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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 preferred 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.