

Brown / PREDATOR WITHIN / 1
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It's a hot, muggy, summer night where daylight temperatures reach a scorching 100 degrees in the shade, and evening hours find no relief. On days and nights like these, people of Rochester seek cool shelter in their shade-drawn, air-conditioned homes. It is too hot and mosquito infested to sit outside. For this reason, the killer chose tonight to lighten his load.

He was no dummy.

He knew the only way to get caught was to screw up. Some of the more notorious in history, Bundy, Manson, Berkowitz, got caught because they got sloppy. Because they felt invincible.

But he wouldn't be so stupid.

There'd be no broken taillight, no unnecessary speeding tickets. Nope, he'd stop when he was ready to stop.

They'd catch him only when, and if, he was ready.

His small, compact car slowly crept to the edge of the soft shoulder along a dark, deserted road a few miles east of downtown. He rolled down his window and inhaled the humid air. Confident that he was alone, he jumped out of his vehicle and opened the hatch. Neither interior dome light nor trunk light went on. He planned ahead.

A canvas bag is quickly lifted out, its contents dumped onto the hard asphalt. He raises his head up, nostrils flaring as if he could smell changes in the air around him. Confident he deposited his package unseen, he returned to the car and drove away, leaving behind his bag of goodies to be found...he had his fill of fun with it.

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Eighteen hours later a middle-aged couple, mindful of the importance of daily exercise, was biking down the Paint Creek Trail that ran through Rochester common and northward to the neighboring towns. On this day, the couple decided to alter their regular route and cut through one of

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the newer sub divisions before returning home. It was on that scarcely traveled road, that they came upon the canvas bag.

“Honey,” Bob Travis stopped his bike and motioned to his wife as she approached. “Look at this!”

“What is it?” his wife Sally asked, coming to a stop and reaching for her water bottle.

“Dunno. Could be someone threw it out while driving by.”

“Yeah, so?” Sally was disinterested and desperately wanted to complete their circuit. It was just like her husband to come up with an excuse to interrupt their exercise.

“Yeah, but, who throws trash out in a canvas bag?” Bob couldn’t hide the gleam in his eyes. “Could be something worth keeping...maybe money from a bank heist or something.”

The displeasure on Sally’s face was quite apparent.

“Ah, come on Bob. Let’s quit the bullshit and get going!”

Bob wasn’t listening. He was already off his bike and inspecting the bag’s exterior.

“Shit!” Sally disgustedly returned her water bottle and began pedaling up the street. “Catch up when you’re finished, Columbo!”

Bob fumbled with the zipper. Whatever was inside was sure bulky and heavy. Is that how packages of freshly printed money felt? - he wondered as his mind raced.

When he finally succeeded with the zipper, and the bag fell open, nothing in his wildest nightmares could have prepared him for the gruesome secrets the abandoned bag possessed.

Two blocks up, Sally Travis could hear her husband’s scream.

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Local Rochester police flooded and secured the area within minutes. The County Sheriff’s office was called in. The police chief realized that once the news traveled, his men would be inundated with on-lookers and gawkers. The important thing for him was to maintain the crime scene until the county boys got there to go over everything.

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Now, with the yellow police tape extending around a quarter mile area, two sharply dressed men sat in the front seat of their dark colored sedan. They quietly observed the scene, and took in all the commotion with a watchful eye.

They intently surveyed the faces in the crowd - for what, they weren't really sure - but it's a known fact that a murderer is compelled to come back and observe. Is this person curious? Both men wonder.

"So what are we doing here if we haven't been officially called in yet?" the younger man asked his companion, who sat motionless behind the wheel. The older man, a black man with graying temples and a straight jaw that many Hollywood stars would kill for, didn't immediately answer. His thoughts were somewhere else.

"Jack....," the younger man persisted, "didn't you hear me, or are you just ignoring me?"

"Hmmm..."

Jack Saunders slowly glanced over toward his partner. Saunders was a good looking man in his late forties, with deep set features, offset by a small, pencil thin mustache. His physique was similar to a fireplug, short and stocky. The muscles throughout his body displayed the ripples of twenty years of weight lifting. But it was Saunders' intense brown eyes that people always remembered. They were able to pierce even the densest veils of secrecy to get to the truth.

He had been with the FBI since graduating college, always staying out of office politics and concentrating on his job. As a result, he'd held a series of menial jobs until finally finding his niche in the Behavioral Science Unit.

His ability to keep the emotion out and stay logically focused on the task at hand made him a successful profiler. He'd been involved in many cases - none that were considered high profile or big news - and that suited him just fine. The less news and exposure those animals received, the better Saunders felt. There'd been too many books, stories and movies glorifying these sub-humans, and he had less stomach for it as the publicity grew.

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Today, he and his partner of five years, Bill Rossi, flew to Detroit on an FBI jet after hearing about the latest possible murder. Although the local news had not made the obvious connections, the investigators in Washington were convinced that there was a full-blown serial killer loose in Michigan. By the recent activity, the killer's hunting had begun to intensify.

The Bureau had not been called in by the local law enforcement and, to date, none of the crimes stipulated any kind of Federal involvement. That wouldn't stop the agents from collecting data and information to prepare for the time they would finally be invited in.

"Hmmm," Jack began, "I'm just thinking. How many does this make?"

"But we don't know whether this one follows the pattern..."

"Let's say it does," Jack interrupted, "how many?"

"Well..." Bill thought out loud, "the local law, if pressed, will put it at three. With our indicators, we believe it could probably be double that. So, we're talking maybe five or six."

"Six? Jesus!" Saunders couldn't believe it. "Six dead kids! And no one has a clue! Fucking unbelievable!"

He shook his head and looked out his window. He watched with disdain at the police, falling over each other, stepping into obvious evidence in the race to find something significant. This murder would never be solved, not unless they found some important forensic evidence. But that seemed highly unlikely, considering the previous murders. No, this predator was different, smarter and no doubt about it - knew the latest police tactics and techniques in assessing a crime scene and the corpus delictic evidence.

"This one's going to be a dead end, too," Saunders quietly mouthed toward the window. "They aren't going to find anything here."

"How can you be so sure?" Rossi asked.

When Jack Saunders turned his head to his partner, his deep-set eyes hid the sadness.

"Because, he doesn't want them to. It's a game and so far, this monster's in charge."

"So...what's next? What do we do?"

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“Do?” Saunders replied, a smile forming on his face. “I think it’s time we go on the offensive, that’s what. Look over there.” He motioned his head in the direction of a young woman in the crowd of gawkers. “See that girl...with the strawberry blonde hair?”

“Yeah...why?”

“Bring her over here. If my guess is correct, she could prove to be very helpful in this investigation.”

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Among the onlookers to the scene was a young woman with a steno pad, furiously putting pen to paper describing the chaos. Finding her writing to be slow and clumsy, she ran to her car looking for her mini tape recorder. Checking to make sure the batteries were good and she had an additional cassette just in case, she rushed back toward the commotion.

“This is Julia Sorenson, reporting for the Sentinel News,” she barked into the small mike embedded in the micro recorder. “I’m here at the latest scene of yet another unexplained child death. By most reports, this makes the official count at three, but the unofficial count could be much higher – maybe as high as four or five.

“Why the discrepancy? It’s simple. Authorities are saying the recent deaths are a result of domestic violence, and are not related to one another. Further, they back up their claims by insisting that the evidence and nature of the crimes do not match. It doesn’t matter, that no one in the press has had the opportunity to have access to this so-called evidence.

“With the recent hysteria from the parents of the dead children and some special interest groups, the local authorities are now admitting that at least two of the slayings could be related.

“Authorities are aware of the mass hysteria and the role it could play if the public believes a serial killer is on the prowl. Local law agencies are mindful of the money and power in Oakland County and do not want to upset a community that houses individuals who control not only some of the largest companies in the world, but county and state politics, as well.”

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Julia clicked off the recorder and checked to make sure it was properly working before continuing.

“It is the belief of this reporter that it isn’t fair for a few law officers to arbitrarily make decisions relative to the disclosure of facts that - quite frankly - could impact many area families. If there is a predator loose among our community, it is our right to know that and understand what we have to do to protect our children and our loved ones.”

With a smile, she clicked the stop button, confident that this story could be her big break, if only she could substantiate her suspicions. She slowly scanned her surroundings, looking at the shocked and excited expressions on the faces of the on-lookers, when she saw the man approaching her.

At first, she pretended like she hadn’t seen him, slipping a little deeper into the crowd standing just outside the yellow tape. The tall man continued coming straight toward her. Julia thought the man’s appearance curious at first. Wearing a white shirt, tie and dark blue suit, he seemed oddly out of place with all the T-shirts, shorts and running shoes many of the spectators wore on this already humid Saturday morning.

Before she realized it, he was next to her and she could see that he was a younger man, about thirty years old, with dark, thick hair combed neatly back off his handsome, clean shaven face. She immediately found him attractive.

“Miss,” Bill Rossi gave her his most sincere smile, “do you mind stepping over to the car?”

Julia looked around at the people in the crowd, who hardly noticed the pair. She was confident though. If she felt threatened in the slightest, all she had to do was scream and police officers would descend upon them. But her curiosity had been peaked, as she wondered what this smartly dressed man wanted.

“I don’t think so,” Julia answered sarcastically, “not on the first date.”

“Look, Miss...,” Rossi insisted.

“Just who are you?” Julia feigned annoyance. “What do you want?”

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Rossi reached into his blazer and pulled out his wallet. He glanced around and quickly flashed his credentials. Her eyes grew wide as she glanced from the badge to his face and back to his badge again. She smiled.

“FBI, huh?”

Rossi cringed and hoped no one heard her. Saunders distinctly told him to guarantee nobody knew the FBI was there. All it'd do is create hostilities with the cops even before their involvement began. It seemed weird though, that neither man felt their clothes would make them look out of place.

“Please miss, not so loud. My partner would like you to step over here.”

“Okay. Let's say I do. What do you guys want with me? Huh? You think I have something important on this little thing? You gonna take my recorder?”

Rossi laughed that this young girl thought she had something critical that the FBI needed on this case. He could see a shift in her demeanor and quickly changed his approach.

“Miss...listen, my partner and I were observing you over there and we noticed that you're obviously a member of the press. Is that correct?”

The brightness and smile returned to her face.

“Why, yes. Well, exactly...I'm working the summer...as an intern while I finish college. I'm mostly working in the production area, but feel that this story could be my break out of the basement. Know what I mean?”

Rossi smiled and nodded. He couldn't believe the intuitiveness that Saunders possessed. Jack had pointed the girl out of the crowd and stated she was either a newspaper intern or was working on a college paper. Either way, Saunders felt there was a way to use her. It would be tricky and it greatly depended on the girl's cooperation.

“We can provide certain information that could possibly aid you in breaking out of that basement job. Interested?”

The hairs on the back of her neck pricked up as she cautiously eyed Rossi.

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“Why me? Why now?”

“My partner will explain everything -”

“Uh, uh. Explain it to me now.”

This was proceeding way too slow for Rossi. All he could see was the color in Jack’s face rising the longer this conversation took. Already, several people were interested in their discussion. The last thing he and Saunders needed was any kind of focus toward them.

“Look, you probably aren’t as smart as we first thought. Any way, if you want to look a gift horse in the mouth...”

Rossi began to move away from the crowd toward his car, anticipating that she would follow, which she did.

“Hold on a sec - ”

“Forget it!” He hastened his gait, drawing her further away.

“Hey!” She caught up to him and reached for his arm. Rossi was half way to the car when he turned.

“Look, young lady - ”

“The name’s Julia. Julia Sorenson.”

“Okay, Julia. You either want the information, or you don’t. That’s the decision. There’s my partner. We have to be careful, because we haven’t been called into this case, and could get severely reprimanded by our bosses if they even knew we are here. Understand?”

“I think so...”

“Then come quickly, or forget it!

Rossi moved on and Julia met him stride for stride until they were both at the side of the road. Saunders slid the window down and looked at Julia.

“Get in the back.”

She didn’t like his attitude and thought about flipping him off, changed her mind, and hopped in. She wanted the exclusive on the story, so she threw caution to the wind. Once the door shut Julia

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suddenly realized there were no window buttons or locks. She pushed her rising fear down and composed herself. She waited until Rossi slid into his spot in front before speaking.

“So...what do you boys have for me?” She tried to sound confident and adult.

Sanders grumbled and Rossi looked uneasy. When Saunders finally turned around to face her, Julia was mesmerized by the dark man’s eyes. So drawn in by their intensity, she didn’t hear what he said initially.

“Hmmm...I’m sorry...whatcha say?”

“Young lady,” Saunders gruffly replied, “you have to pay attention!”

“Of course...I’m sorry.”

“Now listen closely. What I’m about to tell you is highly confidential. You can not...I repeat, can not let anyone know you received this information from the FBI. Understood?”

“Yes...I think so...but how do I convince my editors -?”

“Cite other sources, sources inside the County Sheriff’s office, I don’t care! But if you claim to have received this information from the Bureau, we will stringently deny it and any career you have ever envisioned in the newspaper field will be crushed quickly and permanently! Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. You seem like an intelligent woman.”

“But, why me? If I may be so bold - ”

“Because,” Rossi interceded, obviously hoping to offset his partner’s growing lack of patience by inserting himself into the conversation. “We can both benefit from this relationship, Julia.”

“You benefit by having some insider information and making a mark with your stories, we benefit by...by getting the right information out to the public and informing everyone of the danger.”

Rossi was happy with the way he presented it.

“I can understand that,” Julia replied, “but why isn’t the FBI involved? I mean, this is a serious situation, isn’t it?”

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“Precisely the point, young lady,” Saunders replied, grateful in the knowledge that they had finally won this inquisitive girl over. “In fact, Julia, because of the way the local authorities are handling this case and calling most of them “accidents”, or other ludicrous things, no one is looking for or focusing on a serial killer. That’s precisely what we believe is happening.”

“Is that why I’m here? So that I can report on what really is happening?”

“Absolutely,” Saunders replied, confident she was finally in the game.

“But, what’s your angle?,” Julia pried, “why are you so willing to give information? And again...why me?”

“Shit!” Saunders turned back around in his seat and eyed Rossi. “Maybe I was wrong...get rid of her!”

“No...Jack...wait!” Then Rossi turned to Julia, “Look...the reason we need this story to break, Julia, is...until it comes out, we aren’t able to participate. And until we participate, these killings will go on without much notice. So, do you understand? We can both benefit from this relationship.”

“Okay, okay. But the info can’t just stop here,” Julia responded. “I mean, think about it. If I get some source to come forward now and then it dries up, what kind of credibility will I have? Huh? You’ve got to give me a contact throughout the whole investigation. Until we get this guy. That’s the deal...otherwise, go screw yourselves!”

She sat back hoping against hope that they would bite.

From behind the wheel, Saunders smiled broadly. He had managed to sucker her. This girl thought she was good, but it was clear she wasn’t in his league. There wasn’t any harm in allowing her to believe she was. He glanced over toward Rossi and softly nodded.

“Okay,” Rossi said, taking the cue, “You’ve got a deal. We’ll ensure you have a legitimate contact in the Detroit FBI office. Okay?”

“You got it,” she replied, giving Rossi a sincere smile. “Before you begin, let me get my pad and pen...”

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“Don’t worry,” Rossi said, tossing a fresh steno pad and pen onto her lap, “here’s a new one.”

“Thanks.”

“Now listen closely,” Saunders began again without bothering to turn, “and I’ll give you a little insight into what’s been going on.”

Julia feverishly began writing, trying to keep up with his fast pace. She knew she had the scoop of the year and didn’t want to miss one word.

Of course, her little tape recorder had been running from the moment she met Rossi. Somehow, she knew no word would be overlooked.

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“Look Chief, this is definitely not something I’d make up,” she exclaimed.

“I’m sorry, Julia. I know your father carries some weight here at the paper, but there’s no way I’m going out on a limb like this. The answer’s no!”

Julia Sorenson had just delivered a copy of her story to Kevin Hopps, news editor at the Sentinel News where she had an internship for the summer.

She was twenty-one years old with strawberry blonde hair. Her petite stature complimented her tempestuous personality. Department editors were forewarned about her eagerness and initiative. That was precisely the reason Hopps decided to nip all this talk about a big story quickly, before it got out of hand.

“But, Mr. Hopps...you are turning your back on - ”

“On a pipe dream, Julia! A pipe dream! You want me to believe that someone in the Oakland County Sheriff’s department gave you this information? You want me to stake my reputation and that of this newspaper’s on someone’s whim?”

Hopps’ red face turned down toward the news copy, which he’d thrown on his desk. He grabbed it and shook it to emphasize his point.

“You are supposed to be learning the craft of what makes a newspaper tick, not acting like Woodward and Bernstein for God’s sakes.”

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If she didn't know how true the information was, or who her true confidants were, Julia would have hid her head in shame and left. As it was, her mind was already turning on ideas that would change Hopp's opinion, ever mindful of the ticking clock and the deadline for tomorrow morning's edition.

"What if I tell you my informer isn't from the Sheriff's office, but actually from a Federal agency? And, that I have proof of my information? Would that convince you?"

Hopps rolled his eyes. Everything he'd heard about this girl was true, times a hundred. He was wishing now that he'd taken his feature editor's daughter instead.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he slowly sat back into his chair and let the piece of paper float to his desktop. Sighing heavily, he looked up at the bright-eyed girl.

"Look, Julia, no offense...but...your story cites sources who told you there's a serial killer loose here in the Detroit area and that he's responsible for...not one or two murders, but possibly five or six? Do I have that right?"

"Yes sir."

"You began by telling me your sources were within the Sheriff's department, but now you tell me they aren't. In fact, your informers are some Feds. Is that right?"

"Yes." Julia was getting excited. It looked like Hopps believed her.

"And, please tell me...why would anyone - especially the Feds - give someone like you this information? I mean not to burst your bubble but, you're not exactly a reporter. In fact, you're damn close to not having a job here, period!"

Undaunted, Julia shook her head.

"I know...I know...this all sounds crazy but..."

She slid the micro-recorder from her small handbag and flashed it in front of Hopps.

"They didn't realize it, but I taped the whole conversation. I've got their names so we can check to make sure they are real agents. I've got the whole story right here on tape!"

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Hopps looked at her energized face and then down at the recorder where Julia had softly laid it. Could her story be real? Had she fallen into pertinent information that could break open a conspiracy to conceal evidence?

“You listened to it? Are the voices...the conversation audible? Can you make out what’s being said?”

“Listened to it all the way over here,” she replied confidently, “The agents’ names are Saunders and Rossi. They’re from the D.C. office. They also gave me a contact in their Detroit office, so I can continue to get information. Check their names, if you like, but it all seems legit”

Hopps didn’t hear that last part; his mind was somewhere else, thinking about the opportunity to finally scoop the other large paper in this market. To actually have an insider, could potentially allow his paper to milk headlines throughout the entire investigation right up to and including the capture and conviction of the assailant. He couldn’t believe his good fortune. If only it had been him and not this snot-nosed college kid they had approached.

No matter, as the investigation intensified, so would the scrutiny and the need for a more experienced, polished reporter. He would step in and...hello Pulitzer! He smiled.

“Okay,” he finally said, causing Julia to jump, “okay...we run with the story, provided your sources check out. Okay?”

“Yes sir!,” she piped up.

“And as we move forward,” Hopps continued, “you’ll have to introduce me to your contacts. Just to make sure they aren’t trying to use you, or something.’

Julia frowned. Saunders and Rossi distinctly cautioned her against any one else being involved. They threatened to pull the plug if anyone found out they had fed her information. She was just about to mention this fact to her news editor, but changed her mind. First things first. Let’s get the story printed then worry about how to handle Hopp’s demands for face-to-face contacts.

“Come on,” Hopp’s voice snapped her back to attention, “get this copy downstairs for the front page. We’re close to deadline!”

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“You got it!” Julia snatched up the copy along with her recorder and ensuring that it was securely in her handbag, bolted out of the office

Hopps never saw her leave. He was on the phone intently barking out orders to his copy editors regarding the change to the front page. This was breaking news, he screamed, a story that would set the whole community on its ear!

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It was now late afternoon and Saunders and Rossi were still in downtown Rochester. Feeling a little hungry, they stopped at a local Italian restaurant for a bite to eat and a light libation.

Saunders ordered the grilled salmon, while Rossi fretted over the menu before settling for a chicken pasta dish. Once the waitress brought the drinks and left, Rossi was ready for conversation.

“Okay, so, why are we still here? We planted the information. Don’t you think it’s a little risky to be here when the real story breaks?”

Saunders grunted. Even after these last few years, Rossi still didn’t know how to read him.

“As long as we stay out of the public eye and that young lady keeps her mouth shut, there really isn’t any need for us to leave. The boss knew we were coming. He’s just as eager to get on with this case as we are.”

“Then why not pull some strings? Jump start the process?”

“Because,” Saunders answered a little impatiently, “the local boys need to have some pressure on them, first. That way, we’re assured we’ll get their full cooperation and access to the evidence they’ve collected. Otherwise, we’ll look like fools. Okay?”

Rossi shrugged and sipped his Absolute and tonic.

“It’s all got to look above board,” Saunders continued, “this way, the guys in the Sheriff’s office will be pointing fingers at each other accusing and wondering who the leak is. We’ll be able to ride up on our white horse and save the day!”

“How can you be so sure we’ll be able to solve it?,” Rossi asked, “Look at what we’re up against.”

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The question hung in the air as the waitress suddenly appeared with their dishes. Saunders made a silent motion toward his partner to discontinue this discussion until later, which Rossi obliged.

Neither man said a word throughout the meal, content to enjoy their food and wait for their empty dishes to disappear before resuming their conversation.

“That was great! How was your salmon?”

“Very good.”

“What’s next Jack? Do we just wait until the morning paper comes out?”

“Nope. We’ve got another stop to make. In answer to your question regarding how we’re going to solve this case, we’re going to succeed by getting some help.”

Rossi inquisitively looked at his partner. Help? This was the first time Saunders had mentioned any kind of help. Who did he mean?

Saunders continued; “Have you ever heard the name of Brett Meirs?”

Rossi did a quick memory survey and immediately came up with an answer.

“Wasn’t he that hot-shot the Bureau seemed to put on all the high profile cases? Didn’t he have a huge reputation for solving cases, but also seemed to be a glory-hound? If the case wasn’t big or fresh, he wasn’t on it. Is that that you’re referring to?”

Saunders nodded as Rossi continued.

“Didn’t he resign or retire? Got burned out or something over ten years ago? A lot of the guys figured he’d sold out and would start writing a book or something after making such a big name for himself. I don’t really...remember...anything ever happening, though.

“So where’d he go? You know the story, Jack?”

Reaching into his breast pocket, Saunders pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He shook one out and effortlessly slid it into his mouth. After taking a long draw, he smiled at Rossi.

“Bill...Meirs was my partner.”

“You’re shitting me! I didn’t know!”

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“That’s okay. It was a while ago, I’ve had several partners since then. It was funny. Not many people understood why Brett was so good. Not many people knew that he possessed a power that was both a blessing and a curse.”

“Jack, stop it...,” joked Rossi.

“I’m not kidding,” Saunders matter-of-factly replied. He took a sip of his red wine and another draw on his smoke. “There were stories about Brett that were only whispered at the highest levels. But I’m here to tell you, they were true. I was his partner through some very tough investigations.

“The official word on him leaving is that he got burned out by everything he’d seen...everything he’d experienced. But there was another reason...”

Saunders drifted off, deep in thought. He and Meirs had been an invincible team, able to take on the toughest cases, provided the right circumstances, and solve them in less time than conventional law agencies did. The toll each case took on his former partner was immense and only Saunders truly understood the brink of insanity that Meirs flirted with.

“What? I’m sorry...what did you ask, Bill?”

Rossi shook his head.

“Shit, Jack, what’s wrong with you? Since we started talking about Meirs, you’re starting to act like he’s some kind of ghost or something.”

Saunders nervously laughed. A ghost he thought, no, not a ghost. But something just as scary, maybe even scarier, considering Meirs was real and ghosts were yet to be proven. As much as Saunders hated to admit it, the thought of including his former partner in this case - provided he agreed - gave him a serious case of the heebie-jeebies.

“Look, it’s just that...Meirs and I go way back, okay. This is precisely the reason I was sent here by the Chief. Everyone feels that I’m the only one who has half a hell’s chance of getting him to agree. I don’t mind telling you that it’s a meeting I’m not looking forward to.”

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“Why not? What is it about this guy that gives you the creeps? He was your partner, after all.”

This comment brought a broad smile to the black man’s face.

“All my partners give me the creeps.”

After realizing Saunders was only kidding, Rossi joined in with the laughter.

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Twenty minutes later they pulled into the driveway of a house close to the restaurant. Saunders hoped that the Meirs family was still around and not up north.

The Bureau’s reports kept on Brett since he left the federal family had him living mostly off of his disability retirement and his wife’s medical practice. He had turned into a “Mr. Mom”, staying home to tend to his two daughters while his wife Lori’s practice took off.

The family seemed to have adjusted well to the near-tragedy that struck them. During Brett’s tenure, the Bureau wanted to ensure no further trouble would come from the incident and literally forced Brett into retirement. Of course, they made it both financially and politically attractive for Brett, which made his decision that much easier.

Saunders often thought his superiors’ concern toward Brett’s health wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. They weren’t merely concerned for him because he was “family” as they so elegantly put it. No, there were other reasons, Saunders was sure of that.

The big rumor was that the Bureau was concerned that if Brett ever flipped out, it would put a permanent stain upon the agency. That was probably the reason they held surveillance on him and his family for several years after his “retirement”. It wasn’t until the higher ups felt the cost outweighed the risk that the surveillance was slowly rolled back.

Today, the Meirs’ were treated the same as any other American family, an occasional phone tap, a couple of drive-bys and a little eavesdropping - nothing out of the ordinary. That’s how the Chief knew about their second home up on Glen Lake.

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After she opened the door, Lori Meirs was none too pleased to see who stood on her front porch.

“Lori...it’s good to see you. It’s been a long time.” Jack Saunders gave her his warmest smile.

“Hi Jack,” she curtly replied. “It hasn’t been long enough. Is this visit pleasure, or business?”

Saunders liked this lady. No bullshit...always straight to the point.

“Would it matter?” he asked.

Lori frowned. It wasn’t that she disliked Jack Saunders; after all, he had been her husband’s partner and confidante for many years. To her he represented Brett’s pressure, danger and stress. With those two, it was always just one more case, just one more collar, and then they’d quit.

Only, men like Jack Saunders could never give it up. They were born that way. Subconsciously, Lori knew her husband was no different, but for him, the circumstances had changed.

“Yes it would Jack,” snapped Lori, “you’re not coming over here with any stupid ideas of pulling him back into something, are you? Because, if you are, you better remember that your last case almost cost him his life. You do remember that, don’t you Jack?”

Saunders looked directly into her eyes. A day never went by that he didn’t remember that case.

“Forgive me; allow me to introduce my partner, Bill Rossi.”

Lori composed herself and stretched out her hand to Rossi.

“Pleased to meet you.” Then to Saunders, she said, “Well, since you’ve come here it’d be poor manners not to invite you in for a cup of coffee. Brett’s out back.”

“I remember the way. Thanks Lori.”

As the two men entered the house and moved toward the back she wanted to grab them and warn them again against involving her husband in any wild scheme that would put him at risk.

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Brett's condition had stabilized over the last couple of years and their lives were finally settling into a sense of normalcy. She doubted whether he'd want to jeopardize everything they'd worked so hard for, without consulting with her first.

Still, just Saunders appearance told her something big was afoot. She prayed it wasn't something that could pique her husband's interest.

She prayed it wasn't going to start all over again.

* * * * *

Walking outside, Saunders was surprised at his former partner's appearance. He'd lost about twenty pounds off his six-foot frame. His jet-black hair had turned a white gray in the years since he'd left the business. Overall, Saunders thought retirement had been good to Brett. He seemed more relaxed. The deep worry lines in his face that had been so prominent were definitely gone.

"Jack! What a surprise! Why didn't you call first?"

"Kinda spur of the moment visit," Saunders answered and then made introductions. Brett had been working out back in the garden and by the look of how bountiful the purple cone flowers, dallies and Black-eyed Susans were it certainly hadn't been a part-time effort.

"How 'bout something to drink?,"

"No...no, thanks Brett. We won't be here that long."

He stopped and turned around, motioning the two agents to sit at the patio table.

"What's up Jack? Rochester, Michigan is a long way from Washington, D.C. What brings you to my fair state?"

Jack pulled his smokes from his pocket and motioned toward his former partner. "You mind?," he asked and waited for Brett to give him the go ahead sign before lighting one up.

"I thought you gave 'em up."

"Me too. It's my only remaining vice. Look, I'm not here to talk about my smoking habit. We're here on official business, Brett. The Chief asked me to stop in and see you."

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Brett leaned back in his chair. Rossi noticed his body language and thought that Meirs looked disinterested. The young agent thought this was strange. After being idle for so many years, he would have thought Meirs would jump at the chance to get involved.

“We’ve got some trouble up here.” Saunders continued, “It looks like there’s someone killing kids.”

Brett’s expression looked confused. He leaned forward slightly.

“What are you talking about, Jack? Where? I haven’t read or heard anything - ”

“The authorities are bullshitting the public. You’ve got someone killing kids right here in your own backyard, and you don’t even know it!”

Brett abruptly stood up from the table and turned his back. He looked out over his flowerbeds, inhaling their aroma.

“Brett...?” Saunders began to rise, but Meirs turned back around and motioned him to stay sitting.

“Jack, there’s been nothing reported. Are you involved?”

“No, but - ”

“Then why hasn’t there been anything in the papers?”

Observing their interaction, Rossi was amazed at the way Meirs’ composure changed. He was now interested and assertive. It was funny to see him take charge of the conversation and even funnier, to see Saunders become subservient. There was little doubt to Rossi who the boss of this relationship was.

“Because, Brett, you know how the locals panic! What would the community do, how would it react, if they thought there was a serial killer loose - never mind a child killer! Come on!”

“How many?” Meirs quietly asked.

“Huh?”

“How many kids has he gotten?”

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“We aren’t completely sure,” Saunders answered, crushing the cigarette under his heel, “we think five...maybe six.”

Brett shook his head and sat down. He reached for the pack of cigarettes and looked at Saunders. “You mind?”

Saunders lit his smoke and continued, “This one is starting to gain momentum. The local cops have reasoned many of the murders as either domestic accidents or suicides. They’re keeping it real quiet, low key. And, in the meantime, kids are being killed.”

“Why hasn’t the press picked up on this, then?”

He didn’t notice the smile Saunders and Rossi exchanged.

“That will change. The suspicion is there, and it’s only a matter of time before this situation is exposed. The killer is good, Brett. Real good. We feel he’s either a cop or ex-cop.”

Brett shot his ex-partner a look of amazement.

“Yeah, you heard what I said. Everything is too clean. Our sources in the Sheriff’s Department tell us that Forensics has come up with a big zero. Nothing! The bodies are all scrubbed clean, the discovery area is meticulous, not even the slightest piece of hair has been found. Whoever this guy is, he’s damn good!”

“Then why me, Jack? I’m sure you’ve got a good enough profile on this guy. Why do you need me?”

“Because,” Saunders slowly began, “he’s gotten bolder. He’s no longer hiding the bodies! Now, we’re discovering them within twenty four hours of their death.”

Within twenty-four hours.

So that was the reason they were here. Only Jack and the top Feebs knew of the power

- or curse -

Brett possessed if a body was discovered within that time period.

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Brett stood and turned his back on the pair and again looked out over his beautiful garden. The deep hues of blue and purple and scarlet had been a silent blessing for him, therapeutic in helping him overcome the mental battles he'd been forced to fight.

His marriage had been on the brink, his sanity was at risk, all because of this power, this great 'gift' he had. He never thought he'd have to fight those demons again, never thought he'd have to experience that kind of hell, when he finally decided to walk away. But now...someone was killing children. Children as old as his. And he had the ability...the power to stop it.

"It's not fair," he softly said, without turning.

"Life's not fair," Saunders replied.

"You know, I'll have to talk to Lori."

"I know...when you come to a decision - "

"Leave your card and where I can reach you on the table," Brett interrupted, still looking out over his backyard. "You guys know your way out. You won't mind if I don't accompany you."

Without saying anything else, Saunders and Rossi walked toward their car.

"Say good by to Lori for us?," Saunders stopped and turned around.

"Hmmp," was the response.

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The gift.

That was its' original name.

Brett Meirs saw it in a completely different light. It was a curse. Now, Jack Saunders wanted him to re-live and re-experience the pain and anguish it so readily caused him. Which is why he left the FBI in the first place. To escape the pain...the impending madness his gift eagerly bestowed.

Brett Meirs' thoughts drifted and he began to look back on his life as the world's most proficient man-hunter. The reasons he left the Bureau were just as dramatic as the reasons he entered it. But, it was what happened to him as a boy that significantly altered and set the course his life would take. Who would have thought that one incident would be dictating actions in his life today...

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* * * * *

His mother's name was Keating and she was one of five children who were quite well off and living in Canada. She had met and married Brett's father in college and they settled in Detroit where his father worked for one of the auto companies and his mother stayed home to care for the large brood of Catholic Meirs. Life was good, simple and nondescript.

Brett was the family's athlete preferring sports to academia. It was easy for Brett to be an impact player on St. Mary of Redford High's football team. By tenth grade he was already considerably taller than other kids in his class. Although he was being considered for Michigan's all-American team, the rest of his supporting players were only marginally talented, so the team lost as many games as they won. It didn't matter much to Brett, he played for the fun and sport and the personal competition. Winning just added icing to the cake.

It was a blustery October night in a football match against archrival Catholic Central High when his life changed forever.

Brett fully remembered that night and all its splendid color and detail. He could distinctly remember the thoughts that bounced around in his head as the clock ticked down the final seconds of the game, his team needing a touchdown in order to pull out a victory.

Fourth down, with five yards to go for a first. This young quarterback wasn't thinking about first downs though, he was thinking end-zone and victory. He knew the time clock wouldn't be so forgiving.

With thoughts swirling, he scrambled around in the backfield as first his primary and then his secondary receivers were checked off due to coverage. The time clock continued to count to zero as Brett made the irreversible decision to head up field toward the goal line. So determined in achieving his goal, that one tackle after another were violently shaken off until the end zone was in immediate sight. With one last lunge, Brett hurdled head-first across the goal line and was immediately met by the rival school's 190 pound defensive lineman. Their helmets met with a sickening crack. The crowd's silence was deafening. The two youngsters in men's bodies lay motionless on the turf as

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team members raced onto the field. When the clock signaled the end of the game, no one noticed. The orphan football still laid where it had landed, off to the sideline.

Brett would stay unconscious for over a week, hovering somewhere between life and death. He was luckier than the other boy, who died instantly on the field with a broken neck.

As for Brett, the shadow of change was not initially apparent. Sinai Hospital staff performed emergency brain surgery, inserting two shunts into his skull to relieve the pressure. Several days later, a world-renown neurosurgeon was brought in to perform an experimental procedure cutting deadened portions of the frontal lobe in the theory that it would stimulate new cell growth.

In the end, no one was really sure what it was that brought Brett out of the depths of blackness, whether it was the multiple surgeries, or the sheer volume of prayers. Whichever the cause, he emerged unscathed except for memory loss of that single incident.

Until the first time he experienced his gift.

Undergoing daily physical therapy sessions, Brett worked on strengthening his muscles and his motor skills. Although he was walking within days, he was still unsteady on his feet and often needed assistance.

One day, only two weeks after emerging from his coma the headstrong Brett decided to buck hospital instructions and went walking on his own. He was so determined that he didn't notice he'd moved out of his ward and into the emergency section. Glancing around at all the orderlies and nurses moving from patient to patient, Brett became dizzy. His legs felt like rubber and his vision blurred.

Bracing himself against a gurney lining the hallway, Brett fought the onset of unconsciousness. How stupid he'd been to think that he was ready for this on his own. He tried to yell out for assistance but somehow his feeling of foolishness stopped him.

His legs grew heavier and he reached out for support - any support - and his hand accidentally fell on the face of a patient lying quietly nearby.

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The bolt of pain struck his skull and threatened to shatter it. His vision retreated as the agony intensified. Suddenly, the blackness moved and like darkened thunderclouds, separated away into a bright light.

Then, Brett saw it.

Only, he wasn't sure what he saw. .

He wasn't in the hospital, but on a street.

But...that was impossible...wasn't it?

He felt old, cold, dirty and...drunk? He felt screwed up, lying in the doorway of an old, deserted apartment building. He felt high. Attempting to open his mouth, gibberish flowed out. He could see it was night. The streetlights lining the streets, at least those that weren't smashed, shone dimly.

What was this? Brett wondered if his brain damage was more severe than originally diagnosed. How was he imagining dreams that felt so real? Trying to stand, he stumbled.

Two figures suddenly appeared. They looked young and ominous.

"Hey, old man," the younger of the two sneered, "ya got any more booze?" His partner began to pull on the old man's clothes, ripping his pockets as he went through them.

"Come on, come on, give it up!" The boy, who seemed to be about fourteen, grew angry and pulled a six-inch switchblade from his pants. "Don't make me cut ya!"

Brett's eyes grew wide as saucers, his heart racing wildly.

"Don'tcha hear us, you old fuck?"

Quickly and without emotion, the punk jabbed the blade of the knife into the old man's chest. Brett gasped and a whimper escaped his lips.

"This will teach ya to diss us!"

The kid drove his knife into the old man again and again. Blood surged out onto the sidewalk in widening pools. Waves of pain transcended into a peaceful quiet as the realization that he was

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dying came over Brett. He lost control over his bowels and a tiny tear formed and slid softly down his cheek. Echoing laughter was the last thing he heard.

Blackness...

Commotion everywhere as he slowly opened his eyes.

He was lying flat on the hallway floor, nurses, doctors and on-lookers crowding to see what happened. Instinctively, he brought his hands up to his chest, fully expecting to feel the stab wounds. Surprised, he tilted his head up for a better look.

“No...no,” cautioned one nurse, “you mustn’t move. You may have re-injured yourself. Just lie still.”

“W-What...happened?” Brett was bewildered.

“You passed out, honey,” the nurse kneeling closest to him taking his vitals, replied. “You tried to break your fall against this gurney. Do you remember if you hit your head?”

“I-I don’t...think...so. Where am I?”

The large, blonde nurse smiled, “Why, in the hospital, of course. You’ve walked quite a ways from your room, though. You weren’t supposed to be walking by yourself. Did you know that?”

It was as if he didn’t hear her question. He was still deep in thought.

“Did I leave the hospital?,” he asked.

The blonde nurse chuckled.

“Of course not. You barely had the strength to walk here.”

“B-But...are you sure? I wasn’t outside? In the street?”

She glanced up at her partner, a large black woman. They exchanged worried glances.

“Come on, honey,” blondie replied, “no more talking. We’re going to get you up and run some more tests. Just to be safe.”

Two orderlies stepped forward and gently loaded him onto a stretcher. Once fully strapped in, they raised it up.

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“Where to?,” one of the orderlies asked.

“Down to x-ray. We need to make sure he didn’t bump his head. I’ve already had someone call his doctor.”

The orderly nodded at his instructions and released the brake. Disoriented, Brett glanced over at the man on the accompanying gurney, fully anticipating flashing one of his “oh am I embarrassed” smiles, but instead was appalled. Brett’s arm shot out and grabbed the leg of the gurney.

“Hey!,” the orderly was surprised, “Whatcha doing, kid?”

“This man,” Brett said, looking at the old, black man laying on the gurney, “who is he?”

The orderly was annoyed. He was busy tonight. He needed to dispose the body of this old, homeless, man. He had little patience for kids asking questions.

“He’s just an old drunk. That’s all.” He shook Brett’s grip free with the tilt of the stretcher and continued down the hall.

“B-But,” Brett insisted, “is he...is he...dead?”

The orderly gave him a quirky look.

“Of course he’s dead! Was a DOA. In fact, I’ve got to get you to x-ray before someone bitches me out for him laying there so long. Especially, if someone starts spouting that you passed out because you saw him. So, no more questions.”

Their pace through the hallway quickened and they were almost to their designation as Brett asked...

“DOA, huh? How did he die? Please...it’ll be my last question.”

“Hmmp,” the orderly was exasperated. This kid would not shut up. “Last question! He died of multiple stab wounds. Now...button it!”

Brett laid back and closed his eyes.

Died of multiple stab wounds.

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How did he know that? What exactly had happened to him there in the hallway? What did he experience? Somehow, he relived that poor man's last living minutes. Somehow, he experienced that vagrant's murder.

But how was that possible?

Was he...going crazy?

As Brett was wheeled into x-ray and then into the cat-scan area, all he could think about was the old man and the two thugs who killed him. Had that all been real, or was his imagination running wild?

Later that night the echoing laughter of the murderers filled his head causing a sleepless night.