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Old City Hall

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Published by John Murray

Extract

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1

Much to the shock of his family, Mr. Singh rather enjoyed delivering newspapers. Who would have thought that Gurdial Singh, former chief engineer for Indian Railways, the largest transportation company in the world, would be dropping newspapers at people's doors commencing at 5:05 each morning. He didn't need to work. But since coming to Toronto four years earlier, he had absolutely insisted on it. No matter that he was turning seventy-four years old on Thursday next. Yes, it was a silly little job, Mr. Singh was forced to concede to his wife, Bimal, and their three daughters, but he liked it.

That's why Mr. Singh was humming an old Hindi tune to himself as he walked briskly through the early-winter darkness on a cold Monday morning, the seventeenth of December.

He entered the marble-appointed lobby of the Market Place Tower, a luxury condominium on Front Street, and gave a friendly wave to Mr. Rasheed, the night concierge. The *Globe and Mail* newspapers were neatly stacked just inside the door beside a diminutive plastic Christmas tree. How strange, in a country covered in forests, that they would use plastic trees, Mr. Singh thought as he hitched up his gray flannel pants and bent down to cut the binding cord with his pocketknife. He sorted the papers into twelve piles, one for each floor on his route. It had been easy to memorize which residents took a paper, and it was a simple matter to walk down the deserted hallways and drop one squarely at each door.

The solitude was very nice. So unlike the clutter of Delhi. When he arrived at the top floor, Mr. Singh knew he would see the one person who was always awake. Mr. Kevin something. Mr. Singh could never remember Mr. Kevin's last name, even though the gentleman was one of the most famous people in Canada. There he would be, in his shabby bathrobe, a cigarette cupped in his right hand, a mug of tea in his left, scratching his gray beard with his shoulder, anxiously awaiting his morning paper.

Mr. Kevin was the host of a morning radio show that was broadcast across the country. Mr. Singh had tried to listen to it a few times, but it was just a lot of chatter about fishing in Newfoundland, fiddle music in the Ottawa Valley, and farming on the prairies. These Canadians were funny people. Most of them lived in cities, but all they seemed to discuss was the countryside.

Mr. Kevin, despite his unkempt appearance, was very much a gentleman. Rather shy. Mr. Singh enjoyed the ritual conversation they had each morning.

"Good morning, Mr. Singh," Mr. Kevin always said.

"Good morning, Mr. Kevin," Mr. Singh always said in reply. "And how is your beautiful wife?"

"More beautiful than ever, Mr. Singh," Mr. Kevin would say. Putting the cigarette in his mouth, he'd open his palm and pass an orange slice over to Mr. Singh.

"Thank you," Mr. Singh would say, giving Mr. Kevin his newspaper.

"Freshly sliced," Mr. Kevin would answer.

They'd then follow up with a short discussion about gardening or cooking or tea. Despite all he must have had on his mind, Mr. Kevin never seemed rushed. It was simply courteous and respectful conversation at an ungodly hour. Quite civilized.

It took the usual twenty-five minutes for Mr. Singh to methodically work his way up to the twelfth floor. There were only two suites on the top floor. Mr. Kevin's suite, 12A, was to the left, around the bend, near the end of a long corridor. The resident to the right, an older lady who lived alone, took the other paper, which he always delivered last.

Mr. Singh arrived at Mr. Kevin's door, and as usual it was halfway open. But there was no sign of Mr. Kevin. I could just leave the newspaper here, Mr. Singh thought. Then he'd miss their daily conversation.

He waited for a moment. Of course, he could not knock, that would be highly improper. Humming louder, he shuffled his feet, hoping to make enough noise to announce his arrival. Still, no one came.

He hesitated. It was the engineer in him. He liked routine. Order. He remembered the day his eleventh-form mathematics teacher taught the class that there was no such thing as parallel lines. That because the earth was round, any two parallel lines would eventually meet. Mr. Singh didn't sleep for a week.

There was a noise from inside the apartment. An odd, hollow sound. That was strange. Then a door closed. Good, he thought as he waited. But there was silence again. Maybe he should leave.

Instead, he took Mr. Kevin's newspaper and dropped it onto the parquet floor just outside the door. It landed with a loud smack, which he hoped would signal his presence in the doorway. He'd never done anything like this before.

There was another noise inside. Distant. Were they footsteps? What should he do? He certainly could not enter.

Mr. Singh waited. For the first time, he looked down at the front page of the newspaper. There was a picture of an ice hockey player raising his arms in the air and a story about the local team, the Toronto Maple Leafs. How odd that the name was misspelled: Leafs and not Leaves. And the color of the leaf on the jersey was blue. Mr. Singh had seen lovely red and yellow maple leaves. But never a blue one.

At last he heard footsteps approaching the door. Mr. Kevin came into the hallway, wearing his usual bathrobe, and opened the door all the way. Mr. Singh heard a soft tap as it rested on the door stopper.

But where was his cigarette? His tea? Mr. Kevin was looking at his hands. Rubbing his fingers. Mr. Singh noticed something red on his fingertips.

He had a pleasant thought. Blood oranges. He so loved to eat

them back home, and he'd recently found that they arrived in Canadian stores this time of year. Had Mr. Kevin been cutting one?

Mr. Kevin raised his hands to the light. Mr. Singh could see the red liquid clearly now. It was thick and heavy, not thin like juice from an orange.

Mr. Singh's heart began to race.

It was blood.

Mr. Singh opened his mouth to speak. But before he could say a word, Mr. Kevin leaned closer. "I killed her, Mr. Singh," he whispered, "I killed her."

2

Officer Daniel Kennicott was running flat out. "Where do you want me to go?" he called back to his partner, Nora Bering, who was half a step behind him.

"I'll cover the lobby," she said as they rushed into the Market Place Tower. "You go up."

A uniformed man standing behind a long wooden desk looked up from his newspaper as they hurried past. Inside, the marble walls were covered with textured sculptures, bouquets of fresh flowers seemed to be everywhere, and classical music was playing softly.

As the senior officer, it was Bering's job to assign tasks in urgent situations. As they were running, she'd called the dispatcher directly on her cell phone to avoid the scanners who picked up police calls. The key facts were that at 5:31, twelve minutes ago, Kevin Brace, the famous radio host, met his newspaper deliveryman, a Mr. Singh, at the door of his penthouse, Suite 12A. Brace said that he'd killed his wife. Singh found a body, adult female, apparently deceased, in the bathtub. He reported that the body was cold to the touch and Brace was unarmed, calm.

That the suspect was calm, almost placid, was common in domestic homicides, Kennicott thought. The passion of the moment had dissipated. Shock was setting in.

Bering pointed to the stairway door beside the elevator. "Two choices, stairs or elevator," she said.

Kennicott nodded and took a deep breath.

"If you take the elevator," Bering said, "procedure is to get off two floors below."

Kennicott nodded again. He'd learned this in basic training when he joined the force. A few years before that, two officers had answered what sounded like a routine domestic call on the twenty-fourth floor of a suburban apartment building. When the elevator door opened, they were gunned down by the father, who'd already killed his wife and only child.

"I'll take the stairs," he said.

"Remember: every word the suspect says is vital," Bering said as Kennicott gulped in more air. "Be one hundred percent accurate with your notes."

"Right."

"Enter with your gun out," she said. "But be careful with it."

Kennicott nodded. "Okay."

"Radio me just before you get to the top floor."

"Got it," Kennicott said as he plunged into the stairwell. The job of the first officer on scene at a homicide was containment. It was like trying to protect a sand castle in a windstorm, because every second, bits of evidence were blowing away. He was tempted to take the stairs three at a time, but between his bulletproof vest, his gun, and the portable hand radio, he was carrying about eight pounds of equipment. Just be steady, he told himself.

By the time he got to the third floor, taking two steps at a time, he was in a smooth rhythm. Kennicott and Bering had been on shift four nights in a row and were just an hour away from going home for four days' rest when this "hotshot" emergency call came in. They'd been across the street, strolling through the St. Lawrence Market, the city's big indoor food emporium, which was setting up for the day.

When he hit the sixth floor, a small drop of perspiration formed at the base of Kennicott's neck and began to work its way down his backbone. Up until this call, it had been a pretty quiet night. A Tamil guy over in Regent Park had bitten off part of his wife's ear—when they

got there, the wife claimed she'd fallen on a piece of glass. The coach house of a gay couple in Cabbagetown had been broken into and the intruder had left a turd on their Persian rug. On Jarvis Street an underage prostitute claimed she'd been punched in the face by the old wino who gave her a room in exchange for a nightly blow job—then she propositioned Kennicott. Run-of-the-mill stuff.

By the tenth floor he was breathing hard. It had been three and a half years since he'd joined the force, turning his back on a promising career as a young lawyer at one of the city's top firms. The reason? His older brother, Michael, had been murdered twelve months before. When the investigation seemed to be going nowhere, he'd traded in his legal robes for a badge.

This was exactly what he wanted, the chance to work on a homicide, he thought as he started to take the stairs three at a time and clicked on his radio. "Kennicott here," he said to Bering. "I'm approaching the eleventh floor."

"Ten-four. Forensics, Homicide, and lots of cars are on the way. I've disabled the elevators. No one's come down the stairs. Turn off the radio. That way you can make a silent entry."

"Ten-four. Over and out."

Kennicott burst through the door on the twelfth floor and stopped. A long hallway ran straight ahead before it turned, presumably to the elevator and the other half of the floor. Pale white wall sconces cast a gauzelike light onto muted yellow walls. There was only one apartment in this section of the hall.

Kennicott moved cautiously down to 12A. The door was halfway open. Taking a deep breath, he pushed it all the way to the wall as he unholstered his gun. Stepping forward, he found himself in a long, wide hallway that had a light-stained hardwood floor. Everything was quiet. It felt strange to barge into this calm, well-appointed suite, his gun out as if he were a little boy playing cops and robbers in his backyard.

"Toronto Police," he said in a loud voice.

"We are presently seated in the breakfast room located at the rear

of the flat," an East Indian–sounding male voice called out. "The deceased lady is in the hall bathroom."

He checked behind the front door and then walked slowly down the hallway, his boots thumping on the wood floor. Midway down, a door to his right was slightly ajar. The light was on, and he could see a sliver of white tiles. He didn't have gloves on, so he elbowed the door open.

It was a small bathroom, and the door opened to the wall. He took two steps in. A raven-haired woman lay in the tub. Her eyes were wide-open. Her face was drained of all blood, making it almost as white as the tub. There was no movement.

He backed out of the room, careful not to touch anything. The sweat on his body felt sticky.

"You will find us here," the East Indian voice said again.

A few more steps down the hall and Kennicott came to a big eat-in kitchen. To his right was Kevin Brace, the famous radio host, sitting quietly in a wrought-iron chair. He was holding out a ceramic mug. He wore tattered slippers, and his frayed bathrobe was pulled up tight around his neck. His scruffy beard and his trademark old-fashioned large wire-rimmed glasses made him instantly recognizable. Brace didn't even look up.

Across the table from Brace, an elderly brown-skinned man in a suit and tie was leaning over and pouring tea into Brace's mug. Between the two men, a gaudy Tiffany lamp hovered over the table, like a large bubble in a cartoon in which dialogue was waiting to be written. Under the lamp's glow was a mostly eaten plate of sliced oranges. Kennicott could see that they were red. Blood oranges, he thought.

On the far wall, floor-to-ceiling south-facing windows looked over Lake Ontario, which stretched out like an enormous black pool. Barely illuminated by the hint of early-morning light was the chain of small islands that formed a half-moon arc across the bay.

Kennicott stopped momentarily, disoriented by the expansive view and the calm tableau in front of him. With his gun still out, he stepped onto the slick tile kitchen floor. Suddenly his right foot slid out from

under him. He jammed his arm down to break his fall, and the gun skittered out of his hand and slid halfway across the floor.

What a rookie move, Kennicott thought as he pulled himself up. Great. The detective who gets this case will love this.

Over at the table, Brace was pouring honey into his mug and stirring his tea, as if nothing had happened.

Kennicott edged toward his gun, careful not to slip again. "Kevin Brace?" he asked.

Brace avoided Kennicott's eyes. His glasses were smudged. He didn't say anything, just concentrated on stirring his tea, like a Swiss watchmaker at his workbench.

Kennicott picked up his gun. "Mr. Brace, I am Officer Daniel Kennicott of the Toronto Police. Is the woman in the bathtub your wife?"

"She certainly is," the East Indian man said. "And she is most assuredly dead. I saw much death in my years as a chief engineer for Indian Railways, which is the largest transportation company in the world."

Kennicott looked over at the man. "I see, Mr.—"

The elderly man jumped to his feet so quickly that Kennicott took a step back. "Gurdial Singh," he said. "I am Mr. Brace's morning newspaper delivery person. I contacted the police service."

"Morning newspaper delivery person," "police service," Kennicott thought. The phrases sounded so odd, he had to stop himself from smiling. He reached for his hand radio.

"I arrived a minute earlier than my usual time, at five twenty-nine, and called at five thirty-one, once I had confirmed the fatality," Mr. Singh said. "Mr. Kevin and I have been having our tea, awaiting your arrival. This is our second pot. It is a special Darjeeling I bring the first of each month. Most effective for constipation."

Kennicott looked at Brace. He was studying his spoon as if it were a priceless antique. Sliding the gun into its holster, Kennicott took a step back toward the table.

He touched Brace lightly on the shoulder. "Mr. Brace, you are

under arrest for murder," he said. He advised Brace of his right to counsel.

Brace didn't change his gaze. He just flicked his free hand toward Kennicott, like a magician pulling something out of his sleeve. There was a business card between his bloodied fingers: NANCY PARISH, BARRISTER AND SOLICITOR, PRACTICE RESTRICTED TO CRIMINAL LAW.

Kennicott clicked on his radio. "Kennicott here."

"What's your location?" Bering asked.

"I'm in the condo." Kennicott kept his voice low. "The suspect's here with the witness, Mr. Gurdial Singh, the newspaper . . . delivery person. The scene is calm. The victim is in the hall bathtub. Appears DOA. I've made an arrest." Reporting that a victim appeared to be deceased, dead on arrival, was the top priority.

"What's he doing?"

Kennicott looked at Brace. The gray-haired broadcaster was pouring milk into his tea. "Drinking tea," he said.

"Okay. Just watch him. Backup is on the way."

"Ten-four."

"And Kennicott. Record every word he says."

"Got it. Over and out." Kennicott put the radio into its hip holder, and he could feel the adrenaline in his system begin to slow down.

What would happen next? He studied Brace. Now his spoon was on the table and he was sipping his Darjeeling tea. Looking placidly out the window. Kennicott knew that a case like this could go in all sorts of unexpected directions, but as he looked at the little tea party in the kitchen, there was no doubt in his mind that Kevin Brace wasn't going to say a word.