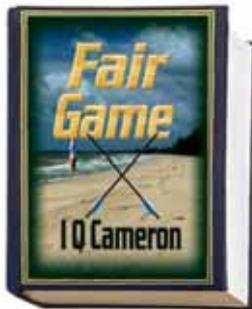


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Fair Game

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(Version: V8.0C, 2018)

(A novel by)

I Q Cameron

Introduction

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As a writer, I make every effort to make available novels of the highest quality, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy this free portion so much that you will purchase the remaining portion of the novel from www.killernovels.com for a small fee. Please remember that by doing so you will receive a fantastic novel conclusion, while also helping me to be able to continue this writing venture.

Fair Game is a killer-thriller loaded with thrills and spills, murder and mayhem, a neat twist, lots of suspense and a particularly memorable plot. If you enjoy murder/detective stories with suspense and surprises, you'll really enjoy the twisted and brutal mind of the hidden killer in *Fair Game*.

Better still, take the challenge and see if you can work out who's-doin'-it, and why. I'm betting you can't! It's tricky, impacting, and most of all, memorable. *Fair Game* offers you the thrill of trying to work out the identity and motive of the hidden killer. All the hints are there... so best of luck working it out!

Fair Game also offers a glimpse into the Christian message, as portrayed by various characters within the story. This allows the reader to consider what the message of Jesus Christ is *really all about*, explained simply and without religious fanfare or ambiguity.

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I sincerely hope you enjoyed this story.

Thank you,

I Q Cameron

Foreword

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truth and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct and

assault, treachery, etc. Indeed, life itself can be unrelentingly offensive. With all that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sex, terror and every other horrifying human advent.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* And only He can do this, because He has the power and authority to firstly forgive us for all our wrongdoings (sins), and then to begin working inside us to change us into what He has always wanted us to be (and wanted for us).

So often Christians (in novels and in life) are portrayed as weak and ‘just too good’ to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Smile...☺) Those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness and everlasting life (in this life) are not perfect. God is changing and working on us and in us every single day, no matter how our story looks. Like a story God is telling, we are a work in progress...

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ’s intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change. And God will never tire of giving it.

Many of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. Hence, I have done my best to withdraw most of those versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. I am attempting to fill what I believe is a Christian literature void, and while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive in some areas, I have tried to write about *real* issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don’t ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

I have no interest in terms such as ‘have faith’ or ‘simply believe’, which are meaningless to the one who doesn’t understand them. Sometimes I may give an example, or even brutally demonstrate them. I would rather ire some readers, who judge my work as ‘going too far’, than to indulge in the usual ‘*too valiant and too true*’ hero figures. Life is real, and when there is

action, it is very often brutal.

With all that in mind, I have decided not to pull punches, so to speak. My ‘baddies’ are bad, and my ‘heroes and heroines’ are human, and as real as I can make them. I avoid excess course language and sexual scenes, but make no apologies for realistic violence and faulty characters. These things are very much a real part of life, and since we are all living in the age of terror, perhaps there is a time and need for recognizing ‘real’ characters and events, even – and especially – in Christian writing.

Hence, perhaps you, the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc.), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God’s love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don’t fail you too greatly... 😊

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CHAPTER 1

Run for your life! Run!

Carol-Ann ran into the thick bush at speed, knowing that it would scratch her, but not caring. She raised a hand to shield her face and eyes, then charged the green monster, not heeding the obvious repercussions. And to her surprise, the bush surrendered to her wild abandonment, and almost seemed to lie down as a concession to her brave attack.

She erupted from the other side, scratched, and yet surviving. The young woman crashed all the way through, tears blinding her as she lowered her hand to see where she should go next, and only as she pulled herself free of the last portion of the natural barrier did a few scratching tendrils make any serious attempt to grasp at her.

Her crying, which had continually accompanied her almost-blind stampede through the pretty countryside changed in pitch as the bush took hold of her. As a considerable sheaf of her long, pale blonde hair became wedged within several tough and gnarled twigs, pulling her head back hard, Carol-Ann screamed out loud.

Blindly, wildly, she reached back into the bush and shattered the coarse branches that had been so reluctant to allow her to proceed.

She reeled, stepping away from the thick bush, ecstatic to be free of it, and yet terrified afresh because she had made such a loud protest and lost precious seconds. Almost instinctively she patted her long, straight hair, which now hung disheveled upon her face and shoulders, and threatened to obscure her vision.

Then she focused again, spinning on her toes to glance in all directions. Two shivering hands patted her pale thighs, exposed beneath her knee-length skirt and now scratched considerably by the bush. She continued to cry, gasping for breath and shaking with terror, her eyes darting about the quiet woods.

A moment of pause and Carol-Ann suddenly realized where she was standing, close to a familiar path that she and some friends had occasionally used. Despite the ringing of terror in her ears she could hear the dull wash of the ocean, perhaps a hundred meters to her right.

The beach, she told herself. Must run to the beach! So she did.

Carol-Ann took one last look behind her as she fled the small clearing. A few frantic paces

brought her to the track she knew would be there, and then she began to sprint without reserve toward the bright sunlight that broke through the trees at the path's end. She followed the sandy track, which was less than a meter in width.

Fallen leaves danced and rustled in the breeze as she ran, her breaths gulping noisily over the soft sounds of the woods, and the ever-growing, albeit gentle washing sounds of the ocean. She took several hasty glances over her shoulders as she ran, each one causing her to veer off the narrow, sandy path so that her sandals crunched noisily on the twigs and dried leaves at the path's edge.

And then she drew a long and spasming breath as she looked forward to where she was heading. Carol-Ann's soft shoes skidded on the dry sand as she let out a whimpering scream of terror.

She spun, almost falling from the sudden change in momentum, bending and lurching as her legs, now wet with sweat and itching with scratches propelled her wildly back the way she had come. She snorted noisily, her long, straight blonde hair billowing behind her as she raced back along the track.

And then she grunted.

The blow from behind hit her like a fist.

First just a punch, then a sharp sting, and then a cruel, debilitating agony that welled up within her gut, burning on her right side. It stung like a cramp, only worse, *far worse*, and at first she hoped desperately that it was only her body's natural aching from the strenuous running she was doing.

But she knew better. She screamed at the pain, but it was a subdued scream, almost demented, and something akin to a shrill whimper. She knew she had better things to do with her breath and energy than to waste it complaining.

Instinctively her flailing right arm groped at the pain in her back as, despite overwhelming fear, her inquiring mind would not be denied. She simply *had* to know. Wearing a knee-length skirt and cut-off blouse that left her mid-section bare and exposed and sweating profusely, her small flailing hand slipped on her wet skin as she ran.

Even with such frantic, groping actions, the truth of her ordeal was not long in making itself horribly real in her tormented mind, despite her best efforts to deny it. She cried anew as her raking, frenzied fingers came to rest upon a thin shaft, thinner than the slenderest of her own small fingers, protruding straight out from the right side of the small of her back.

As though the realization of the thin sliver's presence should have some great physical effect on the speeding girl, she immediately stumbled, almost toppling as she weaved her way

recklessly along the sandy path.

The river, she thought. The river! It couldn't be far away. Perhaps the river would help her to escape.

Carol-Ann glanced briefly over her shoulder again as she continued to run, her mind screaming at the pain in her lower back and gut, her mind frantic with fear. All she could do was run, even though now there was a marked limp to her gait. There barely remained the presence of mind to do anything else. Survival instincts caused her to cast all other considerations to the wind.

And so she ran.

Another few frantic, stumbling paces brought the young woman to a sharp turn in the path, and again she recognized where she was. *Perhaps there was hope after all, her terrified mind demanded. There had to be hope!*

She stumbled on, her upper body threatening to lurch in directions that her legs were not prepared to carry her. *The tree, she thought. The tree is so big! Perhaps it was the place to hide? No! Dare not stop!*

Even in her panic, she realized that there was a carpark less than three hundred meters further along this path. *Surely there she would be safe! Surely!*

She rounded the next bend, passing by the enormous tree trunk. *So clear now, she remembered. Now I remember this place! So frightened! Must keep running. But the pain. The pain in my side is so bad!*

Carol-Ann gasped noisily as she passed by the huge tree, having already decided not to risk hiding behind it. Stopping could only hasten her demise. The protection of that brown and green monster could at best be temporary. She straightened, summoning all the strength and will she could, determined to make her best effort.

The carpark, she reasoned. The carpark – just another few minutes and she would be safe!

She screamed again, and this time she heard the invisible fist strike her.

So brutal was the second punch to her back that Carol-Ann almost fell to the sand. She caught herself, her speeding legs kicking about in an ungainly balancing act beneath her as she struggled to remain upright. And while she managed not to fall, the second blow succeeded in temporarily halting her forward progress.

With both hands she strained to reach behind her, and again her right hand touched something long and thin jutting directly out, this time somewhere below her left shoulder blade. She could just reach the thin, round shaft with the tips of her raking fingers, and its touch sent a new and icy chill of deathly fear rushing through her trembling body.

A small, shrill snort punctuated Carol-Ann's fear and pain, and her will to fight.

She glanced about once more, unable to view the source of the latest pain. Then she tried to run once more, but this time her paces were shorter and far less coordinated. She stumbled, reeling from awful pain and the fact that she was almost insane with fear.

She snorted as her right shoulder smashed hard against a tree, then she stumbled about in the tall grass beside the path as she sought to regain her balance. And her thoughts.

Desperately terrified and in searing pain, knowing that she was not alone in the woods, she spun, her mind so dazed that she was barely aware of which way to continue running. She turned, her glazed eyes searching the well-defined, sandy path. Her stumble into the grass had disoriented her.

Which way had she just been running, anyway?

And then her tearful eyes fell upon her pursuer. *The source of her awful pain!*

She screamed, though it was a somewhat suppressed attempt to communicate her ordeal with a world that seemed to Carol-Ann to be cruelly disinterested in her plight. Her back burned in two places now, and for some strange reason that she could not fathom, it seemed that those injuries were slowing both her body *and* her mind.

She wanted to run, and yet could barely do so. In a surreal moment of blinding terror, it reminded her of the time she had tried some of Jacky Olsen's weed. *That had been similar*, she thought. But never as frightening as *this*.

Tears rolled down Carol-Ann's face as she cried, whimpering, holding up her hands in an expression of surrender. She bleated, her words barely discernable amid the gulping cries that choked her.

"Please!" she sobbed. *"Don't... hurt me! Please – I'll do anything for you... Please, just don't hurt me!"*

Shockingly, her feverish, gasping pleas brought a sudden, eerie pause in proceedings.

The pair eyed each other, both gasping from the effort of running. Slowly, in the absence of any movement from her attacker, Carol-Ann's jerking sobs began to steady. She wavered, almost falling to her knees, but somehow managing to force herself to remain upright. She looked about, and her dulled, traumatized mind suddenly remembered the direction in which she had been running.

Of course, she realized. *She had been running toward the carpark – away from this crazed maniac*. In that moment of eerie silence and stillness, she considered whether or not to continue.

No, she thought. Much of the path between herself and the carpark was straight.

He'll hunt me down easily if I do that, she reasoned. Two internal agonies assured her that

she had been shot with some form of weapon twice already, and she had little doubt that a third blow would likely be fatal. To her left lay the mouth of the Quarry River, with the open beach a hundred meters or more downstream.

You can swim, she thought. You're a good swimmer! Head for the river! Surely he won't follow you into the water...?

Carol-Ann turned her face away from the armed figure, her mind passing into a dazed state in which she saw only simple answers and vague possibilities for survival. She could not fail...

That was not an option...

She stumbled off the path, ignoring her attacker.

Several jarring, uncoordinated paces later she could see the water of the Quarry lapping gently at the sloping, sandy edge among the trees. Carol-Ann crashed heavily against another large tree, wrapping her arms around it as though it was an armed man come to save her.

She gripped the rough bark, hanging on to it for a time as she slowly regained her footing. She stood, gasping for breath, her eyes darting about as her mind struggled for focus against the pain and fear that were so cruelly blinding her.

The rustling of footsteps in the grass just five meters behind reminded her of the one who had already shot her twice in the back, and Carol-Ann turned to face her attacker once more. She was calmer now, still gasping, but no longer running wildly and aimlessly. Now she had a plan...

The river, she thought, must make it to the river. He won't follow me there...

More soft footsteps forced her to look, and brought her eyes to focus upon the weapon that had hurt her, and the fiend who wielded it. Then she remembered... *a crossbow... yes. She remembered seeing it now... just before she had felt the pain in her back...*

So cruel, she thought.

She watched as her attacker held the bow level, then reached beneath it with the left hand. The hand took hold of a lever beneath the stock and pushed down and forward. Carol-Ann watched in cold, agonizing dread as the lever pulled tension on the bowstring while automatically loading the next of a series of short arrows from a magazine into position, ready to be fired. The weapon was reloaded in no more than two seconds.

So efficient, she thought, half-crazed with delirious terror. So... horrible!

Then she looked into her attacker's face, but there *was no face!* Instead, all she could see was a drab, rounded head, void of facial features, with just tiny holes where two cold, glistening eyes peered back. It was a mask, she knew, multicolored browns and greens that blended into the surrounding bushes particularly well. The clothes were the same, loose fitting and so well camouflaged that Carol-Ann found it difficult to believe the figure was real, let alone dangerous.

And yet it was. The deathly agony in her back and gut told her so.

She faced the one who had so mercilessly pursued and shot her, refusing to accept her demise. Even when an audible click assured her that the next bolt was successfully loaded in the crossbow, and when the stranger's hand began to slowly draw the loading-lever back to its resting place beneath the stock, Carol-Ann refused to believe that she would die.

Not here. Not now. And not like this!

"Why?" she gasped in a whimpering voice. "W-Why me? *What have I d-done to you?*"

The stranger offered no explanation, but simply stared back, the eyes within the mask cold and callously uncaring. Only a few excited, panting breaths emanating from a hidden mouth within the green gave any testimony to emotion or passion.

Carol-Ann balanced her faltering body by maintaining her grip on the gnarled tree trunk with both hands as she quickly glanced once more at the inviting Quarry River.

The water! Must get to the water, she reminded herself.

Up close she actually heard the twang of the taut bowstring, and a sharp, albeit brief slicing of the air as the slender missile was thrust toward her. To her mind, though, there was no perceptible time delay between those heartless sounds and the cruel, sharp thudding sensation that exploded in her upper belly.

The bolt caught her like a pounding fist, sinking half its short length into her abdomen on the left side, its tip protruding just slightly from her back. As with those before, this was not intended to be a lethal shot, but merely a disabling one – part of a grotesque game.

Their game.

This time Carol-Ann grunted noisily, long and shrill to show both her pain and her distaste. The pain was instant, unlike the other occasions when adrenalin had managed to keep her running. Standing still now, she gripped the offending arrow-shaft with both small hands, then dropped softly to her knees upon the sand and grass.

This time that pain was enough to subdue her.

Even in such agony, Carol-Ann knew not to lie on her back, remembering the other two arrows protruding there. As the camouflaged trousers of her attacker ambled casually toward her, she rolled away, on to her right side in front of the tree.

She lay on the soft grass, still gripping the shaft of the latest arrow with her left hand while her right arm stretched out beyond her head, trying to pull her away from her cruel hunter. Her right fist gathered a thick tuft of grass, twisted it, and pulled as he scratched bare legs pushed in determined unison. She moved forward almost a meter with several repeated efforts, refusing to cease her struggle for life.

Carol-Ann's efforts were crushed, however, as the hunter stepped behind her and dropped a knee heavily down upon her ribcage, adding to her agony and anchoring her to the sandy ground. Kneeling upon and over her, the hunter then gripped the arrow shaft that protruded from the girl's upper back, and without warning, pulled it out.

Carol-Ann stiffened and tried to scream at the burning agony, only to have the stranger's free left hand push her face down hard into the grass to muffle her protest. As Carol-Ann gasped, trying to recover from the pain, the hunter then repeated the process, reeving the arrow from the small of her back.

Again she screamed in protest, and again her face was pushed down hard.

The hunter dropped the two bloody arrows to the sand, no longer concerned with them now that they had served their cruel, barbaric purpose. Neither arrow sported a barb, but each was sharpened to a conical point, and each was now caked in stark red blood and peppered with dry sand.

Carol-Ann gasped afresh, her senses reeling at the brutality of the treatment she was enduring. She whimpered, making a series of unintelligible sounds as she tried again to escape. As her attacker's knee rose off the girl's ribcage, her outstretched right arm pulled again at the grass, her pale legs kicking and pushing in frantic unison in an effort to save her. She moved forward another half a meter.

She wheezed noisily, her terrified mind desperately trying to find ways to avoid the agony of having the third arrow so unceremoniously removed. The pain of each arrow's entry had been severe enough, but their removal was far more excruciating, and she doubted she could endure the pain a third time. She slithered forward, her body pulling and writhing in clumsy, feeble movements.

She needn't have bothered.

The hunter, having enjoyed the thrill of the hunt, *their game*, had no patience for any more trivialities. Carol-Ann was unaware of what was happening, except for the presence of the *cruel one*, and a cruel, searing pain.

She gasped again; a noisier, more fervent sucking of air, nothing short of a long, gurgling snort.

The hunter reached around beneath her tossing head and slit Carol-Ann's throat from one side to the other, smooth and swift, and very deep. It was a deft move, the knife slipping into striking position in front of the frantic, struggling prey without her ever being aware of its presence. The movement was quick and clean, and very sure.

Carol-Ann made a shrill sucking sound, then gurgled noisily, blood spraying and bubbling

forth in a lavish display of glossy, red death. Her body stiffened, shook violently in protest, and then surrendered.

Her killer rolled her a little further over onto her face, forcing her slit throat toward the sand so as to contain the spray, the act of a consummate hunter – a deft and experienced hand. It was brutal and efficient, an act of hunting and slaying prowess.

As Carol-Ann's body quivered in nervous rebellion to such a cruel, merciless death, her slayer kneeled upon her ribcage once more, holding her down to feel and cherish the thrill as the last trembling traces of life slipped from the young woman's shuddering body.

When the ritual was over, the hunter rolled Carol-Ann on to her back and withdrew the final arrow. Like the others it sported no barb, and slipped from the dead girl's abdomen without argument.

Carol-Ann made no sound, her lungs having already given up their futile, frothing contractions as her body purged itself of blood. Her throat oozed blood for some time, her heart continuing to pump until all trace of hope was gone.

She stared up with wide, frightened unseeing eyes, her killer making no effort to close them. Her mouth remained ajar, bloody teeth just slightly visible, and she looked as though her face had recorded with perfect fidelity the fear and pain in which she had died.

Her attacker stared down for only a short while, happy with the efficient task that had been performed. Just for a moment the bloody knife hovered above the girl's cut-off blouse as her killer considered wiping the blade clean, and then it moved away again without ever touching her clothing or her body.

Instead, a quick swipe of the bloody blade sheared off a considerable shock of Carol-Ann's blonde hair, which was then tucked away lovingly in a pocket – a trophy for her cruel killer. Then the hunter rolled the still, silent victim back over into the position in which she had died.

Wary and yet without obvious fear, and void of any trace of remorse, the hunter stood and paced calmly from the scene, back to the sandy track. The casual demeanor of the individual spoke clearly: *a wild animal had been hunted and slaughtered – nothing more.*

Cold eyes within the mask peered momentarily back at the slain girl, where much of her long, pale hair was now caked with a thick mix of pale sand and glossy blood.

Slowly the mask contorted.

While the mouth beneath the camouflaged fabric was never visible, it appeared almost sad.

CHAPTER 2

“A little more,” called Matt Dunsten. “Just a little more... now smile! That’s the girl. Great! Now smile again.”

He ducked to change the angle, then pushed his shutter button again. He rose, snapping two more photographs as he stood upright again. Then he stepped left and snapped some more.

Cassandra Hill smiled almost continually, just as Matt had requested, then pouted until she heard the satisfying clicking of the camera once more. Matt ducked again, then dived to the right, his camera always held before his keen eyes, and clicking constantly away.

Cassandra sucked in a breath and forced out her chest to make the most of the firm-fitting bikini-top she wore. Her effort was amply rewarded as Matt’s camera stopped, zoomed slightly, and clicked some more.

“Now, time to get a little wet,” Matt called. “Kneel down in the water, Cassie.”

He ran a hand through his unruly, shoulder-length fair hair, wiping some of it away from his eyes so that it would not obscure his view or his lens. On a purely physical scale, he was far above average, with the natural muscular physique that comes to so many with youth, and a particularly handsome face.

Put simply, girls simply loved Matt Dunsten.

At twenty-five years of age he was tanned and trim and fit, and while not a body-builder, most of his models did not find it difficult to think pleasant thoughts to help them smile and pout as they posed for his camera. Added to that, he was simply very pleasant, always flattering and complimenting his models.

Thus, between his demeanor, his rugged masculinity and his considerable prowess with a camera, the young woman before him seemed to come alive, responding wholeheartedly to the experience.

Until now.

Cassie Hill hated the idea of getting wet, especially with a slight coolness to the morning breeze. Matt was calling the shots, she knew, and while he was the one who might launch her to fame, she was not about to suffer unnecessarily for the cause.

“No, Matt,” she whined. “The water is too cold.”

She dropped down close to the gently lapping waves as they rushed softly up the sand in their desperate bid to reach her. The small waves murmured and spat chilly spray, and then having failed to reach her, retreated.

As Matt snapped off more photographs, Cassie considered the fact that he was undoubtedly her ticket to modeling fame – at least in the small town where they lived – and so she tried to

obey. She slowly maneuvered into the shallows, where she squealed upon feeling the chill of the early morning ripples lapping at her feet and ankles.

Matt Dunsten continued to roam about, clicking all the while.

Cassie decided to try something else, and reached her arms behind her head. As Matt's camera continued to emanate satisfying clicking sounds, Cassie flicked her long, glossy golden-blonde mane high into the air, then spun her head repeatedly from side to side in an effort to keep her pale tresses airborne.

Matt smiled appreciatively as he viewed what he could only describe as pure magic through his electronic world.

Click, click, click.

He was silently thankful that his digital camera was cutting-edge, with no delay, so that it could take stills at a much faster rate than his old film-version had done.

Cassie was no *Einstein*, he mused, but the camera *loved her passionately*. She flashed another plastic smile, and while he knew it was as fake as the girl's friendly façade, he also knew it was the kind that could make her famous.

This girl, he knew, could be *world-class*, selfish and immature or not. Moreover, she could also represent a very welcome financial windfall to him. They both had much to gain.

Cassie rose and performed a few impromptu pirouettes in the shallow water, despising its chill but loving the camera's attention. Matt snapped a few more photographs, enjoying the natural relationship his model had with the lens. And added to it all, he realized, he did not even have to direct her as to what to do – it came quite naturally to her.

Twenty minutes later, and after another series of photographs, which mostly consisted of close-ups of the twenty year-old's pale, angelic face, Matt stood changing the memory card in his camera while Cassie draped a large towel over her shoulders. She shivered, the stiffening morning breeze having become uncomfortable to her in her bikini-clad state.

With the new card inserted, Matt snapped another few shots of her, and true to form she tossed the towel about in a playful and photogenic manner, allowing him to catch several more striking shots.

She was pure gold, he thought. If marketed properly, his shots of Cassie would help him pay the rent for quite some time. If not, it still had not been the toughest morning's work he'd ever done.

As Matt stood staring down at the camera's review screen, studying intently the small, yet amazing images of his rising starlet, Cassie suddenly stood against him, craning her neck to sneak her own preview. He could feel her cool skin, and even the goosebumps that had blossomed on

her thighs and middle with the breeze.

“Great shots,” Matt declared as he continued to flick through the images. “You’re a natural.”

Cassie grinned and flashed a wide array of pearly whites, wrapping her left arm about his shoulders as she returned her gaze to the camera. She was a tease in every move she made, and they both knew it. But then, as Matt would quickly have admitted, *that was why his camera liked her so much.*

Since most of the photographs had been taken on the first memory card and far less on the second, it didn’t take long to flick through them. When that was done, and to Matt’s surprise, the voluptuous blonde stood in front of him and planted a heavy kiss directly on his lips.

Always the tease, he thought.

Just the same, Matt felt his entire being warm in reaction to her touch, and he stared, momentarily struck mute. She gave a small laugh, then pecked him again, not as intensely.

“Thanks,” she said. “Looks like you got some good ones.”

“*Great ones,*” he corrected, finally able to find some words.

Physically, he found her to be something akin to skimpily-clad dynamite, but on any other level he knew there was nothing. Indeed, rather than enjoying her personality, he considered that she was just playful and selfish enough to pose some danger.

Selfish. That was Cassie.

Just the same, he felt confused and suddenly unsure of himself. Cassie was only supposed to be his meal ticket – a source of income, even an investment – as were all his models. Anything physical, while potentially pleasant, could only confuse their tenuous, verbal agreement.

And a verbal agreement wasn’t worth the paper it was written on.

That’s what his lawyer-sister had always tried to impress on him.

Most importantly, Cassie’s family had money in spades, something Matt didn’t have – also in spades. She was a *spoiled brat*, he knew, and used to getting her own way. To get involved with her on any level other than financial could only be pure poison to him.

Hence, flames of attraction were amply met with a water blast of cool caution.

Cassie grinned again, flirting with sparkling green eyes, and Matt was unsure what to do next – something that rarely happened to him. He allowed his camera to hang about his neck and ran his hands through his unruly, fair hair.

Attracting women had never been difficult for him, but flirting with clients had *always* resulted in disaster, without exception. And *this client*, he knew, already represented a rather tenuous hope of payment. Cassie’s *wealth* was equaled only by her *selfishness*.

He did his best to ignore her particularly suggestive moves.

“We’re going to make you a star,” he said confidently, avoiding her overt flirtations. “*Today* the local paper, *tomorrow* the whole country. *And then the world*. You’ll see.”

Cassie dared to lean close and peck him once more on the cheek, then hugged him hard, threatening to crush the camera between them. At first he was genuinely afraid that his expensive investment might be damaged by the force of her embrace, but then tried to comfort himself in the knowledge that her ample breasts should be easily up to the task of cushioning the camera.

Girl comes with her own airbags, he mused silently. But he wouldn’t dare have said it.

Matt did not return the gesture, but waited until Cassie was done. Then he stepped slightly back, his eyes squinting just slightly, a war beginning to rage within him. As much as he always remembered his sister’s warnings about getting paid when he had no written contract – *especially with the likes of Cassandra Hill* – his lower body strangely wanted nothing to do with such logic.

“Thanks, Cassie,” he said. “Mmm, but...”

“Oh, but what?” she smirked, flashing another impish grin. She was no *Einstein*, but she certainly knew how to tease. “Don’t you like it when I hug you?”

“Yeah,” he said honestly. “It’s real nice. But...” He hesitated again, the battle raging. “You’re *real cute*, but this is supposed to be business, you know. I gotta... I gotta pay my bills, if you know what I mean.”

“So?” she asked, knowing very well what he meant, but happy to torment him.

“So, normally I might be the one paying you – or at least the paper would,” he explained, keeping his tone as business-like as he could. Then he did his best to play the diplomat, tactfully reminding her of their deal, and his financial need. “But we agreed that because *you* asked *me* for this chance, that *you’d* pay *me*. I really need the money, Cass, and I just don’t like to confuse things. That’s all.”

She pushed out her lips, somewhere between a kiss and a sad pout, and she knew he was finding her irresistible. Matt shook his head as though she had said something funny.

“Course I *liked* it!” he exclaimed.

Her next comment made him blink, almost shocking him.

“Oh, *come on*, Matt,” she crooned, pouting with a smile that grew more seductive by the second. “I know I agreed to pay you for this, but... what can I say? I’m a bit short. I’ve got the money, but... *just not today*. What if you were to, say...”

She rolled her large green eyes, purposefully stopping the roll upon her ample cleavage, then met his gaze again as she finished her sentence – and her offer.

“... give me a discount. Could be fun.”

He drew a long, deep breath, then sighed equally as noisily. His heart sank – it was a story he had heard often before.

“Would definitely be fun,” he replied honestly, sounding somewhat despondent. “But listen, Cassie, I... Sorry, but I *really need the money*. I think you’re... great – but I *need* this gig, you know. I’m almost flat broke. I just can’t afford to...”

Her inviting, pouting smile inverted and she rolled her eyes again, this time stopping the roll when her gaze was up, not down. Matt’s despondent look in reaction to a flirt from the *world’s next supermodel* was not the reaction she wanted at all.

“Oh, what a jerk,” she said coldly, and the warmth of her invitation evaporated instantly. In a moment it was as though her blood had turned to ice.

It was also nothing less than Matt feared, or even expected. Cassie was as immature and selfish as anyone he had ever known. The problem was that she was also potential model dynamite.

“*What-ever!*” she exaggerated, hugging herself with the towel once more, making sure to cover as much of herself as possible.

She pouted, making it very clear that suddenly for her cameraman even to look upon her was strictly off-limits. She turned and began to pace higher up the sandy shore to where her clothes lay in a pile. Turning her head over her shoulder as she walked, she twisted the knife that Matt was already feeling in his gut.

“Could have been *fun*,” she teased.

“Could have *paid*, too,” he whispered to himself.

She caught just enough sound to know that he had said something, and turned a cool gaze upon him in silent chastisement. And even though she knew he must have whispered some small insult, she didn’t care enough to pry it from him.

Sure it could have been fun, Matt decided. *Without a doubt*, but then he would not get paid.

Moreover, Cassie’s instant metamorphosis into whatever she had just become left him with no doubt as to her true character, and it was far from attractive. In the absence of an immediate surrender to her suggestion she had become rather less than charitable, and somehow even the pleasantness of her curves and assets did not compensate for such a nasty, underlying nature.

As much as her offer caused his entire being to become engaged in a wild, internal battle, he knew he still had to eat and pay the rent. He chose to stick with the money.

“I’m broke,” Matt tried to explain, glad that Cassie had covered herself with a towel, her act of spitefulness working in his favor for a change.

“Tell it to your *banker*,” she answered without looking back.

The words of Matt's father, uttered long ago in childhood days on the farm came rushing back. In one of the few memorable episodes of father-son advice concerning women, Matt remembered the old man explaining his somewhat bitter philosophy with striking clarity.

Beauty is only skin-deep, but ugly like that goes right to the bone, he recalled.

Yep, that had been his dad's advice.

Sadly, at least to Matt's experience, it had proven mostly true – at least in his line of work. The old man had insisted on teaching his children to be '*rough and ready*', survivors with a very strong sense of priority, and not driven to accept '*easy*' solutions – such as the one Cassie was suggesting.

Some of Matt's father's expressions had been as rough as the man himself, but the lessons had stuck.

Matt's internal struggle with lust, and Cassie's cruel game came to an abrupt end just seconds later. From somewhere in the woods, probably about one or two hundred meters away, Matt guessed, came a series of long, piercing female screams.

Where the wide, sandy mouth of the Quarry River gently emptied itself into the sea with the outgoing tide, somewhere hidden among the trees, a woman was hollering as though she was being murdered.



Refusing to part with his precious camera, Matt hugged it to his chest with one hand as he sprinted along the sandy track.

He knew the track well, almost every bend and dip as it weaved its way from the beach where he and Cassie had just been, past the sandy river mouth, and through the woods to the carpark a few hundred meters beyond.

Several more screams, somewhat less piercing and intense in volume kept him running.

Perhaps a third of the way along the track he encountered a young woman, dressed in shorts, a t-shirt and running shoes. She gasped heavily as she ran, an almost constant cry of fear billowing from her open mouth. Stretching out his arms to capture her as she attempted to speed past, Matt enveloped her in his grasp. She pulled away, her breaths rasping heavily in her throat, a look of terror etched deep into her face.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he barked tersely. "I won't hurt you. *What's wrong?*"

His eyes darted from the young woman to the track where she had come from, but he could see no sign of danger. Apparently deciding that this man, who had first held her and then released her unharmed, must be trustworthy, the woman pointed with a shaking, outstretched

finger along the track.

“Sh, Sh, Sh, *Sheeee’s deeeaaaadd!*” she cried.

Matt stepped toward her, and extended his hands in a peaceful gesture. He spoke as calmly as he could between his own panting breaths.

“Who’s dead? Where?” he demanded.

The woman shook her head in shock, pointing mutely with an outstretched finger.

Cassie, who Matt had left dressing on the beach when they heard the woman’s screams, trotted up the path behind the frightened, mute jogger. Matt spoke forcefully and quickly to his model as he went.

“Something’s happened, Cassie,” he said. “You stay here with her, and I’ll go and take a look. She thinks someone’s dead, so *stay with her! And don’t leave! Okay?*”

Cassie made a whining protest that Matt could not decipher, but then grudgingly nodded her agreement. As he turned, Matt wondered if Cassie would actually possess what it would take to stay. At least she couldn’t leave, he knew, since they had come in his car.

He trotted along the path, his eyes constantly darting about, searching for anything unusual.

What he was after was not difficult to find.

Matt slowed his jog to a walk, and then he stopped still as he viewed the scene a few meters off to the river-side of the sandy track. The slain blonde girl would have been difficult to miss. He stood still for a time, staring, trying to decide whether to walk over and investigate or to stay away.

After the initial shock had passed, he instinctively looked about the scene in all directions, checking for the presence of others. *After all*, he reasoned, there seemed little point in dashing over to the fallen girl’s side – *she clearly wasn’t going anywhere*.

The once-attractive blonde lay very still, not quite face down on the grass, just a few meters off the track. As he stared silently at her, two things struck Matt as being quite notable. The first was that her blonde hair glistened in stark contrast to the drab surrounds in which she lay – pale green grass, fallen leaves and dry sand.

The second thing was her dark, dried blood.

Laying as she was, almost face down, but just enough on her side to keep her face semi-visible, a large, dark gash full of congealed red-black crust marked the place where her throat had obviously been cut. Her mouth was ajar, her teeth and lips also stained with the dark, ugly menace. Worse still, a small swarm of flies buzzed about her head and back, landing and flying away again in a constant vigil, some even venturing to patrol inside the girl’s gaping mouth and throat-wound.

A thousand flies can't be wrong!

Another of his father's expressions came instantly to mind. There had been plenty of animal slaughter on the farm, and when the children would complain about why so many flies would gather on something so awful looking as blood, gore and offal, that had been the old man's way of explaining the attraction. He usually qualified the tasteless pun by adding, "*Beauty's in the eye of the beholder, kids.*"

Matt swallowed, wondering what to do.

He turned his head briefly, as to his surprise, Cassie not only stayed with the frightened jogger, but brought her slowly pacing along the path behind him.

Probably just wants to see what all the fuss is about, he mused. And then he realized that on this occasion there was actually plenty to make a fuss over. Once the two young women drew close, several more cries of gasping disbelief passed from both, but to their credit, they stood their ground.

"Don't touch anything!" Matt ordered. "Sit her down, Cassie, but don't touch a *single thing. Nothing!*"

Cassie did as she was asked, rubbing the distraught jogger's back with one hand, but never taking her eyes off Matt and the dead girl.

"Matt! *She's dead!* Do you think she was murdered?" asked Cassie, unable to keep her mouth closed. She sounded a mix of morbid fear and voyeuristic excitement.

Stupid question. Einstein again, thought Matt.

"Well I'm no cop, but I don't think she cut her *own throat,*" he replied sarcastically, then he carefully stepped from the path. He approached the slain girl with great care, as though her body might be somehow booby-trapped.

Strange as it was knowing that the young woman was very obviously dead, Matt could not help but lean close and gingerly touch her stained neck to feel for a pulse. Even as he did it, he realized how foolish such a move was, and yet he was drawn to check.

Further to his surprise, she was not as cold to touch as he expected. Lying in the warm morning sun as she was, the girl was not greatly cooler than she might have been while alive. It felt eerie, *like something from those dreaded days on the farm,* being forced to watch while various beasts were slaughtered for food.

Matt had never enjoyed those events, and had tried on more than one occasion to avoid them. That in turn was something that his father had never approved of. And indeed, the old man's disposition on the matter had only been aggravated by the fact that even Matt's sister had proven adept at partaking in the gruesome episodes.

Life and death were an integral part of living on the land, the old man had insisted. And killing was necessary. For some to live, some must die...

It may have been realistic, but it had always seemed cruel.

And so the old man had been bitter at times about Matt's squeamishness, and Matt still bore the scars of his father's open criticism. In the end, and fortunately for Matt, his sister's propensity in the matter, coupled with her love for her younger brother, had saved the day.

But that was years ago, and he was older now. And besides, as a reporter he had photographed enough serious incidents and accidents to toughen him. He couldn't let some blood keep him from what he knew he had to do.

Perhaps his father might have been proud to see that Matt had mastered his squeamishness.

Matt withdrew his outstretched fingers, shocked at the lifeless sensation beneath their tips. He searched for clarity, forcing down any emotions that might put him at risk of falling into even the slightest case of shock. The photographer-side of his nature took over, and almost immediately he became the reporter he had studied to be.

He slipped the lens-cap from his camera and left it to dangle on its string, bouncing off his chest as he snapped a photograph of the dead girl.

"Matt!" Cassie snapped. "What do you think you're doing? *Matt!*"

"*Shh!*" he insisted sharply. "You do what you have to do to make a living, and so do I. What, do you think all I ever do is take photos of girls at the beach? I'm a reporter, dammit! *Be quiet!*"

He snapped off several more shots.

"*Eww!*" complained Cassie, screwing up her face, and yet sufficiently shocked by Matt's strong rebuke not to argue. She made her complaint to herself, though just loud enough for him to hear. "I might not mind so much, but there's photos of *me* on that same camera!"

Matt shook his head in distaste, then mumbled.

"What? Do you think you're going to *catch* something?"

Einstein again...

Another outbreak of whimpering complaints from the jogger distracted Cassie as Matt stood by the fallen girl and snapped some more. Making very sure not to move her or disturb the scene any more than he already had by checking for a pulse, Matt continued to take photos from every angle he could. Cassie watched in surreal awe as Matt kneeled once more beside the victim, then snapped another photograph of her face and throat-wound.

Not the wimp I was on the farm now, Dad, he mused.

Then slowly he lowered the camera to capture Carol-Ann up close. Even though he could

only see half of the dead girl's face, since the other half was buried in the sand, and despite her blood, which had sprayed her so liberally, up close, he saw that she was quite recognizable.

Matt swallowed.

Carol-Ann looked so pale and shocked in death that he might almost not have known her.

CHAPTER 3

Detectives Tony Fisher and Dorothy Shank approached the police-tape that marked the crime scene, bending their backs to slip beneath it as a young, pale-faced officer lifted it for them.

The uniformed cop on duty glanced at their IDs, but that was all.

He had the pale look of a rookie at his first major crime scene, Dorothy thought, although she was sure she had seen him at the station a number of times in past months. He looked particularly young and was obviously nervous, and Dorothy guessed that this was his first murder scene.

As the detectives walked toward a group of officers and other individuals forty meters further on, the young cop at the tapeline held up a restraining hand to the waiting throng of gawking onlookers.

"Don't let any of them past you," Dorothy said, and she shot him a nod and a smile to encourage him.

Ah yeah, early days are always the hardest, she mused.

She twisted her long, dark brown hair into a single roll as she walked, then tucked it beneath the regulation cap she wore. At thirty-something-late, Dorothy Shank had managed to carve out a reputation for herself as a reliable detective who was tough enough to persevere until she had a result, and thus had the respect of her partner and her department.

And while twice having been overlooked for promotion, she was happy enough to work in the field, so had never resented what otherwise might have been seen as a sexist slur. She had ceased having to convince her partner, Tony Fisher, of her suitability for the job early on, and so found herself rather happy not to make waves.

"Nice day for a murder," she said.

A small hint of a smile crossed her face as she waited for her partner's inevitable retort.

"Yeah?" answered Tony with just a hint of feigned surprise in his voice. "Who you thinking of whacking, Dot?"

He maintained the ruse, shooting her a quizzical look, but said nothing more. Tony was ten

years her senior, or thereabouts, since he had never actually told her his age either. He was married, happily it seemed, with a teenage girl and a couple of younger boys who he idolized.

Despite a weight problem that refused to be controlled no matter how much he exercised, and despite the fact that he was balding and largely boring to most people he met, Dorothy could not help but greatly admire him. This quiet, unattractive man was sensitive, and possessed an acute mind – one that had solved many a puzzle. And beyond all that, he had succeeded where so many of their colleagues had failed, managing to keep his family together when most were either unhappy or divorced, or both.

Dorothy always found it difficult to understand how a Christian, which Tony openly and regularly professed to be, could do the job he did, let alone make some of the humor that he did. In her mind she conceived that a Christian should surely be too soft to deal with such horrible things a murder, rape and intrigue. And while the town of Greenrock didn't afford *too many* such horrible events, there had been just enough to try them out through the years.

Tony was a strange mix of sensitive and tough, smart and gritty.

And Dorothy liked him for it.

She smiled at his droll response. *He was funny too. No wonder she liked him.* And, true to his stated Christian values, he had never made a move on her, or any woman for that matter, and this too she admired. And while she might never tell him, in a very real way this unassuming, balding middle-age man was somewhat of a hero to her.

"I'll let you know at the end of the day," she replied drolly.

"I'll stay out of your way then," he said. "Ah, and here comes the good part."

By that he meant that they were drawing close to the crime scene. Both detectives fell silent as they began to concentrate. Dorothy, who walked ahead of her male partner, viewed the area where they walked with considerable scrutiny, searching for clues even before she had viewed the actual crime.

They drew near to a group of huddled individuals, two of whom were kneeling beside a fallen victim. A uniformed cop moved to greet them.

"Hey, Chief," Tony said. "What-a-we-got?"

Chief Aiden Caldwell carried a paunch considerably more developed than Tony's, a reflection of the life he spent mostly behind a desk or a wheel. Caldwell appeared hard, his face cratered with marks and scars.

No doubt he had been a warrior in his time, Dorothy always thought, but that must have been some time back. Now he was subdued, almost bleak in his outlook, and simply waiting for retirement. Still, despite his apparent tiredness, the old man still possessed the ability to strike

fear into most he met, especially if he took a dislike to them. Fortunate for Dorothy, he had never done that with her.

“Dead girl,” grated Caldwell. “Carol-Ann Stacey Kopadnick, accordin’ to her driver’s license. Twenty-three.” He pursed his lips to show his distaste, then led the pair past another uniformed cop to where two plain-clothes individuals crouched over the body.

“Jogger found her,” continued the chief, nodding in the direction of a young woman who now sat some distance away, speaking with a policewoman. “Young fella with a camera, what’s-his-name, young... Dunsten – Mattie Dunsten – works for the rag – he called us. Have a look at this on his cell.”

Not venturing so close as to disturb evidence, Caldwell took the two detectives to a point where they could glimpse the girl’s injuries between the two kneeling officers. She was spattered with dried blood, a small number of buzzing flies still attempting to claim their find, despite the presence of those who intervened.

“Carved her up like a Christmas turkey,” noted Caldwell. He made a face. “Not right – pretty little thing like that. Looks like she might have been shot – twice at least – maybe more. And then the animal cut her throat for good measure.”

“Bugger,” Tony said softly, shaking his head. He looked moved what he saw.

“Yeah, well I might have put it a bit harsher than that,” Caldwell replied, and they all understood that though the old man was prone to occasional harsh language, out of respect for Tony’s Christianity, he would occasionally also refrain.

“What a mess,” Dorothy commented.

Oh, well,” Caldwell said. “I’ll happily leave you to it. Won’t *that* be fun! I’m just gonna check with my boys. You might wanna give some sort of statement to the press before you go – they’re already buzzing around like flies on...”

He stopped himself, looking again at Carol-Ann.

“On her,” he corrected himself. “And it ain’t gonna get any easier since you’re going to be interviewing one of their own.”

He pointed in the direction of Matthew Dunsten, who was trying not to make it too obvious that he was occasionally still snapping photos.

“Must think that being a witness gives him the right to take some exclusives,” Dorothy ventured.

“Well, it certainly got him inside the crime-scene tape,” the older man said with a shrug. “You two can deal with it. And if you don’t want him having those photos, take them into evidence. That sounds fair, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, Chief,” Tony said. “Thanks. Yeah, we got this.”

As the old man stepped away from the sensitive area, Tony and Dorothy turned their attention to the bloody, buzzing victim.

“Got anything for us, Donny?” Dorothy called.

Donny Moffat pivoted on his heels to face her.

Donny was a Crime Scene Investigator, and perhaps just above average by Dorothy’s estimation. Certainly good enough for the crime rate of Greenrock. He was roughly the same age as Dorothy, and he had openly fancied her ever since he had transferred in, but she had always resisted.

Too close, she had warned him – *she could not work and play with a member of the team*. So they had remained friends, a thing made slightly less painful for Donny by the fact that Dorothy had apparently remained single and alone.

“Yeah, come on over,” he beckoned.

The other person present was Patricia Hornet, the local Medical Examiner. She was young, less than thirty, Dorothy guessed, and a pretty tough nut by all accounts. *Hornet by name, and a hornet by nature when roused*. Pattie’s tongue could be sharp, and nothing short of cruel if she thought a scene or a body was being compromised. But as long as crime scene integrity remained intact, she was pleasant enough.

Mostly.

“Hey, Pattie.”

Both Dorothy and Tony’s greetings came out as one, and the examiner nodded, then launched into her preliminary findings without invitation.

“Young female,” she began. “Most obvious cause of death is this.” She traced an imaginary path with a gloved finger close to the girl’s gaping throat-wound. “Throat’s been cut, pretty deep and most of the way around. Bisected all major arteries and the trachea. And, going from the amount of blood sprayed around, she was *definitely* alive when it was done. Death would have been instantaneous.”

“One would hope,” Mused Dorothy.

“What a mess,” Tony moaned. “Time of death?”

“Going by rigor and liver temp...” Pattie answered, *umming* for a moment. “Yesterday evening. Maybe between four and seven. Made a bit hard to tell because of the warmth of the morning sun. Pretty hot here. Be able to tell you more when we get her on the table.”

“Any sexual activity?” Dorothy asked.

“None of your business, Detective,” Pattie shot back with a hard, challenging look.

Had Tony Fisher asked the question, she might have answered differently, but for Dorothy, she could afford the off-color humor. She smirked, screwing up her mouth.

“Nah. No evidence of that – still fully dressed.”

She motioned with a gloved hand to punctuate her words, even raising the girl’s skirt a little to expose her scratched upper legs, lower buttocks and a hint of pale blue underwear.

Dorothy didn’t bother to respond. Tony sighed and tried to glance away, as if they were violating the fallen young woman’s dignity. Or rather, *he was*. He knew he couldn’t *not look*, though, and glanced back to see numerous scratches that had traces of dried blood where the scratches were thickest.

“You okay, Tony?” Pattie asked, unable to miss his small professional slip. She looked genuinely surprised by his move. “It’s not like you *can’t look*, my friend. You *are* a detective, and besides, you’ve seen it all before. And she *is dead*, you know.”

“I know,” Tony acknowledged, well aware that both his female colleagues had seen him glance away. He sighed, figuring they deserved an explanation as to his hesitance to look upon the victim’s body.

“I have a daughter, not much younger than this. *Even looks* a bit like her. Sorry.”

Pattie nodded, herself unmoved by death, body shapes or methods of murder. It was all cold hard facts and evidence to her, no emotional attachment, and with the added pleasure of using her skills to capture the perpetrator. Anyone else she might have chastised for not studying things fully, but for Tony, she easily overlooked the slip.

“Then let’s take a *good look* so we can catch this creep,” she said flatly.

An *Mmm* was all she got from Tony.

Pattie continued her field summation by holding up the victim’s exposed left wrist.

“No bonds, no bruises to the arms. Lots of scratches to the thighs, forearms and exposed midriff might suggest that she was running from her attacker before she was killed. Through the bushes, maybe.”

Dorothy Shank looked at her partner to check that he really was on the job, and upon noticing her sideways glance, Tony moved to put her fear to rest.

“She was beautiful,” he said honestly. “What a terrible waste.”

“Yep, *really* looked after herself, this one,” Pattie agreed. “You don’t get a butt like *that* without working it. Maybe not even at her age.”

“Mmm,” Tony said.

“Don’t take it so personally, Tony,” Pattie said. “Use your... *repugnance* to help catch this creep.”

Another *Mmm*.

Both Tony and Dorothy ignored Pattie for a few moments as they poured over the slain girl. They examined her left thigh, which was largely exposed because of the way she was laying, and because Pattie had not replaced skirt quite as it had been. As a father, Tony despised young deaths with a passion, something Dorothy already knew very well. But he was so visibly saddened by how young and attractive Carol-Ann had been, that Dorothy made a mental note to check on him later.

If the victim's youth and loveliness, coupled with her obvious resemblance to his daughter wasn't enough to throw the male detective, the harshness of how she had been slain certainly was. Not for the first time, but certainly for the *worst time*, he started to feel sick.

Pattie Hornet's next words brought him back to reality.

"She's been stabbed or shot in at least three places."

No emotion. How did she do that?

Pattie rolled the victim slightly to show the detectives a small round wound on Carol-Ann's front, just below her ribcage, and then three more small bloody spots on her back. Two of the wounds were not covered by the girl's cut-off blouse, leaving small, dark, almost black dots encrusted with dried blood. The third wound was hidden, camouflaged within a small tear in the fabric of her cut-off blouse.

"Gunshots?" asked Dorothy.

"No, I don't think so," answered Pattie flatly. She held a gloved finger just over one of the lower wounds. "Don't really look like a gunshots. No apparent residue – not that that's much to go by if she was shot from a distance. But it almost looks to me like the frontal wound and this one at the back might line up. If that's the case, it's unusual for there not to be any tearing at the exit-wound. If the victim was shot with a bullet that went through-and-through, I would expect one wound to be larger than the other. It's not. They're all the same size."

"Maybe shot from in front and behind," suggested Dorothy.

Pattie twisted her nose to show how unsure she was. Moreover, it was obvious that she had given her professional opinion, so there was no point in hypothesizing out in the field.

"Whatever. Not conclusive. Like I said, I'll be able to tell you more when I get her downtown." The ME shook her head. "For now, maybe a bullet, but I'd be more likely to say a long screwdriver or an arrow or some other thin, sharp object."

"An arrow?" asked Dorothy, a look of distaste dawning on her face.

"Yeah," replied Pattie, almost sounding certain. "Makes sense. Shoot her to slow her down. Then administer the fatal blow to the throat. Makes sense. I'll let you know what else I

find when she's on the slab. For now that's all I got."

"Thanks, Pattie," Tony said, his lips pursed.

He sighed, partly because of how distasteful he found *young death*, and partly because of Pattie's crass way of describing the pending autopsy. He was clearly moved by the young woman's demise, and knew he couldn't hide it.

Pattie removed her gloves and patted him lightly on the shoulder with a clean hand.

"You'll be right," she coaxed.

Tony nodded, then continued looking at the victim for a time, waiting until Pattie Hornet was gone. Then he repeated his earlier thought.

"What a waste."

Both he and Dorothy studied the girl, checking the body, clothing, and the immediate scene. After some time, and satisfied that there was nothing more they could do immediately, they rose and stepped back a few paces. While Tony Fisher looked about the scene as a whole, Dorothy Shank viewed the witnesses, still sitting with uniformed police some distance away.

"No rape," mused Tony. He looked depressed, and his next comment was clearly somewhere between a legitimate speculation as a detective, and a clear taunt to his partner's gender. "Beautiful looking girl like that. Maybe the perp was a woman."

"Maybe," replied Dorothy, instantly aware that he was, in his good-natured way, trying to extort a reaction from her. She didn't disappoint him. "Pretty callous though. *Women* don't usually cut the throats of their vics. Sort of thing I would only expect *a man to do*."

"Hmm," he responded, happy to have successfully baited her, and that she had the decency to respond in kind. Still, he didn't sound entirely convinced.

"Well, look at how deep he cut her. That's *very male*," Dorothy continued, enjoying their game while trying to imagine the attack. "Shot her or stuck her to slow her down, then slit her throat once she was down. It's like something a... *man* might do. For sport, maybe."

"Oh, give me a break," he countered, but it was obvious that she was right. Still somewhat shaken, he tried to move on by making more humor. "And by the way, thanks for your faith in the male gender. *Very male*..."

"Just looking at the evidence," stated Dorothy, equally good-naturedly, and happy that she had matched his sarcasm with her own.

"You think he – *or she* – might have been a hunter?" suggested Tony, deferring to her opinion with the word 'he', but still putting up token resistance to her theory, again as humor.

"Well, looks like it to me," she said with a shrug, serious now.

"Great," he said despondently, and he sighed again to punctuate his feelings. "That's *just*

what we need.”

They walked together away from the scene to interview the witnesses.



“It’s like I told the other cop,” Matt Dunsten said.

He ran a hand through his unruly, fair hair, looking as though he had not combed that morning.

“Me and Cassie were down the beach to do a photo shoot.” He pointed with one hand in the direction of the blonde, who was still seated near the jogger, having put her shorts, shirt and sandals on after the photo shoot.

“We heard the other girl scream, and came running,” he explained. “Cassie had to get dressed, so I got here first.”

A frowning of Dorothy Shank’s brow brought an immediate explanation from the young man.

“Nothing like that,” he hurriedly explained. “I mean that she was in her bikinis. We were shooting some photos for the paper. All legit, I swear. Anyhow, when I got here, that other girl was screaming something like ‘*She’s dead*’. When Cassie came along I left them together and came up here to find... well... *Carol-Ann*. Just like she is now.”

“You knew the victim?” asked Tony.

“Sure,” admitted Matt. “Not well, mind you, but I shot some photos of her just a month ago.”

He looked beyond the two detectives to where a stretcher was being loaded with the young woman’s body, and screwed up his face to show his distaste. Then he tapped the camera that still swung from his neck.

“She was cute, you know. I didn’t know her that well, but you don’t tend to forget them.”

“Sure,” replied Tony, and he studied the young man’s face for clues to what was *really* going on in his head. “What did you do then?”

A look resembling almost remorse settled over Matt’s face.

“Sorry guys,” the photographer explained. “I knew not to touch anything, but... I mean... I *figured* she was dead, right, but I still had to feel her neck for a pulse. So I touched her. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” assured Dorothy. “Did you touch anything else?”

Matt thought for a moment.

“No,” he said, considering his response carefully. “But I *am* a reporter for the Local News – so I... *did take* some photos. Is that okay? I mean, *this* is my living, taking photos. Please tell

me I can have them. Please.”

“Sorry, Buddy,” replied Tony. “No. You’ll have to hand them over to us – at least for the time being.” He held up a hand and indicated the camera.

“Oh, no,” countered Matt, looking genuinely horrified at the prospect of losing his prized tool of the trade. He removed the camera from his neck, then began to openly plead. “Just wait. *Please*. My camera is *my life*. Listen, what if I just give you the memory card with the photos? The camera’s got no internal memory. Go ahead, take the card, but *please* let me keep the camera. You *gotta* let me do that. Like I said – it’s my living.”

Tony inspected the camera after Matt had removed the memory card, while Dorothy took a small envelope from a pocket and wrote upon it. She slipped the small electronic card inside and sealed it. Tony handed Matt back his cherished camera.

“Yeah, okay,” Tony agreed. “You can keep it. Any more chips?”

“Cards. They’re called memory cards. And no, that’s the only one,” Matt said, purposely failing to mention the one he had hidden in a pocket. “By the way, Detective. There’s some photos of Cassie on there. Could you *please* make sure I get them back? This is my livelihood. Okay?”

“Sure,” agreed Tony, nodding positively. “I got that already.”

With his precious camera safely back in his grasp, Matt turned to stare at Detective Dorothy Shank. He looked away, but not before she noticed his gaze. Clearly there was something else he wanted to say.

“What is it?” she asked. “You got something else?”

“No,” he admitted sheepishly. “Well, not really... It’s just that you... Sorry, this may not be the time, but yeah, I’d like to... photograph you sometime.”

She tilted her head, showing surprise, and what Matt read to be a measure of distaste.

“Sorry,” he hastened to repeat. “Like I said, I know this is not the time. It’s just that, like I already tried to explain, *taking photos is my life*. And I think you’d look really good on film. Sorry.”

Tony ceased what he was doing and simply stared in surprise at the young man’s insensitive timing.

“Thanks,” Dorothy replied, a noticeable depth of cynicism in her tone. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.” She took a card from a pocket. “Meanwhile, if you think of anything else you might be able to tell us, give me a call on this number.”

Tony Fisher quickly added his own comment, keen to keep the young man’s mind focused on the situation at hand.

“How come you and Miss Universe over there didn’t see Carol-Ann on your way to the beach? You must have walked right by her. She’d be a little bit hard to miss – specially since you already *knew her*.”

That was pointed, Dorothy thought.

“Oh, no,” answered Matt nonchalantly. He pointed to the south, away from the river, to a distant point somewhere through the trees. “We didn’t come this way. We parked at the other carpark, about a kilometer down. Then we took photos as we came up toward the river.”

“Fair enough,” said Tony. “We’re going to need you to come down to the station to give us a formal statement. Can you do that for us?”

“Sure,” agreed Matt. “No worries. You just tell me when, and I’ll be there.” He raised his eyebrows in an exaggerated movement. “Of course, if you could return my photos to me, I could probably come a whole lot quicker.”

“I’ll make sure you get your photos back just as soon as they’ve been cleared,” said Tony. They talked for a while longer, and then Tony gave Matt permission to leave. As the young photographer turned to leave, Dorothy called after him.

“You be sure to call us if you think of anything,” she said.

Matt pulled her card from his pocket to show that he still had it, and despite the gravity of the situation in which they had met, he gave her a mischievous smirk.

“I will,” he said.

Tony shook his head.

“Not really sure he understood why you gave him your card,” he noted.

Dorothy gave the smallest hint of a shrug and a guarded smile.

“Maybe he does,” she said.

CHAPTER 4

Paul Coldstone rose and stood confidently with his client before the judge.

Dressed in an Italian suit, Coldstone said nothing. There was no need; that time had passed. He glanced across at the jury members, still meeting each individual’s glances with a warm endearing one of his own, just as he had done throughout the trial.

Coldstone was tall and trim, having taken the time to keep himself fit and strong as he entered his forties. A tinge of gray in his hair and a particularly short-trimmed beard and moustache gave just a hint of his age and sophistication, just as he intended it to. And his smile,

fake or not, only served to add to the mature air he exuded.

They had argued well, and Coldstone had little doubt as to what the verdict would be. He glanced down at his second, who rose on the other side of their client.

Cheryl was almost as tall as he, just a few years younger, and like him, she showed little sign of aging. Her long blonde hair was spectacular, a crowning glory to a particularly attractive woman. She shared the same gym as Paul, and almost the same exercise plan. She flashed him a tiny smile, so brief that only he saw it, just as it was meant to be. Then she flicked her long hair majestically.

In recent years she had suffered emotionally; that much was true. But even that hadn't been enough to hold her down for long. True to her adventurous and indomitable nature, Cheryl had refused to let herself be dragged down by depression – *or whatever* it had been. Medication had helped her rally, and she barely missed a beat. And certainly not in a courtroom.

She was the best second Paul Coldstone had ever known.

“Members of the jury,” the judge said. “Have you reached a verdict?”

The old judge was a hard-faced woman, who Paul had appeared before many times. He guessed that she must have been approaching sixty, though it was a little difficult to tell with hardened, professional women, he found. She had mid-length brown hair and a prematurely aged face, full of lines, and more importantly, considerable bitterness.

To her credit, on this occasion she had been *almost* fair in what had been a hard-fought contest. *Almost, but not quite.* She had kept Paul honest, demanding much of those in attendance, and while she had been testy, she had been reasonable for the most part.

Still, it was no secret that the judge was single and always had been, and that she showed a significant harshness in cases where women had been mistreated, such as this one. Try as she had to keep pertinent evidence in court, in the end the prosecution's case had been seriously undermined by a small discrepancy – one discovered by none other than Paul's trusted second, Cheryl.

No doubt that irked the old bird, he mused.

Looking at the judge's face now, and knowing that she had just read the verdict, she seemed to have retracted into an even deeper and colder place than that in which she usually dwelt.

Not pleased with the verdict, Paul told himself. *Good!*

He suppressed a small smile of his own.

My assistant is worth more money, he told himself.

Money, *or something...* He dismissed the thought, forcing himself back to reality.

A small, withered member of the jury took possession of the paper as it was passed back

from the judge. He rose to his feet, clearing his throat nervously.

“We have, Your Honor,” he replied. Then he read. “We find the defendant, Henry Chandler, not guilty.”

Not the full version, and not the proper way to deliver it, mused Paul Coldstone, but definitely the decision he was after!

A confident, satisfied grin blossomed across the lawyer’s face as his client turned and spontaneously hugged and shook hands with him, and then with Cheryl. A dull hubbub broke out somewhere behind them as the old judge reluctantly dismissed the jury and pronounced the trial at an end.

When the fuss was over, and as the court began to clear, Paul turned to his assistant, who now leaned back in her chair, a particularly satisfied look plastered across her attractive face. She had worked hard behind the scenes to help win the trial, and now she was practically glowing.

“Cheryl, you’re brilliant,” he remarked smoothly. “You’re definitely worth more money. I’ll have to see what I can do.”

Cheryl Coldstone screwed up her petit nose to show that more money had little appeal to her.

“It’s not money I want,” she replied.

“Okay. Then I’ll buy you dinner and we’ll have rampant sex later,” her husband said.



“Thanks,” Matt said, and he shot the waitress a flirtatious smile as she placed his meal on the table.

She smiled back, captured by his good looks and a small amount of natural charm. Matt’s looks and confidence gave him the ability to attract women like that. She was still glancing back in his direction as she hurried back to the kitchen to retrieve another order.

“Sounds pretty amazing, Matt,” Paul said. He took a sip of wine and gave a satisfied ‘Ahh’ to show appreciation. “Was it messy?”

“Very,” replied Matt, his head nodding solemnly. “She was really... bloody. Not nice at all.”

Paul and Cheryl Coldstone sat with Matt Dunsten, listening to every morbid detail. Cheryl sat close by her younger brother, eventually clasping his nearest hand in both of hers. Like Cheryl, his hair was fair, and he had inherited the same attractive features that she had. Up close, the family resemblance was obvious.

“Are you okay, Mattie?” Cheryl asked, sounding concerned.

“Yeah,” he said, trying to shrug it off. “I’m cool, Sis. It’ll take more than that to rattle a good reporter. Right?”

But he could not easily shrug off all that had happened, nor how wired it had obviously left him. He was nervous and excited at the same time, his hands still trembling as he recalled the details. The sight of his one-time model murdered in such a brutal way could not be ignored. His stomach churned; hence he had ordered only a light salad.

“Did you get any pictures?” asked Cheryl.

Matt smiled, a look of surprise dawning on his face.

“Sis, I didn’t think you’d want to see the blood and stuff,” he joked.

“I don’t,” she asserted. “Oh, Mattie, don’t make fun of me. I don’t want to see the poor girl. You know that.”

She touched him gently on the back of his hand, her affection for her brother etched deeply in her face.

“But you *are* a reporter, and *I would* like to see you catch a break. A scoop like this has *got* to help your career. Am I right?”

He leaned close.

“Yeah, I know, Sis. I’m only teasing. And you’re right, it would help – which is why I’m real pleased to be having lunch with my two best lawyers. I have a legal question for you.”

“What have you done, Matt?” Paul Coldstone’s tone and face showed a hint of good-natured reticence.

“Oh, nothing bad,” answered Matt. “But let’s just pose a hypothetical here. The answer to your question, Cheryl, is that yes, I *did* take some photos. But the detective at the scene made me give them up to. However, let’s pretend for a moment that I still have some photos of Carol-Ann – on another memory card – the same card I used for part of Cassie’s photo shoot. Now let’s say for argument’s sake, that I got maybe two dozen good shots. Would it be illegal to sell them to the Local News – or a network?”

“Oh, Mattie, did you?” Cheryl Coldstone’s voice was filled with a mix of admiration and excitement for her brother, with a look of exaggerated shock at his actions.

“You got them here, Matt?” Paul asked. “Hypothetically, I mean – if they existed.”

Matt placed a padded camera-bag on the table amid the wine glasses and withdrew his most precious possession. He inserted a memory card from a pocket, then switched to review-mode and flicked to the end of the cache of photographs.

“She’s at the end,” he explained. “So you’ll have to work backwards.”

Paul and Cheryl Coldstone’s eyes widened as Paul took possession of the camera and began

to flick through the images. When he came to the first image of Cassie Hill at the beach he realized that they had seen all of the murdered girl that there was to see.

Cheryl took the camera and worked her way back through the last of the images, pouring over them again with her husband. When finally they had seen all of Matt's photographs twice over, Cheryl handed the camera back to its devoted owner. Paul Coldstone leaned back in his seat and shook his head, a cynical smile dawning upon his lips. But it was Cheryl who spoke first.

"Mattie," she said. "You've... really *got something* there. That's amazing. I mean... It's terrible what happened to that poor girl..." She could not hide her joy for her brother. "But that's got to be a scoop in anyone's language. Hasn't it?"

"Yeah, I'll say," agreed Paul. "That Cassie Hill is quite a looker."

Cheryl Coldstone sniffed and smiled, well familiar with her husband's flirtatious sense of humor. And because Paul knew very well that his wife understood him, he knew he could push the joke a little further.

"No, I'm serious," he insisted. "Cassie's great! I've got a bit of a thing for *blondes*."

He caressed Cheryl's fair tresses to punctuate that he was actually referring to her. Cheryl punched her husband on the shoulder as a feigned reprimand, and he smirked, then spoke more seriously to his brother-in-law.

"The police will despise you if you print these, but in the end you're a legitimate part-time reporter for a legitimate newspaper. They'll know it was you, but... I'd have to say... if you want to run with it, you should. Just know that you won't make any friends doing it, that's all." He turned to his wife. "What do you think, Honey?"

Cheryl held her brother's hand tightly on the table, her face rather intense.

"I love you, Mattie," she began. "You've battled through college to be a journo..."

"Yeah, with *your help*," Matt noted.

"Maybe," acknowledged Cheryl. "But you've wanted to be a photographer since we were kids, and you did the journo-thing so you could. I've watched you battle your way through, and I'm just *so proud* of you."

His eyes widened at the open and unexpected rush of emotion from his sister.

"Paul's right, Matt," Cheryl continued. "It's not so much *shaky ground* in this state, as it is... shall we say, *uneven ground*. The cops are not going to appreciate you printing those photos, and sure, maybe you'd better not print the... *worst ones*, shall we say. But you've got the greater story because you already have the ones you shot of her as a model. *Surely*, that's got to help. And if you want to run with this, Paul and I will shepherd you free of charge."

Paul nodded to show his hearty agreement.

“*Go with it, Mattie!*” Cheryl continued, trying to tone down her enthusiasm for her brother with just enough remorse for the victim. “I mean, I’m sorry this girl is dead, but my brother deserves a break and he should take it. Let’s face it – if you don’t sell the photos to the highest bidder, someone else will do it sooner or later. The police *always* release their photos eventually. It may as well be you who makes the buck – and gets the story.”

She sat back and shrugged, as if to apologize for being so intense.

“Sorry, Matt,” she explained. “I *am* sorry this girl is dead. But she is, and I’d *just like to see* my little brother get the break he so rightly deserves. You take photos every day of your life. Make a buck out of it.”

Paul leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, then spent some time with his voice at little more than a whisper as he explained the possible legal ramifications of such a move. But in the end, he was fully supportive of his wife’s appraisal of the situation. When Paul was done, Matt took a long drink of wine, then pursed his lips.

“Well, I’d hate to get in trouble with the law,” he said. “But I guess I can do it as long as I’ve got the two best lawyers in the state on my side.” He made a face, then added, “Don’t really have a choice anyway.”

“Why’s that, Matt?” Paul asked.

“That girl I photographed this morning,” he explained. “Cassie Hill. She was supposed to pay me for it. Three hundred clams – *not much, I know*, but it helps pay the bills. Well, in all the fuss, she got away without paying me. Can you believe that?”

“That lousy little witch,” grated Cheryl. “Her family is the most wealthy around.”

“Well, that’s okay,” replied Paul. “She’ll still have to pay you if she wants your photos to get used anywhere.”

Matt smiled doubtfully.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. Then he laughed out loud. “Can you believe it? She tried to offer me sex in place of the money. Isn’t that some kind of crime? Solicitation, or something?”

“Rotten little cow,” came his sister’s response, just barely a whisper, but she didn’t bother to answer his legal question.

“Yeah, that’s just *terrible*,” mocked Paul. “How could you live with yourself, accepting sexual favors from a girl like that? I mean, that’s just... unconscionable.”

He said the words in an exaggerated tone, well aware of Matt’s financial predicament. Indeed, he and Cheryl had so often helped to pay his bills.

“Don’t they *all* try this with you, Mattie? Bunch of...” complained Cheryl, quite clearly

incensed. And then she made light of it. “It must just be your good looks.”

She thought for a moment, throwing off her displeasure at her brother’s treatment, then made light of it, flirting with her husband. “Oh, well. I shouldn’t be surprised. I guess good looks run in the family.”

She flicked her long blonde hair to punctuate her meaning, a gesture that was certainly not necessary. Even in her mid-thirties, Cheryl Coldstone could have held her own in any beauty pageant.

Never mind, little brother,” she added. “You know if you get caught for money, we’ll always help you.”

Matt smiled; he loved his sister as much as she loved him.

“Thanks, Sis,” he replied. “But, no offense, you know I just want to make it work on my own if I can. I appreciate your offer – both of you – but I think I can still manage, and I just want to be able to say I did it on my own.” He rolled his eyes, then added, “Anyway, if I sell my pics of Carol-Ann to a network, or even the local rag, I might end up needing your help in court, if you know what I mean. Now *that* help, I most certainly would accept.”

Cheryl and Paul nodded first to each other, and then to him.

“You got it,” confirmed Cheryl. “See, that’s precisely why I admire you so much, little brother. You don’t ask for money, and even when we try to offer it, you say *no*. If only you’d stop hanging around with those sleazy, loose-moralled models. What is it, Matt? Is it your charm, or are they *all* like that?”

“No, Sis,” said Matt, holding a finger to his lips. “Not all of them. Besides, like you said, it’s just my good looks that do it.” He laughed it off. “Oh, doesn’t matter. There’s plenty more fish in the sea.”

He looked reflective for a moment, then made a confession.

“Mind you, I’d have to admit, Cassie really had me thinking. She is pretty cute, you know? Boy, I must admit I was seriously thinking about letting the money slide for a while there. Hmm – *the rent or Cassie Hill* – it was no small thing, let me tell you.”

“Hey, I’ve seen some of the photos,” joked Paul. “Forget the rent. Take Cassie.”

They all laughed as Cheryl jokingly punched him again.

“Hey,” he laughed. “I told you – what can I say? I like blondes.”

“Good thing is that I’ve got another shoot to do tomorrow afternoon,” replied Matt when the laughter had died down. “We’re going to try for some evening shots. My model’s Emma Norton. She’s pretty cute. So I’m not completely without hope.”

Paul smirked, still carrying on with the joke, and Matt felt the need to justify himself.

“*Financially*, I mean,” he clarified. He looked reflective for a moment, then added, “Mind you, I might not take this one down to the beach.”

“You have every reason in the world to have hope, Mattie,” Cheryl assured, ignoring the male banter. “Don’t you know you’re my hero?”

“I’m touched, Sis,” Matt replied, putting on a brave face. “Really. Thank you.”

He was tempted to doubt that she believed a word she was saying, but because she had always been the sister who loved him so much and looked out for him, he knew she was sincere. When he replied, his words were mixed with humor so as not to cause any offense.

“Here you are,” Matt said, eyes locking with his sister’s. “Both of you, the best lawyers in town – maybe the state – and you tell me I’m *your* hero. I think you’ve got it all screwed up somehow, Sis.”

“No, Mattie,” Cheryl assured him. “Sure, we’ve made it okay. But I’ve watched you all my life. You struggle, but you never give up. You always find a way to make a success out of what you’re doing. I admire you heaps for that. Like I said – you’re my hero.”

He did not argue, moved as he was by her sentiment.

Paul Coldstone added his own words of encouragement about the young photographer, doing his best to buoy his brother-in-law in what was obviously a difficult time for him. Coldstone paid for lunch, placing his credit card on a plate with the bill when the same young waitress brought it around. As the waitress turned to walk away with the items, Paul Coldstone nodded toward Matt, catching the young woman’s attention in the process.

“My brother-in-law here is a professional photographer,” he said with considerable charm and ease. “He wants you to take a twenty dollar tip on top of the bill, and he’s too shy to say it, but he thinks you should be in modeling. I think he wants to take your photo sometime.”

The young woman smiled nervously, not quite sure what to say. She stared longingly at her fair-haired customer, clearly rather smitten by him, and yet unsure whether Paul Coldstone was serious in his comment about Matt. She continued to smile, looking nervously about her and clearly fearing to stop and talk while she was supposed to be working. She simply giggled as she turned away and headed back to complete the order.

But she did take the tip, and her eyes never left Matt Dunsten until he was gone from the restaurant.

CHAPTER 5

Juanita Diamond lifted her surfboard down from the tubular roof racks of her Beetle, then gripped the sleek white, fiberglass under one arm.

The shining, white board felt hot against her skin, her one-piece swimsuit offering just enough protection to prevent her from being burned by it. With her free hand she scooped up the handles of a tall cane beach-bag and began to pace the long sandy track to the beach.

Swimming was a ritual for Juanita, a habit formed in childhood, and one she now had the freedom to enjoy as a newly licensed driver. With sunglasses to keep out the afternoon glare, her towel and spare clothes in the basket at her side, she strode confidently down the sandy path that led from the carpark.

Her feet made soft rubbing sounds as warm, white sand squeezed between her toes with each step. It felt good – so much better than wearing shoes during the long day at high school had done. She strode with purpose, happy now that it was afternoon, following the long, winding sandy path as it leveled out and continued through the trees toward the glistening water.

A light breeze caused her golden shoulder-length hair to play about her face, so that she was forced to flick her head from time to time in what otherwise might have appeared to be some kind of beauty ritual.

The waves at Greenrock Beach were never awe-inspiring, and in truth, most self-respecting board riders avoided the town for that very reason. However, for a local girl who knew no better, the occasional wave was large enough to catch and certainly good enough to practice her board skills on.

Besides, on occasion Juanita had met some of the boys from her school at the beach, and that always made the trip worth making. She had even met the occasional more mature surfer, and those times had proven even *more* interesting.

Juanita walked confidently down the first of several undulating sandhills between the carpark and the water. It was a long walk, the carpark having been built where it was easier to build, and the better part of the beach for surfing being some distance along. The track meandered between bushes and occasional she-oak trees, and the hot sand rolled over her sandals, burning the tops of her feet as she walked.

No matter, she knew – the water was always pleasant, especially at this time of day. Only the very bottom of the tide could make the trip not worth taking. She walked casually down the first small sandy hill, then the second and third, following a well-defined path among the bushes and she-oaks and swinging her bag in time with her purposeful strides.

There had been a rumor at school that afternoon about a girl who had been killed at the next beach along, and whether true or not, Juanita felt a little spooked. She looked behind her several

times as she strode along. *Maybe next time she would invite one of those schoolboy friends home with her*, she decided, *if she was lucky enough to find one at the beach.*

That wasn't usually too difficult to do. Boys always liked Juanita.

Or maybe even one of those older men, she mused, smiling mischievously to herself. Surely her father would understand *that* – considering the rumors about the dead girl. *Hmm. No, probably not.*

She wondered if there was any truth to it.

Suddenly, alone on the sandy track, Juanita found herself questioning the wisdom of having come unaccompanied to her favorite beach. *Her friends would be in the water already*, she told herself. She tried to see a humorous side to it; *perhaps it might be the first time ever when she would feel safe in the presence of the boys from her school.*

Then she abruptly stopped.

As though her worst fears had been some kind of premonition, her heart skipped and she drew a sharp, deep gasp. Juanita's blood seemed to turn to ice in her veins. So shocked was she by what she saw that she simply stared, unable to decide what to do, and unsure even of what she was seeing.

It was a joke, surely, she tried to convince herself – though that didn't work at all.

Standing just thirty meters ahead of her on the track was a masked figure, not moving, but clearly *very interested* in her.

The person was dressed entirely in drab camouflage, a mix of greens, browns and grays, though against the white sand, the loose-fitting suit stood right out. She could see no face at all, except for two small holes in which she imagined she could see cold, beady eyes boring into her. The figure did not move, but rather appeared to be riveted to the sand, simply staring.

Juanita stood equally still, instantly terrified. She swallowed, too afraid to proceed, but not wanting to retreat in case it might cause the stranger to advance. In Juanita's mind the figure took on an evil, almost possessed look.

Clearly the person was staring at her, the hidden face never moving as the cold, cruel eyes bored into her. She turned her surfboard to face the person in an attempt to hide her swimsuit-clad body. Of course it was too late for that, she knew, but still it seemed like a logical move.

Then she took a backward pace.

And another.

And then she noticed a device hanging loosely toward the sand at the stranger's side.

While not familiar with such things, it didn't take an expert to realize that the device was, in fact, a weapon. She had seen crossbows in movies, and while this one was modern and perhaps a

little more complex than those she had seen, there was no mistaking what it was.

Juanita decided it was *definitely* time to retreat. She began to retrace her steps.

To her dismay, as soon as she began to walk back towards her car, the masked figure began to follow.

She was headed slightly uphill now, her feet sinking deeper in the soft sand as she retreated. A few more paces placed her on level ground with a hundred meters of undulating, soft sand between her and the ten-meter high sandy hill that led up to the carpark. At each side of the track, from time to time were thick bushes and the occasional she-oak tree.

Juanita decided that once she reached the cover of the next few bushes, she was going to run. As her legs began to stride more quickly, she took a glance over one shoulder to see what the stranger was doing.

Juanita had only enough time to realize that the stranger was aiming the weapon in her direction before she felt something punch into the back of her left thigh. It drove in hard, causing instant agony, a pain sharper and more vicious than she had ever known.

The smashing blow almost felled her, causing her to stagger and turn, and to temporarily pause her retreat. Only the girl's grip on her upright surfboard, which she thrust into the sand, and her strong urge to escape gave her the strength to remain standing.

Adrenalin surged through her veins in place of the ice that had slowed her just a few seconds earlier. Her pulse raced, and she felt searing, crippling agony in her upper leg. She reached a hand to the back of her thigh and felt something protruding there.

Juanita screamed and dropped her basket.

She had time to take just a few more hurried limping paces before turning to see the terrifying individual taking aim once more. In an automatic reaction, Juanita stopped, turned and stood her surfboard vertically before her, gripping it with both hands at shoulder-height. She extended her arms full length to put as much distance between the board and her body as she could. Her mind had only a half-second to ponder whether the board might be strong enough to stop the next missile before a loud crack answered her unspoken question.

When the second missile struck, the board seemed to explode on one side just above hip-height. Juanita flinched and blinked as a shard of the board burst forth, slapping her hard on the belly. She instinctively took another step back, expecting her board to be thrust at her with force, but the blow never came. Her arms held it upright and away from her with ease, and she was thankful that it had saved her. Still holding the board vertically before her, she glanced nervously down.

And then she realized.

It had not been a piece of the board that she had felt smack her midriff – it had been something worse.

Far worse.

She screamed again and dropped her right hand to grip the thing. Having lost some of its momentum as it punctured the board, the second arrow had penetrated her lower belly only about a quarter its length, but its effect was nonetheless devastating. The reality of having the slender arrow protruding from her swimsuit-clad belly caused a burning agony to both body and mind, and Juanita let out a series of shrill, panicked grunts. She gripped the shaft tightly in her small, right fist.

By the time that self-preservation forced her to look up again, Juanita's attacker was trotting toward her position, closing the gap quickly. She stumbled back several more limping paces, still dragging the shattered board with her left hand in the hope that it might still protect her from further arrows.

Sand kicked up with each confident stride that her camouflaged attacker's feet took. Juanita turned, ducked her head, and still dragging the board, began to run once more. Her left leg, skewered deeply by the first cruel arrow, limped badly, and the stranger closed the gap with ease.

When Juanita glanced behind again, the fiend was only five meters back.

Something in the girl's mind told her that she could not hope to outrun her attacker, so she did the only thing she could think of. She stopped and faced the puffing individual, holding up her board once more between them.

To her immense relief, the stranger stopped too.

They were both panting heavily as they stood facing each other, just meters between them. Juanita cried out again, her eyes darting from the cruel stranger to the bushes about them, hoping that someone might hear her and might suddenly appear.

But no one did.

Even up close she could see nothing to identify her attacker, though her eyes searched frantically for any hint of who it might be.

"What?" she cried in a shrill, fearful voice, her ears ringing and her mind screaming. *"Why are you doing this to me? What have I done to you? What?"*

The stranger did not reply, but simply stared, apparently enjoying the experience. There passed several long and agonizing seconds between the two as each gasped for breath, one from terror and crippling pain, and the other from electrifying excitement and cruel enjoyment. Juanita began to cry, tears welling up and then cascading from her eyes as she tried to barter for her life.

"What do you want?" she cried again. *"You don't have to hurt me! You can have*

whatever you want. Just don't shoot me again, okay? *Please! Don't hurt me!*"

The stranger's head shook from side to side, apparently showing distaste at something Juanita had said. Clearly *those* were not the words the person wanted to hear. Juanita read the reaction easily, and quickly amended her offer.

"Look, I don't know what you want me to say," she blurted, her lips quivering as she cried more and more. "I won't try to... I won't... Look, I'll do *anything*. Just, *please don't hurt me!*"

Again the head nodded negatively.

Something she had said, Juanita told herself, *had offended this lunatic*. And then she wondered if there was *anything* she could say that might turn this insane individual's anger away.

Juanita cried aloud as the stranger raised the crossbow once more.

"*No! No! No!*" she blurted.

Then, seeing no hope, she thrust her surfboard in the stranger's direction, turned and ran. She did not wait to see whether the board struck the crazed person, nor did she run along the well-worn track anymore.

Even in her terrified, almost hysterical state, she realized that her injured leg could not carry her with any speed in the soft sand. Instead, she opted for the harder sand and better cover between the tall, thick bushes. As she ran, she barely noticed her sunglasses falling from her sweating, tearful face.

Juanita ducked and weaved as fast as her injured left leg would allow. Only as she swerved around the first few bushes did she realize that she had forgotten about the pain in her gut, and the arrow protruding there, even though she continued to hold tight to the cruel, thin shaft.

Crazed with fear, she pulled at the shaft as she ran, and to her surprise, it slipped easily from her bleeding belly. She threw down the arrow without ever breaking her stumbling run. She screamed from the pain, but did not slow, desperately hoping that someone might hear her, and no longer did she even bother to look behind to gauge the progress of the stranger.

Her mind, screaming with a mix of terror and crippling, searing pain, and desperate for a way to survive, grappled with her ordeal. And to Juanita's surprise, she felt a small suggestion of hope begin to tell her that she would not only survive her encounter with this cruel, crazed individual, but that as long as she ran, she would go on to brag of her escape.

And then she felt something like a fist punch her hard in the back.

The invisible hand knocked her off her feet and sent her sprawling on a soft carpet of fronds beneath a gnarled, windblown she-oak tree. The fist was brutal and decisive, driving pain deep into Juanita's back.

She groaned as she instinctively began to rise to her hands and knees to continue her desperate bid for survival. Her left hand reached behind to feel yet another shaft, this time protruding from her back, just to the left of her spine and a little lower than her ribcage. She gasped noisily, a shrill series of wheezes. Then she struggled forward on her hands and knees, refusing to stop.

So horrific was the experience, and so great was her pain that she was oblivious to the approach of her attacker, who strolled casually behind her, knowing that she was beaten. Brutally, and yet almost mercifully, the stranger did not hesitate or seek to draw out the brutal process.

As the whimpering girl crawled forward in her futile effort to survive, the camouflaged figure straddled her, standing silently astride the bleating young prey, carefully dodging the arrow that protruded from her back.

Terrified and in agony, Juanita was not even aware of the stranger's feet at her sides as she continued to crawl forward.

The hunter took a thick shock of Juanita's wavy blonde hair in the left hand, twisting and wrapping it about the hand to gain a better grip. The hand then lifted sharply, raising the bleating girl's head high and stretching her neck back as far as it would naturally go. In a simultaneous and decisive move, and with smooth and practised skill, the hunter's right hand then reached a large knife beneath the gasping prey and drew it back heavily. Juanita's throat was sliced almost to the vertebrae in a quick, smooth and brutal motion.

The girl's hands, raised just slightly from the sand by the lifting action of her killer's left hand upon her hair, made only brief movements as though she might reach up to touch her gaping, spitting throat. Then they dropped away, almost immediately as her body quivered and sprayed forth long plumes of bright, glossy blood.

Juanita's hands jiggled at her sides as the morbid ritual played out.

The stranger held her aloft, allowing her body to empty itself of blood, which fanned out to form stark patterns upon the she-oak leaves and the clean, white sand. Juanita frothed and gurgled for a time, spitting air and blood in an ever-decreasing spray. Her body spasmed, then shivered, and then she was mercifully still.

The hunter shivered too, long after the small movements of the prey had ceased. Then the satisfied killer raised the bloody knife once more and cut through the thick shock of golden hair that supported Juanita's head above the sand. A few quick strokes of the blade amid the golden strands and the dead girl plummeted unceremoniously, face down into the warm sand, quite dead.

The hunter stood aloft again, then backed up a pace to better view the young victim. Again

the killer refused to wipe the knife clean on the girl's clothing, preferring not to leave a print of the blade for the police to find. Instead, having returned the murderous knife to its pouch, the masked one bent down beside the fallen girl's body.

From a hidden pocket within the camouflaged clothing, Juanita's killer took a small lock of blonde hair, slightly paler than that of this latest victim. With considerable care the stranger then tucked the end of the pale wad beneath the top hem of Juanita's swimsuit, where it plummeted between her sweating shoulder blades. The freshly cut shock of Juanita's golden hair was then placed in the same pocket from which the wad of Carol-Ann Kopadnick's hair had come.

Juanita's body wriggled slightly as the stranger removed the two bloody arrows that had helped deliver her to her cruel demise. Then the hunter's treadless shoes paced quickly back to where Juanita had withdrawn and cast down the last remaining arrow, and the lethal missile was also lovingly regathered.

Another full minute passed before her basket and sunglasses were tossed a few meters to the girl's right. Then, as a final tribute, her shattered surfboard was dropped just above her head, like a broken, white tombstone to mark a life that had been so callously taken.

And then the cruel hunter was gone...

(Continued...)

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