

A Call to Action

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**A novella for
Studies in Biology: Forensic Biology and Mystery Fiction
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Chapter One

The young girl squirmed as he tied her frail arms behind her back. Silent sobs emerged from a well-fed mouth that was now incapable of making any more noise; exhausted from three days of screaming. Her eyes traveled slowly upwards, as if she was gathering the courage to look him in the eyes along the way. "Do it," he thought, "look at me." Her big watery blue eyes, now swollen and shadowed from lack of sleep, would do nothing to change his mind. Her eyes rested on the one place he did not want her to look. He shifted so his body blocked her view and fumbled with the plastic protruding from his arm. In capturing the girl, she had kicked his arm backwards, hyper-extending his elbow, completely incapacitating his left arm.

He gazed at her cowering in the corner, shivering from the cold of the basement in which they now resided. Disgusted, he left her there and walked to the back room and prepared his things for a deed that in his earlier years never would have crossed his mind. He was pushed to this though, and it had to be done.

A picture of a face, of *the* face that had come to be the nightmare of his sleep, the cause of rage, sweat and tears started to formulate in his mind. A burning hatred slowly crept through every part of his body, reminding him for another time why he was about to do this. He tried to push the picture out of his head, but he couldn't stop it. Rage engulfed every single cell of his body; control slipped away from him. His body shook, and a cold sweat trickled down his spine.

He wanted to kill; he wanted to hurt, to cause pain to anything and everything. He wandered back to the main room where the girl was, muscles tense. He entered with his head down allowing the sweat to drip down before him. The girl's head raised up, their eyes meeting through pieces of her wet hair that had fallen out of the big pink bow that had once held them so neatly in place. Through the foggy cloud of rage obscuring his vision, he watched her eyes grow with a mixture of fear and of recognition.

They both knew what was about to happen and she scrambled to find cover. The urge to destroy tingled in all five of his real fingers. With one arm he picked up the first thing he could find and whipped it across the room. A tiny shred of satisfaction came over him as shattered pieces of a stool littered the ground like confetti. An old paint can became his next victim and he watched as it ricocheted off the leaking pipes and back to the ground, all the while spewing mold green paint everywhere. The noise was unbearable and he was unable to tell whether it was a result of his destruction, the little girl's crying, or his own mouth gnashing; roaring like a lion in all his rage. He threw, punched, broke, and destroyed almost everything that he could get his hand on. The single bulb overhead found itself in the path of a flying hammer and the sudden darkness brought him back instantly.

He stood there with sweat and tears dripping from his face, breathing heavily. The silence had become deafening and he heard the girl whimper in the corner. Water dripped from a pipe somewhere above them. He pulled on his keychain looking for the mini light he had collected at work. The amount of keys he had was disgusting and made it rather difficult to reach the light, but eventually he found it. He gathered the paint-splattered, soaking girl to the back of the basement. "Enough," he thought, "tomorrow,

I'm going to end it." He knew he couldn't keep her forever, and he couldn't wait to see the look of horror and devastation on the man's face when he finds out that his youngest daughter is dead.

As he sharpened the hunting knife, a soft noise emanated from the girl's direction. Ignoring her, he continued on with his work and gathered some plastic garbage bags. Again, but louder this time she spoke. "Why are you doing this to me?" she asked weakly. For a minute he didn't answer. The words sat on his lips like poison. It was torture to even think about him, let alone speak his name.

"Your father..." he grunted and left the room, slamming the door and leaving her to think about the horrible man she called "Daddy."

Chapter Two

Beep! Beep! Beep! 6 o'clock on the dot. I rolled out of my newly purchased dark brown Victorian bed. As the thoughts cleared in my mind, I brushed my teeth to perfection and took a quick look in mirror. I smoothed down my slightly greasy but well-kept hair as much as possible at six in the morning and finished getting ready. I couldn't stand not making my bed. The thought of coming home to a dirty room impulsively made me turn around and make it. It was an extra two minutes, but two minutes well worth it. The clean pressed edges and lack of wrinkles made me proud.

After I was satisfied with my bed, I walked into the living room, still trying to wake up, and tripped. I looked down and it was Tyler. Tyler passed out on the floor. Again. This was not an abnormal occurrence for him. Don't get me wrong, he's an awesome guy and watching the Ohio State/ Michigan football game was the highlight of our year. Although, last year it involved a trip to the hospital after Tyler got a little too excited and jumped off the table. We both went to Northwestern to get our undergrad degrees together. He was naturally a really smart guy, majoring in mechanical engineering and everything. But, he hadn't quite figured out how to apply that to his post-graduate work and still has a job at Applebee's four days a week. I walked over him and made sure he was still breathing.

"Hey Tyler, you doin' okay?" waking him up from the dead of sleep.

"MMMM!" That meant he was okay.

I finally made it outside into the brisk Chicago air that hit my face like a whip at six fifteen in the fall mornings. Every time I walked out of my tiny apartment I was surprised at the amount of traffic on the streets at all hours of the day. Coming from a small town in Ohio, with a single stop light in the middle of town was a major adjustment to the seemingly endless traffic lights of Chicago. It seemed to get bigger every time I walked outside. Without grass, or trees for that matter, it just seemed so confining. As I caught the train to the gym, I couldn't help but to think about home. The train seemed to be the only time I have for myself everyday. The smell of my mom's famous chocolate chip cookies that permeated every inch of our little cabin made me homesick every time. The thought of my little sisters playing on the swing set and yelling as loud as they could trying to convince me to play house with them every night before dinner almost made me leave every time. Home. I know I left the country eight years ago, but it still felt like yesterday that I was left in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the country to fend for myself. I mean, I love this city but it's just not quite the same.

As the train pulled to my stop, I let the lovely young woman behind me get off before me. I was always taught that manners would get you the farthest in life. I finally made it to the gym to begin my workout. Five minutes on the treadmill got my heart pumping and ready to lift weights. The squats reminded me of the 5 a.m. lifts in college for the football team. It was my life and dream for so many years. It almost worked out for me too. But as I looked back, I was so glad I didn't go pro. The year after was pretty tough, but now I know I was not cut out to be a football player, too many squats and way too much yelling. I'm just not like that. I finished my leg workouts pretty quickly and headed over to do some free weight arm workouts. As I finished the second set of dumbbell presses, I grabbed my wrist. It just wasn't the same. I moved on to some abdominal workouts before I went back up to the treadmills to finish up my morning workout. A protein shake later, I was ready to go to work. Okay, I guess I hadn't forgotten everything about the football life style. These workouts were great for me to clear my head before work. It had been getting harder and harder every day to stay focused and not think about the poor families I had to help solve the crimes for.

7:55 a.m. sharp. I always got to my desk five minutes early. I was taught to be early in life. My desk was as I left it last night, just my old computer and pictures of each of my sisters and parents. That's all I really needed. Nothing new today, only the normal paperwork I got to fill out after every case that gets put through the Chicago crime lab. I just graduated last May, so I got all the jobs no one else wanted. I guess it was a pretty good learning experience though. I didn't really mind it that much. As I began filling out all of the paper work I looked up and saw Franky walking towards my tiny desk in the corner of the lab. I could tell by the look on his face that this was going to be a good one.

Chapter Three

The head of the homicide investigation, John Gordon, and two of his investigators, Ryan Kelly and Chris Davis, parked the newly purchased police SUV in front of the Bailey residence, a large house in the center of Chicago. John Gordon was a tall, broad man whose thick, dark hair fell in front of one of his brown eyes, as if he did not want to be exposed to everyone around him.

“Just following up on a missing child report, right Boss?” asked Ryan.

“It isn't just any child,” sharply replied his partner Chris, trying to impress his boss, “it's the thirteen-year old daughter of Richard Bailey—the mayor of Chicago.”

Ryan looked him in the eye with disapproval. “You know how it goes, irresponsible parents will lose track of where their child was the night before, report her missing, and then realize soon after that she was at the neighbor's house and stayed the night for a slumber party.”

“Well, just because they—”

“Both of you, shut up,” scolded John Gordon. He was not in the mood for their immature bickering. He started flipping through some documents and statements for the case with his right hand to gain background knowledge of what had happened. Gordon had polio when he was a child and was ashamed of revealing his other hand. “It's true that most calls for missing children really aren't valid, but you have to be professional. I bet you this Bailey guy is doing this for publicity—God, I hate him. But you gotta take

each report seriously whether you believe it or not. Besides, it's been more than a day. It's been four." Ryan and Chris looked at each other and gave a nod. If anyone had the right to complain, it was Gordon. He had a history with this Mayor, back to when they were in college. Ryan and Chris heard this story numerous times during his daily mumblings and ignored him.

All three slipped out of the car, Gordon taking the first step. His two investigators tagged along like ducks waddling cautiously behind their mother, not wanting to make a wrong move. They dodged the droplets of rain and found refuge under the family's covered porch.

Chris Davis knocked on the overbearing mahogany front door and took one step back. No response. "Are you kidding me?" He walked forward to knock again. He was able to get another pound on the door when it slipped open. Richard Bailey hovered over the door. He was a tall man for his age. He must have been at least sixty and nothing in him looked weak. He stood with great composure.

"I apologize, I didn't hear the knock with the rain pounding on the ceiling upstairs. Please come in."

The living room that Richard Bailey led the officers into could have held the entire police department. Richard Bailey's wife, Karen, was standing at the far end of the room, bringing out a teapot and cups, incessantly walking back and forth from the kitchen to the living room. She was nervous to see Gordon in her household. They were lovers before she finally chose Richard. Gordon never seemed to get over her final decision. He gazed at her the moment he walked in the door, his eyes peering at her out of jealousy, reminiscing on what could have been between them.

The room was spacious but cozy, with large paintings from various artists, such as El Greco and Renoir, with warm lighting structures reflected on the vases that matched the sofa and carpets. Earth tones filled the room, with the natural and wistful atmosphere affecting everyone in it.

John Gordon sat down on the beige couch followed by his two colleagues. Richard Bailey was sitting on the largest sofa across from them. "Thank you so much for coming out, Commissioner. My family is very distressed over the situation and needs as much help as we can get in finding Lauren. I don't know how much more time we can lose in this search."

"It's our job, Mayor Bailey," Gordon replied coldly. He took off his jacket and put it aside. He still could not believe Karen chose Richard over him. "We apologize for the delays. I know you've told the story to the other investigators when you first made the report a few days ago, but we need to hear the story again." Gordon's voice sounded sincere to Richard, as if Gordon was actually concerned about their daughter, although deep down he wanted Bailey to suffer. Ryan and Chris had notepads and pens ready to jot down all the essential information.

"When was the last time you or your family saw Lauren?" started Gordon.

"Well, my wife and I saw her that morning at seven-thirty during breakfast. However, I had a meeting at eight, and my wife had her own meeting half an hour after mine. We both left shortly after breakfast."

"You left your daughter by herself then?" Gordon knew Bailey was not cut out to be a family man, and peered over at Ryan and Chris for them to take note of Gordon's careless nature.

Quite defensively Richard Bailey snapped back, “Of course not! What kind of parents do you think we are?” Karen looked petrified and clung harder onto her husband’s arm. Gordon stared at Richard blankly and continued.

Out of the corner of Gordon’s eye, the one that was not covered by his hair, he spotted another woman stepping into the living room. She looked tired and stressed, but behind the emotions was unfathomable beauty.

“I always take care of her when Mom and Dad have their early meetings. The maids, security guards, and I are always around. She is never by herself,” she said impudently. She looked around the room, placed her eyes on the chief and stuck out her hand, “I’m Kara Bailey, Lauren’s sister.” There was a real glow of arrogance in her presence, but it was balanced with some softer poise that made Chris and Ryan admire her. Underneath her façade however, her bright blue eyes were filled with sharp torment and fatigue.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Bailey. Did you have any details that can help in this investigation?”

“When my parents left twenty minutes after breakfast, I helped her get ready for school. I packed her lunch while she brushed her teeth, and we always picked her outfit together. She was wearing a white blouse that had pink flowers on it and a small jean skirt. She always wore something in her blonde hair to match her shirt...” said Kara lost in thought. She feared that it would be the last time she would ever help Lauren pick her outfits again. She was quiet.

Gordon interrupted the silence, allowing for her to continue. “Anything else?”

She twitched out of her state of mind and spoke. “Lauren leaves and comes home from school with the security guards driving the family Lexus.”

“The other officers questioned people at her middle school. She was there all day, and was taken back home, correct?”

“Yes. She gets home about four and usually waits twenty minutes until I get home from work. I’m a teacher’s assistant at the University of Chicago. She always sits outside on nice days reading and waiting for me. She must’ve that day.”

“Who was taking care of her at that time?” asked Ryan. Everyone looked over in his direction. Right behind him came a voice answering him.

“I was.” It was one of the security guards. His elderly face looked distraught as he walked weakly toward the family. He had scraggly hair and was wearing a wrinkled T-shirt that had not been changed since the day she went missing. Richard Bailey stood up and walked him over to the sofa. After Karen consoled him, he began to speak again.

“I was the person on duty to take care of her that day. I usually sit at the patio in the backyard to give her some distance from where she sits in the grass. The phone rang and I went inside the house to answer it. I was on the phone with a family member for five minutes and when I went back outside, she was gone. I figured she had gotten up and was roaming the area behind the house. I called for her, and when there was no response, I went looking for her. After half an hour, I called the police. I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault, and—” The older man started sobbing.

“Bobby, it is not your fault. Stop saying that,” said Richard in a loud, but compassionate voice.

Kara interrupted the emotional gathering and said in a scornful voice, “That was four days ago. Don’t you guys have any leads yet? You’ve been searching nonstop and have yet to come back with my sister.”

Gordon was ready to respond when there was knocking on the door. Everyone in the living room migrated over to the door to find the members of the forensic team. They had finally arrived to gather possible evidence from around the house.

Gordon realized it was time to leave. Mayor Bailey directed the forensic team into the living room, and Gordon quickly shook his hand goodbye. Karen started to walk toward Gordon as he was leaving the porch area. Gordon looked at her and said stridently, “You shouldn’t be with Bailey. You knew I would’ve been the better man. If you were with me, *none* of this would have happened.”

Karen looked at him, with a look of confusion seeping over her face. Gordon turned around to leave, only to see that his two colleagues and Kara were looking out the door and clearly heard his breakout to Karen. Kara was disgusted to hear about this love affair and quickly walked back inside. “Let’s go!” bellowed Gordon. Chris and Ryan followed him to the car. They heard Gordon murmur under his breath, “Bailey is a bastard. Everything that’s happening to Bailey is called karma.” The other two were quiet, not wanting to disturb their chief.

Chapter Four

He watched as the girl slept; her hair blew in the gentle fall wind coming from the drafty basement door. He couldn’t help but allow a smile to form across his face with the knowledge that in the next hours the man he hated most in this world would feel heart-wrenching sorrow, almost but not equal to the anguish he had felt the past thirty years of his wretched and miserable life. He watched her chest go up and down, rhythmically like a clock, as if counting down the minutes to her death. He looked at her face, seeing so much of her father that he had to look away.

His coffee pot beeped, ready with a fresh brew, and he left the girl to fix himself a cup. It tasted like dirt, no different than it had any other day. Cup in hand, he headed outside to grab a newspaper from the bus stop ten feet from his door. The day was glorious- blue sky, not a cloud to be seen, and the fall had brought with it the most magnificent colors of leaves hanging from the trees lining the sidewalks of Chicago. Sometimes, small things like that could make him happy, but he didn’t let them. Sometimes he thought he would change, but he didn’t want to. Still, he would kill today; that was something the weather could not alter.

He took a breath of the fresh air and went back inside. Finishing his cup of coffee, he set down the paper without even looking at it. He knew what it would say- “13 Year Old Girl Still Missing” or variations of those same words. Not wanting to wake her up and having to deal with the futile, but painful retaliations of this girl, he crept over to the table where the finely sharpened knife lay. He would not wake her, instead, he would let her dreaming continue on before he put an end to it. He wanted to tear her apart though. It was all he could do to keep from letting his rage loose on her small body.

He held the knife firmly in his strong hand just above her throat and carefully slid his bad arm under her head. In doing so, she stirred and awoke to the shining blade of a knife. Her eyes opened wide and before she could scream he pulled the knife in one swift

motion across her throat. He watched as her eyes rolled back and waited as her blood gushed out for her to die. He rested her back down on the pillow, and he knew she was no longer dreaming.

He felt anger rise up his throat and rest in a lump, but it was too strong for him to push back down. He unhooked the keys off his belt loop. He held the key against her soft, sun tanned arm and pushed as hard as he could, dragging the ridges along her flesh. Blood dripped out in slow waves. His hand shook as he pulled, and his anger slowly subsided as he saw more blood. She was dead, her Daddy would be miserable. He had a reason to be happy.

He lifted her small, lifeless body off of the bed and carried her to the trash bags he had put out before. He laid her down on one of the bags before he put her in. He looked at her again, thinking that she looked more peaceful than ever.

Chapter Five

The crime report stated that a girl, age thirteen, was kidnapped from a house downtown and then went on to list the biological evidence that was waiting for me to analyze. A downtown “house”, not downtown “apartment”, which made those people out of my senior cop paygrade. I was going to need Alex’s help on that case for two reasons: it was a kidnapping case, which meant there might be a body found soon, not to mention that the list of evidence looked like a slightly condensed version of War & Peace. Those cops were very thorough, much more so than usual. The girl must be pretty important.

“What do you have, Franky?” Alex asked coolly, without looking up from the papers in front of him – the kid is a mind reader.

“Thirteen year old girl got kidnapped...” That jerked Alex’s head up, he has a special place in his heart for people that mess with kids. “And about as much evidence as they collected for O.J.”

I plopped the report down on Alex’s neatly arranged desk, blowing a few papers out of place. He moved his large hands around quickly to put them back in place. One thing I know about the kid is, despite how he acted there, I wouldn’t want to face him on the football field. I imagine with a helmet on all you can see is his muscular body and his dark eyes, not exactly a friendly image for a quarterback to see across the line.

“Where do you want to start?” he asked

“You pick first this time, kid.”

“I’ll take the hair and fiber analysis.”

“Make sure you take lots of notes on those hairs when you’re using the microscope, if the mitochondrial DNA doesn’t give us anything those notes are all we’re going to have. I’ll run the fingerprints, all two-hundred thousand of them, and check out the stuff they thought might be a blood stain.”

“Okay.”

I left Alex’s lab and headed upstairs to my own, which is about twice as big but unlike Alex’s, is filled wall-to-wall with junk. A cluster of beakers were off to my left, a chemical hood on the back wall contained part of an old sandwich, polarizing and comparison microscopes were to my right, and every space in between was full of papers – journals, cases, procedures. I booted up my computer and started running the

fingerprints, which had already been scanned into the system, through the Cook County archives. Unbelievable, the best forensic biologist in the city and I was still running fingerprints. But rules are rules and I need to verify any possible match the computer finds. After a few prints came up empty I got a hit. It became clear pretty damn quickly why there was a crime report about five times longer than any kidnapping case I had ever seen sitting on my desk. The mayor of the City of Chicago lost one of his daughters.

“Hey, kid, let’s go get a beef. I’m hungry and I’ve got something to show you.”
“I’ll meet you at the garage in five, Franky.”

Now I had never especially liked this mayor, but I’d never disliked him either. I suppose that’s the common feeling around the city since he has been in office since about the time Alex was born. He makes the city bright and colorful in the summer, keeps the streets plowed in the winter and has set up a few good schools around the city – in particular, one high school I hope my teenage daughter will get in to. It seems all of this keeps the people happy enough to ignore the corruption charges that surface every few years. I started down to the garage and, surprisingly, Alex got in the same elevator. Unlike me, he’s usually a stairs kind of guy.

“What is it?”

“Take a look at this.” I handed him the printout of the fingerprint ID which showed the mayor had been at the crime scene. My first thought upon seeing the picture pop up was “the mayor kidnapped someone?”. But Alex was a little more logical and got what really happened right away – the mayor’s fingerprint was found because the crime scene was his house.

“The pages and pages of evidence make a bit more sense now, huh?” he suggested. We stepped out into the parking garage and headed to my aged Pontiac.

“Yeah. Once the press gets a hold of it the whole place will become a zoo.” I’ve seen cases similar to that one get so much publicity it becomes impossible for the cops to follow any leads – everyone wants to be on T.V. “Original Al’s sound good to you?”

“Of course.” Good answer.

We jumped on the expressway and headed to Taylor St. The Original Al’s is a little counter-eating joint that specializes in dipped Italian Beefs, a Chicago staple. The place’s walls are covered in pictures of every celebrity that had ever lived in Chicago posing with Big Al. The Original Al’s is right next to University of Illinois – Chicago and has grown big enough that a franchise spawned out of it. But nothing compares with the original. We each grabbed a beef and a Coke and nabbed a place on the counter looking out onto the street. I’d been eating those for most of my fifty-some years even though my doctor repeatedly told me that I needed to cut back on the fat and grease. The nice belly I saw every morning in the shower told me that too. I was sure Alex needed two beefs to come close to filling him up but it was on my dollar so, like usual, he just followed my lead.

“So any ransom notes or demands?” he asked quickly.

“I called a friend who’s pretty high up in that department. He said that they haven’t heard a thing yet.”

“Bad sign.”

“Yeah, really bad. We might have to start reading up on our entomology in the next few days.”

Alex responded with a grunt – entomology is only used with dead bodies.

Chapter Six

Franky's phone rang and he was coming to my desk right away. I saw his face change moods pretty quickly. He got off the phone and came back to my desk. "Hey buddy, you remember your entomology right?"

Oh no, it is a dead body. The protein shake in my stomach quickly turned in my stomach.

"It's not her is it?" I knew the answer to the question and I could barely get the words out of my mouth.

"Yeah, they found her by the lake, pretty beat up. We have to go meet Gordon at the crime scene in half an hour to look for some evidence to convict the bastard who did this."

The compassionate tone of Franky's voice was comforting. It made me happy to know that after being on the job for so long, you can still be human and feel for the victim.

"It looks like you'll be getting some pretty good experience on this case. You read over all of the missing person reports, right?"

"Of course, all 1,000 pages of them."

"Good boy, now let's go catch this bastard!"

As we got in the car to drive to the lake all I could think about was the family. I knew they were just finding out now, and the thought of it made my stomach turn even faster. I didn't know if I could hold it down anymore. How could someone do this to a poor child? I knew this was my calling. It was now my job to find this bastard. He's not going to get away with it anymore. We pulled off the interstate onto Lake Shore Drive. There were cops everywhere. Everything was blocked off. We showed them our passes and headed to the scene. I knew this was going to be one of the hardest things I had ever done. But, it was my job now.

Gordon stepped out and greeted us with a short "O'Reilly, I see you brought our kid with you."

"Yeah, he's one of the best and you know it. If we're going to catch this guy, we need him."

Wow. I had never been complimented like that in my life. I guess Franky really did believe in me. I knew then that I had to be on the top of my game.

We headed to the scene and from afar I could see her. Her poor little bloated body was lying softly on the shore. I watched her intently, hoping that somehow her chest would rise one more time to take a breath. It never happened. She looked so innocent in her blue skirt and white shirt with little pink flowers that was soaked with the freezing Lake Michigan water. I got closer and saw traces of green paint all over her clothes, but that didn't distract me from the cause of death. Her throat seemed like it was slit so far open her head was barely attached. You could still see the knife mark that took her innocent life away. I walked around to the other side of her to examine her more closely. I noticed there were marks all over her. I couldn't quite figure out what they were, maybe tool marks.

At this point I lost it. I ran over to the tree and puked. I tried to get it all out. Get out all of the memories, all of the sights and sounds. But it never came out; it would always be with me. I could never escape it. I made it back to the crime scene to do my job. It was now personal. I was going to solve this. He was not going to get away. I was doing this for nobody else but her.

“You okay buddy?”

“Yeah, bad protein shake this morning.” I just couldn’t tell him yet.

“Okay... well, we’re going to start collecting evidence; you want to get all of the clothing and hair samples?” It was obvious he didn’t believe me, but knew it wasn’t the right time to ask.

“Sure.”

Gordon came over. I knew this wasn’t going to be a happy conversation. Gordon and Franky didn’t have the best relationship.

“Alright guys, let’s hurry it up. I have some shit to get done at the office.”

“Gordon, a 13-year-old girl was just found dead. Relax. We’re getting as much evidence as we can.”

“20 minutes and we’re closing up. That’s it.”

“Oh just go on T.V. some more and leave us to actually do our job!”

Gordon stormed off of shore, embarrassed by Franky’s comment. He was checking his watch; we were only getting 20 minutes, no more. He seemed so distant, so unattached. It was almost as if he didn’t want us to solve this crime.

As I started collecting evidence, I couldn’t help but look at her face. She looked so familiar. She reminded me of my sister. I forced myself to pull my feelings out of it. I could see the fear in her face. She didn’t die in peace. She died fighting. I felt her body. She was cold but not too stiff. I could make a good guess that she died over 48 hours ago. I collected as much hair and fiber as I could from the crime scene. Because it was so close to the water, I knew I wasn’t going to get much. I put the samples in vials and looked for anything else. I started looking at open wounds on her body. There were some maggots in the wounds. I started remembering back to all of the entomology classes I’d taken in graduate school. I never did that well, but I could still recall a decent amount. I took all of the different insects and put them into separate vials. To tell the actual species I would have to wait for the insects to fully develop. The insects were also good for determining the approximate time of death of the victim.

As we started putting everything away and getting ready to begin the tremendous task of trying to analyze all of the data we had collected, something caught my eye. I went over to look at it. It was a seagull with something in his mouth. He was pecking at the remains of a tiny pink bow. The bow was ripped and slightly discolored from the water but laid helplessly in the mouth of the seagull. I took the bow and took out a fiber for analysis but more importantly I gently put it back on the girl’s head. That’s where it was supposed to be.

Chapter Seven

A day later, Alex and I were both still thinking about Lauren. I’ve seen dead women of all ages but young girls still hit home – my daughter is about Lauren’s age. Alex was taking it pretty tough, but it looked like his competitive nature was starting to

kick in. I intentionally got to the lab early that day only to see Alex had been there for a while before me. He had slides lined up all along his normally spotless worktable and I could see sweat dripping from his brow – that was some intense microscopy. Hunched over like that he looked like one of the old cartoons where the scientist was the beast using a microscope that he could fit in between two fingers.

“Hey, Alex.” He didn’t look up. Already I could tell kind words weren’t going to convince him to relax, so I wasn’t going to waste my breath. I was going to have to force him to take a break. “We have to go over to the mayor’s house to get another sample, the red stain isn’t giving me good results on the blood tests.”

Alex looked up at me. Back down below the microscope. Again at me – that time with an icy look. I guess I didn’t fool him.

“Come on, let’s go.” This time I said it slightly more demanding. He got up, grabbed his coat and stormed out the door. He didn’t stop to turn off the microscope light.

A drive to the near north side from the south side. At eight A.M. On the expressway. An upset partner who doesn’t talk much even in the best of moods. That was going to be quite a drive.

“You looked like you were having a hard time at that crime scene the other day, were you sick?”

I was answered with silence.

“Is it something you want to talk about?”

“I had a bad experience.”

“Really? What crime scenes have you been to without me?”

Again, silence. He stared out the window at the bumper-to-bumper traffic.

“Is it from back home?”

An ever so slight nod.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

Another nod.

So we aren’t exactly Mel Gibson and Danny Glover.

I got off the expressway and headed further east towards the high rises. A rule of thumb in Chicago – the taller the buildings, the closer you are to the lake. Out of nowhere, a few blocks into the expensive north shore apartment buildings, like finding a river in the desert, there was a single block consisting solely of houses. Not flats or lofts, true houses with lush grass lawns and backyards. Except they all had ten-foot fences, security cameras and shiny Mercedes or Jaguars in each driveway.

I noticed an unmarked car a few driveways down from the only house with a security guard standing at the gate. I guess we had found it. I flashed my badge and we were allowed through. I parked my all-of-a-sudden raggedy looking Pontiac on the brick driveway just in front of the house, if that’s the proper term for the building. Alex was out of the car and making his way to the door before I turned the engine off. I had to grab a kit full of sampling gear from the backseat – there really were problems with the tests. I caught up on the way to a hefty, mahogany wooden door and before we could ring the doorbell a butler appeared to let us in. I told him we needed to see the backyard for about

half an hour and he led us through a number of rooms. We reached the back of the house and found a wall full of windows looking out onto a deck.

“Quite a house,” Alex whispered.

“Not many of these in Ohio?”

He let out half of a chuckle.

We walked out onto the deck and the mayor was standing against the rail looking out at a play set in the yard. He turned when he heard the door close.

“Good morning, who might you be?” he questioned.

“Good morning, sir, we’re forensic biologists from the Police Department. My name is Franky O’Reilly and this is my partner, Alex Powell.”

“Pleased to meet you, I’m Richard Bailey. How can I help you?”

“We need to collect another sample from the yard if you wouldn’t mind.”

He gave us a questioning look, which was pretty surprising coming from someone who trusts his life to the CPD every day.

“Is this normal procedure, Mr. O’Reilly?”

“Totally normal, sir. We did not receive enough of a sample for the tests we are running. Why do you ask?”

“There have been quite a number of police running around here for the last few days and I’m starting to think something else might be occurring as well.”

“It will always seem like there are a lot of police around when there is a kidnapping, sir, especially in a high profile case such as this. But as for any secondary motive, I can assure you we have no part in that.”

“So you were not sent by the Chief of Homicide over here?”

“No, sir. We needed another sample so we came on our own, standard procedure.”

“Well then I wish you two gentlemen the best of luck. If I can do anything to help, do not hesitate to ask. Nothing is more important to me than this case.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll do our best.”

He walked by us back into the house. He was quite charismatic but the paranoia was surprising. I supposed he might just still have been on edge, it is a stressful situation. We walked around the edge of the pool, past a Jacuzzi, to the stairs and then circled back around to the driveway. I handed Alex the kit and slowly got down on my knees while I realized that I could use a few days at the gym

“Could you pass me a vial?...Alex?”

I looked up and saw Alex turned halfway around. A young woman wearing running shorts and a tank top was closing two large wooden doors that led the driveway to the backyard. I had forgotten my contacts that morning so it wasn’t until she’d started walking towards us that I could see why Alex was so entranced. Her almond colored hair was pulled back into a pony-tail revealing movie-star features. Freckles were spread across her face like trees in a tan wheat field around two dark caves. Her thick ruby lips were turned slightly away from her soft jaw line in a gentle smile.

“Hi, can I help you?” she asked confidently, trying to hide the pain that still lingered in her voice.

“I’m Franky O’Reilly and –“

“I’m Alex Powell,” he interrupted. “We’re biologists from the crime lab.” - quite a change in attitude.

“I’m Kara Bailey, nice to meet you both. I didn’t know they send biologists out in the field to collect evidence. I thought you’d stay behind a microscope where it’s safe.” She just managed to get that attempt to lighten the mood out before she started choking up.

“Not quite. I’m sorry about your sister, though. I’ve had some experience with that.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but thank you. It’s been a bit hectic around here for a while. If there’s anything you would like, feel free to ask.”

“We’re both fine. Thank you.”

Kara turned away and Alex followed her with his eyes.

“She seems like a nice girl, terrible that something like this would happen to her,” I said.

“Yea,” he replied, not yet looking back towards me.

We got a few samples, which was pretty much all of the red liquid, and started packing to leave. Kara came out onto the deck freshly showered and dressed, looking even better than she had before. Alex broke out his heartbreaker smile.

“Hi, Ms. Bailey.”

“Hello. Are you two all done?”

“Yes, for now.”

“Well, I wish you the best of luck. I hope we meet again.”

“Goodbye, stay safe.”

We turned to walk down the driveway and I noticed Alex look back and wave. That should keep him from being gloomy for at least a few days, I hoped.

Chapter Eight

He walked into the coffee shop with the best view of the gym and plopped himself down in the comfiest chair he could find. Kara Bailey rushed by in her black spandex pants and matching workout shirt with a look of overall unhappiness. Ever since her baby sister had been found in the lake, Kara had a different outlook on life. She found that running everyday was a great outlet for all the emotions rushing through her. Her father had offered her a bodyguard to go with her everywhere and even though she now had a constant feeling of trepidation, she thought that was a little drastic.

He followed her with his eyes and could not help but notice how beautiful she was. There was an outstanding resemblance between her and Lauren and he thought that if not for the age difference, people might have mistaken them for twins. He forced himself to look back at the information about Kara sitting on his lap. His cousin had given him plenty of information as to her whereabouts for most of the week, but he wanted to watch her himself. Planning this kidnapping was much harder than planning her sister’s. It would be even harder to actually go through with it seeing as Kara was older and bigger. Her newfound hobby of extreme working out would not help either.

He decided the best time to get her was early in the morning when she was at the gym; less people walking on the sidewalk, less witnesses. He planned on waiting in the parking lot for her to finish her workout. He would soak a rag in chloroform and sneak up on her, wait for her to pass out, and put her in his car. He imagined the scene in his head. Go up to her in his nicest “business man” outfit with a large smile on his face and

ask to borrow her cell phone to call Triple A because he has a flat tire. He'd keep the towel in his pocket and when she turns around to open her car, sneak up and cover her mouth and nose with it. When she passes out, put her in his car and drive away.

The invention of his plan pleased him and Kara was a nice girl who would have no problem sharing her cell phone with a stranded old man in a gym parking lot.

He looked back at her through the window. As she was just finishing her run on the treadmill, he finished up his coffee, and he knew he almost had everything he ever needed to make the mayor's life as miserable as possible. He could not wait.

Chapter Nine

I hadn't been back at the autopsy lab at U of C since I had graduated. I was heading to the center underground that was used by the city for some of their autopsies. This lab was built when I was a freshman and had all the state of art equipment for forensic analyses. I liked Franky's lab better. I wanted to do some observations on the Mayor's daughter, hoping that I could at least do the background notes for Franky before he came in tomorrow morning. It was weird coming back to the room alone with a murdered young girl. We usually worked on corpses in class with our professors or lab partners. This was the first time I didn't have Franky with me.

I locked the door behind me and put on some gloves and a mask before I lifted the white sheet, starting from her feet up to her head. I must confess I was quite reluctant to see her face again. Although her body was placed in the freezer to stop the decay, it became frightening to see how much a person's composition can change, how morbid it becomes. I wanted to find this killer and lock him up for life. Her body was decomposing at a slower rate than it was before but the smell was still overwhelming. I readjusted my mask.

Looking at the body, I saw the purple marks and clotted scratches all over her skin. Her arms especially had lined slashes all over them. Up close, I realized that these were deep cuts, more than just the tree branches by the lake that did its toll on her. Poor girl must've put up a good fight. I looked at her neck and saw that it was a clean cut. She must have bled to death since the slash was deep enough to hit the fatal jugular vein. I was careful in examining her neck, fearful that I might detach her fragile head from her already lifeless body.

I looked at the hair samples I had collected from Lauren at the lake and noticed that the green spots of paint I saw earlier on her body were even in her hair. I couldn't understand why that would be, but wanted to note it for some paint analysis by using the GC/MS. I checked on the inside of her fingernails hoping that there would be more evidence that can be used to link suspects. Blood, fibers, anything would help. I was quite excited to find what appeared to be cotton fibers under two of her nails. I collected these samples and placed them into vials and wrote all of it down in my notebook. The notebook was placed right next to her left hand and I saw that her hand was partially bruised at the wrists. I didn't want to do this anymore and took off my gloves and mask. I started wringing my own wrists. To think that some forensic scientist had to examine my sister the way I'm doing now was a little too much for me to take.

I needed a break from all this and decided to leave the autopsy room. I turned off the light and was walking toward the door when it started opening on its own. Who else

would be down here now? “Franky, is that you?” I couldn’t see his face since the light from the hallway only made a silhouette of his cap and long sleeved shirt. I started backing up until I bumped into the table with Lauren. I accidentally looked at her face again and then firmly said, “Who’s there? You can’t be in here.”

“Relax. I have more access to this place than you do.” He turned on the light. I flinched when the switch and his fingers touched. I recognized him from somewhere, but couldn’t figure out from where. Was he from back home in Ohio? Was he a part of the forensics team? And then he wheeled in a cart full of cleaning supplies, spray bottles, towels, and a trashcan. It was the university’s janitor.

Now I remember. Man, this guy’s been here forever. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think that you would clean at this hour of the night.”

“It’s only eight. It’s called the night shift kid, ever heard of those? I wanna pick up some extra hours since I’ve been out a few times this past week. See what happens when you work around a bunch of college kids? You catch every disease possible.”

I nodded. He looked over behind me and saw Lauren. I forgot to cover her up before I left. I started putting on the sheet when he came over to look at the body. “Well hot damn. That’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it? Geez.” I looked over at him. He looked terrified, but excited to see a dead body for the first time. He stood there with his eyes glued to Lauren’s corpse, like a person who couldn’t turn away from a horrid car accident. I covered her face. “Yea, this poor girl is all over the news along with her macho daddy. You got any leading suspects yet?”

I shook my head.

“I bet you it’s probably some lunatic that wanted revenge on Mayor Bailey for raising the city’s taxes.” He started chuckling and left. “Good night.” Maybe he was right, I didn’t know.

I was walking out of the room and down the hall only to see that the janitor had started mopping the floors near the next office. He seemed unaffected by the sight of a girl with her throat slit open, and was lazily cleaning the tiles, with one hand on his hip and the other one swaying the mop back and forth. I was leaving the building when I noticed someone walking towards me. It was Kara. She looked more beautiful then ever. She still looked like she hadn’t slept for nights, but her natural radiance made her look well-collected.

Her black knee-high skirt and cream-colored buttoned top fit her perfectly. Her heels clicked the ground rhythmically. She stopped a few feet away from me, but didn’t let me pass her.

“Mr. Powell, right?” she softly whispered, barely making an audible sound.

“Yes, but please call me Alex. Is there something I can help you with Ms. Bailey?”

“Kara.” She had that arrogant but poised expression again, and spoke now in a louder tone. “I actually do have a favor to ask of you, Alex. I want to see my sister one last time.”

I looked at her and must have given her an odd expression because she suddenly blurted out, “I know it sounds bizarre, but one last time with her will help me accept what has happened, and move on with my life.”

No way, I thought. How will seeing a decomposing body that is barely recognizable give anyone some last minute consolation? “I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. It

is against the policies to let you see her now. Franky and the team will be releasing the body in a few days after the tests and examinations are cleared.” I was lying. I knew nothing about these type of policies. They didn’t teach me how to deal with the family members of the deceased in my classes or textbooks. I was nervous for her response, fearful that she would take it up with Franky.

She looked at me—through me even, and her calm seemed to be breaking apart. Her blue eyes started to fill with tears and she started cupping them with her fingertips. Her body slowly collapsed toward the ground out of anguish, as if my words were pure evil.

I jumped forward and grabbed her before she was completely on the ground and helped her towards the wall, allowing her to rest her back on it. Her legs were bent to one side and she tried to stop crying out of embarrassment.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

I was kneeling on one leg and holding her hand. “It’s okay. Look, I’m really sorry. It’s just that seeing your sister at this time wouldn’t be the best idea.” I thought of my sister lying on the autopsy table. “I mean, all your memories of her, when you helped her get dressed everyday, and all the time you and Lauren spent together would be more meaningful. These memories are eternal. Seeing her now shouldn’t end that beauty and love that you shared with her.”

Kara looked up at me and nodded. I saw inside those glass eyes and realized how much sorrow she had to carry from the moment Lauren died. I wanted to suck the pain out of her, and make her happier, but I couldn’t. I was frustrated knowing that I couldn’t help her in any way. All I could do was sit beside Kara and hold her close as she continued sniffing and weeping quietly on my shoulder.

Chapter Ten

I woke up to the knock on the door of the apartment. I wasn’t going to get up because I figured it was one of Tyler’s drunk friends again. It was too dark during this time of year for me to open my eyes. The knock was louder and stronger, as if it was urgent, but not life threatening. I peeked one of my eyes open and could see a shadow of Tyler on the floor near my side of the room. Great, I thought. How many times can a person get wasted in one week? I hope there was no drool on my rug. The knocking continued and I attempted to roll out of my bed, although I forgot how high this Victorian bed actually was. I crawled off the floor and kicked Tyler while getting up. If this was one of his friends, I was ready to give him a couple of punches to the wall. I wouldn’t have to go to the gym if I got my workout in now. I’m more of a pacifist, but don’t bother me when I’m trying to sleep.

I grabbed the door and was ready to give the person a piece of my mind when I stopped. It took a couple of moments for my eyes to adjust to the light. When everything was less blurry, I saw that it was Kara. I took her back to her apartment less than twelve hours ago. She looked more rested than she had been lately, but that still wasn’t much. She was wearing her clothes from the night before, but was able to look as stunning as always. She gave me a small smile and started walking into the room. I was embarrassed that she might notice Tyler’s dirty clothes in the corner of the living room, but she didn’t.

Although she did see Tyler's body peeking from the door of the bedroom. I hope she wouldn't notice.

She took a quick glance around the house and said, "Wow, this is a nice place you have. Although you might want to have something done about the guy passed out in the other room. He might stain your carpet." I smiled back and led her to the scratched oak kitchen table with its three wobbly chairs. We usually don't have any company sit at the dinner table. I grabbed the only packet of tea that we had in the entire house and made some green tea in the U of C and Northwestern mugs.

I sat down and she was staring at me smiling again. "Thank you again for taking me home yesterday."

"You're welcome." There was a long pause in between us and I was still confused as to why she was here. It was finally broken by my alarm clock wailing that it was six o'clock. I got up to turn it off and saw that Tyler had rotated his head off the carpet, suffocating on his spit. I think he mumbled some girl's name in his sleep. I took the next ninety seconds to make my bed and fix my sheets.

I sat back down in the kitchen. Kara was silently sipping her tea. I wasn't very good at socializing, but realized that it was my turn to make a comment. "I know that the Chief of Police and the rest of the investigators are working very hard to find the person who took Lauren away from your family."

She nearly choked. She put the down the mug, grabbed a napkin, and scoffed. "I doubt it. Gordon is probably the leading man in hiding something in the case." I was not expecting to hear that at all.

"What are you talking about? How do you figure?" I honestly thought she was getting desperate, ready to blame anyone and everyone. She had the right to undergo a mental breakdown after all the things she'd been through.

She reached into her small black purse and threw a tattered photo onto the table. The paper was folded up and was torn on three of the four corners. It was a picture of John Gordon kissing Karen Bailey on the cheek.

"The picture was taken when they were in college together. Apparently, Gordon and my mom were engaged until my father stepped into the picture. A few weeks after they got together, my mom broke off the engagement to Gordon and quickly married my father and had me."

"Is that enough to accuse Gordon of murder though?"

She explained to me that she had many conversations with her mother about the love affair and how Gordon had a raging temper. "He threatened to get back at her once he heard about their marriage. He even showed up at their wedding drunk and flipped a few tables." She continued explaining about the day he and the other two investigators came over for an interrogation and the words he spoke as he left the house.

"None of this would've happened', huh? Do you think he meant that literally?"

She shrugged. Could Gordon have killed the Bailey's child out of anger nearly thirty years later? I wanted to go talk to Franky about it later today.

She finished her mug of tea and placed it in the sink. She turned back to the table and I got up to walk her out of the apartment down to her car. Now would be the time to use those manners.

The sun was on the verge of rising but was hidden behind some moving dark clouds. The wind was still as strong as ever, rustling Kara's hair. Maybe it will get

brighter later today. I opened the door for her to get in. She looked at me, squeezed my hand, slipped into the family Lexus and drove away.

Chapter Eleven

I picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number.

“Alex, it’s Franky.”

“What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you’d want to go to the Sox game tonight. They’re playing your Indians, ya know. A pretty big game in the race for the division.”

“Um... yeah, I think I can make it.”

“A friend of mine gave me a pair of tickets behind home plate, the V.I.P. section. All you can eat buffet before hand and free drinks and food during the game.”

“Sounds great, Franky.”

“Then meet me outside of the park at about six. See you there.”

After countless brats and beers, my White Sox had taken the lead in the sixth inning with a two-run homer. I jumped up and high-fived the Sox fan sitting next to me and turned to Alex to give him a wink. His Indians had been good enough over the years that any game the Sox win was a reason to celebrate. But that’s not what we were there for. Hopefully, I could find somewhere there for him to relax and chat.

“Do you want to take a walk around the concourse, Alex?”

“Sure.”

We made our way up to the main level and I grabbed a free ice cream bar on the way. Nothing beats all you can eat.

“Back among the common-folk, this is where I really like to watch a game.”

“Yea, I like it here, too.” Alex responded.

“You remember our first time here together?”

“How could I forget, you offered me the internship on the spot.”

“Well you deserved it kid, but you’re lucky – I almost didn’t offer it because you wouldn’t say a damn thing.”

“Well then, good thing you knew how to pull it out of me.”

“You had the look, I could tell. And the credentials, my goodness. You know that I only took some night classes at a junior college to get here, right? The re-”

“The rest was all experience, I know Franky.”

“Well don’t forget it, nothing replaces experience.”

“I swear I won’t.”

“Anyways, I just heard that our own chief, Gordon, is a suspect in the Lauren Bailey case. Apparently he and Mrs. Bailey used to be an item back in their younger days until Mr. Bailey swooped in to take her away. I guess she never looked back and Gordon might be a little upset with how it all turned out.”

“Do you buy it, Franky?”

“It’s the best lead we’ve got, and I don’t know if you’ve ever met Gordon, but he’s an asshole at best.”

“An asshole generally isn’t a kidnapper and murderer.”

“Well either way, it’s the best lead they’ve got. I guess it’s up to you and me to see if it’s him or not. Oh, I forgot to ask you. How’d you do during the autopsy?”

“What do you mean, Franky?”

“With the sick feeling that you had when we found her.”

“Oh. It was alright, no more problems but it was close at one point. I saw Kara there, though.”

“The mayor’s daughter? What did she want?”

“She wanted to see her sister.”

“What did you do?”

“I stopped her. There was no way I could let her in there with her sister looking like that. She thought she wanted closure but I know that seeing something like that can’t give you closure – only hatred, sadness and a bad memory.”

“You know... first-hand?”

“Yeah...”

That stopped me, he usually got to that point but would never go any further.

“Come on, let’s sit down.”

We sat down at a picnic-style bench as far from the crowd as we could. Someone for the Indians had just gotten a hit.

“My older sister, Emma, was kidnapped when I was ten,” Alex said, looking down at his hands while he rubbed his wrists. “She was killed pretty soon afterwards. The guy busted through our bedroom window and snatched her. I was in the next bed over. I held on to her with all of my strength but then my wrist was gashed open on the broken window pain. I almost bled to death, and that’s were I got these scars.”

“That’s terrible Alex, I never knew.”

“She’s the reason I became a forensic biologist, though. I wanted to move to Chicago to try make sure if it ever happened again, the crook would pay for it. There weren’t too many kidnappings where I grew up and when I started going to school here I knew that I had a shot to do something meaningful. So, I gave up football and started studying forensics. Biology came to me pretty easily and it was something I could do that could help find those creeps, maybe even before they killed someone. Finding out who took this girl, Lauren, was exactly what I had been waiting to do my whole life and I failed, plain and simple. I was trained and ready to prevent what happened to Emma but I couldn’t. I know there are a hundred reasons that it’s not my fault that Lauren died, but if I can’t stop what happened to her why am I trying to become a forensic biologist?”

“First off, Alex, stop using the word “trying”. You’re already a forensic biologist, you just don’t have the title yet. You’re almost as good as I am and you’re going to be better in a few years. You came into this job knowing that our work would rarely be the reason a killer is found but it often could be the only reason someone is convicted. Our work with Lauren isn’t over yet, you know that. If the detectives manage to find who the killer likely is we’re going to have another boatload of work to do to make sure he goes to jail and stays there. So with this one case, you’re right, you couldn’t prevent something bad from happening. But what about the girl last year, Ashley, from the projects? After she was assaulted by that guy you were the one who thought of a way to isolate his DNA from hers. I thought for quite a while about whether or not I would have known how to do that and decided I probably never would have been able to. Your intelligence is the sole reason that she never had to run into him again and why he’s stuck

down in Joliet. So your romanticized view of why you do this job has been hurt, but the realistic reason, Ashley, is still there and you're smart enough to know the difference. I'm going to grab us some nachos, stay here and think about it for a minute."

As I thought about my future, my Indians hit a home run to take the lead and the game was not looking good for the Sox. I was looking at the families walking by when I heard a man yelling a ways down the concourse. I walked to the corner to get a better view and right then I saw the man was yelling for help and standing over Franky. "Oh God," I thought, and took off down the walkway, trying to get through the hordes of people. I ran through the few people that had gathered around Franky and dropped to my knees.

"He's having a heart attack!" the man continued to yell.

The medical crew arrived right after me and they lifted Franky onto a stretcher with my help. Franky's head rolled to the side, his eyes were half closed and his mouth was hanging open. He recognized me and grabbed my arm, his grip weaker than I had hoped. As we ran towards an exit ramp to the ground level I locked eyes with Franky, except that mine were swelling with tears and his were closing more and more often. We ran down the concrete ramp and I knocked open the gate leading to the ambulance. As Franky was hoisted into the back entrance I could only look into his eyes, helplessly. Just as the first ambulance door was slammed shut Franky's eyes closed again. I kept waiting for them to reopen but they never did. The second door was slammed closed. I was left standing alone, totally still in the empty street.

Chapter Twelve

When the alarm went off this morning, it was a lot harder than before and not because I was tired. I just couldn't get out of bed. I didn't want to face the fact that the one person I truly looked up to in my profession was gone. Tyler was on the floor again, passed out with Pabst Blue Ribbon all over the floor. This time I didn't wake him up. He seemed so peaceful. If I couldn't be, he might as well have been. I made my way outside. The wind stung my face just as the morning mist rushed off the lake. I knew it was hitting my face, and I let it. I finally got on the train that was too crowded for its own good and grabbed on to the railing for support, surrounded by what felt like the entire city of Chicago yelling around me. My stop came up and I barely made it out of the train before the doors shut.

I walked into Maxwell Brothers Funeral Home to the sight of dozens of people all there for one reason: all there for Franky. I couldn't believe how many people's lives he had touched throughout his successful life. I found Franky's wife. She tried to pull out a smile but I could see the hurt and despair in her eyes from losing her husband so unexpectedly.

"I'm so sorry Mrs. O'Reilly, he was a remarkable man."

"Thank you Alex. I really want you to know Frank really believed in you and he knew you were going to have an amazing career." She began to cry. I hugged her as tight as I could; I tried to take the pain away from her. That is nothing a woman should ever have to go through.

Being at the funeral only reminded me of the last time I was at one. I remembered wearing the itchy black suit and feeling the newly acquired scar on my wrist, but the pain I felt on the outside was nothing compared to the pain I felt on the inside. I didn't really know how to explain it. But, I could still feel the tears running down my eyes, feeling like it was all my fault, as I watch Emma in the casket hoping that she was only asleep. I had to watch my big sister get lowered into the ground, where I would never see her again. I was too young to understand it. But I wasn't too young to realize what I needed to do. That was the moment I decided that I was going to help catch criminals that committed these heinous crimes.

I sat through the service and heard all the usual processions for a funeral. It felt so mindless to sit there. But there was one special song. They started playing Journey's "Don't Stop Believing" as we walked out. It gave me only the smallest glimpse of hope. It was almost as if Franky was trying to talk to me. He was trying to tell me to get this bastard behind bars for the rest of his life. He was now passing the reins on to me. It was now my turn.

As I walked to the back of the chapel I noticed a familiar brunette in the corner. I looked again and saw it was Kara. Kara and her family had come to the funeral. Apparently they really believed in us and knew we could solve this crime. It probably didn't hurt the mayor's image either. They were swarmed with tons of security guards. As I approached her, she caught my eye and came to meet me. I noticed her eyes were red and puffy, but she tried to hide it.

"Hi Kara."

"Hello, Alex. Are you doing okay?"

"Don't worry about me, how are you doing?"

"Well, I've decided I've been to two too many funerals in the past couple of weeks."

"Yeah. I'm so sorry." As I embraced her, I could feel her put all of her weight into me. She let go. I could feel tears drop onto my suit. I could hear the slightest of whimpers that made me melt. I felt so bad for this woman. She just lost her baby sister in the worst way possible. If someone can feel her pain, it's me. I could feel the hurt inside her and all I wanted to do was take it. I had gone through it before and I could do it again for her. As I held her I could feel her heart beat almost as fast a hummingbird. I could feel the fear in her. I held her even tighter but it didn't matter now.

"Kara, I'm going to get this guy."

Kara tried to pull herself together to get the words out. "I know Alex, I know. But, why her? They should have taken me, I've lived longer. She was just an innocent little girl who hadn't experienced life yet."

"Don't ever say that! You are a beautiful woman who still has so much of her life ahead of her." My heart ached for her. I just wanted to make it better somehow. I took her face gently in my hands and looked into her eyes. I could see the fear and the hurt in her face. She didn't know what to do anymore.

As I held her face, she kissed me softly. It took me by surprise. Her soft, red lips caressed mine with a tender vulnerability that felt just right. I didn't want to let go anymore. I could feel that she didn't either.

As she finally let go, I looked her in the eyes and said, "It's going to be okay, I promise."

She nodded. But I could still see fear in her eyes, as if she didn't quite believe me.

Chapter Thirteen

At five o'clock in the morning, the sound of the alarm he had set beeped right in his ear. He rubbed his eyes, surprised at how well he slept the night before he would kidnap Richard Bailey's other daughter. His excitement had nearly caused him to go mad the day before. He rolled over in the small cot he had acquired in a dumpster earlier that year. He never liked getting out of bed and usually wondered to himself why he was getting up for a job he despised. He especially did not like getting up when the rest of the world was not yet awake and it was still dark outside. Reluctantly, he pulled the torn blanket off his body and wiggled out of bed. The cold basement floor welcomed his feet and he limped over to his dresser to find his clothes. He pulled on the pair of dress pants he'd borrowed from his cousin. Tucking in the collared shirt, he reminisced back to the time when this was what he looked like everyday. He missed the days of sitting behind a desk and working at a computer. His eyes wandered down to the plastic fingers sticking out of the unbuttoned cuff and glared at the fingernails that had been painted on to make it look more realistic. With a grunt of disgust, he gathered the things he needed and headed out the front door.

A harsh wind struck his face as he shoved the key into his rusty, white Geo. He prayed to God it would start on the first try today. After three attempts, his little white car pattered down the street towards the gym.

The extreme exhaustion Kara felt this morning shortened her workout to only half an hour. She figured that was enough time to release some energy before she went to work. She threw her sweaty towel in the basket as she entered the locker room and headed to the back to rinse off before she changed. She turned the heat as high as it would go and let the hot water run down her back. The steam filled the whole locker room as she opened the shower door. She jumped into her work clothes, ran a brush through her hair, and left the gym for work.

She welcomed the crisp fall air as she left the gym and eyed the parking lot for her car. As she spotted the shiny silver Lexus, a man in a business suit and a prosthetic arm came over with a grin on his face. "Hi! I have a huge favor to ask of you..." he said in a little too bubbly of a voice for the hour of day that it was.

"Yes?" Kara responded, taken aback.

"I just got a flat tire, I'm late to work, and my cell phone's dead, do you mind if I borrow yours quickly to call Triple A?"

Kara thought for a moment, decided he looked harmless enough and replied with a smile on her face, "You just have a bunch of problems, now, don't you? Of course you can, my car's just over here."

She turned to walk and he yelled after her, "Okay! I'll be over in a second, I just gotta get my insurance card." He ran back to the car, grabbed the towel, and followed the beautiful brunette to her car.

Just as he raised the towel behind her head, she whirled around and asked, "So, do you always work out here?"

He pulled the towel down quickly and shoved it in his pocket, “Umm... sometimes I do, I have to admit though, I get a little bit lazy,” he chuckled. She nodded with understanding and continued walking. She stopped at her car and fumbled for her keys in a purse that resembled a small suitcase. Slowly, he raised the towel behind her head and in one swift motion held the towel over her mouth and nose. Kara resisted, whirling her arm around and letting out a muffled scream. She swerved and punched, dropping her purse. Slowly though, her struggle became weaker, her head fell forward, and her body went limp.

He had to work quickly now. He dragged her over to his car and dropped her in the front seat. He jumped into the other side and sped off into the early Chicago morning with Richard Bailey’s last living daughter in the passenger side.

Chapter Fourteen

I was back in my office trying to get more work done. I stared at the data that Franky was going to analyze for me. Now, I didn’t have that option. I was remembering the things Franky told me at the baseball game. But I wasn’t what he said I was. I wasn’t as good as he was and I never would be. What was I supposed to do without him? I looked up from my desk and remembered that just a few days before he walked through that door to introduce the case. Now, I won’t see him ever again.

I pushed my squeaky rolling chair back and got up out of my seat. I walked down the hall and up the stairs that he too had stepped foot in and opened the door to his office. It was such a messy room with books and papers everywhere. It always bothered me that it looked like a dumpster before, and I rarely went in there to talk to him. But it didn’t bother me now. I came around the desk and saw a picture of him and his daughter. He was a really good father, I thought, both to her and to me.

I was looking at the fingerprint data he had gotten back when suddenly the telephone on my desk started to ring. I was trying to get out of the maze, around his desk and lab equipment, but I knocked over his cup of pens. I picked them up and put all the black and blue ballpoints back on his desk. I stormed down the stairs and caught the phone on the fourth ring.

“Hello?”

“Is this Alex Powell?”

“Yes.”

“This is Anthony from the Qotex lab downtown. I got your lab results you asked for the other day on that green paint sample.”

“Great, thanks. When can you send it over?”

“I’ll drop it by your office later today for you to look at. I thought it was strange that pentachlorophenol came up on the GC/MS.”

“What was it used for?”

“It was used as a fungicide, but that stuff hasn’t been added in paints since the eighties. This guy must have had it in his basement or shed for over twenty years.”

“You think?”

“Quite sure.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll go check out the Bailey house to see when their house was built and what type of paint might’ve been used.”

“Good luck, you won’t find anyone there. The Baileys’ went down to the gym downtown.”

“Bailey decided to go work out all of a sudden?”

“No, it was Kara.”

“Kara? What are you talking about?” I really didn’t want to know.

“You haven’t heard? The police think Kara was kidnapped this morning at the gym. She never showed up to work.”

“That’s not like her.”

“No it’s not. That’s everyone’s acting so fast on this one. The entire investigation team has been there all morning. But yea, I gotta go, I’ll make sure you get the GC/MS results by four today.” He hung up the phone.

I struggled to put the phone back down. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe she slept in and forgot. I wanted Anthony, or even Gordon, to call back and say false alarm. Although deep in my mind I felt that this wasn’t right. I grabbed my jacket and drove as fast as I could to get over there.

When I got to the fitness center, it looked like a block party. There were people everywhere, police, detectives, the CSI team, and reporters raiding the front of the tiny place, with all the people inside on the treadmill horrified that they might be on the news that night in their sweat-stained shirts and mismatching neon shorts. I flashed my badge to the officer guarding the entrance. He didn’t seem like he believed me and looked at my photo over again as if it was a fake. I snatched it out of his hand, said thank you and proceeded into the gym. I overheard some overweight women talk to Chris Davis and Ryan Kelly, with them excitedly pointing out the machines that she used every morning. I glanced at the treadmill they were looking at and thought about how Kara was there a few hours before. I bet she ran five miles, if not more. She really enjoyed running. And now she may be missing. The thought of that made my protein shake rise up to my throat. I took a hard swallow and vowed not to drink those ever again.

I walked toward Gordon, who just finished talking to the manager and started walking toward the reception desk. I watched him carefully, thinking about the conversations I had with Kara and Franky regarding him as a suspect. I slyly walked over the front desk, but had my back against his, to take note about what he was doing. He was talking to Karen. Karen was bawling and sobbing nonstop. Poor woman. To have your youngest child killed and then hear that her older daughter may be missing is more than anyone should bear.

I pretended to be looking at some information on the counter. I rotated my body a little to hear their conversation, although there wasn’t much dialogue. Karen was crying and very distraught, occasionally looking up to Gordon for refuge, although Gordon denied it and didn’t seem to show any sympathy. Instead, he stood there with his arms crossed. After a while, he took out his notepad and was asking her questions about Kara’s daily schedule, and although Karen was trying to speak, she was sniffing every other word and it was impossible to understand what she was saying.

“Breathe. Calm down and I’ll come back to talk to you. I’ll talk to Richard first.”

Gordon turned away to find Richard, but he was walking towards them. Richard saw Karen and gave her a hug and a kiss on the forehead. “It’s okay, honey. We’ll figure this out.”

Gordon interrupted the moment and said callously, “Bailey, any ideas why you might have some enemies? Any policies that you approved that may have stirred some ill feelings? Any protests against you that you can recall?”

Bailey responded, “Come on, what kind of man do you think I am? I was voted in by the city, the hard working civilians of Chicago, because they wanted *me* to represent them and make their lives better. I won the election by a landslide against Ramsey, don’t you remember?”

Cocky bastard.

“Ok, this isn’t an election Bailey. I’m trying to find the person who killed your daughter. Work with me here.” Bailey and Gordon stared at each other, wanting to fight to the death, but realized they needed each other, for Karen’s sake at the least.

Gordon continued. “Ok Mr. Perfect, since you couldn’t have made enemies being Mayor, what did you do before that?”

“I was the president of Bailey and Associates Construction Company for a few years.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I saw bigger and better things in my future. Becoming Mayor was my destiny.” So was stealing my fiancé, thought Gordon.

There was another awkward pause. Gordon was done; he couldn’t look at Bailey for another second. However, Richard kissed his wife again and left to go outside to talk to the officers at Kara’s car. Gordon thanked Bailey as both walked away. But Karen quickly extended her arm to Gordon and struggled to get his name out. “J-John. Wa-Wa-wait.”

Gordon turned around. He coldly replied, “Yes?”

Karen took a couple of breaths and walked toward Gordon. She was gently holding his arm and there was another long pause between the two. Then Karen said something with such soft a voice it was almost impossible to hear. “John, Kara is your daughter.”

Gordon didn’t move at all. He simply looked at Karen in the eyes. He flinched when she moved her hand away from his arm and tried to hold both his hands. She gently caressed his right hand, and held his left hand that was tucked under his sleeve in her fingertips. She said a little louder with more confidence. “And I still love you.” At that moment, he squeezed her hands with his right hand and pulled her body towards his. Maybe Gordon had finally changed his attitude towards her and the Baileys now that he realized he has always been a part of Karen’s life, even after she married Richard.

“Karen, I’m so sorry. I feel like I have failed you.” He was holding her with her face resting on his chest. Karen started to sob quieter by his gesture. After a few moments, he lifted her head so their eyes would meet. “I promise I will find this person that is hurting you. We will find Kara and bring her back to you safe and sound. I love you and will sacrifice everything I have to make you happy.” He gave her a small kiss on the cheek.

I was surprised to see the sincerity he had in his expression. I could see he was trying to relieve Karen from her agony just like I had tried to do with Kara, especially now he realized that Kara was their daughter. My instincts told me that maybe he couldn’t be the killer and was simply a man in love with a woman that chose someone else. But good thing forensic science isn’t all about intuition. I was skeptical just in case.

Could this be an act? Was he involved in the death of the Bailey daughters anyway, considering he didn't know Kara was his daughter?

The person at the reception desk came back and asked me if I needed any help, but I said no and walked away, hoping that Gordon and Karen did not see me. I started walking out of the gym when I saw her car out front. I thought about Kara and how I walked her into her car a few days before and the last time I saw her at Franky's funeral. I was motivated to solve the case, and decided to go back towards the office.

I sat back at my desk, realizing that time was of the essence and that I needed to figure out the situation quickly. Yea, Franky was right. This job was rarely the reason why the killer was found. But I was determined to be ahead of the murderer this time. Kara needs me.

I looked on my computer for more information about the Bailey and Associates Construction Company on Google. I clicked on the first link, but the "Cannot Find Server" page came on. His company did close down a long time ago. I clicked the Back button and went on to look at the second link. It was a Chicago Times article with the headline saying, "Bailey Cares More About Work than Workers." What's new now that he's Mayor? The story said that there was a civilian protest in front of his company on August 17, 1978. Apparently, rumors were leaked out that Bailey changed the equipment they used to cheaper ones to save the company money at the expense of the workers' safety. The petition occurred right after one of his workers had a bad accident with the chain snapping in the lifting and conveying equipment. The article said that the worker received no compensation for it since Bailey said the worker was being reckless and not following safety procedures. What a bastard.

I went back to Google to look at Bailey's history during his thirty years in office in Chicago and possible suspects as political enemies. Maybe people were protesting against him when he denied the bills against the environmentalists. Maybe someone was angry that he didn't give his or her organization funding. There could be many reasons why you would have enemies as a mayor. I was quite frustrated.

But the phone rang again. I was excited to hear that it was my family back home. I talked to mom, dad, and the girls for an hour before I left the office. I felt better hearing from my family, until I thought about Kara and how she must be missing hers.

Chapter Fifteen

Kara woke up to darkness. A sudden wave of nausea kept her from sitting up to look around. She lay there curled up in a ball, shivering in the cold, dark room. She could no longer hold her stomach, leaned over and threw up all over the floor. After the nausea came fear, a fear so intense she could not do anything. She couldn't shake, she couldn't scream, she could do nothing but sit in the darkness of a room she had never been to in her life. She sat there trying to scream, but nothing came out. She grabbed the wall, feeling around for a light switch or flashlight. She opened her eyes as wide as they could go, but she couldn't even see her own hand in front of her face. Slipping in and out of a dizzy consciousness, Kara could do nothing but let herself fall back asleep.

Some time later, a hand grabbed her cheeks and turned her face towards the ceiling. Kara awoke with a start and shrunk back against the wall, eager to get away

from the stranger towering over her. She huddled against the wall and a light came on. She squinted at the sudden brightness. She felt something being pushed into her lap, and a man's voice say, "Here, eat." She looked down and was able to make out a plate with some bread and a piece of cheese on it. She shook her head no.

When her eyes adjusted to the light, she looked up at the man and suddenly it all came back to her. The man from the parking lot was standing above her. "Who are you? You fucking asshole, who are you?" Kara screamed through sobbing breaths. "Let me go!" Kara covered her face with her hands and cried, rocking back and forth against the cold cement.

"Eat," he said again and left Kara with the plate of food and the room to herself. When she had composed herself, Kara looked around. She was in a basement of some sort with tools, paint cans, old boxes, and some dirt. The floor was cold and wet, gathering water from a leaky pipe overhead. The cement was cracked, as if an earthquake had run through there at some point. The tools looked dusty and unused. The walls were splattered with numerous colors of paint, the most recent closely resembling some sort of mold. The single light bulb in the room was broken and the light source was now a bright lamp coming from the corner. A cot, with a sag in the middle so large it was almost touching the floor, poked out from the back of the room, along with some dirty clothes piled on the floor. Pizza boxes littered the area. The stench was unbearable down there. It smelled of dirty socks, mold and rotten milk. The smell alone was enough to kill a person.

All Kara could think about was her little sister, and if this had been the place that she too was held hostage. An anger she had never experienced before emerged from every part of her body. She felt her ears getting hot as her body was overcome with a feeling of hatred so extreme she could no longer stand it. She grabbed one of the hammers she found laying on the floor and tiptoed around to the back where the cot was. The man who'd given her the food before was sitting in front of a small black and white TV with the worst static she'd ever seen. She held the hammer up behind him, ready to strike when she heard, "Put that down," as if he had eyes in the back of his head. He stood up and pivoted around to face her. Kara was frozen with fear; she stood there, hammer in hand, and took a small step backwards.

Without hesitation the man took two steps forward and backhanded her across the face, causing her to lose balance along with her grip on the hammer. "Don't ever touch my shit. Stay in that corner, or I'll kill you now," he said, grabbing a rope from one of his messy drawers. She could tell he wasn't kidding and was cradling her now swollen cheek with her hand. She got up with a look of defeat. As she regained balance, he grabbed her with his good hand and dragged her to an old, wooden chair that looked as though it had not been used for centuries. He pushed her down onto the chair, and tied her wrists and her legs to the chair. He pulled the rope so tight she could feel it cutting into her skin and she let out a yelp of pain. "You're not going anywhere, you dumb bitch," he said so fiercely that little droplets of spit flew out of his mouth. She felt helpless as she watched the man sharpen a knife he had pulled out of one of the drawers.

Her mind kept wandering back to Alex. She thought of her sister, but that only brought more fear along with it. Alex was the only one that brought comfort. She teared up at the thought of not seeing Alex or her family again. Her devastation made her

sleepy and again, she drifted into an uneasy sleep as her captor sharpened a knife that would be used once more to take a life.

Chapter Sixteen

The lab seemed to have a certain buzz to it today. Everyone seemed to have something to do and was going to do it. Trying to dodge all of the lab personnel, I had to walk by Franky's office. Every time I walked by it I looked in, almost hoping he would be sitting at his desk solving another crime. Nothing would bring him back. I had slowly come to realize it was up to me and there are plenty of criminals to catch. So, it was time for me to get to work.

As I sat down at my tiny desk in the corner I began to think. Who would kill the Mayor's daughter, but more importantly, why? What would the mayor have done to make someone so mad that they would actually kill his daughter? I looked through all of the hair evidence I had analyzed. I looked at all of the fiber evidence but that did nothing. I still had that one fiber from the pink bow. I couldn't use it yet, because I could not connect it to anyone either. I thought about Lauren's body. I knew she was killed by a knife slitting her throat. I could guess by looking at the wound that it was a chopping knife about nine inches long, but that was only a guess. The body also had those marks all over it. I analyzed the marks and they seemed to be tool marks. They seem to be deep enough to be torture marks. My best guess would be key marks.

But, thinking about Lauren made me think Kara. I dropped Lauren's case for a couple of minutes and thought about our kiss. The feeling inside of me after we kissed was something I never wanted to forget. All I wanted to do was see her again, get to know her, hold her, and kiss her. That got me to thinking about her case. I knew she was kidnapped before work. This person had to know her; it was just too much of a coincidence. So, the person had to know she went to workout before she went to work. Ironically she worked her and the University of Chicago. But she was a graduate student getting her Ph.D. in mathematics so I never got to see her. I decided I should go talk to Gordon, maybe I could help out a little bit. I walked upstairs and entered his office.

"Hey Gordon, I was wondering if I could talk to you about Kara's case."

"Not now Powell, we have our detectives all over it, she'll be fine."

"But I have some ideas—"

"Not now!" He interrupted. As I walked out of the room I made up my mind. I was going to take this into my own hands. This woman meant so much to me, I was going to find her myself so decided to start at the beginning so I headed up towards payroll. I figured they might know anyone who knew about Kara's interactions.

As soon as I got up there I looked at the woman behind the desk. She looked like she should have retired about ten years ago. I knew this would take a while, and a lot of sweet talking. "Hello ma'am, is there any way I can get some information on Kara Bailey?"

"Sorry, our information is confidential."

"Ma'am, Kara Bailey was kidnapped this morning and her sister was found dead a week ago. The clock is ticking to find her alive. If there is any way you could help us that would be wonderful." The woman's face still showed no emotion.

"What do you want?"

“Well, I only have a few questions. First of all, do you know of any people here that would want to hurt Kara or her family in any way?”

“How would I know that? I’m just in payroll.” She had a point.

“Well did anyone come down here looking for information on her?”

“No,” she snapped.

At this point I was getting a little desperate so I decided to try something new, “Ma’am, is there anyone who didn’t report for work today?”

“I’ll check.”

She came back four minutes later with a list.

“Thank you very much, ma’am.” I aside and looked at it. There were eight names on the list. However, six of them were all cleared for illness or vacations. Then, I had an idea. I grabbed the paper and walked back to the old woman at the desk.

“Hello ma’am. I have one more quick favor to ask of you. Of all of these people, were any missing on Tuesday, the 24th of October?”

“As a matter of fact, Gary McKinley and Lisa Dauwalter were gone then too.”

That was it. I don’t think it was a coincidence that they were gone both of those days.

“Could you tell me what their positions are here?”

After a long and pathetic sigh, “I guess.”

She went back into her little room and came back. “Gary is a janitor on the mathematics and science floors and Lisa is in management. Oh wait, I think Lisa has been gone for a week. I’m pretty sure she was fired.” That couldn’t have been a coincidence. So, Gary McKinley wasn’t here both days and most likely knew Kara, or at least knew when she came in to work. But I couldn’t quite make the connection yet.

As I was walking back into the lab I opened up the door and thought of something. The University of Chicago had not remodeled in a while. We didn’t have electronic locks yet, they were still manual keys. As I held up my key I began to run. I ran as fast as I could into the autopsy room. I lifted the towel over Lauren’s body to look at her arm. I then looked at the indentations of all of the keys I had. It made sense. McKinley was a janitor here. He most likely knew who she was, when she got to work and when she left. The indentation on Lauren’s arm were very deep but I could see very small indentation that looked like my keys. There was not a strong connection between the two, but I had a feeling about this. It had to be him.

Chapter Seventeen

I asked a young administrator to lead me from the university’s main office to Gary’s janitor’s closet. I missed being in school. Back then I never worried about the sadistic people and simply lived in my own little world. But to think that there was a possible murderer on campus that had been there longer than I had, who had swept the floors that I walked on, made me look at this place with a grave perspective.

The janitor’s closet was more than a closet; it was definitely bigger than my own office. I told the administrator that I simply needed to go to find the mop to clean a spill and that I’d be right out. She trusted me, thank goodness. She left and I started digging inside his office space. It seemed rather plain and didn’t have that many personal items in there. There was a few old Readers’ Digest magazines, old newspapers, and the typical

school posters on the wall, promoting students to conserve energy and water. Great, this would be helpful in pinpointing a murderer. He likes reading and saving the environment. I was looking for more personal belongings that could give me clues. Near his desk area, which consisted of a table and a chair that looked like it was stolen out of an old classroom, I saw the grayish blue uniform he always wore. I remembered how many times I would see him on campus and think nothing of it. Now I was in his office suspecting him as a murderer. I couldn't find anything in the office that looked suspicious, quickly fumbling through random objects that he must've collected over the years, such as discolored baseball caps, bent sunglasses, and moldy t-shirts.

I was ready to give up in the office. I wasn't a criminal investigator. I wanted to go back behind the microscope where I felt safe analyzing all the pieces of evidence we've collected. I was walking out of the office and picked up the mop in case I passed the administrator that let me in, until I saw a cardboard box on the floor. I walked towards the tiny brown cube and realized it was a shipment of some supplies he had ordered to some address outside of the university. 4659 Orchard Ave? It must have been a house address.

Forget the mop. I left immediately to go search for that address. I was fearful that I was on the wrong track and would get myself into some major trouble, but it was worth a shot.

It was a thirty-minute drive to Gary's house. I recognized the area since many parties that Tyler went to were out in this part of town. I parked in the back alley a block away just in case Gary would see me approaching his house. I walked down the alley dodging behind the large overflowing dumpsters out of paranoia and finally got a glimpse of his house. It looked like a normal home in the city, with the white picket fence that was missing a few on one side of the yard, and the robin's egg blue house, a little worn down along the bottom edges. It reminded me of my own house back home in Ohio.

I made sure that no neighbors were peeking out of their window. No one. Just a couple of curious poodles that seemed more interested in what I was doing than to actually expose me. I crawled over the fence and realized that it looked nicer from far away than it actually was up close. I was tiptoeing through the lawn; the yard was filled to the edges with nothing but spiky dandelions engulfing the already dead grass. I kept along the walls of the house, sweeping the outside clean with the back of my jacket, dodging the windows above my head. I slipped my hand out in an attempt to see if the back door was already open. I turned the knob and it rotated about ten degrees to the right. Great. Of course it couldn't be that easy.

I looked up at the screens in the window to see if they would be removable. They weren't. So I pulled out my Swiss army knife and decided to start cutting a small slit along the edge of the screen. That way I could fix the screen by stretching it and pocketing the mesh panel back into the metal frame so that no one would know I entered his house. That's what Emma and I did all the time back home when we got locked out of the house after sneaking down to the lake. It really paid off at the moment to be six-foot one, considering jumping over the ledge of the screen barely took any effort whatsoever.

I slipped in quietly and ducked behind the kitchen counter just in case the janitor really *was* sick and making some chicken soup and lying on the couch. It was pitch black in the house considering all the curtains were drawn and not a single light illuminated the rooms. No one was home. I pulled the rest of my body in the window, which was

apparently right above the sink in the kitchen. I climbed down from countertop and tried to steer clear from the moldy mildew growing along the crease of the tiles next to the ceramic murky-yellow sink.

His house looked clean and tidy, despite all the tattered belongings he had, just like someone would still wipe their 1955 Ford Mustang, ignoring the major rust stains on the body that spotted their car. I walked from the kitchen into the family room. It had one checkered brown couch on the left side and one recliner that was a darker shade of brown right next to it. There was a small TV stand in front of both furniture pieces with a Panasonic TV that seemed older than my grandmother's. There were a few bottles of Corona on the floor with a half-eaten burrito falling out of the wrappers next to it. I made sure I didn't stomp on these items and looked at the mantel right above the fireplace.

There were some dust covered gold trophies for a little league baseball team dated before I was born, along with some picture frames of what I presumed to be his family. There were only a few figures in the pictures, an elderly woman and man standing on both sides of him in front of some restaurant I recognized downtown. His mom and dad. There was a major resemblance between Gary and his mother. The picture right next to him was Gary with another middle-aged guy during a fishing trip off of Lake Michigan.

I recognized this man from somewhere.

It took me a minute to figure it out, and then I stormed out of the house, through the kitchen window, back out into the yard, and into my car. I got on the phone with Gordon.

"Gordon, you need to come with me to the Baileys' house now."

"Why?" he said casually.

"I think that the security guard that watched over Lauren had something to do with this."

"Bobby? Why him?"

"He and the murderer are buddies. He must've helped in kidnapping Lauren. Meet me over at Bailey's."

Gordon and I met outside the gates of the Bailey house before we went in.

"You ready?" Gordon asked.

"More than you know." I was pumped to confront that bastard. I was going to save Kara.

We walked up the front steps only to find that Bobby was on duty guarding the property. Perfect. He allowed us into the house.

"Thank you, Bobby." We started toward the living room. "Hey Bobby, is it all right if you can ask you more questions? We just wanted to get the information right."

"Of course. I want to help in anyway I can." I was glad he was willing to work with us.

"So tell me again why you left Lauren?" I asked.

"I only left her for a brief moment." He was getting defensive.

"Why did you leave her?" I said again in a more forceful tone. Bobby didn't answer.

Edwards helped me out. "Answer the question, Bobby."

"I was talking on the phone with someone."

"Who?"

“A family member. It was my cousin, Gary.”

So Bobby and Gary weren't friends. They were family. Bobby must've been the one supplying him all the information on the family. He must have turned a blind eye and talked to Gary, telling him it was clear for him to grab Lauren in the backyard when he was on duty.

“You know that he is our primary suspect, right?” I was bluffing, and seeing where he would go from there.

Bobby was quiet again. He sure wasn't expecting that. He was no longer the helpful family guard and began acting like an innocent feeble, old man again, the act that he must have put on the last time Gordon interrogated him. I didn't believe him.

“Give it up, Bobby. I know that you were involved in Lauren's death.”

He gazed at me with such cruel eyes that I was becoming uneasy. But in a split second, his eyes flashed to something behind me and down to the floor. I looked behind me to see what he was staring at.

It was Bailey. The Mayor walked forward.

“Bobby—Why? Why would you want to hurt my daughter?” Bailey lost his composure and ran towards the old man. He pushed him out of the chair and up against the wall. Bailey's firm hands gripped Bobby's neck. I thought it was justified, but Gordon went over to push Bailey off of him, and allowed Bobby's feet to reach the ground again.

“Tell me what you did with my daughters?!” Veins in Bailey's neck began to protrude. “Where's Kara?!”

Bobby was terrified. Gordon, the compassionate and kind man that had given him a job for over ten years of his life, was now in a state of rage that was unseen by Bobby throughout the entire time he had known him. “Godamnit! Tell me! Or you'll never—” screamed Bailey while nearly slapping the old man across the face.

Bobby didn't flinch. He was still in shock and said, “I'm sorry! I didn't know he was going to kill her! I really didn't! I didn't tell him anything about Kara, I swear!”

Bobby was crumpled on the floor with his face down and holding his knees with his arms. He looked terrified at what Bailey would say to him next.

Bailey was in shock and confused at the information presented to him. “Who is Gary? What did I do to him that he took my family away from me?”

“Gary felt that he had the right to do what he did. You took away his life.”

“What are you talking about?! I'm not a murderer!”

Bobby was feeling somewhat resentful toward Bailey and said, “Gary lost thirty years of his life because of you! He lost his arm because *you* decided to be cheap with your construction equipment, do you remember that? And what else? You didn't even give him compensation money, and forced him to become a janitor. You're lucky he didn't take your life!”

Bailey replied softly out of the torment of what he had just said. “Is this why you came to work for me? So that you could help your cousin take away my daughters?”

Bobby looked up and no longer defended his cousin. “I'm sorry. I didn't want to tell him anything about your family. I loved the girls. But Gary had kept me in check my entire life. I had to tell him when Lauren was home from school that day. He didn't say he was going to kill her. He said he was going to scare you and bring her back after you paid a ransom for all the years he had missed out on being a janitor. I had to tell him, he

threatened to bust me after I was involved in a drug-dealing ring when I was younger. I can't afford to go to jail for smuggling cocaine when I was younger. I couldn't get involved with those people again. If I had known he would have hurt Lauren, I would have never helped him. I'm sorry."

Bailey was shaking and slipped down into the chair. There was a long, sorrowful pause. "Bobby, please help me find Kara," he pleaded.

"I'm not sure where she is, although my best guess would be the run-down boathouse that he uses for storage."

Chapter Eighteen

As I speed down I-80 all I think about is seeing Kara with her throat slit just like her sister's. The image tells my foot to press down on the gas even harder. My Toyota Camry is being pushed to its limits on the expressway through suburbia. I had left the other cops in the dust as soon as we got to the expressway – I've spent enough time on the highways between Ohio and Illinois to know how to do some swerving, and having the chance to find this McKinley guy before he hurt Kara any more is enough of a reason to risk my life. I glance down at the directions that I was given and see that it is only two more exits until I need to get off. I check my blindspot and fly across three lanes of traffic and shoot down the exit ramp. I screech to a stop at the light to let a truck pass by then blow through the intersection. Just two left turns and I'll be on this guy's block. I take the first left and then slow down to a reasonable speed. I try to slow my blood from pumping through me so quickly but it feels like I'm trying to dam the Nile. I try to unclench my muscles and slow my pulse. I take deep, slow breaths and start to think. All of the houses look like one story ranch-style places, so I bet Kara will be held somewhere in the basement. I could try to sneak in and look for the janitor, but he'd have every advantage because it's his house. I'm going to have to face him head on. I roll up to the front of the house and walk over some brown grass with patches of green that are holding on for their lives. I ring the doorbell twice and start to wonder if he'll even answer.

"Mr. McKinley, it's Alex Powell from school!" I knock. I hear some movement behind the door and ring again. The same man I saw in the autopsy room with Lauren's body opens the door wearing a worn baseball cap without a shirt, revealing a prosthetic arm.

"What do you want kid?" he says, standing firmly in the doorway blocking the entrance.

"A lot of us noticed you haven't been around as much lately and we were starting to get worried. The records said that you hadn't missed a day of work in the past few years before last month. We went to your house and then called the emergency number you had listed and your cousin told us to check here. I was in the area so I volunteered." I'm gambling with the cousin story. His face grows dark for an instant and then is covered up with a forced smile. I don't think he bought it. Now we're probably on the same page, I have to make sure he doesn't surprise me.

"Well sure, come on in." He's a little too friendly all of a sudden. We walk into a very normal looking house except that it is messier than any house should reasonably be. He clears a newspaper that was covering a chair but before he folds it I see that it is

turned to the Tribune's coverage of the mayor – McKinley must like looking at Bailey in pain.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure, thank you.” It's just like a 007 movie, now I just have to sneak around while he makes the drink.

“Pick your poison, I can probably make it.”

“A martini would be great.” I might as well keep the James Bond theme going. And hopefully it will take him a while to make it.

“I'll be back in a minute.”

This is starting to feel like a game of chess. We keep setting everything up as well as possible but we wait for someone to make a move. I'm going to have a lot of time until the real cops show up, when I might become a hostage, so I am going to have to push the action. I turn around a corner and see a worn, wooden door that looks suspicious – not a single ray of light is coming through the cracks and it looks like there is a deadbolt locking it to the doorframe. We might have a winner. I go back to the living room and pace around to stretch my legs out. McKinley returns holding two drinks. He hands me one, as if I would drink it.

“Did you hear one of the grad students from school disappeared?” I prodded.

“No, who is it?”

“Kara Bailey, the mayor's daughter. Her sister was kidnapped and murdered a little while ago, she was the girl you saw in the autopsy room with me.” I look him directly in the eyes as I say it.

“That's horrible,” he says dryly. “You work for the cops don't you?”

“Yea.”

“No luck finding her? Or who killed the sister?” he asks insultingly while turning his back.

“I hear they have a good lead or two.” I watch his good arm for any sign of movement. It shifts a little bit and stays hidden as he turns back to me – I pray it isn't a small gun he managed to conceal. He spins quickly now and throws his glass at me. It shatters against the wall just behind my head. He takes off back into the kitchen. I race after him but pause at the doorway while he throws a few steak knives my way. I pick up a frying pan that is lying on the floor. I take a deep breath and then do a police roll into the middle of the floor. As soon as I am upright I throw the pan as hard as I can in his direction. He turns to run but is hit in the middle of his back. I hear the thud as it connects but he keeps moving. I get to my feet and turn the corner after him. As I spring towards him he picks up a golf club and begins to swing it at me. It's too late. I explode into him and take him down just like I've practiced sacking a quarterback thousands of times. He drops the club and swings at my head with his fist. I deflect it and drop an elbow onto his nose. His hand reaches for his face as I roll him over. I grab a nearby rope, pull his good arm back, now covered in blood from his face, and tie it to his prosthetic. As I lift myself from him he starts to wiggle around. I kick him twice in the ribs.

I leave him on the ground and run to the door I already found. I try the handle, it's locked, of course. I try a hard kick and it doesn't budge. I try again and hear a faint crack, the door is too strong. I back up as far as I can. I push off the wall and sprint towards the door, lowering my shoulder as I hit it. I break through and tumble down a

flight of wooden stairs until I run into the concrete wall at the bottom. A sharp pain from the knee that hit the wall incapacitates me for a few seconds. As I try to push the pain away I look around at the stale basement. There is the scent of moldy boxes, slightly rotting food and open paint cans. Some scraggly looking furniture is strewn about but the most important piece is the chair with Kara bound and gagged to. Her head is hanging limply and I see patches of dried blood formed beneath the numerous cuts along her arms and head. The pool beneath her has also dried completely – either her cuts healed or her blood hasn't been pumping for a few hours.

I hobble over towards her, each step sending another wave of pain from my knee. I ignore it and start looking for signs of life. There aren't any flies around, a good sign, but we are indoors so if she is dead they might not come for a while anyways. I lift up her head and she doesn't move. I place my finger under her nose, there is the slightest feeling of air being sucked in. I put my two fingers to her neck, hoping to feel a trace of a pulse. There it is, barely noticeable but definitely still there. I quickly cut the cords holding her arms behind the chair and untie the gag. I pick her up and set her over my shoulder. I start back towards the stairs and have to use the wall as support, two people on a bad knee is rather difficult.

After a few minutes of work I stand at the top of the stairs. I can hear sirens in the distance and set Kara on the floor as gently as I can.

“Stand up!” I hear from behind me. “If you move so much as an inch I'll shoot you right in the head.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see a reflection of what is happening behind me. McKinley has a pistol pointed at my back. His prosthetic arm is dangling from the rope, which is still connected to his good wrist. I knew he couldn't get the knots undone but obviously didn't think he could detach his arm. What a stupid mistake. But the arm dangling will make it very hard to aim with that hand, especially if he has to move quickly to try and shoot me. Hopefully, though, I won't let him fire.

“How come mmmgggdda dddmm,” I intentionally mumble.

“What?” he replies, taking a step closer to my back. Now it's hard to see him in the reflection.

“I said, why are you doing all of this?”

“Wouldn't you like to know. But guess what, I'll let you think about that one for a while, you probably won't have much else to do when you're dead.”

He raises the pistol and places the end against my head. Big mistake. Now I don't need the reflection to know where the gun is, I can feel exactly where it is. I spin my arm around and swat the gun hand away. I put one arm around his neck in a choke hold and yank the rope down with the other, his gun hand following close behind. The gun is now pointed at the floor and in a minute or so he will be unconscious. He tries to kick me with one of his legs so I sweep the other and fall on top of him with one of my knees landing in the middle of his back. He lets out a pathetic groan of pain. He lets go of the pistol and, letting go of his neck, I quickly move to grab it. I place one knee on the small of his back and hold the gun right above his head. He moves his arm again so I hit him in the back of the neck with the butt end of the gun. I hear the sirens right outside the door now. I look over at Kara's limp body. Then back down at McKinley's head. I point the gun at his head again. I cock the hammer back. The trigger feels so light I know I barely need to move my finger to kill him. My whole body tenses up. I feel my

forefinger twitching on the trigger. I look at Kara again and see her eyelids flutter for a moment, just a brief sign of consciousness. I can almost feel her sensing what's going on right in front of her. I stare down at the back of his head, then back up at Kara. I uncock the hammer, put the safety on and lean in towards McKinley's head.

"I could have just killed you. How do you like that feeling of helplessness? Instead, I'm going to send you to jail for the rest of your life, so you can feel helpless forever," I said, while grabbing a torn piece of cloth from his prosthetic arm's elbow joint. It was the same pattern as Lauren's bow, all I had to do was analyze it and he was tied to both sisters.

The cops bust in through the door and help me to my feet as McKinley lets out a little whimper. Kidnappers and kid-killers are always the weakest when you bust them. The cops take hold of McKinley as I move over to Kara. I move one of the cops away and pick her up. I carry her out the door onto the front lawn, it wasn't right for her to be in that place any more.

Chapter Nineteen

As I walk out the door with Kara in my arms and a limp in my walk the paramedics run over with two stretchers. I place Kara down in one but I refuse to get in the other – Gordon just pulled up. He runs out of the car, right past me, and checks on Kara. I could tell that he sees her in a different light now that he realizes she is his daughter. Maybe this guy isn't so bad, maybe Franky was wrong to call him an asshole. Gordon comes walking over to me.

"Great job, son. Maybe you should've waited for the cavalry but everything turned out alright, I can't fault you for what you did. Trust me, I know how you felt. If I hadn't been caught up in the investigation elsewhere I would've liked to have been in there with you. These kids mean a lot to me."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. They mean a lot to me as well."

"I was told earlier today that the CPD is ready to offer you a Forensic Biologist position. You could have your partner's old lab and position, he wrote rave reviews of you before he passed. If you're interested, our offer to help serve justice is there."

I feel my eyes swelling again and I don't try to stop the tears. "Thank you, sir. Yes, I think that position would suit me quite well."

"Alright, son. Go get to the hospital, I can see the injury you're trying to hide. I had knee problems back in my football days, too."

"I'm on my way, sir."

While I limp over towards the ambulance I only think of Emma and my work. Maybe I can't stop kidnappings from happening, but no one really can. I'm one of the best at what I do and it's hard to imagine leaving the job to someone less qualified who might let a bad guy get off some day. Today's normal police work, I decided about five minutes ago, is not something for me. I don't want to have to face that tough decision again – whether or not to impart my own form of justice.

I look into the ambulance just as they finish loading Kara in. She looks a little better already, they have an IV in place and the rest seems to be putting her more at ease. I put a hand on the blanket covering her foot and give a gentle squeeze. Her eyes roll towards the bottom as she tries to see me.

“Are you coming with us, sir?” one of the EMT’s beside me asks.

I give him a nod and hobble over a few steps. He puts my arm around his shoulder and steps up into the ambulance with me.

“Thank you, I’ve got it from here.”

I slide down towards the end with Kara’s head. I clasp her hand and look at her face. Her head bobs over to the right and we lock eyes. Her eyes are half-closed, just as Franky’s were. But instead of her mouth hanging open I see her lips turn into a smile as the tears stream down my face again. The double doors in the back thump shut. The two of us don’t notice anything else as the ambulance speeds off away from the house – the red lights flashing all around and the siren wailing aren’t there to us. Tomorrow should be a great day.