

House in the Woods

Chapter 1 – Brad

Wednesday, July 24, 2002

Zoë picked up the note on her kitchen counter. “Brad, Wednesday 5:45,” it said. She tore it up, strolled into the ground floor washroom, and flushed the pieces of paper down the toilet.

She drove to Ajax train station and joined the line of vehicles occupying the short-term parking spaces close to the ticket office. Several people sat waiting in their cars with the engines running and the air conditioning turned up. A few others, possibly worried about global warming, had turned off their engines and were propped against the front of the hood, one foot on the bumper.

Brad’s GO Train arrived on time. The Toronto commuters streamed out of the station and headed for the parking lot or hopped into their “chauffeur-driven” vehicles. A few men jogged to their cars, almost half a kilometer away in the huge parking lot. But the majority of the commuters weren’t in as much of a hurry as they might have been in January’s frigid temperatures. Men in shirtsleeves carried their jackets over their arms, while women in cotton dresses and sandals looked much cooler.

Zoë had given Brad the color of her car and said she’d attach a pink ribbon to the antenna. He’d sent her his photo, which showed him to be about thirty, fair-haired, a bit overweight and, in her opinion, reasonably attractive. She spotted him walking towards her.

He wore a business suit that put him in the category of guys who held down an office job in the city. He had told Zoë he was single, and she had checked. He was. Not absolutely conclusive, but his answering machine hadn’t identified a co-habiting partner.

He walked toward her and stopped a few meters away. She pushed the button to open the window and beckoned him.

He poked his head into the car. “I’m Brad.”

“Yeah, hi Brad. Jump in.”

Zoë pulled out of the parking lot and headed north. They drove in silence while she concentrated on negotiating several sets of traffic lights and the junctions at Highways 401 and 2. But when they were clear of the traffic, she opened the conversation. “Do I match the description I gave you on the phone?”

Brad turned to look at her. “Yes, apart from the hair color. I could have sworn you said you were a brunette.”

“I was deliberately vague.”

Blonde, blue-eyed, and slim, almost to the point of anorexia, Zoë hadn’t wanted to hand out a detailed description of herself in case he wrote it down.

Brad didn’t pursue the apparent discrepancy. “You had no trouble recognizing me,” he said.

“Well, you sent me a picture of yourself, so I had the advantage, even though you weren’t wearing a suit in the photo.”

“You’re not dressed the way I imagined you’d be, either.”

Zoë laughed. She’d put on a pair of jeans and a cream silk blouse. “I didn’t want to come to the station dressed in a leather cat suit.” She glanced across at Brad to see if he appreciated the humor and also to see if he appeared at ease. She concluded that both were true. “It’s quite a novel way for a dominatrix to advertise, isn’t it?”

“The personals? Yeah, but there’s quite a few in there like yours now. The idea must be catching on.”

“It’s a good way of flying under the radar.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean pimps. How do you know I’m not someone like that?”

Zoë took her eyes off the road for a brief moment. He had a grin on his face. “For the same reason you don’t think I’m a serial killer. Most people are fairly good judges of character.”

“Yeah, that’s true. And I must say that you don’t look like a typical dominatrix.”

“What do they look like?”

“I’ve only met a couple of them. But they were both larger than average for a woman.”

“Ha! The stereotype. But as you’ve noticed, I don’t operate the same way as others you’ve encountered.”

“No, they had their own Web sites and gave me their address, phone number, picture, everything. But you seem to have gone to great lengths to create a kind of clandestine operation.”

“Yes, I have, and for extra security, I’m going to ask you to put on these ski goggles when we get closer to my place.” Zoë pulled a pair from under her seat and handed them to him. “Okay with that,” she said. It sounded like a statement.

“Sure.” Brad studied the goggles. She’d covered the lenses with duct tape, but he didn’t comment on it.

“The trains going back to town leave at six minutes before every hour. It takes about fifteen minutes to get to the station from my place, so we’ll leave on the half hour to make sure you don’t miss it. Otherwise you’ll have a long wait until the next one.”

“Right.”

“Now that the logistics are out of the way, tell me about your reason for being here today. You said in your email that you’re an escape artist. I took this to mean, like Houdini?”

Brad squirmed in his seat, as if a suddenly erect penis had snagged in his boxers. “Yes, that’s right. I’m pretty good at it.”

“I thought Houdini used fake handcuffs. You know, ones that would pop open if he pressed them in a particular spot. You’ll have a hard time getting out of mine. They’re real.”

“Houdini was also an expert lock picker. Did you know that? He would challenge people to chain him up with shackles they supplied.”

Zoë nodded her head slowly a few times. “So, I assume you know how to pick a lock.”

“Yes.”

“We’ll see. Put the goggles on; we’re only a few kilometers away from my house.”

Brad did as he was told and slid down in his seat. But they’d entered farm country now; there was nobody around to notice his odd-looking eyewear.

“This reminds me of a movie I once saw,” he said. “A CIA agent had been abducted by the bad guys and was being transported somewhere. He was blindfolded, too, but worked out where they were going by remembering the changes of direction and by counting his pulse. The counting gave him the approximate distance between left or right turns.”

Zoë turned again to make sure the goggles were still in place. “Sounds a bit farfetched. How did he know how fast they were going?”

“From the engine’s pitch.”

“So where are we now, then?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t making a note of either my pulse or the turns.”

Zoë laughed. “Good, then I don’t need to coast the engine down the hills to throw you off.”

Brad squirmed again. Zoë noticed the movement out of the corner of her eye and that he had placed his hands over his crotch.

Chapter 2 - Detective Jane Arlenton

Friday, August 9

Detective Constable Jane Arlenton had recently arrived at 58-Division, having been transferred from the uniformed branch. The “uninformed branch”, her boss, Detective Sergeant Patterson, sometimes said, but only in jest. The twenty-nine year-old, jade-eyed brunette had been fast-tracked in the division. Although it was often a source of resentment when minorities and women received special treatment, Arlenton had long since stemmed those undercurrents.

Patterson collared Arlenton at her cubicle. “The inspector has got something he wants you to drop everything for,” he said.

“Is your bad grammar or innuendo a clue that this is the lead-in to a joke?”

He smiled. “No, seriously, he so was impressed with your effort and initiative on that hotel murder that he thought you could head up this investigation.”

“The excessive amount of flattery is telling me it’s an awful case that no one else would touch with a ten-foot pole.”

“Give Inspector Loudon some credit. It involves a certain amount of diplomacy and is a bit political. It involves an MPP’s wife.”

“Just the wife? Not the honorable Member himself?”

“They’re divorced.”

“Okay, you’ve aroused my curiosity.” She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “What’s the story?”

Patterson pulled up a chair from an empty cubicle and sat down. “Well, the woman, her name is Marcie O’Reilly by the way—”

“Oh! Her husband’s a cabinet minister, isn’t he?”

“Yes. As I was saying, the woman has reported that their son, Donny, has gone missing.”

“How old is he?”

“Thirty-one,” Patterson replied.

“What! How did he get a threshold score on the missing person sheet?”

Arlenton was alluding to the scorecard completed for all missing persons. Points were allocated for various factors associated with the missing person: age, sex, medical problems, weather conditions at the time, and special circumstances. A score of “1” was rated as high risk, while a “5” was designated at the low end. A combined rating lower than eleven would trigger immediate attention. Donny O’Reilly had scored twenty-three, a figure that wouldn’t raise any eyebrows or cause legions of police to start combing Toronto’s streets for him.

Patterson lifted his right leg and rested his ankle on his left knee. He leaned back in the chair, hands held together at the back of his head. "You were assuming he'd be younger than that? I did, too."

"Can a person really be classified as missing at that age?"

"Yes."

Arlenton shook her head. "So I've been assigned to the missing persons unit, VIP section?"

"It's got to be treated with some care."

"The guy's probably gone backpacking round Europe."

"Without telling anyone? His mother doesn't think so. She's not the hysterical type, apparently, and it's been five days now."

"That's not long," Arlenton said.

Patterson sighed. "Plus, he has a job with an insurance company and hasn't shown up since Monday."

"How come they didn't miss him earlier?"

"Assumed he was sick. They said they don't normally worry until it's been a week."

"Then why are we?" Arlenton's tone made her question sound disdainful.

"I think I mentioned that." Patterson raised his voice a couple of decibels. "Cabinet minister's son!"

Arlenton knew she couldn't make this go away, but she persisted in pushing Patterson. "The family's not short of a few dollars, or even a few million, so couldn't Mrs. O'Reilly have employed a private investigator?"

Patterson uncrossed his legs and planted both feet on the ground. "Yeah, she could, but you're making the same arguments I made to Loudon. I didn't try to get you this assignment. It came down from the top."

"The top?"

Patterson stood up. "Inspector Loudon will explain. He wants to see you in his office."

"Right now?"

"Yes, you'd better get moving."

Loudon's office door was open, but Arlenton knocked anyway and peered in.

"Come in, Jane. Please close the door and take a seat."

Jane? Please? "Thank you, sir."

There was only one other chair in the small office. Arlenton lowered herself onto it as Loudon pulled a file from his desk drawer.

"Patterson clued you in?" Loudon asked.

Although only fifteen years Arlenton's senior on the Police Service, Louden's haggard face made him look as though he'd soon be retiring. The heavy lines had been caused by job-related stress, as had his lack of hair. What little remained of it would have been gray but he'd shaved his scalp, leaving people to speculate on the color. Louden was well respected in 58-Division; he was a hard worker, good administrator, and his team almost always got results. But success had been traded off against his family life. He was separated from his wife.

"Patterson gave me the bare bones then said you wanted to see me, and presumably hand over the case file," Arlenton said, pointing to the folder that lay unopened in front of the inspector.

"Yes, but first some background. You know we don't spend a lot of resources tracking down missing adult males. However, this particular person is well connected, and the family doesn't want to attract attention to the matter."

"Then why didn't they just go to a private investigator?" Arlenton said, repeating the question she'd posed to Patterson, but hoping to get a better answer this time.

"Mrs. O'Reilly came to us or, to be more accurate, she approached Chief Hammond, first. He asked me to take a look at it and make a recommendation. I would have done as you suggested but for the fact that there has been another, similar, missing person report filed a few days ago in 41-Division. The guys over there saw our Donny O'Reilly on the database and flagged a possible connection: two single white males, both professionals. They've handed over the file on their missing person, er... Brad Webner. Not much in the file because they hadn't got started on it yet."

"Not a high priority for them?"

"No. The link between the two men is tenuous, I know, but worth looking into. Brad Webner's bank manager reported him missing. The bank—"

Arlenton held up her hand. "Not his parents or companion?"

"No. Webner has a large mortgage with the bank. They might have been worried he'd skipped town."

Arlenton shook her head. "Doesn't make sense. A house is all the collateral they need."

"I know, but they reported it to us as part of their due diligence, not because they were expecting us to find him for them. They'll get a collection agency to do that."

"And do you really think these two men are connected?"

Louden leaned forward. His voice hardened. "It's unlikely, but we'd look pretty stupid if we overlooked it."

Arlenton ignored his apparent impatience. “Foul play?”

“I’ll leave that to you. It’s possible you’ll find Donny O’Reilly on a beach in the Turks and Caicos Islands.”

Arlenton wondered if Louden had invented that last bit to make the job sound more interesting. It didn’t, so far.

“I assume that the hospitals have already been checked?”

Louden tapped the file. “Yes, it’s all in there.”

“And his car?”

“Donny O’Reilly’s is still in the parking lot at his apartment building. Webner’s is in his driveway.”

She reached for the file folder. “I’m your man, sir.”

Louden smiled. He’d only known Arlenton a short time but was getting used to her sense of humor. “Your progress reports will go straight to Chief Hammond,” he said.

Arlenton assumed that Louden’s dropping of Hammond’s name was intended to sweeten the job. “Thank you, sir, the exposure I’ll get from him reading them will be nice.”

“Okay, Arlenton, cut the sarcasm. I appreciate that progress reports aren’t the highlight of a policeman’s life, or a policewoman’s, but I’ll be scrutinizing yours. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” She stood up to leave.

“Just one other thing before you go.”

“Sir?”

Louden hesitated.

Arlenton guessed what was coming next. She also knew that delicate personnel matters weren’t the inspector’s forte.

He stared at the sturdy five-foot-seven, one-hundred-and-thirty pound woman standing in front of him. He waved her back into her seat. “You and Sergeant Patterson...”

She figured he was having a hard time spitting it out, so she decided to rescue him. “You’re splitting us up?”

“Yes. It’s in everyone’s interest that you don’t work on the same team,” he said. “You know the score, right? He’s your er...”

“Boyfriend, yes. We’ve already discussed it, sir. I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Good. So, to recap, within the Adult Missing Persons unit, you’ll be heading this up but doubling as field investigator.”

“Understood, sir.” She stood up again and took a step toward the door. “And who is the file coordinator? Me, too?”

“Dave Smythe has been briefed on the case. He’s got solid experience and a good track record. He’s handling another case, but don’t let that worry you. When you need him, just ask. He’s a hard worker. He also knows his way around computers and some of the technical stuff we use now.”

“Thanks.”

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“Mrs. O’Reilly?”

“Yes, oh, it’s Detective Arlenton, isn’t it? You called earlier. Come in.”

Marcie O’Reilly led Arlenton into the family room. Arlenton was surprised at the size of the house, more modest than she’d imagined. After all, before becoming an MPP, her husband had been the CEO of the Ontario-Quebec Bank, one of biggest financial institutions in Canada. He’d had to resign when he took the public service job, but he was already a multimillionaire by then.

“I gave Donny a chunk of my settlement money to get him started,” Mrs. O’Reilly said, as though reading Arlenton’s mind.

Above the fireplace, Donny’s mother had hung a picture of her son in his graduation gown and mortarboard. Arlenton walked over and took a closer look. She’d seen Mr. O’Reilly’s picture in the Toronto newspapers often enough to be able to recognize him on the street, but Donny didn’t seem to have inherited his father’s features.

“I’m guessing he was twenty-two in this picture. Do you have a more recent photograph of him?”

“Yes, of course,” Mrs. O’Reilly said. She went across to a bookcase and pulled out one of several photo albums that filled the second shelf. She placed the album on the coffee table and sat down on the sofa. Arlenton came over and sat next to her.

“This album covers the last two years,” Mrs. O’Reilly said. She opened the album at the back and found a picture of Donny sitting in front of a Christmas tree. She eased it out of the plastic pocket and handed it to Arlenton.

“Was this taken last Christmas?”

“Yes. It’s a close-up. I don’t usually take close-ups. I prefer to include some of the surroundings.”

Arlenton assumed Mrs. O’Reilly meant the entire Christmas tree, not just a few branches and their glitter. Donny wore glasses and had brown hair and brown eyes. He wasn’t handsome in the Hollywood film star sense but

Arlenton thought that his mouth, curving up slightly at the edges, was rather attractive.

“Can I borrow it?”

“Yes, please do.”

Arlenton slid the photograph into her bag and fished out her notebook and pen. She turned to face Mrs. O’Reilly. Down to business. “When did you last see Donny?”

“He was here for lunch on Sunday. Last Sunday.”

“That’s not long ago, Mrs. O’Reilly.”

Mrs. O’Reilly seemed taken aback. “I phoned him on Tuesday but he didn’t return my call.”

“And so you called him at work the following day?”

“Yes, that would be Wednesday. His boss said he’d not been in since Monday but told me not to get worried because he thought Donny might be working from home. He does sometimes, but they weren’t telling me anything I didn’t already know.”

“I see. Tell me about Donny, Mrs. O’Reilly.”

“Where should I start?”

“His friends of both sexes. What kind of people does he hang out with?”

“I have to say, officer, my son is a bit of a loner.” She hesitated and stared up at the ceiling as though she’d revealed a terrible family secret and sought forgiveness from above. “His girlfriends don’t usually last very long, and he has only a few good male friends from his high school days.”

“What about work?”

“I believe he usually works alone and, as I mentioned, sometimes from home. I don’t think he socializes with the office staff very often. In any event, he doesn’t mention them much.”

Arlenton wasn’t a psychologist, but she was fairly sure that a person who was quite comfortable with his own company would be more likely to take off on a whim. She sighed and hoped Mrs. O’Reilly hadn’t noticed. “Do you know any of his school friends?”

“His best friend is Zack Bettini, but I don’t know where he lives now.”

“I’ll find him. Where does Donny live?” Arlenton already had the address but it wasn’t a street she recognized.

“He has an apartment off Bayview, south of the 401.”

“Do you have a key, by any chance?”

Mrs. O’Reilly bit her lip. “Er... yes. I look after the place when he’s on vacation.”

“Have you been there in the last few days?”

Mrs. O'Reilly blushed and then put the palm of her right hand against her cheek. "Yes, I thought he might be sick."

Arlenton didn't think that he'd be so sick he couldn't pick up the phone. "Have you argued lately?"

"No, absolutely not! He comes over for Sunday brunch every couple of weeks and we often chat on the phone." Mrs. O'Reilly's voice was beginning to crack. "What would we argue about?"

"Is there any specific reason he might not be able to call you for an extended period?" Arlenton asked, softening the line of questioning.

"No. It's quite unlike him."

"There's probably a simple explanation. Can I borrow that key? I'd like to see if there's anything in his apartment that could give me a clue to his whereabouts."

"Of course." Mrs. O'Reilly disappeared into the kitchen and returned holding the key.

"Thank you." Arlenton pocketed it.

"You'll be careful, won't you?"

"I won't disturb anything."

Mrs. O'Reilly seemed to be thinking about her next question. After a pause she asked, "Don't you need to get a search warrant?"

"It's normal procedure if a crime has been committed, but in this case, I'm simply trying to find out who Donny might have been in contact with. It's okay for me to go in there with your permission." Arlenton had carefully avoided saying, "... with your permission as next of kin."

"I'm pleased to see that you're taking this matter very seriously, officer. What do you think has happened to Donny?"

"I can tell you, Mrs. O'Reilly, that this kind of case is usually resolved within a few days. There's always a simple explanation."

Chapter 3 - Getting Personals

Zoë's ad appeared in the Web pages of one of Toronto's many Internet dating systems, or "personals" as they liked to be known. She'd placed it several weeks before meeting Brad.

To respond to an ad, one had to sign up and pay a small fee. There was no other way to contact the person because phone numbers and Internet addresses were not permitted in the short profile—a condition set by the dating company because browsing for a mate was free.

Most of the advertisers included photographs of themselves, but Zoë had avoided doing so. As a further layer of privacy, she had mentioned to the administrator of the system that she couldn't pay with a credit card. "It's been stolen."

"A money order would be okay," the woman at the "personals" company said. "I'll open the account now, but it won't go live until your money order arrives."

"Can I pay for three months in advance?"

"Sure. With tax that'll be forty eight dollars, sixty-four cents. Make the money order out to Companions TO Go."

"Can I alter the wording as many times as I like, just in case I don't get it right the first time?"

"Yes, most people do. I'll give you an account code and a temporary password now. Got a pen handy?"

"Yes, go ahead."

The woman gave Zoë an eight-digit account code and a jumble of letters and digits for the password.

"If you have the wording of your ad I can enter it for you now, just to get you started."

Zoë had written it down. "Oh, thanks. Here it is: Late twenties beautiful and demanding female looking for one special man who can appreciate my qualities and meet my expectations. Certain frailties tolerated but only on my terms."

"And which section do you want it in?"

"Females looking for males—for intimacy."

"Okay. How do you want to be known?"

"Umm, sign it MAS," Zoë said.

"And we'll need an email address to send the account notification to. And your postal code so that we can tell you roughly how far away someone you contact lives."

Zoë gave her the email address. It was the kind that the large Internet portals provided free. All you had to do was supply them with your address and phone number. Zoë had given them fake ones. They rarely checked. The postal code was more problematic. With it, she could be traced to a specific street. She supplied a Markham postal code, instead.

"One last thing," the woman said. "I'll email you when the money order clears. At that time, you should change the password immediately. You can also supply more personal details if you wish."

"Such as what?"

“Some people like to say what kind of hobbies they have, if you know what I mean?”

Zoë did know. “Okay.”

“Thank you for joining Companions TO Go.”

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Zoë purchased the money order from a Post Office in Whitby. She sent it off the following day.

Brad replied almost as soon as Zoë’s entry appeared.

Dear MAS,

I’ve always been a bit of an escape artist. So I wondered if that’s the kind of activity you’d be interested in...

He signed his reply “Brad” and included his phone number.

Zoë responded the next day and entered into a cyberspace dialogue with him. Her emails were curt, and she refused to be drawn into a lengthy discussion or supply her phone number. None of which gave Brad any reason to break off the dialogue.

Brad would not be the only one to respond to MAS’s advertisement but he was the only one to whom she sent a reply. The others would have to try someone else or wait their turn.

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In the summertime, it was impossible to see Zoë’s house from the road. Not that Brad could see it anyway—he was still wearing the taped-up ski goggles when they arrived. Situated on a dirt road, the house could be reached by driving north from the Ajax train station on County Road 31, then turning west. The dirt road fizzled out half a kilometer farther on, so there was no through traffic.

Standing at the roadside mailbox, one would notice that her gravel driveway snaked around a small copse of pines and maples then disappear as it headed left. From late May to early October, the trees provided an effective curtain, making the house invisible from the street.

The old house looked neglected. The paint on the window frames and the front door was peeling, the front lawn had not been cut for a while, and the flower gardens appeared to have been planted with a wide variety of weeds.

Zoë parked the car on the apron in front of the garage. “You can take the goggles off now.”

The garage was at the side of the house but detached. It was wide enough for only one car but deeper than usual, deep enough to take a stretch limo. Zoë punched a code into the keypad by the garage door.

“No remote entry?” Brad asked.

“Don’t trust those radio devices.”

The door rolled up to reveal a spotless interior. Cushion flooring had been laid from wall to wall, and drywall installed and painted light green. There were no windows but there was a door, complete with a separate screen, on the house side of the garage.

Cabinets that would have looked more at home in a kitchen, filled most of the back wall. They were one meter high and attached to the wall a half-meter off the floor. In front of them stood a pine table, solid enough to be a workbench, except that it had been heavily varnished and lacked the usual chips, scrapes and splotches of paint. In the corner, Zoë had stacked four folding chairs. Together with the table, they made it look as if the garage could be used as a dining room. It was that clean.

Suspended in the center of the four-meter high ceiling a hook hung down, parked in its top-most position. It connected via a cable and two pulleys to a winch on the right-hand wall.

“Welcome to my lair, Brad,” Zoë said, as they stepped inside. She switched on the fluorescent light and pushed a button to close the door.

“You can undress now.”

Brad looked up at the ceiling. “What’s the hook for?”

“It was installed by a previous owner who used the garage for his car repair business.”

“You’ve clean it up pretty well, apart from the hook.”

“I kept it for people who like to be kept in suspense,” she replied, laughing at her own joke. “Put your clothes on the table. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Zoë exited through the side door.

A couple of steps led down to a concrete path that ran between the house and garage. Zoë entered the side door of her house. Had she followed the path to the rear of the property, she would have come to a large hole in the backyard. She’d had the hole dug to accommodate an in-ground Jacuzzi, or rather, that was what she had told the contractor. To the casual observer, the hole looked as though it were awaiting the delivery of the tub and fittings. Behind the hole, a pile of cedar planks had been stacked. The previous owner had left them behind, and Zoë had placed them there to give the impression they were going to be used to construct a deck around the hot tub. She had asked the contractor to leave the pile of earth from the hole

beside the planks. “I need it for the flower gardens,” she had told him. Few could argue with that.

Ten minutes later Zoë returned to the garage dressed in a Cat Woman outfit, complete with mask. “My working clothes,” she said. Brad was sitting on the table, still in his socks and boxers.

Zoë turned and opened the door of the left-hand cabinet. From it she extracted a foam bedroll and gave it to Brad. Next, from the bottom of the same cabinet, she pulled out a tarpaulin. Made of heavy grade PVC, it had been designed to cover a Jet Ski. Sewn into the four corners and the four sides were steel rings.

“Unroll the foam and lay it out on the floor.”

Brad did as he was told. Zoë unfolded the tarp and helped him center it over the foam mattress.

“Why the tarp?” he asked.

“Protects the mattress.”

She opened the right-hand cabinet and took out two pairs of handcuffs, a roll of duct tape, and a box of surgical gloves. “You can take off the rest of your clothes now,” she said. She pulled on the gloves. “And you don’t mind if I search you for lock-picking tools, do you? After all, you did claim to be as good an escape artist as Harry Houdini.”

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Brad’s time was up.

“Not escaped yet, I see,” Zoë said, reentering the garage through the side door. “I thought you were a budding Houdini.”

Brad gave a muffled, incoherent reply. He could manage nothing more than that; Zoë had stuffed one of his socks into his mouth and had secured it in place by winding duct tape round his head a few times.

He lay on his stomach, not moving. He’d been hogtied with the two sets of handcuffs in such a way that any movement made the cuffs bite into his wrists and ankles.

“Painful? You must have realized that, surely. But you’ve done quite well; it’s been more than an hour.”

Brad nodded his head.

“Anyway, I’ve come to put you out of your misery, if you’re sure that’s what you want.”

Brad nodded again. The agreed safe signal had been established before Zoë had muffled him, two successive affirmative replies.

“Okay.”

From one of the cabinets, Zoë removed four lengths of rope, the type used for securing a boat to a dock. She threaded one of the pieces through the ring at one corner of the tarp and tied it. She repeated this with the other three pieces, one at each corner.

“I’m not unlocking the handcuffs. Bet you can’t guess what I’m doing.”

Next she knotted the four free ends of rope together and dropped them. The cluster fell onto Brad’s back. Zoë pushed the button on the winch to lower the hook, stopping it short, a half-meter shy of him.

“Wondering what that noise was? Look up.”

He rolled onto his side and saw the hook above him. The knotted ropes went onto the hook and the winch whirred again, raising it just enough to tighten the ropes but not enough to lift Brad off the garage floor. The tarp now looked as though it was an empty wading pool. Empty of water, that is.

Zoë peered over the side at Brad. His head was still turned sideways, mainly so that he could breathe better, albeit only through his nose.

“Still okay?” Brad shook his head again and tried to say something. “I didn’t catch that. Not what you were expecting, eh? That’s the art of being a good dominatrix. Wait and see what I have in store for you.”

Zoë removed the hose-pipe hung on the wall and connected it to the faucet. She dropped the other end into Brad’s improvised wading pool.

“There’s another trick Houdini was famous for; he could escape from handcuffs when under water. Are you up for it?”

Brad squirmed in a vain attempt to escape.

“Spoilsport. I’m going to see what happens, anyway.”

His eyes bulged and he tried to push against the tarp.

“The water will be a bit cold, but you look quite sweaty.”

She turned on the tap.

Chapter 4 – Search

Friday, August 9

Armed with the key Donny’s mother had supplied, Arlenton and Smythe drove to Donny’s apartment. Patterson had told her to take Smythe along. Standard practice, he’d reminded her.

A rookie detective constable, Smythe was the kind of man you would want coaching your son or daughter at hockey, patient, supportive, and high-spirited. He had fair wavy hair and a light step, rare for one supporting a two-hundred-pound weight over a six-foot-two frame.

They paused at the door. Arlenton dug out a pair of disposable gloves from her bag and pulled them on. The small lobby led into the living room. It was a typical bachelor pad: build-it-yourself furniture, widescreen plasma TV, and posters on the walls rather than framed paintings. Atypically, the place appeared tidy and dust free. Off the living room were the kitchen and a narrow hallway. The hallway led to the bedroom, bathroom, and utility room.

“I’m going to start in his bedroom,” Arlenton said. “That’s where he’d likely keep his private stuff. Make sure you keep your hands in your pockets, just in case.”

Smythe chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

Arlenton scanned Donny’s bedroom: bed, desk, computer and phone on the desk, and a printer, the kind that doubled as a photocopier. The printer sat on the floor beside the desk. Pinned to the walls, two more posters, but these depicted slender women dressed in skin hugging latex.

Arlenton opened the door to the walk-in closet. The tidy clothes racks revealed that Donny had fairly conservative taste, which more or less what she expected of an insurance actuary. In the corner of the closet sat a fireproof lockbox. It stood about seventy-five centimeters high and half-meter square at the base. Arlenton tried the lid, but it didn’t yield.

“Damn. Now, we’ll have to return with a locksmith.”

“Want me to go and ask for one?” Smythe asked.

“Let’s see what else we can find first.”

She turned her attention to Donny’s desk. It came with two lockable cabinets, one on each side, which supported a lacquered particleboard work-surface. Each cabinet had two drawers, not locked. On the desk, Donny’s computer was still running in power-save mode.

“Looks like he hadn’t intended to be away for a long period,” Smythe said. “I always pull the plugs out in case of lightning.”

“Hmm, good point.”

Arlenton moved the mouse, bringing the computer out of its dormant state. While she waited for it to come back to life, she took a quick look in the desk drawers. They held an assortment of work files and personal documents. The personal files were arranged in alphabetical order starting with A in the top left drawer and ending with Z in the one below it. She leafed through them: computer and appliance manuals, receipts, utility bills, and dozens of other pieces of paper that a less organized person would probably have stuffed in a box. Donny’s work files were in the two right-hand drawers, the top one contained work-in-progress and the bottom one, reference material.

The computer had now become operational, but Arlenton advanced no further than the screen that said, "Please Login."

"My God, our Donny is one obsessive guy," she said.

Beside the computer monitor, Donny had placed a brass ashtray, obviously a souvenir since he didn't smoke. Or so Arlenton assumed. When they had entered the apartment, she hadn't detected the unmistakable acrid smell that a non-smoker notices immediately. The ashtray was, instead, a repository for paper clips, pens, a miniature Swiss Army knife and, buried underneath, a few keys.

"Spare keys, I wonder?"

"Let's try them," Smythe said.

They discovered that one of them opened the lockbox in the closet.

She extracted the contents and placed them carefully on the floor in the order in which she'd taken them out: a hardback journal, insurance policies, tax returns, his will, bank and Visa statements, and some legal documents relating to the purchase of the apartment. There was nothing intrinsically valuable, but obviously important enough to Donny to warrant safeguarding the documents against a possible fire.

The journal promised to be the most interesting, Donny's little black book. Arlenton started to flip through its pages. He'd recorded the usual data: names, addresses, phone numbers.

"I'll have to borrow this for a while."

Smythe took his notebook out of his pocket. "I should record that?"

"Yes." She was about to close it and put it into her bag when she noticed a page with the heading "P/W". Passwords, she guessed. He had six of them. Alongside the "login" password, four sets of numbers and letters had been scratched out and a fifth one hadn't been. She memorized the password and placed the journal on the floor in its correct place, first out, last in.

Smythe stood over Arlenton's shoulder as she typed the password. It worked; they had entered Donny's private cyber-world.

"Now, what does he have in here that needs to be protected?"

Arlenton looked in Donny's "My Documents" folder first. Nothing much of interest there.

"Try his browser log," Smythe suggested.

Arlenton was familiar with Internet browsers. Their ability to remember which Web sites the user has visited was sometimes useful to a detective. Arlenton scanned the list and discovered that Donny spent a fair amount of time looking at certain sites that specialized in sadomasochistic practices.

"Now it's getting interesting," Smythe said. "Let's have a look at his picture files."

They were easy to locate, too. Most computer pictures are stored in either JPEG or GIF format. She searched for files of both types and found dozens of them that confirmed where Donny's interests lay.

"What about his emails?" Smythe said. Arlenton wondered if he'd done this before.

Hunting through them revealed that Donny didn't appear to communicate with anyone about his sexual habits, or perhaps had deleted those ones. They weren't in the delete-box, either. Then Arlenton spotted a recent incoming email from a "personals" company.

"Can you make a note of that name," she said, pointing to the screen.

Smythe wrote down the company's name. The email said that the company wished to confirm that he had paid an electronic invoice with his Visa card. The card number wasn't included in the email, a common security precaution.

"We need his Visa statements," Arlenton said.

"You removed them from his lockbox."

They went back to the bedroom, and she extracted the statements from the piles spread out on the floor. Arlenton photocopied his last six Visa statements.

"While you're using Donny's photocopier, you might as well copy his little black book, too," Smythe said.

"Good thinking, Batman."

"I'll record that you used his photocopier," Smythe said, with a grin.

Arlenton gave him a look but said nothing.

They returned to the living room and crossed over into the kitchen. In keeping with the rest of the apartment, it was also spic-and-span. No dirty dishes piled in the sink, and the pots had been stowed away neatly in the Lazy Susan.

A stack of mail that Donny's mother had collected from his mailbox, sat on the kitchen counter. Arlenton looked at the postmarks. They were quite recent, confirming that he hadn't been missing long. She considered opening some of the mail but nothing looked remotely interesting. No letters with a return address that might offer a clue as to his whereabouts.

Back in the bedroom, they carefully returned all the documents to the lockbox, the little black book last. Arlenton closed the lid and locked the box.

"Have a look at his phone," Smythe said.

Arlenton picked up the receiver and scrolled through the phone's call display memory. It cycled after ten entries.

She read out the ten numbers, Smythe noted them down.

“When we get back to the station, I’ll get the phone company records, too” Smythe said.

“What else should we be looking for?”

Smythe tugged at his chin. “I keep all sorts of junk in my basement, but he doesn’t have one.”

“But he does have a utility room.”

She thought it odd that the utility room was locked, but the key was with the others in Donny’s ashtray. Arlenton opened the door. The water heater occupied one third of the floor space, while a moving company’s boxes took up most of the rest.. They were open, and looked as if they contained assorted junk for which he had no immediate need.

A couple of suit-bags hanging on a hook on the wall caught Arlenton’s eye. She unzipped one of them; it was empty. However, the second one wasn’t. It contained a polished, red rubber jacket and matching trousers.

“Looks like a scuba suit,” she said, smiling.

“An odd color to go swimming in,” Smythe said. He had a serious expression on his face. “I’d hazard a guess that it’s fetish-wear.”

“Yup. It pretty much confirms that he’s into that kind of stuff. Let’s go.”

Arlenton took one last look around. They returned the keys to the ashtray, closed the closets, and locked the utility room. Smythe hadn’t touched anything.

Arlenton dropped Smythe off at the station. “I have other urgent work to do,” he had pleaded.

The search of Donny’s apartment had been useful, and Arlenton pondered where to go next: the “personals” company that counted Donny as one of its customers, or Donny’s best friend, Zack? She also needed a follow-up chat with Donny’s mother. Mrs. O’Reilly might be able to explain her son’s relationship with the other people in his journal. She settled for Zack first. Now four in the afternoon, she could catch him at work.

Chapter 5 - Best Friend

Arlenton traveled to Brampton, a few kilometers north of the city. Zack worked at the HQ office complex of World Wide Engineering Solutions, or WWES as they preferred to be known. The company supplied circuit boards to telecommunications manufacturers.

At the front desk, she showed the security guard her badge and asked for Zack. The guard paged him and gave her a visitor's pass. "Just so nobody challenges you," he explained, unnecessarily.

Zack arrived in less than a minute. "We can use one of the meeting rooms in the customer center," he said.

"Lead the way."

Zack led Arlenton through the metal detector, and turned left at a Japanese rock garden, complete with fountain.

"What do you do here?" she asked.

"As well as circuit boards, we can supply our customers with a finished product. We can also package it and ship it directly to their customers. Those are called turnkey products. I work as a project manager in that division."

"Interesting," she said, although the tone of her voice conveyed the opposite and didn't invite a fuller explanation.

They walked along a corridor that opened up into another foyer.

"This is the customer reception area," Zack said. He selected an empty room and manipulated a sign on the door so that it read: "Meeting in Progress."

Arlenton could see why Zack and Donny might be good friends. They both looked overly studious and had selected occupations with a high cerebral demands. "Your friend Donny O'Reilly has gone missing. We're trying to find people who might have seen him recently. Have you?"

Zack blew out his cheeks and let the air escape through pursed lips, as though the question ranked alongside asking him to describe how cold fusion worked. He reached into his jacket pocket and produced his PDA. Arlenton smiled. The personal digital assistant was becoming *de rigueur* among her former classmates; she wasn't surprised that he'd rely on one. She'd even considered buying a PDA but settled for the more reliable paper notebook and pen.

Zack scratched away with the stylus. "Ah, here we are. Donny and I met for a drink on July twenty-sixth. It was a Friday; we usually meet on Fridays after work."

"Where?"

"The Royal Oak, near his home. Mine too, I live quite close to him."

"Did he give you any indication that he was going away?"

Zack paused, apparently deep in thought. He looked down at the screen of his PDA, as though expecting the clever little device to supply the answer.

"No, not that I can recall. And I would have remembered something like that."

"Does he have a current girlfriend that I can contact?"

“I believe he was dating someone but...”

“Can you remember her name?”

“I’m not even sure he told me. He was pretty tight-lipped where his love life was concerned.”

Arlenton pulled a sheet of paper out of her bag. It contained a photocopied page of Donny’s black book. She read through the names.

“Possibly Angela, but I couldn’t be sure. Although you should be looking for...” Zack hesitated. Arlenton wondered if he was worried about revealing his friend’s dark side. Did he even know about it?

“Looking for who?”

Zack pushed the PDA’s off button and put it back in his pocket. “It’s probably nothing.”

“Donny could be in danger, Zack.”

“I don’t know her name; he didn’t tell me. But he sort of indicated that he was seeing someone in the S and M line of work.”

The way he said it, Arlenton could be excused for thinking S&M was a trade that you’d learn about at the local community college. “When?”

“I don’t know.”

Arlenton looked at a calendar on the wall. “Monday, August fifth, was the last time he was at work.”

“He sometimes works at home,” Zack said, squirming in his chair.

“Are you sure you don’t know? You’re not seeing her too, are you?”

“Look, officer, Donny and I are good friends but I don’t share his sexual interests.”

“But he obviously confided in you about them.”

“It was kind of an accident, really. I was at his apartment one time and saw a magazine that he’d forgotten to put away. He was a bit sheepish about it, but in the end he gave me the lowdown on the er... scene. We’re good friends, and I think it helped him to have someone to unload onto.”

“Today’s the ninth—two weeks since your last drink together. Why didn’t you meet last week?”

“I think he had a doctor’s appointment.”

“Did you have a pub meeting scheduled for today?”

“No, he hasn’t been answering the phone.”

“Did you leave a message?”

“Yeah, several.”

“Is it unusual for him not to get back to you?”

Zack fidgeted in his chair. “Well, it’s only been a few days since I first tried to reach him. That’s not a long time. I just assumed he was extra busy.”

Arlenton wondered if he was starting to feel guilty about his friend's disappearance or at least for not noticing it. "But you'd expect him to say if he was going to meet you at the pub."

"No, not necessarily. The arrangement is that we only meet if we get positive confirmation from each other."

Very anal of you both, Arlenton thought. But at least it saved her a trip to their regular watering hole.

Chapter 6 - Zoë's Inheritance

May, the previous year

Zoë's best friend, Penny, had invited her over for dinner. The two women had cleared the dishes away and loaded them into the dishwasher. They stood in Penny's kitchen, watching as the last few drops of brewed coffee fell into the pot.

Penny poured two mugs and topped them up with milk. "Come and sit down."

They put their mugs on the coffee table in the living room and flopped onto the sofa.

"Are you sure you don't mind coming?" Zoë said.

Penny had a concerned look on her face. "Don't be silly. Where's it going to be held?"

"They're having the actual ceremony in a church near Kevin's parents' home. Then he'll be buried in the cemetery by Black Creek."

"No cremation?"

"No, his parents don't believe in it."

"Oh, was Kevin religious?"

"Not since I've known him. Gave up going to church when he was fourteen, he told me. Although as a concession to his parents, he always went to the Christmas Eve service with them. Apparently, their minister still remembers him and was quite willing to officiate."

Two days later, Zoë and Penny took a cab to the Stanstead family home in an up-market neighborhood near the Humber River. "This is the street," Zoë said.

The Pakistani cabdriver half turned but kept an eye on the road.

Zoë leaned forward so that she was only a few centimeters from his ear. "Eighty-eight."

The Stanstead home looked like a replica of an English West Country manor house, not the lord of the manor's house, but perhaps the estate

manager's. The two-story gray stone structure looked perfectly symmetrical from the front: three smallish sash windows on either side of the front door with dormer windows directly above them on the second floor. The ground floor windows were fitted with functioning olive green shutters. To complete the British ambiance, the front of the house had been fastidiously landscaped, as though the Stansteads might be competing for a prize in *Canadian Gardens*.

Mrs. Stanstead greeted them at the door. "Zoë! I'm pleased to see you," she said. At fifty-five, she looked younger, in spite of her lack of makeup. She'd chosen not to wear any. "In case I cry too much," she'd told her husband. But even without cosmetics, Mrs. Stanstead's high cheekbones and long thin nose suggested that, in her youth, she had been a beautiful woman.

"Hello, Mrs. Stanstead, I'm so sorry about Kevin. I just don't know what to say."

"And you've lost your fiancé. It's devastating, isn't it? A mother should never have to bury her own child."

Zoë could understand Mrs. Stanstead's hurt but felt that hers was greater. However, the protocol of funerals did not allow her to pursue the issue.

"This is my best friend, Penelope Walsingham."

"It's nice of you to give your support to Zoë, Penelope."

"It's the least I could do. And my condolences to you, too, Mrs. Stanstead, Kevin's death must be awful for you and Mr. Stanstead."

"Yes, it is. Even though he'd been ill for a while, we always clung to the hope that he'd pull through. Please come in and have something to drink, and eat if you are hungry."

"A cup of tea would be fine," Penny said.

They followed Mrs. Stanstead into a spacious room at the front of the house. The Stansteads had moved all the furniture off to the side so that people could either sit down or stand, cocktail party style, in the center of the room. Two tables, also against the wall, held two coffee urns, two teapots, plates, cups, saucers, and cutlery, and serving trays of croissants, toast, a variety of jams, and sausage rolls. Uniformed caterers, two teenage girls, were buzzing around, replenishing the food and drink and clearing away the dirty plates.

About twenty people, clad mostly in black, already occupied the room. They chatted in hushed tones. "What a horrible way to die." "And so close to his wedding." "I hear that the weather will be sunny all day." They comprised the select group of relatives and close friends who would accompany Kevin on his final journey.

Zoë and Penny helped themselves to a cup of tea.

“Are you okay?” Penny said. It was the umpteenth time she’d asked Zoë this question, and Zoë assumed her friend didn’t know what else to say. “Do you want to sit?”

Zoë walked over to the nearest chair and sat down. Penny took the one beside her. “What time does the hearse get here?” Penny asked.

Zoë looked at her watch. “About now, I think.” She drained her teacup. “I’m going to find a bathroom.”

When her friend had left, Penny stood up and wandered over to the window. The weather had been kind: bright sunshine, a cloudless sky, and unseasonably warm. As she stood waiting, sipping her tea, the cars appeared, appropriately soundless. They formed a line at the curb.

Zoë crept up behind Penny and whispered in her ear. “Mrs. Stanstead said we’re in the second car. I guess Kevin’s parents will be in the first one, along with his sister.”

The funeral guests trooped out and were ushered into their allotted carriages. Two of Kevin’s cousins shared the car with Zoë and Penny, but nobody spoke a word on the way to the church.

* * * *

“This man loved by all his family and admired by his colleagues... Kevin had striven to build a career and was on the verge of one of life’s greatest challenges, marriage... He touched everyone who met him... and now has left devastated parents and a grieving fiancée...”

To Zoë, the minister’s address sounded somewhat lopsided and hyperbolic, but she understood he had no other option. One of Kevin’s colleagues had preceded the minister with a eulogy. He did not, however, have the minister’s oratorical skills. His short speech, “Kevin was on his way to the top... Had amazing gifts for our business...” sounded like he’d altered the tense of the one he was saving for Kevin’s next promotion.

The assembly moved on to their next stop, the burial site. The headstone looked expensive. No mere urn of ashes for Kevin, his mother had insisted upon a proper burial for her son. So the mahogany coffin was dropped into the equally expensive parcel of consecrated land that would forever belong to him.

“Are you coming back to the house, Zoë?” Mrs. Stanstead said. “You and... I’m sorry, I...”

“Penny.”

“You and Penny are very welcome.”

“I don’t think so. I’m not feeling that well.”

“Yes, you do look a bit wan,” Mrs. Stanstead said. “Coming down with something, perhaps? It’s probably the stress of all this.”

“Yes, probably. I thought I’d ask the driver to drop us off at the Jane Street station. Do you think the detour will be okay?”

“Yes, I’m sure he can do that.”

* * * *

“Christ, I’m glad that’s over and done with,” Zoë said, as the subway train sped eastward into the city. She lifted her knees and put her feet on the seat opposite, a very unladylike pose. “I hope I don’t have to see that stupid cow again.”

“Mrs. Stanstead?” Penny asked.

“Yeah.”

“I did detect some animosity. The conversation between you two was a bit stiff.”

“Did you notice how nobody actually mentioned the cause of death?”

“Yes, but his family knows how he died, don’t they?”

“Of course they do, but they’re a bunch of hypocrites. No one was going to come right out and say it.”

Penny looked at Zoë. “You know, you needn’t have come.”

“I wish I hadn’t, but Kevin made me promise. ‘You’re in my will,’ he told me.”

* * * *

Zoë hadn’t wanted to be present at the reading of the will, either. “Is it necessary?” She had asked the executor. She had called him as soon as she’d received the letter requesting her presence.

“It’s usual for the major beneficiaries to be there in person so that everyone simultaneously hears what’s in the will,” Mr. Dumsday said.

“I’m a *major* beneficiary?”

“Yes, you are.” He sounded surprised. “I assumed you knew that.”

“But you didn’t answer my first question,” Zoë persisted. “Do I absolutely have to be there?”

“We can’t force you to attend but, if you’re sure you don’t want to, I can send you a letter with the details. I’ll register it and you must sign for it.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

The letter arrived by courier the day after the reading of the will.

Dear Ms. McWatton,

We were sorry that you could not attend the reading of the Last Will & Testament of Kevin Stanstead. However, it is my

duty as executor to communicate to you the relevant parts of the document as they apply to you. If you wish to see the complete document, then please contact this office, and we will make the necessary arrangements for you to do so.

Kevin Stanstead has bequeathed to you his condominium, its contents and his car. The condominium and contents have been valued at \$732,000. There is no mortgage nor are there any outstanding liens on the property. Moreover, it is free from tax liabilities because it was his primary residence, although you will have to pay probate on it. There is no capital gain on the furniture, fixtures, and fittings. This is also true of the car, which has depreciated in value to \$35,000. But in transferring it to you, the applicable provincial fees will have to be paid. In addition to the aforementioned items, there is a cash sum of \$349,000. Kevin set this sum of money aside for you to cover the probate duty and fees. He intended that there be enough left over to ensure that you were comfortably provided for.

If you need further clarification, please do not hesitate to call me. But in any case I will need you to come to the office to sign certain documents that allow me to release the aforementioned sum of money to you, and to transfer ownership of the house and the car.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours truly,

William J. Dumsday

Zoë read the letter several times, glad that she hadn't attended the reading of the will. How would Kevin's mother have taken it?

House, car, and the cash: it came to over a million dollars. A lot of money, she mused. And "comfortably provided for" was a nice touch. Were they Kevin's exact words, she wondered? How comfortable would life be now?

Chapter 7 - Disposal

Zoë waited until Brad's aquatic tomb had filled with enough water to submerge his head completely, then she turned off the tap. "I'll be back in a moment to see how you're doing."

In Zoë's absence, Brad stopped thrashing around after less than a minute. Houdini often performed miraculous escapes when shackled and submerged. Brad did not possess the same powers as the great escapologist.

* * * *

Zoë knew full well that murderers were generally caught once the body showed up. A body frequently contains incriminating evidence, the murderer's DNA, for example. Moreover, the simple act of disposing of human remains is itself hazardous, leaving behind a swath of evidence. And, more importantly, until a body is found, the police can't be sure that a murder has taken place.

The disposal of the body had been Zoë's biggest logistical hurdle, and she was about to discover whether her planning enabled her to leap over it without tripping.

After Brad's failed escapology escapade, Zoë returned to the garage in an old pair of jeans and a tattered T-shirt. She'd brought along a small water pump that normally served as a backup to the main sump pump in her basement. She screwed the pump into the end of the hosepipe that was still dangling in Brad's wading pool, then disconnected the pipe from the faucet and dragged the free end toward the main door. She hit the button to raise the door.

She waited for a second, listening, no cars and no crunching of gravel to signal someone approaching along the laneway. With the outside lights already off, the moon rising in the southeast provided all the illumination she needed.

It took only a few minutes to drain the water out of Brad's pool onto the apron. That task complete, Zoë went back inside. She pushed the winch button to raise the hook and the tarp with Brad in it half a meter off the floor.

The dolly resembled a kid's wagon with an arm attached to steerable front wheels. It differed from the junior version in that it was larger, sturdier, and had a flat bed. Zoë maneuvered it into place underneath Brad, then lowered him onto it. She folded the wet tarp over him and hauled the whole package out of the garage along the concrete path to the back of the house.

She stopped beside the Jacuzzi hole. She'd be using the handcuffs again, so she removed them, but the sock and tape went into a garbage bag along with the rest of Brad's clothes. The only item she held back was his wallet. Apart from the money, everything in it would be cut up and also put into the garbage bag.

Finally, there was Brad. Zoë wasn't a strong woman, but it was a simple job to fold back the tarp and roll him off the dolly into the hole. The shoveling took a bit more effort, but the earth had been left conveniently near the hole so that gravity did most of the work.

One down.

Chapter 8 - Mrs. O'Reilly Again

zzz“Can I hold onto the key for a while longer?” Arlenton said, back at Mrs. O'Reilly's house after she had interviewed Zack.

Zack hadn't been much help except to confirm that Donny had planned a meeting with someone who was likely to ask for several hundred dollars for the pleasure of flogging him. Although, apparently, Donny shared equally in the pleasure.

Mrs. O'Reilly ushered Arlenton into the family room. “Keep it as long as you want.” Arlenton looked at her. She seemed deep in thought, then blurted out, “But give it back to me when you find him.”

“Of course,” Arlenton said. “To help with the search for Donny, I might need to go back into his apartment to check a few things.”

“Was the place in a mess?”

“When I went in?”

“I know my son was a tidy person, officer. I meant did you leave it as you found it?”

“Yes, I did. It's not...” Arlenton stopped herself from saying, “a crime scene.” She recovered with, “It's not our practice to tear the place apart. We reserve that for drug searches and the haunts of known criminals.”

Mrs. O'Reilly seemed satisfied with the improvised answer. “Did you find anything useful?”

“Possibly. It depends on your answers to some extra questions I have.”

Mrs. O'Reilly's eyes widened. “Go ahead.”

“Do you know who Donny's current girlfriend is? I ask this because he listed the phone numbers of several women in his notebook. It would speed up my investigation to know which one or ones to interview first.”

“As far as I know, he has no regular girlfriend.”

“Does Angela ring a bell?”

“No, sorry.”

“So these are all casual friends?”

“I don't know. But officer, I'm sure you found his magazine collection.” Mrs. O'Reilly paused. She seemed to be waiting for confirmation.

Arlenton said nothing. She hadn't found any magazines but now assumed they must have been in the boxes in Donny's utility room. "What about them?"

"His father discovered some of Donny's magazines quite a few years ago when our son was still living with us. My husband—ex-husband now—absolutely exploded. Our marriage was pretty shaky at the time, and he cited Donny's perversion as another reason to prove I was a lousy mother."

"Mr. O'Reilly didn't see it as his failure, then?"

"Ha! Failure was something he'd never admit to. According to him, the breakup of our marriage was entirely my fault. He told me not to contest the divorce because it would cause Donny and me more pain."

Arlenton noted that Mrs. O'Reilly had made those statements without any hint of sarcasm. As though she, Arlenton, would understand that was how men rationalized the world in order to prop up their fragile egos. "Getting back to Donny's girlfriends, Mrs. O'Reilly, did you ever meet any of them?"

"No, but I did see one of them once from a distance. I was in town shopping and I happened to spot my son disappearing into a shop on Havant Avenue. I crossed the road and noticed that the shop was one of those..."

Mrs. O'Reilly hesitated.

Arlenton waited.

"I think it was a sex shop."

"Can you describe the woman?"

"Only superficially. Donny had his back to me, but the woman turned to say something to him as she was about to enter the store. I'd almost caught up with them at that point, but when I realized it was a sex shop, I hurried away."

Arlenton concluded that the chance encounter had embarrassed Mrs. O'Reilly. "Tall, short, blonde, brunette?" she prompted.

"She was taller than Donny, although she may have been wearing high heels. Blonde, but it might have been dyed. You know what I mean? Dyed hair doesn't shine the same way natural hair does."

"Good looking? Skinny?"

"Neither. She was quite heavy set and I'd say rather plain."

"What was she wearing?"

"Black leather pants and matching jacket. With her build, she looked like she could have been a biker."

"But you don't know her name?" Arlenton said.

"No, I didn't wait to find out, and I didn't mention it to Donny the next time I saw him, either."

"Do you remember the name of the store?"

“It had a kinky name.”

Kinky? Arlenton was almost certain she'd seen a name like that in Donny's Visa statements. And there couldn't be more than one such store on that street.

“You're sure there are no other girlfriends?”

“Not that I know of. You could phone those numbers, I suppose.”

“Yes, I will.”

Chapter 9 - Zoë McWatton

March 2000

“He's seeing another woman,” Zoë said.

“How do you know?”

Penny and Zoë were having lunch at one of the many fast-food establishments in the Eaton Center. Zoë worked a block away at a bank where she was employed as a clerk. Penny worked nearby, too, at a hairdressing salon she now owned.

The two women had been friends since high school. Penny had stayed at home until she had passed her hairstylist exams and then followed her friend to Toronto. She'd been offered a job in Ottawa, but there was more money to be made in the big city, and besides, she didn't speak French.

The restaurant wasn't a suitable place for a private conversation, but the high level of ambient noise meant that you'd have to be pretty close to hear what the pair were saying.

“His sex drive has dropped off and he gives silly excuses not to make love,” Zoë replied.

“He could be sick.”

Zoë considered her comment. She knew that Penny was trying to make her feel better rather than defend Kevin. “He's showing no signs of it, and...” Zoë's voice trailed off.

“And what?”

“I hired a private detective to check up on him.”

* * *

Wayne Harting had been a private detective for ten years. He had worked for the Toronto police for eight years and then quit, mainly because he wanted to be his own boss. But he discovered that being your own boss had some downsides. At the onset, customers were few, so he had to supplement

his income with contract repo work. Over time, he managed to obtain customers with help from his buddies at the station. They would give his name to people who phoned the desk to ask for a recommendation. His Yellow Pages entry and Web site were handy, too. He'd spiced them up with "Spouse cheating on you? Call us." The "us" was a nice touch; he worked alone.

Zoë had located him through the good services of Google. Ever cautious, she had checked him out with the Better Business Bureau, whose automated interactive voice response system told her that Harting had no complaints against him in their database.

She found Harting's place, off Dundas Street West near High Park. The house was eighty years old but looked immaculate, as though it had qualified for a heritage grant and been renovated with the proceeds. It had been converted into a number of suites, each with its own button on the intercom panel on the front porch. Beside Harting's button was a label that said, *W. Harting PI*. She pressed it.

"Wayne Harting," announced the squawk box.

"Zoë McWatton for my appointment."

"Come on up. I'm on the second floor. Turn left as soon as you reach the top of the stairs."

The automatic lock whirred. She pushed open the door quickly, in case the whirring stopped and she'd find herself shut out. It yielded easily. The lobby led straight to a polished hardwood flight of stairs. She climbed them to the second floor.

Harting's head peered round the door of his office, surprising her. "Ms. McWatton," he said softly, as if they might be overheard, compromising his client's anonymity. She nodded and followed him through the door.

Zoë quickly scanned Harting's office. Looks Edwardian, like the house, she thought. He had furnished it with dark leather armchairs, an oak-topped desk and a whole wall of bookshelves that seemed to be populated with thirty sets of the Encyclopedia Britannica. If he had a computer, it must have been hidden in the matching oak armoire.

Without being invited, Zoë flopped into the armchair on the other side of Harting's desk.

"Pleased to meet you," Harting said, offering his hand.

"And you," she replied. She made a quick mental appraisal of him: about forty, looks like a cop, not flabby.

There was a good reason for the lack of flab: he frequented the local swimming pool four days a week and racked up two or three kilometers in the water. The effect of the exercise was to make his upper body and thighs

something of a challenge to his tailor—ready-to-wear suits were out of the question.

Harting walked around his desk and sat down. “I understood from your call that you wanted to...” He paused. He’d done this hundreds of times but still preferred the client to come right out and say they wanted him to spy on their mate.

“Yes, my boyfriend,” Zoë said, without hesitation. “He’s cheating on me.”

“You sound pretty sure of that.”

“I am.”

“Sorry to query you on this, Ms. McWatton, but I’d hate to go off on a wild goose chase and waste your money.”

“No, I’m sure of it.”

“Good. Now have you seen any particular pattern? Daytime, evening, weekend?”

“Never the weekend. Mostly after work, I think. Possibly either out of town or on his way back from an out-of-town trip.”

“Do you know who it is?”

“No. It could be someone at work, but I really have no idea.”

“I have to tell you, Ms. McWatton, that it would be rather expensive to tail your boyfriend round the clock, even without the weekends. So what I suggest is that you give me some advance warning of times when you think it’s most likely he’ll be seeing this woman. and I’ll concentrate my efforts accordingly.”

Zoë pulled her pocket diary out of her purse. She turned the pages then stopped. “He’s coming home from Calgary on Wednesday next week. If he’s late getting home, it means...”

Harting jumped in before she could finish. “Yes, I understand. Did you bring his photograph with you?”

“Yes.” She produced an envelope and gave it to him.

Harting extracted three 4 x 6 prints and studied them. “Recent?”

“Less than a year old.”

“Does he take his car to the airport?”

“Yes.”

“Good. What is it and what’s the license plate?”

“A Lexus. The plate is one of those personalized ones. I’ve written it on the envelope, along with his name and our address.”

Harting smiled.

“Yeah, the license plate is embarrassing. He’s a bit arrogant,” Zoë said in a defensive tone of voice.

Harting laughed. "It helps if I don't like the guy. Anything else about his work habits. What time does he go for lunch, and where?"

"The building where his office is located has a cafeteria, but he doesn't like the food there, so I guess he goes out."

"About what time?"

Zoë put her right forefinger to her temple. "Between twelve and one, I think."

"You never have lunch with him?"

"No, why?"

"The reason I ask is that it's possible that lunch is another opportunity to meet this woman."

"Just tell me when and I'll be down there with my shotgun."

Harting frowned and made what appeared to be an involuntary backwards movement of his head. "You have one?"

"No, I wasn't being serious."

"Oh no, of course not." He looked relieved. "One final question, Ms. McWatton. I notice you're wearing an engagement ring."

"Yes, Kevin and I were planning to get married."

"Were planning?"

"*Are* planning."

* * *

"And what did this guy find?" Penny said, when Zoë had finished.

"A whole other story."

"I've got time."

"Can I get us both a cup of coffee first? The lineup at the coffee counter is much shorter now, and my throat's dry from talking non-stop."

"Sure."

Zoë was back at the table in a few minutes. "Okay, where was I?"

"Your PI's findings."

"Right. He phoned and asked me to come to his office two weeks later..."

* * *

"Take a seat Ms. McWatton. I'd rather you heard the news sitting down."

"Bad is it?"

"Well, I confirmed your suspicion," Harting said, as though trying to spread the responsibility for what he was about to tell his client.

"He's seeing someone?"

“Yes, but with a twist. The someone is a prostitute.”

Zoë slumped back in the chair and looked up at the ceiling. “Why did he do that?”

“I’ll assume that’s a rhetorical question, because obviously I’m in no position to answer it.” He tried to make eye contact with her but she avoided it. “I’m sorry, Zoë.”

Zoë finally looked at Harting. “How did you find her?”

“I followed him,” Harting said, cautiously, as though protecting a trade secret. “Do you want the details?”

“No. I can hardly call her and accuse her of taking my man, can I?”

“May I give you some advice? It’s more an observation, really. It’s based on a year I did with the Toronto Police vice unit.”

“I’m not in the mood for a male view of why men seek the company of prostitutes when they have a woman already.”

He coughed. “No, of course not.”

But she held her hands out, palms up. “But go ahead, for what it’s worth.”

“You’re engaged. He might just have been having a final fling.”

“Thanks,” she said, standing up. “Is that a male rite of passage?”

* * *

“Final fling! The nerve of the guy. You’re paying this PI just so he can tell you that men can’t keep their dicks in their pants?” Penny said. “As if you didn’t know that already.”

“Trouble is, when I confronted Kevin with it, he broke down and cried.”

“I think I can guess what’s coming next.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking. I should just leave the bastard, right? But he begged me to forgive him.”

“Oh, did he?” Penny’s voice conveyed ill-disguised skepticism.

“Yeah, and I did. Forgive him, I mean. Am I stupid?”

“Very stupid. No, I didn’t mean that. I don’t know, Zoë. I…” Penny seemed to be struggling to find the right words.

“It’s not like he fell for her, is it?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Zoë knew how lame they must have sounded. She took a deep breath. “Is it?”

“No, I suppose not. But what’s the bottom line?”

“The wedding’s still on.” Zoë sat waiting. When Penny didn’t respond, she said, “What do you think?”

“I can tell you precisely what I think, but it’s not going to help because I haven’t been where you’ve been.”

“Be diplomatic then.”

Penny laughed. “Like *Dear Abby*? I guess if he’s truly sorry, and it was just what he said it was... So how *are* the wedding plans going?”

“Now you sound as if you’re putting it on. It’s as if you’re saying an unfaithful man is merely one of life’s many obstacles. I know you don’t believe that.”

A woman at the next table turned her head sharply and made eye contact with Zoë, then quickly turned back to her soup and sandwich. Zoë wondered if the woman had tuned in to “wedding plans” and then latched on again when she had said “unfaithful man.” “Nosey bitch,” she whispered, tipping her head in the direction of the woman.

“What?”

“Behind you. She’s been listening to us,” Zoë said, still in a whisper.

Penny turned around and glared at the woman. She turned back. “Who cares? But you didn’t answer my question.”

“Oh, yeah, I got myself a wedding planner.”

“Oh, who?”

“Not who, what. It’s a computer program.” Zoë smiled. “But there’s no part of it that deals with cleansing the groom of his bad habits.”

“I’m relieved that you’re taking it well and not poisoning that wayward fiancé of yours.”

“As if.”

“You’re forgetting that you’re an expert in the retribution department.”

“You mean Hilary?”

“Yes, Hilary. I seem to remember that you wrought vengeance upon her for inviting your boyfriend to a party at her parents’ place.”

“Hey, she deserved it! There was no party, and her parents were away for the weekend. Hilary just wanted to screw him.”

“Yeah, I know, but you should have gone after *him*, not put that instant glue in her gym shoes.”

“Just so she couldn’t get her feet into them. I didn’t intend for her to get her foot stuck.”

Penny smiled. “Noooo.”

“Anyway, the Hilary situation wasn’t the same as the one with Kevin; I wasn’t engaged to the guy. Although I suppose it was my first exposure to the fact that men will do anything to get their penis inside a woman—slaves to their Y-chromosome. That’s why I’m letting Kevin off the hook. If a rabbit has its tail up, you can’t punish a dog for chasing after it.”

Penny smile turned into a laugh. “Not that I see the connection, but if you’re ready to forgive him?”

“I am. And as far as Hilary was concerned, I wanted to send a message to other girls. Anyway, she had rich parents; they could easily afford to spring for a new pair of shoes for their little darling.”

“Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

“Penny, how could you...”

“Just kidding.” But Zoë knew what her friend was intimating: the vindictive side of her nature. “Well, you must have truly forgiven him, otherwise Kevin would have woken up one morning with crazy glue sealing the end of his foreskin.”

Zoë laughed out loud. “Not true. If I’d taken my revenge out in the same manner as I had on Hilary, then I’d have done something to his call-girl friend, wouldn’t I?”

“I guess. But if I were you, I don’t think I’d tolerate a second ‘final fling’ incident,” Penny said.

Two years later, Zoë would hear a “final fling” story again—but this time from Trevor Cowplain, her third victim.

Chapter 10 - Dressed to Kill

Saturday, August 10

The Quinquedress store disguised itself as an establishment selling regular lines in women’s apparel. In the window, the mannequins wore clothes respectable enough for a cocktail party—albeit a somewhat risqué one. That Mrs. O’Reilly had leaped to the conclusion it was a sex shop, mystified Arlenton. The clue in the name would go over the head of most people.

Arlenton yanked open the door and walked to the counter. Inside, the couture was of a decidedly non-mainstream nature. She cast a quick eye at the PVC, latex and leather display of clothing. Perhaps, she thought, Donny’s mother had actually got this far and, embarrassed, turned back. She showed her badge to the woman at the cash register. “I need to trace one of your customers.”

The woman, dressed from head to toe in black, gave her a look that transmitted a dislike of cops. Her tone did, too, “Yeah, why, what’s he done?”

“I didn’t say it was a man, Ms....”

“It’s usually men who do the kind of things that come to the attention of the cops. And my name is Sheila; don’t they teach you people to read,” she said, pointing to her nametag.

Arlenton stared her in the face, trying not to smirk at Sheila's array of piercings and her Goth-black lipstick. Dilated pupils matched the sartorial darkness. Arlenton wondered if Sheila's eyes explained her demeanor. She pulled Donny's photo out of her shoulder bag. "This guy. Seen him before?"

Sheila barely glanced at the picture of Donny. "No."

"He was in here a couple of months ago and paid one hundred and thirty-five dollars for something. Can you please tell me what he purchased? It may jog your memory of him."

"I'll check but I'm not on the counter twenty-four-seven; someone else may have served him."

"Okay, one thing at a time; please look up the purchase."

Sheila waved to another woman in the store who Arlenton had assumed to be a customer. She came over. "It's the cops," Sheila said. "Cops" was obviously one of Sheila's four-letter words.

"Oh, what can I do for you, officer? My name is Claris Brankart, I'm the manager."

Claris was dressed in lighter shades, a knee length, red leather skirt and sleeveless sweater in pink Cashmere. Arlenton repeated the request and showed her the photo of Donny.

"Yes, he's a semi-regular customer of ours."

"He was here about two months ago with a woman: blonde, tall, fairly heavy, and wore leather."

"Sounds like it could be Heather—also a regular."

"Does Heather have a surname?"

Claris hesitated. "I don't remember surnames but if she paid by credit card I'm sure I can find it."

Arlenton waited while the amenable Claris disappeared through a door marked "Employees Only." Sultry Sheila stood at the cash desk, glaring at Arlenton. "Look around. You might find a good whip to thrash the boys down at the station with. But I suppose I can't interest you in handcuffs? You probably already have some," she said, sniggering.

"Yes I do, but thanks for your help."

Arlenton took Sheila's advice and wandered off in the direction of the magazine stand. She flicked through the pages of some that weren't shrink-wrapped.

Claris pushed open the door of the back-office and rejoined Arlenton. "Good guess, officer. Donny's purchase was for books and magazines," she said. "And the woman was Heather Schoenstein."

Chapter 11 - Companions TO Go

Feeling good about the progress she'd made at the dress store, Arlenton walked the couple of blocks to the Marsden Street office of Companions TO Go. Indeed, it had been a successful two days: two interviews with Mrs. O'Reilly yielding some useful leads, a productive search of Donny's house, Zack's confirmation of Donny's tastes, and the lead that Claris Brankart had just given her. No dead-ends so far—the bane of a detective's life.

Arlenton had arranged to meet Hossein Golkani, the president and owner of Companions TO Go, in the lobby at the small building where the company had its offices. The lobby also housed four cubicles. A man occupied one of them. He looked like a stereotypical computer geek, complete with unkempt hair and shapeless T-shirt. Two of the cubicles were empty and, closest to the entrance, a woman sat in the fourth one to provide the friendly face to people who visited the premises.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Golkani," Arlenton said.

Golkani appeared and showed her to his office. "How can I help you, officer?"

Arlenton studied the man. Probably from the Middle East, she thought. "Thanks for seeing me on a Saturday, Mr. Golkani."

"We're in here most Saturdays with a skeleton crew," he said.

It seemed to Arlenton as though it would be a pretty bare-bones operation even with a full complement of staff. "We're trying to find a client of yours and would like to know who he might have met on your Web site."

"Is he in trouble?"

"Maybe."

"I pride myself on running a high-integrity business," he said. "We do not tolerate clients who stray over the line."

Arlenton thought he sounded defensive. Possibly because he knew the police were not enamored by businesses like his—ones where men could use the anonymity of the Internet to prey on women. She had checked on his outfit before leaving the station. It had a clean record with the local cops and wasn't on the RCMP blacklist, or even the watch-list. "That's good to hear," she said.

"We don't run chat lines even though our competition offers them. They're a breeding ground for... Well, I don't have to paint a picture, do I?"

"No. You validate the identity of your customers?" Arlenton said.

"We insist that they either supply a credit card or present themselves in person."

"You apply that rule rigorously?"

Golkani hesitated. He screwed up his mouth. “We do, but only for men.”

“How do you know the person at the other end of the phone line is a man? It might be difficult to tell from the first name sometimes.”

Golkani thought about this question for a moment, too. He jotted something down on a Post-it note. “Hmm, we’ll tighten that up.”

“Donny O’Reilly is the man I’m interested in. Can you tell me who he’s been in contact with since he first opened an account?”

Golkani frowned. “Our clients are guaranteed privacy, officer. I can’t reveal personal information without some kind of written authority. And even with it, I’d have to check with my lawyer.”

“Yes, I know, but you asked if he was in trouble. Donny O’Reilly has committed no crime; he’s simply gone missing, and naturally we’re concerned about him.”

“I suppose I could indicate which entries he responded to. I’m sure you could get the same information by doing a forensic data analysis of his computer. However, I can give you the pseudonyms only. That’s the only identification his computer would offer up.”

“Thank you.”

Golkani shifted awkwardly in his chair. “And to speed things up for you, I’ll ask one of my staff to print those ads. You’ll notice that they are all...” He hesitated, as if searching for precisely the right word. “Innocuous. You won’t see ads from ‘hot chicks’ looking for well-endowed men. Or vice versa.” He picked up the phone and whispered instructions to the person on the other end. “We’ll have a printout for you in a few minutes, officer. Anything else?”

“No, not at the moment.”

“We can pick up the results on the way out if you like.”

Arlenton stood up.

“But before we do...” Golkani said.

She sat down again.

“A couple of months ago, I was investigated under the new terrorism bill; C-36, I think it was. They said they were making routine inquiries in accordance with an amendment to the criminal code, eighty something.”

“Eighty-three point oh-two,” Arlenton said.

“Yes that was it. Something to do with supplying money to terrorists.”

“As you said, it was just routine,” Arlenton said. “They were probably checking up on illegal funds transfers.”

“Yes, but my point is: do they check non-Muslims, too?”

“I don’t know. I work for the Toronto Police, not the RCMP.”

“My second point, officer, is that I am willing to do everything I can to help you but within the bounds of the law.”

“Jesus Christ, Mr. Golkani, I’m not here to entrap you.”

He smiled. “No, of course not. Incidentally, it is interesting that you would invoke your prophet to emphasize your sincerity. The Qur’an, surah 3, verse 45 says, ‘Allah giveth thee glad tidings, Christ Jesus is born the son of Mary and he will be held in honor in this world and the Hereafter as being one of those nearest to Allah.’ Honest Muslims are aware of this.”

“Yes, I’m sure they are. I prefer Ghandi’s comment on the subject. He said something to the effect: ‘I agree with Jesus Christ’s teachings but not the interpretation of them by Christians.’”

Golkani laughed. “To be honest with you, the same kind of statement could be said to apply to certain members of my religion.” He bounced out of his chair and led the way back to the lobby and went over to the cubicle occupied by the computer geek. The man handed Golkani three pages of printout. Golkani didn’t even look at it before passing it straight to Arlenton.

Arlenton scanned it. He had given her more than she could have expected. Below each ad, following the pseudonym, was the “real” name, postal code and email address of the correspondent. Arlenton guessed that, if challenged, Golkani would contend he hadn’t seen the names and addresses, and would claim it was a simple mistake by his staff.

Later, Arlenton would discover how useless the extra information would be. Zoë’s postal code put her in Markham—a fair distance from where she actually lived.