Sworn to Silence

Linda Castillo

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Extract

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Forthwith the devil did appear,
For name him and he's always near.

– Matthew Prior, *Hans Carvel*

Prologue

She hadn't believed in monsters since she was six years old, back when her mom would check the closet and look beneath her bed at night. But at the age of twenty-one, bound and brutalized and lying naked on a concrete floor that was as cold as lake ice, she believed.

Enveloped in darkness, she listened to the hard drum of her heart. She couldn't stop shivering. Couldn't keep her teeth from chattering. Every minute sound made her body tense in terrible anticipation of the monster's return.

In the beginning, she'd entertained fantasies of escape or convincing her captor to let her go. But she was a realist; she knew this wasn't going to end nicely. There would be no negotiation. No police rescue. No last-minute reprieve. The monster was going to kill her. It was no longer a question of if, but when. The waiting was almost as hellish as death itself.

She didn't know where she was or how long she'd been there. She'd lost all concept of time and place. All she could discern about her surroundings was that the place stank of rotting meat, and every little noise echoed as if she were in a cave.

She was hoarse from screaming. Exhausted from struggling. Demoralized by the horrors he'd inflicted upon her. A small

part of her just wanted this terrible struggle for life to end. But dear God how she wanted to live . . .

She lay on her side with her knees drawn up to her chest. The wire binding her wrists behind her had tormented her at first, but over the hours the pain had ebbed. She tried not to think of the things he'd done to her.

The sound of boots against concrete jerked her from her reverie. She raised her head and looked around wildly, trying in vain to see past the blindfold. She could hear her breaths rushing between her teeth, a wild animal that had been hunted down for slaughter. She hated him. If only she could loosen her binds and run . . .

'Stay away from me you son of a bitch!' she shouted. '*Stay away!*'

But she knew he wouldn't.

A gloved hand brushed her hip. Vaguely, she was aware of hands touching her feet. The distant clink of steel against concrete. Cold seeping into her until her entire body quaked uncontrollably.

A pristine new terror whipped through her when she realized her attacker had wrapped a chain around her ankles. The cold links dug into her skin when it was drawn tight. She tried to kick, tried to free her legs so she could make one last, desperate stand.

But it was too late.

She screamed until she ran out of breath. She floundered, twisting and writhing, but her efforts were futile. Above her, steel rattled against steel. The chain slowly lifted her feet from the floor.

'Why are you doing this?' she cried. '*Why?*'

The chain jangled, pulling her feet upward, higher and higher until she was hanging upside down. All the blood in her body seemed to pool in her head. It pounded in her face, the

veins throbbing. She fought to right herself, but gravity tugged her down. 'Help me! Someone!'

A mindless panic gripped her when a gloved hand grasped her hair. A scream poured from her lungs when the monster drew her head back. The sudden heat of a razor cut pricked her throat. As if from a great distance she heard the sound of water pouring down, like the spray from a shower echoing off tile walls. Staring into the darkness of the blindfold, she listened to her lifeblood drain away.

ONE

The cruiser's strobes cast red and blue light onto winter-dead trees. Officer T.J. Banks pulled the car onto the shoulder and flipped on the spotlight, running the beam along the edge of the field where corn stalks shivered in the cold. Twenty yards away, six Jersey cows stood in the bar ditch, chewing their cud.

'Stupid fuckin' cows,' he muttered. Besides chickens, they had to be the dumbest animals on earth.

He hit the radio. 'Dispatch, this is forty-seven.'

'What's up, T.J.?' Mona, the night dispatcher, asked.

'I got a 10–54. Stutz's damn cows are out again.'

'That's the second time in a week.'

'Always on my shift, too.'

'So what are you going to do? He ain't got no phone out there.'

A glance at the clock on the dash told him it was nearly two a.m. 'Well, I'm not going to stand out here in the frickin' cold and round up these stupid shits.'

'Maybe you ought to just shoot 'em.'

'Don't tempt me.' Looking around, he sighed. Livestock on the road at this hour was an accident waiting to happen. If someone came around the curve too fast it could be bad. He thought of all the paperwork an accident would entail and

shook his head. 'I'll set up some flares then go drag his Amish ass out of bed.'

'Let me know if you need backup.' She snickered.

Yanking the zipper of his coat up to his chin, he slid his flashlight from its nest beside the seat and got out of the cruiser. It was so cold he could feel his nose hairs freezing. His boots crunched through snow as he made his way to the bar ditch, his breaths puffing out in front of him. He hated the graveyard shift almost as much as he hated winter.

He ran the flashlight beam along the fence line. Sure enough, twenty feet away two strands of barbed wire had come loose from a gnarled locust-wood post. Hoof prints told him several head had discovered the opening and ventured onto the shoulder for some illicit grazing.

'Stupid fuckin' cows.'

T.J. went back to the cruiser and popped the trunk. Removing two flares, he set them up on the centreline to forewarn traffic. He was on his way back to the cruiser when he spotted something in the snow on the opposite side of the road. Curious, he crossed to it. A solitary woman's shoe lay on the shoulder. Judging from its condition and lack of snow cover, it hadn't been there long. Teenagers, probably. This deserted stretch of road was a favourite place to smoke dope and have sex. They were almost as stupid as cows.

Frowning, T.J. nudged the shoe with his foot. That was when he noticed the drag marks, as if something heavy had been hauled through the snow. He traced the path with the flashlight beam, tracking it to the fence and into the field beyond. The hairs at the back of his neck prickled when he spotted blood. A lot of it.

'What the hell?'

He followed the trail into the ditch where yellow grass poked up through the snow. He climbed the fence and found

more blood on the other side, stark and black against pristine white. It was enough to give a guy the willies.

The path took him to a stand of bare-branched hedge apple trees at the edge of a cornfield. He could hear himself breathing hard, the dead corn stalks whispering all around. T.J. set his hand on his revolver and swept the beam in a 360-degree circle. That was when he noticed the object in the snow.

At first he thought an animal had been hit and dragged itself there to die. But as he neared, the beam revealed something else. Pale flesh. A shock of darkish hair. A bare foot sticking out of the snow. Adrenalin kicked hard in his gut. 'Holy shit.'

For an instant he couldn't move. He couldn't stop looking at the dark circle of blood and colourless flesh. Giving himself a hard mental shake, T.J. dropped to his knees beside the body. His first thought was that she might still be alive. Brushing at the snow, he set his hand against a bare shoulder. Her skin was ice-cold, but he rolled her over anyway. He saw more blood and pasty flesh and glazed eyes that seemed to stare right at him.

Shaken, he scrambled back. His hand trembled as he grappled for his lapel mike. 'Dispatch! This is forty-seven!'

'What now, T.J? One of them cows chase you up a tree?'

'I got a fuckin' body here at Stutz's place.'

'*What?*'

They used the ten-code system in Painters Mill, but for the life of him he couldn't remember the number for a dead body. He'd never had to use it. 'I said I got a dead body.'

'I heard you the first time.' But the words were followed by a stunned pause as realization hit her. 'What's your twenty?'

'Dog Leg Road, just south of the covered bridge.'

A beat of silence. 'Who is it?'

Everyone knew everyone in Painters Mill, but he'd never

seen this woman before. 'I don't know. A woman. Naked as the day she came into this world and deader than Elvis.'

'A wreck or what?'

'This was no accident.' Setting his hand on the butt of his .38, T.J. scanned the shadows within the trees. He could feel his heart beating fast in his chest. 'You'd better call the chief, Mona. I think we got us a murder.'

TWO

I dream of death.

As always, I'm in the kitchen of the old farmhouse. Blood shimmers stark and red against the scuffed hardwood floor. The scents of yeast bread and fresh-cut hay mingle with the harsh stench of my own terror, a contrariety my mind cannot reconcile. The curtains billow in the breeze coming through the window above the sink. I see flecks of blood on the yellow fabric. More spatter on the wall. I feel the stickiness of it on my hands.

I crouch in the corner, animal sounds I don't recognize tearing from my throat like stifled screams. I feel death in the room. Darkness all around me. Inside me. And at the age of fourteen, I know evil exists in my safe and sheltered world.

The phone rattles me from sleep. The nightmare slinks back into its hole like some nocturnal creature. Rolling, I grapple on the nightstand and set the phone against my ear. 'Yeah.' My voice comes out like a croak.

'Chief. This is Mona. Sorry to wake you, but I think you'd better come in.'

Mona is my graveyard dispatcher. She's not prone to hysterics, so the anxiety in her tone garners my full attention. 'What happened?'

'T.J.'s out at the Stutz place. He was rounding up cows and found a dead body.'

Suddenly, I'm no longer sleepy. Sitting up, I shove the hair from my face. 'What?'

'He found a body. Sounds pretty shaken up.'

Judging from the tone of her voice, T.J. isn't the only one. I throw my legs over the side of the bed and reach for my robe. A glance at the alarm tells me it's almost two thirty a.m. 'An accident?'

'Just a body. Nude. Female.'

Realizing I need my clothes, not the robe, I turn on the lamp. The light hurts my eyes, but I'm fully awake now. I'm still trying to get my mind around the idea of one of my officers finding a body. I ask for the location, and she tells me.

'Call Doc Coblentz,' I say. Doc Coblentz is one of six doctors in the town of Painters Mill, Ohio, and acting coroner for Holmes County.

I cross to the closet and reach for my bra, socks and long johns. 'Tell T.J. not to touch anything or move the body. I'll be there in ten minutes.'

The Stutz farm sits on eighty acres bordered on one side by Dog Leg Road, on the other by the north fork of Painters Creek. The location Mona gave me is half a mile from the old covered bridge on a deserted stretch of road that dead-ends at the county line.

I crave coffee as I pull up behind T.J.'s cruiser. My headlights reveal his silhouette in the driver's seat. I'm pleased to see he set out flares and left his strobes on. Grabbing my Mag-Lite, I slide out of the Explorer. The cold shocks me, and I huddle deeper into my parka, wishing I'd remembered my hat. T.J. looks shaken as I approach.

'What do you have?'

'A body. Female.' He's doing his best to maintain his cop persona, but his hand shakes as he points toward the field. I know those tremors aren't from the temperature. 'Thirty feet in by those trees.'

'You sure she's dead?'

T.J.'s Adam's apple bobs twice. 'She's cold. No pulse. There's blood all over the fuckin' place.'

'Let's take a look.' We start toward the trees. 'Did you touch anything? Disturb the scene?'

He drops his head slightly, and I know he did. 'I thought maybe she was . . . alive, so I rolled her over, checked.'

Not good, but I don't say anything. T.J. Banks has the makings of a good cop. He's diligent and serious about his work. But this is his first job in law enforcement. Having been my officer for only six months, he's green. I'd lay odds this is his first dead body.

We crunch through ankle-deep snow. A sense of dread staggers me when I spot the body. I wish for daylight, but it will be hours before my wish is granted. Nights are long this time of year.

The victim is naked. Late teens or early twenties. Dark blonde hair. A slick of blood two feet in diameter surrounds her head. She'd once been pretty, but in death her face is macabre. I can tell she'd originally been lying prone; lividity has set in, leaving one side of her face purple. Her eyes are halfway open and glazed. Her tongue bulges from between swollen lips, and I see ice crystals on it.

I squat next to the body. 'Looks like she's been here a few hours.'

'Starting to get freezer burn,' T.J. notes.

Though I was a patrol officer in Columbus, Ohio, for six years, a homicide detective for two, I feel as if I'm out of my league. Columbus isn't exactly the murder capital of the world,

but like every city it has a dark side. I've seen my share of death. Still, the blatant brutality of this crime shocks me. I want to think violent murder doesn't happen in towns like Painters Mill.

But I know it does.

I remind myself this is a crime scene. Rising, I fan my flashlight beam around the perimeter. There are no tracks other than ours. With a sinking sensation, I realize we've contaminated possible evidence. 'Call Glock and tell him to get out here.'

'He's on vac—'

My look cuts his words short.

The Painters Mill PD consists of myself, three full-time officers, two dispatchers and one auxiliary officer. Rupert 'Glock' Maddox is a former Marine and my most experienced. He earned his nickname because of his fondness for his sidearm. Vacation or not, I need him.

'Tell him to bring crime-scene tape.' I think about what else we're going to need. 'Get an ambulance out here. Alert the hospital in Millersburg. Tell them we'll be transporting a body to the morgue. Oh, and tell Rupert to bring coffee. Lots of it.' I look down at the body. 'We're going to be here a while.'

Doctor Ludwig Coblentz is a rotund man with a big head, a balding pate and a belly the size of a Volkswagen. I meet him on the shoulder as he slides from his Escalade. 'I hear one of your officers had a close encounter with a dead body,' he says grimly.

'Not just dead,' I say. 'Murdered.'

He wears khaki trousers and a red plaid pyjama top beneath his parka. I watch as he pulls a black bag from the passenger seat. Holding it like a lunchbox he turns to me, his expression telling me he's ready to get down to business.

I lead him into the bar ditch. It's a short walk to the body, but his breathing is laboured by the time we climb the fence. 'How the hell did a body get all the way out here?' he mutters.

'Someone dumped her or she dragged herself before she died.'

He gives me a look, but I don't elaborate. I don't want him walking into this with preconceived notions. First impressions are important in police work.

We duck under the crime-scene tape Glock has strung through the trees like toilet paper at Halloween. T.J. has clipped an A.C. work-light to a branch above the body. It doesn't cast much light, but it's better than flashlights and will free up our hands. I wish for a generator.

'Scene is secure.' Glock approaches holding two cups of coffee and shoves one at me. 'You look like you could use this.'

Taking the Styrofoam cup, I peel back the tab and sip. 'God, that's good.'

He glances at the body. 'You figure someone dumped her?'

'Looks that way.'

T.J. joins us, his gaze flicking to the dead woman. 'Jeez, Chief, I hate to see her laid out like that.'

I hate it, too. From where we stand I can see her breasts and pubic hair. The woman inside me cringes at that. But there's nothing I can do about it; we can't move her or cover her until we process the scene. 'Do either of you recognize her?' I ask.

Both men shake their heads.

Sipping my coffee, I study the scene, trying to piece together what might have happened. 'Glock, do you still have that old Polaroid?'

'In my trunk.'

'Take some photos of the body and the scene.' I think of the trampled snow and mentally kick myself for disturbing the

area. A boot tread might have been helpful. 'I want shots of the drag marks, too.' I speak to both men now. 'Set up a grid inside the crime-scene tape and walk it, starting at the trees. Bag everything you find, even if you think it's not important. Be sure to photograph everything before you touch it. See if you can find a boot tread. Keep your eyes open for clothing or a wallet.'

'Will do, Chief.' Glock and T.J. start toward the trees.

I turn to Doc Coblentz, who is standing next to the body. 'Any idea who she is?' I ask.

'I don't recognize her.' The doc removes his mittens, slides his chubby fingers into latex gloves. He grunts as he kneels.

'Any idea how long she's been dead?'

'Hard to tell because of the cold.' He lifts her arm. Red grooves mark her wrist. The surrounding flesh is bruised and smeared with blood. 'Her hands were bound,' he says.

I look at the scored flesh. She'd struggled violently to get free. 'With wire?'

'That would be my guess.'

Her painted fingernails tell me she's not Amish. I notice two nails on her right hand are broken to the quick. She'd fought back. I make a mental note to get nail scrapings.

'Rigor has set in,' the doc says. 'She's been dead at least eight hours. Judging from the ice crystals on the mucous membranes, probably closer to ten. Once I get her to the hospital, I'll get a core body temp. Body temp drops a degree to a degree and a half per hour, so a core will narrow down TOD.' He releases her hand.

His finger hovers above the purple flesh of her cheek. 'Lividity in the face here.' He looks up at me. His glasses are fogged. His eyes appear huge behind the thick lenses. 'Did someone move her?' he asks.

I nod, but I don't mention who. 'What about cause of death?'

Removing a penlight from his inside pocket, the doctor peels back an eyelid and shines it into her eye. 'No petechial haemorrhages.'

'So she wasn't strangled.'

'Right.' Gently, he sets his hand beneath her chin and shifts her head to the left. Her lips part, and I notice two of her front teeth are broken to the gum line. He turns her head to the right and the wound on her throat gapes like a bloody mouth.

'Throat was cut,' the doc says.

'Any idea what kind of weapon made the wound?'

'Something very sharp. With no serration. No obvious sign of tearing. Not a slash or it would be longer and more shallow on the edges. Hard to tell in this light.' Gently, he rolls her body to one side.

My eyes skim the corpse. Her left shoulder is covered with bright red abrasions or possibly burns. More of the same appear on her left buttock. Both knees are abraded as well as the tops of her feet. The skin at both ankles is the colour of ripe eggplant. The flesh isn't laid open like her wrists, but her feet have definitely been bound.

My heart drops into my stomach when I notice more blood on her abdomen, just above her navel. Obscured within the dark smear is something I've seen before. Something I still see in my nightmares. 'What about that?'

'Good God.' The doctor's voice quivers. 'It looks like something carved into her flesh.'

'Hard to make out what it is.' But in that instant I'm certain we both know. Neither of us wants to say it aloud.

The doc leans closer, so that his face is less than a foot from the wound. 'Looks like two Xs and three Is.'

'Or the Roman numeral twenty-three,' I finish.

He looks at me and in his eyes I see the same horror and disbelief I feel clenching my chest. 'It's been sixteen years since I've seen anything like it,' he whispers.

Staring at the bloody carving on this young woman's body, I'm filled with a revulsion so deep I shiver.

After a moment, Doc Coblentz leans back on his heels. Shaking his head, he motions toward the marks on her buttocks, the broken fingernails and teeth. 'Someone put her through a lot.'

Outrage and a fear I don't want to acknowledge sweep through me. 'Was she sexually assaulted?'

My heart pounds as he shines the penlight onto her pubis. I see blood on the insides of her thighs and shudder inwardly.

'Looks like it.' He shakes his head. 'I'll know more once I get her to the morgue. Hopefully the son of a bitch left us a DNA sample.'

The fist twisting my gut forewarns me it isn't going to be that easy.

Looking down at the body, I wonder what kind of beast could do this to a young woman with so much life ahead. I wonder how many lives will be destroyed by her death. The coffee has gone bitter on my tongue. I'm no longer cold. I'm deeply offended and angered by the brutality of what I see. Worse, I'm afraid.

'Will you bag her hands for me, Doc?'

'Sure.'

'How soon can you do an autopsy?'

Coblentz braces his hands on his knees and shoves himself to his feet. 'I'll shuffle some appointments and do it today.'

We stand in the wind and cold and try in vain not to think about what this woman endured before her death.

'He killed her somewhere else.' I glance at the drag marks.

'No sign of a struggle. If he'd cut her throat here, there'd be more blood.'

The doctor nods. 'Haemorrhage ceases when the heart stops. She was probably already dead when he dumped her. More than likely the blood here is residual that leaked from that neck wound.'

I think of the people who must have loved her. Parents. Husband. Children. And I am saddened. 'This wasn't a crime of passion.'

'The person who did this took his time.' The doctor's eyes meet mine. 'This was calculated. Organized.'

I know what he's thinking. I see it in the depths of his eyes. I know because I'm thinking the very same thing.

'Just like before,' the doctor finishes.