

The Watcher

Brian Freeman

Published by Headline

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

One

Lieutenant Jonathan Stride shielded his eyes as the glass door shot a laser beam of sunlight at his face, and when he could see again, he realized that the woman who had stepped out onto the patio was his late wife, Cindy.

For an instant, time slowed down the way it does on a long fall, while the buzz of conversation continued around him. He forgot how to breathe. The enigmatic smile he remembered from years ago was the same. When she lifted her sunglasses, her brown eyes stared back at him with a familiar glint over the heads of the others in the restaurant. She was in her late forties, as she would have been if she had lived. Small, like a faery, but athletic and strong. Suntanned skin. An aura of intensity.

It wasn't her, of course.

More than five years had passed since Cindy died of cancer as he sat beside her hospital bed. The pain of her loss had retreated to a distant ache in a corner of his soul. Even so, there were moments like this when he saw a stranger, and something about her brought it all back.

It didn't take much, just the look in her eyes or the way she carried herself, to stir his memory.

This woman was looking back at him, too. She was small but a couple of inches taller than Cindy, who had barely crossed five feet four on tiptoes. Her blond hair fell breezily around her shoulders, and her sunglasses were now tented on top of her head. Her earrings were sapphire studs. She wore a blue-flowered summer skirt that hung to her knees, baby blue heels, a white blouse, and a lightweight tan leather jacket with a braided fringe. She balanced one hand on a narrow hip as she watched him. The lacy ties of her jacket dangled between her legs.

He knew her from somewhere.

'Your five seconds are up,' Serena Dial told him.

Stride broke away. 'What?'

Serena sipped her lemonade and eyed the woman in the leather jacket as she was shown to a table on the patio. A gust of wind blew off the lake and rustled her own silky dark hair. 'You get a free pass to look at any woman for up to five seconds. After that, it officially becomes flirting.'

'She reminded me of someone,' Stride said.

'Sure she did.'

Serena was an ex-cop and now a private investigator. She and Stride had shared a bed for almost two years.

Stride turned to his partner in the Detective Bureau, Maggie Bei, as if consulting an Olympic judge for a ruling. 'Is this five-second thing commonly known?' he asked.

'Absolutely,' Maggie said, with a wink at Serena.

Stride knew when he was on the losing end of an argument. 'OK, I was flirting,' he admitted.

Serena stretched out her arm lazily and used the back of her hand to caress Stride's cheek, which was rough with black and gray stubble. She sidled her long fingers through his wavy hair and leaned forward to plant a slow kiss on his lips. She tasted like citrus and sugar.

'Most animals mark their territory by urinating,' Maggie remarked, with her mouth full of a large bite of her steak sandwich. She batted her almond-shaped eyes innocently at Serena and grinned.

Stride laughed. 'Can we get back to work?'

'Go ahead,' Serena told him. She swiped a French fry from Maggie's plate and bit into it while baring her teeth.

'What's the latest on the peeper?' Stride asked Maggie. He stole a sideways glance across the restaurant at the other woman and noticed that she was doing the same thing to him from over her menu.

'He struck again on Friday night,' Maggie replied. 'A sixteen-year-old girl in Fond du Lac noticed a guy in the trees outside her bedroom when she was getting undressed. She screamed, and he took off.'

'Did she get a look at him?'

Maggie shook her head. 'She thought he was tall and skinny, but that's it. It was dark.'

'That's nine incidents in the last month,' Stride said.

'It's summer. Time for the perverts to come out.'

The calendar said 1 June. It was late Sunday afternoon, but the sun was warm and high over the steep hillside on which the city of Duluth, Minnesota, was built. It wouldn't be dark until after nine o'clock. After the usual long, bitter winter, the tourists were streaming back on the weekends to watch the ore boats come and go through

the narrow channel that led out into Lake Superior. The Canal Park area, where the three of them sat on the rooftop patio of Grandma's Saloon, teemed with lovers and children feeding noisy gulls by the boardwalk. As tourists and locals collided, and the weather got warmer, Stride and his team got busier. Crime was creeping up for the season but, so far, it was nothing more than the usual run of thefts, break-ins, drunks, and drugs.

Plus a peeping Tom with a fetish for blonde high school girls.

Stride had overseen the city's Detective Bureau, which handled major crimes in Duluth, for more than a decade, and he had steeled himself to human behavior that defied all rational explanation. Sexual abuse. Meth labs. Suicide. Homicide. The peeper had shown no inclination to violence, but Stride didn't minimize the danger of someone who liked to watch young girls undress in their bedrooms. It was a short trip through the looking glass to molestation and rape.

'He's been stalking the south side, right?' Stride asked.

Maggie grunted affirmatively and pushed her black fringe out of her eyes. She was a diminutive Chinese cop who had worked side by side with Stride since he took over the major crimes unit.

'Yeah, all the reports have been south of Riverside,' Maggie said. 'He's crossed the bridge into Superior a couple times, too.'

The great lake that loomed over Stride's shoulder narrowed into the jagged bays and harbors of the St Louis River as it wound southward between the cities of Duluth and Superior. On the scenic drive along the river,

Duluth broke up into small towns like Riverside, Morgan Park, Gary, and Fond du Lac. None of the towns was large enough to afford its own police force, so the Duluth Police stretched its enforcement coverage all the way along the river's twisty shore.

'You know what it's like down in the river towns,' Maggie said. 'People leave their shades up and their windows open. For a peeper, it's like a cat with a goldfish bowl. Lots to look at.'

'Do we have any leads on an ID?' Stride asked.

'Nothing yet. We have no description and no idea how old he is. We're working our way through the sex offender list, but no one looks like an obvious suspect.'

'How about a car?'

'We've had reports of a small SUV – something like a CRV or a Rav4 – near three of the peeping locations. Maybe silver, maybe gray or sand. No one in the area would claim it. That's as close as I've got to a lead.'

'What about the victims?' Stride asked. 'How does this guy find them?'

'The girls range in age from fourteen to nineteen,' Maggie said. 'They go to different schools, and I haven't found any overlap in their social lives. They're all blondes, though. I don't think this guy is just going from house to house, trying to get lucky. We'd have caught him by now if he was simply trolling through backyards. When he hits a house, he already knows there's a girl there with the right look.'

'Has he made any attempts to get inside?' Serena asked.

Serena wasn't a member of the Duluth Police, but she was a former homicide detective from Las Vegas.

In addition to being his lover, Stride considered her one of the sharpest investigators he had ever worked with. He and Maggie consulted her unofficially on most of their cases.

‘No, he just watches,’ Maggie said. ‘The girl’s window was open in several of the incidents, but he stayed outside.’

Serena stole another fry from Maggie’s plate. ‘Yeah, but he might be getting his courage up. Along with other things. Peeping’s a threshold crime.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of,’ Maggie said. ‘I want to catch this guy before he moves on to bigger things.’ She glanced at the opposite side of the restaurant patio and added, ‘By the way, boss, you’re about to understand why women adopted that five-second rule.’

‘What do you mean?’ Stride asked.

Then he looked up and understood.

The woman in the braided leather jacket, the one who reminded him of his late wife Cindy, was coming over.

‘You’re Jonathan Stride, aren’t you?’ she asked.

Stride pushed his chair back and stood up. He was over six feet tall and when he looked down at the top of her head, he saw silver roots creeping into her blond hair. He took her offered hand and shook it. Her long nails dug into his palm. ‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘I’m sure you don’t remember me, but we were in high school together. I graduated a year before you and Cindy did. My name is Tish Verdure.’

Her voice had a seductive, breathless rumble. Her clothes smelled of violet perfume covering cigarette smoke. She was perfectly made up, but under the foundation,

age and nicotine had carved winding paths into the skin around her brown eyes and above her forehead. Even so, she was very pretty, with a tiny, tapered nose, a pale pink oval at her lips, and a pointed chin.

Stride remembered her name but nothing else, but it explained why she had looked familiar to him. 'It's been a long time,' he said in an apologetic tone.

'Don't worry, I knew Cindy before the two of you ever met.'

'I don't recall Cindy ever mentioning you,' he said.

'Well, back then, I was Laura's best friend.'

At the sound of Laura's name, Stride felt a rush of memories storm his mind. Himself and Cindy, naked in the water, making love. Ray Wallace checking his gun. The huge black man, Dada, escaping on a train car. Most of all, the whooshing sound of a baseball bat in Peter Stanhope's hands. It may as well have been 1977 again.

Serena cleared her throat loudly. Stride burst from his trance.

'I'm sorry. Tish, this is my partner, Serena Dial, and this is my colleague on the police force, Maggie Bei.'

Maggie waved with half her sandwich without getting up. Serena stood, dwarfing the other woman, and Stride felt the air blow cold like dry ice between Serena and Tish. They didn't know each other, but with a single glance, they didn't like each other.

'Do you live in the area?' Stride asked.

Tish studied Lake Superior with wistful eyes. 'Oh, no, I haven't been back to Duluth in years. I don't really have much of a home base. I'm a travel writer, so I'm on the go most of the time. When I stay put, I live in Atlanta.'

‘What brings you back here?’ he asked.

‘Actually, I was looking for you,’ Tish told him.

‘For me?’ Stride asked, surprised.

‘Yes.’

Stride exchanged glances with Serena and Maggie. ‘Maybe you should sit down and tell me why.’

Tish took the empty chair at the table for four, facing the lake. She slid a leather purse off her shoulder and put it on the table in front of her. She pulled out an open pack of cigarettes. ‘Can you smoke outside at restaurants here?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t,’ Serena told her.

‘I’m sorry,’ Tish said. ‘I know I should quit, but smoking’s one way I handle my nerves. The other is drinking. Not very smart, I guess, but what can you do?’

‘I’m a reformed smoker myself,’ Stride said.

‘Well, I don’t mean to be such a mystery,’ Tish told them. She smiled at Maggie and Serena, but the two women wore stony masks. Tish ignored them and focused on Stride. ‘First of all, I want to tell you how sorry I am about Cindy’s death. I know the two of you were a real love match.’

‘It was several years ago, but thank you,’ Stride said.

‘I would have come to the funeral myself, but I was in Prague on a story at the time.’

Stride felt suspicion poking like a spring seedling out of the ground. ‘That’s kind of you to say, Ms Verdure, but you knew Cindy back in high school. I don’t think anyone would have expected you to go to her funeral twenty-five years later.’

‘Oh, Cindy and I stayed in touch,’ Tish said.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Not very often, but we wrote to each other now and then.’

‘Really.’ He didn’t say it like a question. He said it for what it was – disbelief. He added, ‘Do you mind showing me some identification?’

‘Not at all.’ Tish dug in her purse for her wallet and extracted her driver’s license, which she handed across the table. The silence from the other three people didn’t appear to bother her. ‘I understand how odd this is, me showing up after all these years,’ she continued. ‘Cindy and I wrote to each other at the hospital where she worked. It was only the occasional postcard or Christmas card, that kind of thing. For me, it was nice having a little connection to my life back here. I left Duluth after graduation and never came back, but that doesn’t mean I forgot about it. And of course, whenever I wrote to Cindy, it made me feel a little closer to Laura. Do you know what I mean?’

Stride studied the Georgia driver’s license carefully and confirmed that the name Tish Verdure and the photo matched the woman sitting across from him.

‘Who’s Laura?’ Serena asked.

Stride felt as if a scab were slowly being pulled away from a deep wound. ‘She was Cindy’s sister.’

Serena’s eyebrows arched, with a look that said unmistakably, *why haven’t you told me about her?*

‘Laura was murdered,’ Stride went on. ‘Someone beat her to death with a baseball bat. It was 4 July 1977.’

‘Did they catch the guy who did it?’ Serena asked.

‘No, he got away. Because of me.’

He didn't say it in a way that invited questions. Serena opened her mouth and closed it again. Maggie pushed the food around on her plate, not looking up.

'Maybe you should tell me why you're here, Ms Verdure,' Stride said. 'And what you want from me.'

'Please, call me Tish.' She leaned forward with her elbows on the table. Her brown eyes were dark and serious. 'In fact, I'm here because of Laura. It's obvious that her death still weighs on you. Well, it does on me, too. She and I were very close in high school.'

'So?'

'So I'm writing a book about Laura's murder.'

Stride's weathered face wrinkled into a scowl. 'A book?'

'Exactly. Not just about her death, but about the people around her. How their lives changed. It's a non-fiction novel, sort of an *In Cold Blood* thing, you know? I mean, look at you. You're the man in charge of the city's major crimes unit. Your wife's sister was killed when you were all of seventeen, and the case was never solved.'

'I think this conversation is over,' Stride declared.

'Please, wait.'

'I won't be part of a book about Laura,' Stride told her. 'I have no interest in dragging up that part of my life again.'

'Just hear me out.' Tish held up her hands. 'It's not just a story about Laura's death. There's more. I want the book to be a catalyst to reopen the investigation. I want to solve the case. I want to find out who murdered Laura.'

Stride folded his arms. 'You?'

'That's right. Look, I'll do it on my own if I have to,

but I want your help. What's more, I think you *want* to help me. This is a chance to put this case behind you once and for all. Cindy told me what kind of person you are. How every death takes a piece out of your soul.'

He was angry now. 'Ms Verdure, don't you think I would have reopened this case years ago if I thought there was more to be done? Laura's murder was never unsolved. We know who did it. He got away. He disappeared.'

Tish shook her head. 'I don't believe that's what happened. I don't think you do, either. There was a lot more going on in Laura's life that summer. It was easy for the police to pass it off on some anonymous vagrant, a *black* vagrant. Talk about your stereotypical bogeyman. No one wanted to deal with the fact that it was probably someone close to Laura who killed her.'

'Do you have a suspect in mind?' Stride asked.

'Well, you could start with Peter Stanhope.'

Serena's head snapped round at the mention of Stanhope's name. 'Peter was involved?' she asked Stride.

'Yes, he was the prime suspect for a while,' Stride admitted.

'Why didn't you tell me any of this before?' Serena asked.

Stride was silent. Peter Stanhope was an attorney from one of Duluth's most influential families, but more importantly he was one of Serena's clients as a private investigator.

'I've done my homework,' Tish continued. 'Randall Stanhope had the police in his pocket back then, and it wouldn't have been hard for him to shift the focus away

from his son. Somebody needs to take a close look at Peter Stanhope.'

Serena pushed her chair back with an iron screech and stalked away from the table.

Maggie watched her go, then leaned forward, shaking her head. 'Look, Trish.'

'It's Tish.'

'Tish, fish, knish, whatever. Let me give you a reality check. You can't go around making accusations about anyone, let alone a rich lawyer like Peter Stanhope, without evidence. You can't expect the police to help you.'

'Unless you've got something new to add to the investigation, we can't do anything,' Stride added. 'Even if we wanted to.'

'I do have something new,' Tish said.

Stride's face was dark and suspicious. 'What is it?'

'I know Laura was being stalked.'