"I know there are two."

"I thought you coroners never presupposed."

"And you detectives never act quickly. Always hedging, always collecting more evidence."

Fair point, she admitted and strode ahead. Kapanen's cadence was irritating. It was too rushed, too unrelenting.

Before entering the pool area, she donned full CS gear and insisted Kapanen do the same.

Although he always wore gloves and shoe covers, he was averse to wearing clean-suits.

Approaching the corpses, she took a series of CS photos before signaling him forward. Being a long-serving coroner, he knew the drill. Don't move a body unless absolutely necessary.

Kapanen began with Hayden's body, studying it intently. Finally, he spoke. "We have proximity to sufficient water for drowning, but there are no signs of drowning. Or blunt force assault or firearm injuries. However, there are two ligatures. I haven't seen that before. A wire and a necktie. The wire caused deep compression." Kapanen moved closer. "Extensive ecchymosis or bruising of the neck, extensive hemorrhaging of the infrahyoid muscles." He stopped and challenged Naslund. "Do you know them?"

"Yes. AKA the straps. Eight muscles that help hold the head in place."

"Correct," he snidely said. "A in Anatomy One-oh-One."

And an F to you in manners, Naslund thought, but let it go. No use sparring with Kapanen.

Although the crime scene was hers, the bodies belonged to the coroner and pathologist.

Kapanen pointed to the victim. "Do you see the presence of hemorrhaging in the eyes and eyelids?"

"Yes."

"What are they called?"

"Petechiae."

"Impressive. You're outdoing yourself. As you no doubt know," he sarcastically added, "they're associated with traumatic asphyxia, which accompanies strangulation. Now, look at the neck.

The wire is the culprit, not the tie. The extensive blood flow indicates homicidal strangulation.

Infrahyoids only bleed that much when a ligature is applied with sufficient force. If someone applies force to their own neck, they can certainly strangle themselves, but they rarely cause that kind of blood flow." After examining the neck again, he continued. "From what I see, the wire wasn't tightened by the victim. I see homicide, not suicide."

That's what she saw.

Kapanen's eyes moved down the body. Eventually he looked up at Naslund. "The victim's vulva shows evidence of recent intercourse, including the presence of sperm. Sadly, strangulation is frequently associated with sexual interference. Make sure your technicians capture the sperm. It could be from the male hanging beside her, or an assailant."

Naslund nodded.

The coroner switched to Novak. As with Hayden, he studied Novak before speaking. "Again, no signs of drowning, blunt force assault, or firearm injuries. I only detect one ligature, a necktie. There's not as much bleeding as with the female. Which could indicate either homicidal strangulation or self-strangulation. Unlike with the previous victim, this victim could have hanged himself."

Again, as she thought.

The coroner bent closer to the corpse. "There are traces of sperm on the penis. Advise your technicians to capture it. I won't theorize as to why a wire ligature was used in one case, and a necktie in the other. I'll leave that to you. I hope you have better training than those TV detectives. Or luck."

Naslund didn't reply. She didn't count on Lady Luck. "Would you be able to estimate time of death?"

Kapanen scowled at her. "Of course. What do you think I am, a wet nurse?"

She raised an eyebrow. Kapanen always got offended when she asked for PMI, post-mortem interval. However, she always asked. If she could place a suspect at a crime scene during the PMI window, she had opportunity; she could probe for motive.

Kapanen seemed to realize he'd been too snarky. "Well," he generously said, "we're lucky. The hat trick should work today."

She nodded. Kapanen's *hat trick* was lividity, algor mortis, and rigor mortis. Lividity, or blood pooling, left bruise-like patterns on a corpse, usually reddish or purple. Algor referred to a body turning cold. When the heart stopped and blood flow ceased, body temperature dropped by about one Celsius each hour, until it reached air temperature. Rigor mortis, or body stiffening, took hours to become fully established.

Kapanen knelt next to Hayden. "Rigor hasn't hardened the largest muscles," he pronounced and pointed to the glutes. "Which indicates this victim died less than twelve hours ago. No sign of lividity, not to the naked eye. We'll use algor." He drew a liver thermometer from his medical bag and pierced the victim's right side. "Thirty-four-point-two Celsius," he read. "Given thirty-seven is the norm, algor suggests the victim died roughly three hours ago."

Kapanen moved on to Novak. "I see the same indications," he soon said. "No large-muscle rigor. No lividity." He used his liver thermometer to read Novak's internal temperature. "Thirty-three-point-nine." He stood. "I'd conjecture both victims died three to four hours ago. Approximately," he warned. "Both suffered severe neck trauma. Cause of death is strangulation. I can't definitively rule on means for both. It's not clear." He appeared to be embarrassed, as if he'd failed his calling. He soon composed himself. "I'd rule homicide for the female. The male could be either homicide or suicide. That's it."

Naslund nodded. She almost felt bad for Kapanen. Almost. As he hobbled back to the house, she lagged behind. The sun's rays ricocheted off the deck tiles, creating confusing reflections. Her thoughts were ricocheting around as well, flying in different directions.

Chapter 4

With the coroner gone, Naslund sat on the front steps waiting for Chandler. Dawn had become day. The cloudless sky was brighter and bluer. May warmth suffused the air. In a nearby Norway pine, grackles chattered vociferously, countering the presence of death. She welcomed their company. The Canada jays were silent. Leaning against a stone balustrade, she went over what she knew with certainty. Not a lot.

Two dead bodies. One clear case of murder: Hayden. One of suicide or murder: Novak. As for motive, she had no firm leads. No evidence of forced entry. From what she'd seen of the castle interior, it hadn't been ransacked. She could be looking at a botched B&E, a Break-and-Enter gone bad, but why would thieves string up the Novaks? They might kill them, but hang them with neckties? She didn't see it. The more time spent on killing, the less time left to pillage. Naslund eyed the large reflecting pool facing the castle. It was as still as the air. Deep within Novak's estate, there was no wind. The castle was isolated, located in a private forest—a good locale for murder.

She let her mind cycle. There were suggestions from Zupan that financial gain was in play. The old chestnut. Money. Who'd benefit from Novak's death? His family would certainly be centerstage. Ditto for his business partners. She wondered how often he'd become a devil investor. Depending on the money involved, an aggrieved partner could turn into a murderer. She'd subpoena all *Angels or Devils* footage, including the outtakes. Then there were Novak's many other business ventures. He'd been a multimillionaire well before rising to TV stardom.

Get your blinkers off, she chastised herself. What about Hayden? Just because she was a glamour puss, it didn't mean she had no money of her own. Someone could have killed her for financial gain. An ex-husband, or maybe Novak, her current husband. However, that undermined the murder-suicide angle. Why would he murder her for money and then kill himself?

Naslund shrugged. What if someone murdered him? Perhaps he'd taken Hayden's money previously and left it with someone, who then killed him to keep it. Enough, she told herself. You're getting convoluted.

It was time to marshal what she knew. As she dictated preliminary observations into her duty phone, Chandler pattered up in his squad car. He drove like a farmer piloting a hay baler: slowly and with deference. Bickell liked that. The chief was always on them to show respect to the public. He spent half his time urging them to be 'good ambassadors,' and the other half castigating them for being too lenient.

Chandler raised his hands in disappointment as he reached her. At six-foot-three, two-hundred-and-thirty pounds, even in his mid-forties he resembled a football linebacker. Not surprisingly, he'd once played professionally in Canada. "No fresh tire marks," he said. "Nothing suspicious." "What about the barricades?"

"Locked. Both padlocks covered in rust. Haven't been opened since the Pope kissed a girl."

She chuckled.

"I'm not saying kissed a boy. That could be last night."

She nodded. She knew Chandler was a Catholic. He claimed it gave him licence to mock what he called *holy fuckers*. She overlooked his occasional crassness. If you had to keep all your jokes clean, you'd stop laughing. "Can you relieve Derlago? He's watching the butler. His suite is above the garage. Post Derlago at the sliding pool door, in full view of the corpses."

“Yes, Sergeant. By the way, that’s a suspicious butler. Fancy suit, but doesn’t trim his ear hair.”

Chandler grinned.

“That is suspicious.”

“I know, only in the movies. But I’m half-serious. He moves like a big cat. A killer cat.”

“Agreed.”

“Why don’t we nudge things a long? Just a tad. Set a few snoops in his suite.”

Snoop cameras, she knew. She shook her head. In her undercover days, she’d have done it. Back then, she’d temporarily *adjusted* rules to snag perps. She’d tried hard to be a successful criminal—and succeeded. That’s when she knew she had to leave and straighten out. It wasn’t something she ever talked about. She’d been on the other side, and come back.

“We might catch him in the act,” Chandler continued, “flushing evidence or throwing it out.”

“Appreciate the thought,” she said, “but his story checks so far. He’s not in possession of potential evidence, such as wire, or weapons. Anyway, your idea would backfire. One, we don’t have a surveillance warrant. Two, he hasn’t been charged with anything. Innocent until prov—”

“No need to harelip the Pope. Jesus H, I hate being hogtied.”

She nodded heartily. Yet that was the system. As she now knew, the undercover way was easier, but it was also a good way to torpedo a court case. One glitch and a guilty perp could walk on a technicality.

Chandler shrugged. “Wife says I’m too good for my badge.”

“Too sexy for your uniform.”

“*Me?*” He wiggled his butt, then sashayed away with an exaggerated strut.

She laughed and almost went inside to type her case notes. However, the sun was warm, strong enough to draw out the scent of pine. The moon was in perigee that morning, the closest it came

to Earth, not only raising tides, but also tugging at human emotions. It was unseen now, outshone by the sun, concealed until early evening. The grackles had multiplied. Though not her favourite bird—she considered them long-winded blackbirds—they dispelled the castle’s gloom. It seemed to be growing.

Seeing a patio table in the shade, she fetched her laptop from her car and began making case notes, the least favourite part of her job. When she’d applied to become a detective, she had no idea how much paperwork it entailed: case notes, warrants, subpoenas, reports.

Having almost finished her notes, she looked up to see Inspector Moore’s elongated black Ford Explorer roaring up the drive.

Like her, the inspector had a lead foot. His car reminded her of a hearse, which, given his job, seemed appropriate. Although she’d worked thirty-plus murders, he’d worked over two hundred. Jumping out of his hearse, he grabbed a CS kitbag and strode toward her. With his height and bony face, he resembled a skeleton on stilts. If he grew a beard, he’d pass for Abe Lincoln on a diet. At first glance, he looked the same: a tall, thin man who moved with surprising quickness. His gaze said *I’ve seen it all before*. However, he wore a natty midnight blue suit, not his usual drab grey. His hair was still grey but it was much longer, curling over his collar and ears.

“Hello, Sergeant,” he said and extended his hand ceremoniously.

She stood and shook hands, trying to match his formal demeanor. “Good to see you, sir.

Welcome to my temporary HQ.” She gestured at the patio table.

He smiled. “I like it. Al fresco.”

She smiled back. He seemed to have loosened up a bit already. His sartorial style certainly had.

A good omen.

“Let’s look at the bodies,” he suggested.

Naslund led Moore to the pool area, keeping her investigative opinions to herself. She didn't want to colour his first impressions.

After donning CS gear, the two detectives nodded to Derlago and walked the pool deck to the shallow end, Moore's eyes sweeping the tiles. Reaching the corpses, he knelt beside Hayden. He seemed lost in thought. Naslund almost asked what he was thinking. She'd never seen him so unhurried. Another good omen. In their past collaboration, he'd shown one gear only: full speed ahead. Just as she parted her lips, he spoke.

"I see murder." He pointed to the wire ligature. "Can't cut it any other way. The necktie is a red herring." He winked. "A very red herring."

She grinned. The man really was more relaxed. She hoped he didn't have a joke quota. A year ago, he seemed to be good for one a day, no more.

He turned to Novak's corpse. This time, she left him to his analysis and took in the complete crime scene. The dark red of the two neckties caught her eye. It reminded her of the bottom band of the Slovenian flag. She'd watched Scotland play Slovenia twice in World Cup prelims. Did the necktie colour mean anything? Maybe it was a message from Novak. If so, to whom? She filed the thought away.

Moore finally looked up. "Another murder," he stated. "I don't see suicide." His voice, thick and resonant, belied his thinness. It was more measured than the last time she'd worked with him. By slowing down, he'd found another level of authority. "Hangers sometimes change their minds, try to undo their neck ligatures, and leave evidence: broken fingernails, self-lacerations. There's no indication of that. Beyond that, look at the position of the Hayden wire crossing, and then the Novak necktie knot."

She did so.

“Both are below the upper spinal vertebra,” he pointed out, “which suggests murder, not suicide. In a hanging suicide, when a body falls, in most cases, the noose is jerked upwards. It rides up the neck, ending above that vertebra. In most cases,” he cautioned. “What did the coroner rule?”

“Cause of death, strangulation. Means, homicide for Hayden. Either homicide or suicide for Novak.”

Moore shrugged. “I don’t like second-guessing a coroner, but when you see something, you see it.”

“Can’t un-see it.”

“True. Looks like two murders. However, re optics for the public, let’s start out by calling this a murder-suicide. It could be. The coroner may be right. I’ll release a press statement this afternoon.” Moore pursed his lips. At first, she saw a kissing codfish. Seconds later, his face morphed into a pondering sage. “Ditch that thought,” he said. “It might be good to announce a double suicide. Hold off on what we actually know. Let the murderers think we don’t have a clue.” He grinned. “We’re useless idiots. Ruling possibilities out when we should be ruling them in. All right, that’s the way to go. Two suicides.” He nodded judiciously. “But I’ll close with a little caveat: pending further investigation. Don’t want to have egg on our faces when we announce the real McCoy. I’ll drop a press release after lunch. No live news interviews, not yet.”

“Okay.” She got the impression Moore was thinking aloud for her benefit, trying to teach her the ropes. She didn’t mind. She liked his MO. He didn’t keep his ideas to himself. Other detectives she’d worked with kept their theories private, never airing missteps, believing the way to get ahead was to always look right, regardless.

“Any signs of forced ingress?” Moore asked.

“Didn’t see any. I’ll tell the whitecoats to search for B and E evidence.”

He nodded. “Before I left Central, I looked up recent strangulation cases. There aren’t many in the system. It’s a rare form of murder in Canada, less than twenty in the last three decades.”

“Good,” she said. Rare was useful. It limited the known perp gene pool.

“All the cases were solved, not that that helps us. But I’ll use it to bolster the troops. Past victories point to future success and all that. *Now go and solve this!* You know the speech.”

Naslund wasn’t the rah-rah speech type. In fact, she wasn’t given to speeches of any kind—one reason why she wasn’t moving quickly to become an inspector. Besides, these days, she figured the “troops” didn’t need a DI on a high horse to lead them to victory. If finding murderers didn’t motivate them, what would?

Moore turned back to Novak’s body and continued as if still thinking aloud. “I don’t see Novak standing around while his wife was strangled, or vice versa. There were likely two perps. One to strangle her; the other to strangle him. Possibly more. Maybe someone riding shotgun.”

Naslund agreed. “I suspect we have a staging of sorts. The bodies were strung up afterwards.

Perhaps there’s messaging in play.”

He nodded judiciously.

“Let’s talk to the butler,” she said.

“There’s a butler?” Moore grinned. “The butler did it. Case closed.”

She chuckled. “If only.”

Moore switched gears. “What’s your read on him?”

She shrugged. Again, she’d didn’t want to colour Moore’s first impressions. She wasn’t going to mention Zupan’s remote eyes. Too subjective, not to mention fanciful. In any case, she didn’t believe everything Zupan said. Although people liked to believe each other—belief built cooperation; it was a societal glue—as a detective, she defaulted to the opposite: she distrusted

them. She'd learned to tread the fine line between treating POIs with respect and treating them like liars. It was a difficult dance: you had to be courteous but, at the same time, sceptical. The trick was to think on your feet, to change your mind if needed. Just as importantly, you needed to admit your errors, something many of her colleagues were loath to do.

Naslund walked the inspector to Zupan's studio, delivering a synopsis of her two previous interviews with the butler. Damijan Zupan was Slovenian, like Novak. He'd been an artillery captain in the Serbian army. He'd served dinner to Novak and his wife the previous evening, and to a guest, Karlos Vega.

Moore stopped her. "The Karlos Vega?"

"Yes. From what I know, Vega is one of Novak's best friends."

"Hard to believe. Oil and water, those two, with Vega the oily one."

"Very greasy."

Moore grinned.

"Do you want to listen to the audio of my interviews with Zupan?" she asked.

"Good idea."

She stopped at the wing-back chairs in the foyer and emailed Moore the audio files. While he listened, she retrieved her laptop, sat outside and resumed her notes. Her never-ending notes.

Despite the ideal spring weather, she felt trapped. Fortunately, the trap was soon sprung. Moore approached her half an hour later.

"So," he said, "I'm thinking Vega should be at the front of the POI line in Toronto. It appears he was the last POI to see Novak alive. I talked to the big man. He's at his Toronto condo. Bloor and Avenue Road area. He'll *entertain us*—his words—at eighteen-hundred."

"Kind of him."

“He’s granting us thirty minutes, no more. Apparently, he has to fly to Miami this evening. Private jet from the Island Airport but, still, there’s the limo to the island and the pilot needs runway time.”

“Poor Vega.” She shook her head in mock sympathy. “So little time to add to his billions.”

“And the likes of you and me, we’ll have to hoof it to Toronto.”

“How about my car this time?” Working the Tyler Triple, they’d used his vehicle.

“Okay. We’ll stay in Toronto tonight. Rollo Junior is there too, as well as his brother and mother.

They all live downtown, but in scattered neighbourhoods. By the way, I hooked Junior for ten-hundred tomorrow.”

Naslund nodded. Fast work. Per the norm with Move-it-Moore.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Moore rolled on. “I also hooked Atlas for eleven-hundred-thirty and the ex-wife for thirteen-hundred-thirty. A family affair. I’ll get Central to book us two hotel rooms. Let’s leave as soon as we’re done with Zupan.”

“It won’t be right after. A Mobile Unit’s on the way. I have to debrief them.” One side of her wanted to stay behind to work the crime scene and consolidate the evidence. On the other hand, they had to gather new evidence. The first forty-eight hours were critical. A murder case was like an avalanche. If it lost its momentum, it ground to a halt.

Chapter 5

As Moore entered Zupan's studio, Naslund glanced at the inspector. The moment he saw Zupan, his demeanor changed. His body stiffened; his gaze sharpened. She'd seen it before. She sensed he'd go bad cop from the get-go. Too bad. It was often counter-productive.

"Detective Inspector Moore," he said and thrust out his badge. "Homicide."

Zupan snorted, and not quietly. He sounded like an irritated horse.

Moore curtly waved him to a kitchen chair but remained standing, legs wide apart, head tilted back. His stance said *enough of your horseshit*. "I'm curious, Mr. Zupan, how did you know Mr. Novak was swimming in the outdoor pool today?"

Zupan said nothing for a few long heartbeats, seemingly telling Moore to eat more horseshit. "He advises me yesterday."

"I wonder if you can enlighten me. Why do you think Mr. Novak hanged himself?"

"He did not!" Zupan's eyes flashed. He appeared about to bull-rush Moore, but then gripped the sides of his chair and remained seated.

"Why do you say that?"

"It is truth." Zupan's voice had descended a few octaves, almost to a growl. "Complete truth.

This I know."

"How can you know he didn't kill himself? Not to get philosophical, Mr. Zupan, but no one knows what goes on in someone else's head."

"This I agree. I know only what I know. And, in this case, I know. That is good enough for me."

“But not for a court of law.”

“This too I know. We are caught between inner truths and outer truths. Always. But I am responsible for knowing. And for making correct choices.”

Okay, Naslund thought, enough of the existentialism.

Moore seemed to agree with her. He switched topics. “Do you know Karlos Vega, the financier?”

“Yes.”

“Was he here yesterday?”

“Yes. I already tell the Sergeant.”

“What can you tell me about him?”

“He is loud. But he is rich. Much richer than Mr. Rollo. I hear Mr. Rollo say this. Also he says Vega is sometimes, what is word, tactless. But Mr. Rollo, he likes Vega.”

“Do you like Vega?”

“Not so much. But I do not dislike either. He is like older brother to Mr. Rollo. He is watchful.

No, that is not correct word. I am now remembering my English lessons. Better word is *protective*. I hear Mr. Rollo say to wife, ‘Karlos and I are good together.’ Karlos is making sure Mr. Rollo makes more money. Much more. Mrs. Katrina likes that. She showed much interest in making money.”

Naslund read his tone. Disapproval. Wives shouldn’t sully themselves making money.

“Did you like her?” Moore asked.

Zupan shrugged.

Not much of an endorsement, Naslund concluded. She regarded Zupan’s face: sullen, almost menacing. There appeared to be no love lost between the butler and the new wife. Although

Naslund would have continued the Hayden line of questioning, Moore dropped it. “Are you responsible for the security of this house?” he asked.

“Yes. I set and monitor security system. Mr. Rollo shows me how. He trains me. System is very precise, very powerful. Has eighteen cameras, all outward-facing. They cover complete outside.”

“And the interior of the house?”

“There are no cameras. Mr. Rollo, he does not like. He wants good privacy inside.”

“What about the artwork, such as the three-piece painting in the foyer?”

Zupan snorted. “You mean triptych? Is *altare portatile*. Reproduction of ‘Dresden Triptych’ by Jan van Eyck. Mr. Rollo try to buy original, but they would not sell.”

Dresden Triptych, Naslund thought, *altare portatile*. Zupan was no goon.

“Is the *altare*,” Moore snidely asked, “secure?”

“Yes, same as all art in house. Is protected one-hundred percent with force fields. You come too close, they make you unconscious. You try to remove art, maybe you die. If power goes out, there is backup, run by generator.”

“Is it fail-proof?”

“No. No system is fail-proof,” Zupan stated matter-of-factly. “But I am here. I am trained in other things,” he imperiously added. “Hand-to-hand, guns, knives. I know them all.”

“What about the grounds? Do you monitor the grounds?”

“Yes,” Zupan peevishly replied. “I tell you already. Grounds are secure.”

“Then why was the pool gate unlocked?”

“Is not unlocked.”

“It was this morning.” Moore eyed Zupan as if he’d unlocked it himself.

Zupan’s face reddened. “That is not possible. Not possible, I say.” He jutted out his hefty chin.

“The Sergeant,” Moore gestured to Naslund, “will tell you what she found.”

“The gate was unlocked,” Naslund confirmed. “I opened it and went through it at approximately nine a.m., about half-an-hour after I first met you.”

Zupan studied her, seemingly judging her words. Eventually he shrugged, apparently conveying acceptance. “That is very strange. It is, as you say, suspicious.”

“Yes,” Moore said. “It is. So, Mr. Zupan, the premises were not secure.”

“I am surprise.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Moore’s smile said the polar opposite. “For the time being, you’ll remain here.”

Naslund figured Zupan didn’t realize he was being jailed without a warrant. Or maybe he did. Maybe he was feigning cooperation, the better to break out when he saw the chance. Despite his ostensible cooperation, she didn’t trust him. She told herself to forget his rights. A snoop camera or two was tempting.

Outside the studio, she stopped next to Chandler and gestured inside. “He doesn’t leave.”

“Roger. A butler in hand is worth two in the woods. Running like hell.”

She chuckled.

“I’ll get him a bottle of whiskey.” Chandler winked. “That’ll keep him grounded.”

“Nah. Sooner or later, you’d be skoling with him.”

“Possibly.”

“*Possibly?*” She chortled. “How about definitely?”

“You know me too well.”

She smiled. “Just trying to keep you employed. When you need a break, switch with Sandhu, not Derlago. The Inspector and I are going to Toronto. As soon as the whitecoats arrive, assign Derlago to canvass the neighbourhood.” Derlago’s relative innocence was good in one regard. People opened up to him.

“Consider it done,” Chandler said.

Catching up to Moore, she gestured back at Zupan’s studio. “The butler’s under wraps.”

“Excellent. I’m calling Central now. I want the autopsies tomorrow afternoon.”

She nodded. The gears didn’t grind when DI Moore was on a case. They hummed. Autopsy bookings usually took several days, but not with Moore. As he talked, she dissected Zupan’s interviews in her mind. The butler had used the word ‘precise’ a few times. *My time is precise. System is very precise.*

How was the wire twisted around Hayden’s neck? Precisely. Zupan was certainly strong enough to pull it very tight. She recalled his sullen face when speaking of Katrina Hayden. Small observations, but, collectively, they hung in the air.

Maybe he’d killed Hayden and a comrade killed Novak? It was only a supposition, yet Naslund couldn’t dismiss it. Her mind had dredged up some of Zupan’s exact words. When it did that, she listened. If he’d left the back gate unlocked, the partner could have entered the pool area. What else had Zupan said? *I feel something is wrong.* So did she. For now, she’d keep it to herself.

Although the new Moore seemed open to intuition, it wasn’t time to hit him with word associations and body language.

Chapter 6

Toronto, Ontario. May 21st

Early that evening, Naslund and Moore pulled up to the Four Seasons Private Residences. The sun sat low in the west, tingeing the Residences golden red. A valet hesitantly walked their way, seemingly in no mood to service them. Naslund assumed it was due to her car: an eight-year-old Mazda 3, unwashed to boot.

Moore powered the passenger window down. “We’re here to see Mr. Karlos Vega,” he snapped.

The valet’s back straightened. “He expecting you, Sir?”

“Yes. We have a six o-clock appointment.” They were five minutes early.

The valet bowed and pointed to the lobby. “Please, go right in. I’ll take care of your car.”

Inside the lobby, a liveried attendant hustled up to them, smiling profusely. Naslund figured he’d seen the episode with the valet. “Who are you visiting today?” the attendant inquired.

“Karlos Vega,” Moore said.

Instantly, the attendant became even more attentive. “Very good.” He escorted them to a softly-lit alcove with a pair of luxurious coffee-brown leather chairs. “Please, have a seat.”

Thirty minutes later the two detectives were still sitting. Naslund had begun researching Zupan on her phone. The butler was born on March 4th, 1973, which made him Novak’s age. Maybe Novak talked to him because of their shared past. They came from a fractured region.

Yugoslavia, a quarter the size of Ontario, had disintegrated in the 1990s, giving way to seven nations, Slovenia and Serbia among them, adding further complexity to the historical divisiveness of the Balkans. She scanned the region’s topographical map. It was no wonder the

Balkans were divided. There was little geographic continuity. The region resembled a maze. The valleys ran in all directions—north, south, east, and west.

Moving on, she determined Zupan had arrived in Canada four years ago and worked two years as a security guard in Toronto before joining Novak. His address was 12 The Bridle Path, Toronto, Novak's main residence. The butler had a clean sheet: no speeding, no traffic violations, no misdemeanors. She zipped off a secure email to her old friend Jan Januski, an inspector in Organized Crime with Metro Toronto, asking for a global search on Zupan.

Switching to Wikipedia, she checked out the Serbian Army, which, she soon learned, had supported the Bosnian Serbs during the Siege of Sarajevo, at three-plus years, one of the longest sieges in modern history. She remembered it and the bitter Bosnian War. She wondered if Zupan had taken part in the Siege. He was an artillery man. He was old enough: nineteen at the start.

She and Moore would have to take another run at him when they arrived back in Wiaraton.

For now, she sank into the chair. Very nice. She'd like to buy two for her livingroom. Then again, the likely price—a fortnight's salary—wasn't on. Moore kept glancing at his watch. She knew he wasn't impressed. He hated being kept waiting.

Naslund sensed someone close by and looked up to see a beefy man approaching them. Given his severely broken nose, she took him for a brawler. He wore his expensive dark suit and polished shoes proudly, but they didn't make him a gentleman. His wide neck said *muscle, pure muscle*. Unlike with Zupan, she wasn't expecting any existential musing from this man.

"Show me your IDs," Wideneck bluntly ordered.

The detectives obliged. "And who are you?" Moore asked.

"Mr. Vega's Security Manager. Follow me."

No name offered, Naslund noted, no pretense of welcome. The three rode up an elevator in silence. It opened onto a huge private foyer. Vega owned the Residence's only penthouse, the entire top floor. Wideneck ushered them forward, leaving them in another softly-lit alcove. A huge rococo vase held dozens of fresh tiger lilies. The stamens were glossy and engorged. The petals seemed to glow, almost as if they were lit from within. Naslund eyed the vase. She'd bet it was solid gold. She was familiar with ostentation. Her mother had very expensive tastes, yet Vega's condo orbited another planet altogether.

As if on cue, a waiter appeared bearing a gold drink tray. He wore a gold-braided uniform.

"Champagne or Cognac?" he asked.

Moore waved him off.

Naslund asked if he had water. A minute later, he reappeared with sparkling water served in a gold-rimmed glass. More gold, she saw. A Midas theme.

She glanced at the inspector. Not happy. She could read his pursed lips: *another effin wait*.

He was wrong. Within seconds, Karlos Vega joined them. She didn't hear him coming. Taking in his last step, she saw that he walked like a puma, on the balls of his feet. She and Moore stood.

The famous man was about her height, five-foot-seven, above-average for a woman, but subpar

for a man. He wore a sleek ebony-black suit, white shirt, charcoal tie, gold cufflinks, and

crocodile-skin shoes. His long dark hair was tied back in a ponytail. It shone like buffed onyx.

His face radiated health—wrong, Naslund decided—it radiated money. She felt distinctly underdressed.

Vega shook hands and sat in the chair opposite them. His eyes seemed to say he could buy anything, including them. According to the celebrity rumour mills, what you saw of him in public was what you got in private: a take-no-prisoners smart-ass. "I could have met you on

time,” he divulged, “but I decided to keep you waiting.” His voice was loud yet silky. “Don’t be offended, Inspector. I see it in your face. I wanted to find out about you. With some people, it takes less than a minute. With you, longer. In my world, the longer you wait, the more important you are.” He smirked. “Sometimes.”

Moore said nothing.

“You’re well-respected, Inspector. Famous even. In your world,” Vega added and turned to Naslund. “You, Sergeant, are a bit harder to plumb. Keep out of the limelight, don’t you?” He scrutinized her frankly. “Not likely from any lack of self-confidence. Yet you prefer to lay back. That won’t help you make Superintendent.”

He’d nailed her on that one, Naslund admitted. Was it that obvious? In any case, it seemed to be his nature. From what she’d seen on TV, he was a man of quick judgements that were often correct. He liked to probe people for weaknesses and show right away he’d uncovered them. The best thing to do was return the favour. When the time was right, she’d zing him back.

“Congratulations, officers,” Vega continued. “You two solved the Tyler murders. He’s my favourite painter in the world. Bar none. I’d show you my Tyler collection.” He glanced at his watch. “Perhaps another time. Well, no. There won’t be another time.” His tone was somehow both arrogant and agreeable. “What do you want to ask me?”

Moore leaned in. “Was Mr. Novak on edge lately, worried about anything?”

“The old standard.” Vega waved dismissively. “The *old wives* standard, I should say. Haven’t you detectives gotten past Agatha Christie?”

Moore seemed unable to answer.

“To reply, Inspector, not that I know of. But that wasn’t Rollo. He wasn’t a worrier.”

Moore seemed to recover his equanimity. “Did he mention any business deals that were troublesome?”

“All deals are troublesome,” Vega said with condescension. “Contrary to what most people think, a deal is not sealed with a handshake. That’s just the start.”

Naslund shook her head inwardly. Most POIs acted deferential or nervous, even fearful. Not Vega.

“I mean,” Moore said, “was he involved in any deals that might have made enemies?”

“All deals have that potential. However, he had no enemies that I knew of, business or personal.”

“Are you sure?”

Vega regarded Moore as if he were a child. “Of course I’m sure. I said, *that I knew of*. Don’t you have any better questions?” Vega shook his head irritably.

Moore tried a new tack. “Do you know why Mr. Novak committed suicide?”

“Suicide?” Vega huffed. “That’s ridiculous. Where do you detectives get your theories? If one can call them theories.”

“Forensic science,” Moore replied.

“You call that science?” Vega huffed again. “Putting people away for life based on a fingerprint pattern? Excuse my bluntness, Inspector. That’s bullshit.”

Naslund couldn’t argue with that. The man was right. Fingerprints were unreliable.

“That was the past,” Moore managed to say. “We’ve learned.”

“I hope so,” Vega shot back.

“We’ve improved,” Moore insisted. “You can’t judge us by the past.”

“What else can I judge you by?”

Moore appeared to be tongue-tied.

“Don’t you have an answer?”

He remained silent.

“Not a clue.” Vega smirked. “And you’re supposed to be a detective.”

Moore looked confused. If Vega was contemptuous at the start, his contempt was only increasing. Naslund stepped in for a zing. “Apparently, Mr. Novak had no enemies. Given the detection you do on TV—the *theories* you form—why don’t you tell us why.”

Vega smiled. “Touché, Sergeant. And I will tell you. Because Rollo was fair in everything, especially in business. Often too fair. Not a patsy, but too much of a gentleman for his own good.”

“For his own profit, you mean.”

“Let’s not waste time, Sergeant. You two have a lot of hard work ahead of you.”

She nodded accord, but not acquiescence. Like many arrogant people, Vega shut down topics he disliked. “Mr. Vega, when did you last visit Mr. Novak’s house north of Wiarton?”

“Yesterday. Only for the day. I arrived around eight a.m. and departed about eleven-thirty p.m.”

“Where did you arrive from?”

“Here. I left at half past five. Some people think Rollo and I spend all our time drinking champagne. Incorrect. We work. We get up early, both of us. Well,” he added in disbelief, “we once did.”

“Do you have proof you arrived there at eight a.m.?”

“Yes, Rollo’s butler greeted me. If *greeted* is the word. Mr. Damn Jan.” Vega sneered. “Don’t know what Rollo sees in him. Saw in him. Face like a brick, eyes like stones.”

True, Naslund thought. “What can you tell us about Melanya, Mr. Novak’s first wife?”

“Very little. She’s beautiful, but everybody knows that. I rarely socialized with her.” Vega stopped and regarded his hands, then looked up. “We didn’t talk, other than to say hello, and Rollo didn’t talk about her with me. I didn’t visit him much at home, any of his homes, not until he married Kat.”

Kat, Naslund noted. No one else had called her *Kat*. A small thing, but Naslund looked for small things. She filed the tidbit away.

“Now,” Vega said, “if you want to know about *Kat*, I can help.”

“Please. But, first, when did you meet Mr. Novak?”

“About five years ago, on the set of *Angels or Devils*. We became fast friends, which surprised some.” He grinned mischievously. “To extend a theme, to many people, Rollo’s an angel and I’m a devil. I’m not all ego, Detective. I have some self-knowledge.”

She nodded. “What about Katrina Novak?”

“Let me put it this way: she’s—was,” he corrected himself and sighed heavily. “She was both an angel and a devil. Both heavenly and earthly. Tall, blonde, and beautiful, like Melanya, but a lot more worldly. Despite the bombshell appearance, one might say bimbo appearance, she was as smart as they come. And as tough. Rollo adored her.” Vega glanced at his watch.

“One more question. Did Mr. Novak’s sons like her?”

“Oh yes. Especially Rollo Junior. But don’t think salacious. She and Rollo Junior simply had the same outlook: make hay while the sun shines.”

“Very good, Mr. Vega. We may need to speak with you again.”

“That won’t be easy to arrange. After Miami, I’m due in São Paulo. Two days later, I’m back here for a night, but then I fly to Hong Kong the next morning.”

“We’ll book a time.”

Vega shrugged.

“I thought Mr. Novak was one of your best friends. With all due respect, I think you should make time.”

Vega studied Naslund silently. Eventually he nodded. “You’re right, Sergeant. Here’s my card. Call me.”

Moore inched forward, as if to return to the fray.

Vega eyed him with disdain.

Moore spoke anyway. “In the meantime, Mr. Vega, we need to take a DNA swab and fingerprint you.”

Vega’s eyes narrowed.

“Standard procedure,” Naslund explained. “We have a kit.”

“I’m going to call my lawyer.”

“Of course,” she said. “We simply want to eliminate you as a suspect. We don’t want to confuse your bio matter with anyone else’s.”

Vega considered her words. “All right.”

As Naslund drove away from Vega’s condo, the inspector remained silent. He was more than pensive, he was subdued. She knew he wasn’t used to ‘losing’ an encounter. Well, she reflected, he’d won their hotel debate. He insisted on the Sheraton on Queen West. She voted for the Holiday Inn on Carlton, but he said it was too down-market. *Down-market*, she’d thought. It cost \$150 a night for a single, not that she was paying. It was taxpayer’s money. But that didn’t matter to her; it was the principle. Her ex had joked that being part-Scottish, her cheapness was

inevitable. *I'm frugal*, she would counter. In her view, you were frugal if you pinched pennies on your own behalf. If you pinched them when buying for others, you were cheap.

Having reached the Sheraton, Naslund and Moore checked into their rooms and went to the hotel steakhouse for dinner. They rushed through their mains—filet mignon for Moore, chicken pasta for Naslund—and passed on dessert in order to reach his room for a team teleconference with the ninjas, Forensic Constables Dan Mitchell and John Wolfe, and the Mobile Unit, aka the MU, Forensic Sergeant Lance Chu and two forensic constables, Jamil Chahoud and Tamara Kovalev. All communication lines encrypted, Moore turned the proceedings over to the ninjas. The two reported that the Novak security system was state-of-the-art, but it wasn't wireless. The wire arming the back-gate alarm had been cut. The ninjas swept the nearby grounds, including the packed-earth path to the east, which ended at Colpoys Bay, 260 metres away. It hadn't rained for four days so the path was hard. They only found three workable shoeprints.

Sergeant Chu went next, relating that Kovalev videotaped the crime scene and took over 200 photos. She searched the house for personal electronic devices and discovered two smartphones. Having powdered the complete pool deck, she found shoeprints leading from the sliding pool door to near the hanging rail, and back. She also uncovered eleven partial shoeprints, eight clustered around the rail, three leading to the back gate. Chu then summarized Chahoud's work. He recovered blood, skin, and hair from the wire around Hayden's neck as well as both neckties. He conducted an intensive DNA sweep of the pool area, hoping to at least find perp hairs, skin flakes, or nail slivers, but found nothing.

Bad luck, Naslund thought. Killers often left DNA signatures near bodies, especially when struggles occurred. She took over and described Zupan's interviews and then moved on to his

Serbian Army background. She concluded by delivering a recent update from Januski: Zupan had no international sheet.

Moore thanked everyone and unceremoniously signed off. No rah-rah speech. Naslund glanced at him. Still brooding. The Vega effect was powerful. She left him to lick his wounds and walked to a nearby pub, a favourite haunt from her undercover days.

Although she'd grown up in Toronto, the city centre felt alien. The streets were walled in by mushrooming towers. The sky above was clear but empty. The stars that illuminated the Wiarnton night were absent, devoured by a massive urban corona.

At the pub, Naslund ordered a half-pint of Scottish oat stout. Murder didn't swell her thirst, it suppressed it. Nursing the stout, she pulled out her personal phone and called Hal. They'd been 'seeing each other' for almost a year. More to the point, as she teased, they'd been smelling each other. And Harold John Bell smelled very good.

She'd moved a few outfits to his place, and then a few more. Now she spent most nights there, happy to inhabit his world, that of a man with no cares. He laughed easily, the laugh of a younger man, genuine and hopeful. His house was shipshape and modern. In comparison, her's, a century-old grange that looked two centuries old, felt dark and haunted. Hal was a journalist. He generally worked from home, which was perfect. She was usually out. Now, with a murder investigation on the boil, she'd rarely see him. Get home, plop into bed, get up, hit the road.

"Hello, sweet," she said. She still said that. He was a sweetie.

"Is that my Sergeant? I love a woman in uniform. Or out of it."

"Your wish is my command."

"Today's police. So friendly."

“Only to you,” she purred. “And how’s the Garden of Eva?” She’d commandeered his small backyard and planted high-bush blueberries, which would take years to yield fruit. Presumptuous of her, but sometimes you looked ahead.

“In full bloom,” he said. “You find the murderer? There’s got to be one down there.”

She chuckled despite herself. “Oh yeah, one or two.” She didn’t like talking about work. She’d learned the hard way with her ex. Private chit-chat could morph into news from a ‘verified source.’

“Good,” Hal sunnily said, “it’s a city thing. We’re safe up here. Not that I’m fishing, Sarge.”

She smiled inwardly. “Put it this way, I value you and the Bruce more than Scottish stout.”

“Then all will be well,” he kidded. “The wind’s picking up. How about a sail tomorrow?”

“Sorry, sweet, likely no sailing for me for weeks. Inspector Moore’s in the house.”

“Ah.”

“Better sign off. Sleep tight.”

-86-

WIN a FREE Ebook. If you can guess who did it, you’ll win a free eBook when the novel is released. (Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, publication has been delayed.) The installments will be re-released as a ten-chapter teaser two months prior to publication. Entry details to be announced.