



"A standout mind-bender!
This guy can write!"

—*Ridley Pearson*

MIRROR IMAGE

A
Daniel Rinaldi
Mystery

Dennis
Palumbo

Mirror Image

Mirror Image

A Daniel Rinaldi Mystery

Dennis Palumbo

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Dedication

*To
Lynne and Daniel
with love*

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Epigraph

“All pasts are like poems; you can derive a thousand things, but you can’t live in them.”

—John Fowl

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Chapter One

Shame is a deep well.

Face tightened in anguish, a young man named Kevin Merrick was sitting in my office, telling me about the first time he'd slept with his sister.

"I musta been eight or nine," he said. Kevin was in his early twenties, but thinning hair and pained, sunken eyes made him seem older, faded somehow. The three-week-old growth of beard didn't help.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Rinaldi. I didn't think...I mean, shit, it was all so long ago..."

"Take your time," I said.

I let a silence fill the space between us. But inwardly, I was thrilled. After months of intensive work, of building trust and rapport, he was finally opening up, risking connection with another human being.

Not an easy task for him, considering what he'd been through. Life had battered him, left invisible bruises no less real than the old needle tracks on his forearms, the self-inflicted scissor-cuts emblazoned on his wrists.

His eyes flitted to the window overlooking Forbes Avenue five floors below. The steady drumming of the rain masked the usual hum of afternoon traffic snaking out of the Pitt campus.

Beyond, through the grey-black webbing of the storm, you could just make out Heinz Hall and the Carnegie Museum, venerable Pittsburgh landmarks, hunched beneath the regal spire of the Cathedral of Learning.

Kevin stirred, hands massaging the arms of his chair. This calmed him. It had taken time, but my office had finally become a sanctuary for him, a refuge. Once, he'd jokingly referred to it as the Womb with a View.

He *did* seem to derive solace from the place: the tan leather sofa, the twin brass table lamps, the marble-topped antique desk. My worn Tumi briefcase leaned against it.

Then there was the stuff my patients *didn't* see—the photo of Barbara taken on our honeymoon, tucked away on a book shelf; a copy of *Ringsider* magazine, autographed by Sugar Ray Leonard, sharing cabinet space with patient files and a pewter hip flask—a gift from my old man after the Allentown fight, twenty years ago. Consolation prize, I guess. I'd gone down in the seventh.

Kevin's eyes had been slowly sweeping the room, as though searching a crowd for a familiar face. His gaze rested finally on some psych journals stacked on the floor.

"Karen was four years older than me," he said at last. "We were in her room...it was late. I knew she was supposed to be in bed, but Dad hadn't tucked me in..."

"Did he usually do that?"

"Every night, since the year before, when Mom died...I remember people saying what a burden I had now. That he had to be both mother *and* father to me and Karen..." He blinked up at me. "What was I saying?..."

"That your father wasn't in Karen's room that night."

"Yeah. Anyway—" His voice caught. "All of a sudden, we were in her bed...just foolin' around. Laughing. I remember how *girlie* I thought the sheets smelled..."

"Girlie?"

"You know what I mean." A crooked smile. "I remember thinking, Yuck, how could she sleep in here?...Those pink, frilly sheets with the girlie smell...Yuck!"

His smile faded.

“Then...” He dropped his head. “Then she *touched* me... and I was so confused. It felt so strange. Not bad, but not good either...I mean, I knew what was happening...I was already pretty good at jerkin’ off, ya know?...”

He tried to laugh, a dry rasp that held no mirth.

“And I loved Karen so much...I mean, I *hated* her, too, ’cause she was my older sister and a bitch and everything, but I also loved her...and ever since Mom died, she was—”

He looked away again, at the window.

“And then she had her pajamas off,” he said slowly, “and I could see—it was dark, but I could somehow see everything, and *feel* everything...and it felt so...”

Suddenly, a sheet of shame reddened his face. His hands shot up, palms pressing against his eyes like a child trying to push the tears back in. He cried out.

I leaned closer, on the edge of my leather chair. I could almost see a shudder move through his body, like a powerful wave. I also saw how thin and bony his shoulders were under his light blue shirt.

Finally, he turned, eyes searching for mine. His face was bleached of color, lifeless.

“I...I felt her hand on the back of my neck...I was shocked, surprised...The hand was so strong, pressing my face down...forcing my mouth between her legs...forcing me to...making me...*touch* her...”

Great sobs wracked his whole body. Without a thought, I reached across and held him, felt his body slump in my embrace. His tears were wet on my cheeks.

We stayed that way for an endless minute, the blood pounding in my ears. My own feelings shuddered through me. Anger. Pity. Some vague sense of anguish...

Finally, I released him, gently guiding him back against his chair. He seemed to be swallowed by his legs half-drawn up in a fetal position. He closed his eyes.

I took a breath. Kevin and I would have to explore the meaning of my embracing him at some future date. For now, it was enough for me to know that I’d had the impulse to hold him, to cradle him, and so I did.

Fuck it, somebody should’ve done it a long time ago.

As I watched him settle down, I thought again about the clinical risks I often found myself taking with him. After all my years as a psychologist, it was always new; each patient a new beginning, a chance to teach myself how to do therapy all over again.

I recalled, too, something that Jung had told one of his students. “It’s not what you know that heals,” he said. “It’s who you are.” A sentiment I agree with. It’s also a notion that conveniently flatters the narcissism woven into every therapist’s personality.

Kevin’s body had relaxed, and he was reaching for the Kleenex on the side table. As he dried his eyes, I managed a smile, which he managed to return.

Some deep chasm, some important gulf between us had been crossed, and we both knew it. Despite the potential for significant pain ahead, he’d made another crucial step on his personal journey. And in the end, I believed—I *had* to believe—there would come a healing.

I’d never find out.

Within an hour, Kevin Merrick would be dead.

Chapter Two

Kevin had been referred to me six months earlier, following confinement in the West Penn County Psych Ward. He'd been found wandering the aisles of a 7-11 store, bruised and bleeding at three in the morning. Barefoot, wearing only torn pajamas.

He led the police back to his place, an apartment just off-campus, where the trashed room backed up his story: he'd been awakened around midnight by an intruder in a ski mask rifling his bureau drawers. They struggled, then Kevin managed to get free and out through the window. He told the cops he could only remember running like hell, into the night...

And then his memory went blank, until he found himself in the convenience store hours later, being rousted by two uniformed patrolmen.

After his discharge from the ward—where a computer check revealed he was no stranger to local mental health facilities—Kevin was questioned again by the police and a sympathetic Assistant DA, but he could offer no new information about the crime. All he could remember about the man was that he was big, and reeked of sweat.

“Probably a hype, needin' cash,” the investigating officer said. “Fuckers don't use ATM's.”

The police got a break two days later, when another local resident called 911. Same scenario: a sweaty guy in a ski mask helping himself to cash and jewelry in the bedroom. Only this time the apartment's occupant—a retired steel-worker named Hanrahan—grabbed a baseball bat from under his bed and knocked the guy senseless. He was still groggy when the cops arrived.

With his mask off, the burglar was just another junkie, a scared black kid from the Hill District. His name was James Stickey, aka “Big Stick.” Nineteen, with two prior convictions. They gave him eight years upstate.

Meanwhile, Kevin just wanted to forget about the whole thing and get back to class. It was springtime, and a week from finals. But his blackout the night of the crime, along with reports of nightmares and frequent disorientation, had worried the Assistant DA enough to call the Department's Chief Community Liaison Officer.

Who was worried enough to call me.

People like Kevin are my specialty. Victims of violent crime. Those who've survived the assault, the kidnapping, the crime itself—but who still lived with the trauma, the fear. The daily, gut-wrenching dread.

Or, perhaps even harder, lived with the guilt of having survived at all when a loved one didn't.

My job is to help them remember what they need to remember, so that they can forget. Or at least achieve a *kind* of forgetting that lets them move on with what's left of their lives.

Though the Pittsburgh Police have a number of shrinks on the payroll, they sometimes make use of outside consultants. Which is how I got into this in the first place.

It was about five years ago, during the public panic and media firestorm caused by Troy David Dowd, the monster they dubbed “the Handyman.” A serial killer who tortured his victims with screwdrivers, pliers, and other tools, he'd murdered and dismembered twelve people before his eventual capture.

Dowd would snatch people outside of roadside diners or highway rest stops in isolated rural areas.

throughout the state. Only two of his intended victims managed to escape. One of these, a single mother of three, was sent to me.

Her name was Sylvia. Bound with duct tape, she'd been kept for two days in a stifling, stench-filled canvas tent, buried under a pile of twisted, decaying body parts from his earlier victims. Somehow during one of Dowd's frequent absences, she was able to cut through a section of tape using the sharp edge of a metallic watch band still strapped to the wrist of a severed forearm.

For weeks after her escape, she'd wake up screaming, clawing the air at the imagined blood-blackened stumps encasing her. Recurrent flashbacks of her ordeal with Dowd continued long after her arrest and conviction.

In fact, it wasn't until almost a year later—by which time Dowd was on Death Row, where he sits pending his latest appeal—that Sylvia was willing to even leave the house. She'd walk around the block once with her oldest daughter and go back inside.

I considered this a victory.

My work with her caught the attention of the city fathers as well as the press, and soon the cops were using me on a regular basis whenever they feared for a crime victim's mental health. Or when the DA worried that the victim's emotional stability might be in question when it came time to testify.

Why me? Because of my background in Post-Traumatic Stress, working with Gulf and Iraqi War vets. Because I'd treated numerous victims of trauma and abuse at two state hospitals.

And probably because of something else, something personal, that inextricably bonds me to my patients, and always will. Something *very* personal.

Kevin was stirring.

I smiled at him again, absently pushing my hand back through my hair. Then I instinctively—a reflex instinct reborn a thousand times—felt near the top of my head for the old scar, the familiar ridge of a surgical scar, where the bullet had gone in...

Chapter Three

Kevin couldn't look at me. Shifting uncomfortably, he finally bolted from his chair. He stood trembling. Staring out at the black October rain.

I turned to the small table beside my chair for a pen. The monogrammed one from my alma mater. It was gone.

I sighed. I knew where it was. With his body half-turned away from me at the window, I couldn't tell which pocket it was in. But I knew Kevin had it. He'd taken it.

As he'd taken other items from my office over the past months. A stapler. A letter-opener. A silver card case.

In the byzantine mesh of our relationship, Kevin was aware that I knew he'd taken these items, and that I probably wouldn't mention it. And felt both shame at his deeds and elation that he was getting away with it. Then shame at feeling the elation.

What Kevin had been doing, these last few months of treatment, was becoming me.

Hesitantly at first, and then quite blatantly, he'd begun dressing like me. Gone were the plaid sweatshirt and jeans. He now wore therapeutically-neutral dress shirts and Dockers. Not to mention dark-framed glasses. His beard, without my telltale sprigs of gray, was coming in nicely.

Then today, when I opened the connecting door to the waiting room for our regularly scheduled appointment, I found Kevin hanging up a dripping jacket next to mine on the standing coat rack.

"Can you believe this weather?" he'd said. "Cold as hell, too. I shoulda worn a sweater or somethin'."

I must have been staring at the coat rack, for his glance nervously followed mine. His jacket was a light brown, very similar to my own new Eddie Bauer. I'd only worn it a couple times to the office. But enough for Kevin to have registered it and found a similar one.

As I sat here now, watching him stand with his back to me at the window, I thought about those two jackets hanging on the rack in the next room, and wondered if I knew what the hell I was doing.

In our first few sessions, he'd appeared to have some classic "borderline" symptoms—poor self-image, a history of drug use and failed, half-hearted suicide attempts. He was suspicious of my attempts to help him, especially when I prodded him to relive the experience of finding an intruder in his room. These memories only reinforced his sense of violation, of vulnerability.

Then, below these feelings of dread and panic, the predictable litany of self-criticism emerged: I should have locked his windows. Fought back harder against the guy. Hell, maybe he *deserved* what happened to him...

I'd seen it a hundred times. The victim blaming himself as a way to make sense of what's happened to gain at least the fantasy of control over events that threatened to overwhelm him.

These feelings faded over time, and with them the nightmares, the panic attacks. We began to concentrate less on Kevin's symptoms and more on him.

It was then, as our bond deepened, that Kevin started to mirror me in dress and appearance. I didn't do anything to stop it. Given the shattering loss of his mother at a young age—and now with confirmation of my hunch that he'd been sexually abused as well—it was no surprise he'd be yearning for an identity. Even one that was borrowed.

"If I'm like you," some part of him was saying to me, "I'll be okay. So I'll *become* you."

And I'd been letting him do it. Part clinical judgment, part gut feeling. He'd come into my practice

so lost, so fragmented, he needed a platform on which to stand. I was willing to *be* that platform. For how long, I didn't know. I'd hoped that same gut feeling would tell me when it was long enough.

A position I got all kinds of grief for. Recently, I'd presented Kevin's case at one of our peer review conferences at Ten Oaks, a clinic in suburban Penn Hills where I'd been on staff before going into private practice. Predictably, some of my colleagues there were outraged at what I was doing with Kevin. Or allowing to happen.

"It's just an extreme variation of Kohut's twinship longing," I'd argued.

Brooks Riley, the new shrink down from Harvard Med, disagreed. "No, it's a pathologic accommodation. The poor bastard's willing to disappear, to allow himself to be literally *usurped*, and replaced by you."

He shook his head. "Christ, Rinaldi, I knew you were nuts. I didn't know you were arrogant as well."

Riley was a prick, but maybe he was right. I knew I was taking a big risk—sure as hell not the first I'd taken in my work. But I was convinced it was paying off. Kevin's bond with me was stronger now. He'd just trusted me enough to reveal the details of his incest with his sister.

A painful, anguished revelation. In the strange, hallowed vocabulary of my world, a breakthrough.

I cleared my throat, which made Kevin tilt his head slightly. When at last he spoke, still gazing out the window, his words seemed faint as ghosts.

"One day, it all came out. I mean, about me and Karen...I got sick at school and was sent to the nurse's office. Then, all of a sudden—I don't know why—I start talkin' about my sister foolin' around with me..." He turned at last. "I ratted her out, Doc."

"You were just a kid, Kevin," I said gently. "In turmoil. No way you could deal with what was going on inside you. Hell, it was brave of you to—"

"Brave?" He gave me a fierce look, as though I were an idiot. "I screwed everything up, man. It was *me!*"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, the shit hit the fan. The County sent social workers to our house—my sister just...she just *freaked*. And my poor Dad...Banford's a small town, with small, angry minds. They blamed *him*. He worked at the one goddam bank in town. People deserted him, said he was a bad father—"

"Wasn't he? He sure didn't protect you—"

"His wife had *died* the year before!" Kevin's eyes filled with tears. "And, yeah, he drank...Who the hell wouldn't? Two kids to raise alone, and then *this* shit—"

"Kevin, you can't blame yourself."

"I coulda kept my mouth shut. I coulda dealt with it."

"At eight years old? Come on..."

He looked away from me again. "Big deal. It had already been going on practically every night for months, maybe a year. Why didn't I just—"

I hesitated. Waited for whatever it was he needed to say to work its way out.

"Karen and me...what she did...what *we* did..." He let out a breath. "It's not like I didn't *like* it, you know?..."

He turned to me at last, a deep angry blush burning his cheeks. This was his secret shame, his sin, and he wanted me to see it.

“I *hated* it...and I *loved* it...Okay?”

I nodded.

Another long pause, as though time had frozen. Then, hand trembling, he reached to touch the back of his chair.

“Later on, after I was placed in County Services, and Karen was sent to counseling...Right in the middle of all this, my Dad takes off...”

“Takes off?”

“Leaves town. Gone. The social worker has to tell me about it herself, one day out in the playground. Dad’s skipped town, nobody knows where. No note, nothin’.”

“I’m sorry, Kevin.”

“So...me and Karen are placed in separate foster homes, and life goes on in Mayberry.” A shrug. “Wasn’t too bad. My foster father only beat me when he needed a fix, or his old lady wouldn’t fuck him, or he lost money on a ball game...” His pale eyes found mine. “Coulda been worse.”

“Jesus, I don’t see how.”

I tried to collect my thoughts. In our first sessions, Kevin had told me only that his mother had died and that he’d spent his adolescence in foster care. He’d always been vague about the details concerning his father. I figured they’d come in time. Well, they were coming now...

“Did your own father ever contact you after that?” I asked. “Have you talked at all with him since then?”

His silence gave me the answer.

He looked down, his breathing shallow. There was only the sound of the rain clattering against the windows, the ticking of the thermostat as the heat kicked on.

“Where’s Karen now?” I asked.

“She left town soon after Dad did. Ran away from her foster home. I never saw *her* again, either. I just found out a couple years ago from some third cousin or somethin’ that Karen was out west. Married, with a kid. Anyway, that’s the rumor. I had a P.O. box address for her in Tucson. Wrote a few times. She never wrote back.” His eyes narrowed. “Hell, that’s fine with me.”

“Is it?”

“I guess it has to be, right?”

Another long silence. Then, abruptly, he came around and sat down again. He pushed his glasses up on his thin nose. Glasses he didn’t need, I reminded myself.

I phrased my next words carefully. “I appreciate the fact that you told me about all this. I know it was hard.”

He sat back. “Well, as long as *you’re* happy...”

As I’d expected, after such a painful revelation, Kevin’s defenses were up. With feigned casualness he slowly crossed his legs, hands clasped at the knees.

Though there were still ten minutes left on the clock, I knew today’s session was over.

Outside, the storm had subsided, the rain now a misty curtain drawn against the blackness.

Kevin stood up, stretched. “So, Doc, what’s the diagnosis? Bi-polar? Psychotic?”

“Beats me. I haven’t read that chapter yet.”

“Very funny. It’s just that I wonder what all this shit has to do with why I came here in the first place.”

I took a long pause before answering.

~~“The way I see it, there are some things you’ve needed to talk about for a long time. Regardless what brought you here, some part of you wants to talk about them now.”~~

He considered this. “But I feel a lot better,” he said. “I mean, about that night. No more nightmares and stuff. No more guys in ski masks.”

“That’s good news,” I said, walking him to the door. “If anybody deserves a good night’s sleep, you do.”

“Tell me about it.”

I opened the door to the waiting room. It was empty. Kevin was my last patient of the day. As he started for the coat rack, I stopped him.

“Kevin, I meant what I said in there. It took guts to reveal such an old, painful secret...”

He gave me an odd look, a mixture of intensity and ruefulness that I’d never quite seen on his face before.

“Hell, man, I got *lots* of secrets...”

And with that, he turned away. I shut the door behind him.

Chapter Four

I went over to my desk and jotted down some notes about the session while it was still fresh in my mind. I'd need ammo if I was going to present Kevin's case again next week at Ten Oaks.

Though I was still smarting from Riley's criticism, I usually got valuable insight and support from most of the others there, and I felt I needed it. Especially now, in the wake of these latest revelations. The road ahead was going to be tricky.

I glanced at my desk clock. I had plans for dinner, having promised to meet my cousin (an accountant) Johnny Manella at a restaurant in nearby Shadyside. Figuring dinner traffic and rain, parking in the newly gentrified district would be hell. I knew I better get going.

I got up and locked Kevin's case folder in the filing cabinet. Then I checked my voicemail. Three calls, nothing urgent. One even announced good news. A former patient, who'd been raped four years ago, had since married, and had now delivered a baby. In a happy, astonished voice, she promised to send me a photo of mother-and-child, doing fine.

I couldn't help smiling. Nice message to get, especially at the end of a long, hard day. Grabbing my briefcase, I locked the waiting room door behind me and padded down the narrow, carpeted hallway.

Ahead of me, Lenny Wilcox, building maintenance, was backing out of the storage room, balancing an armload of boxes. He was in his fifties, with smooth black skin and the build of an SUV.

"Hey, Lenny," I said, holding open the door with my foot. "How ya doing?"

"Not bad." An eyebrow went up. "By the way, Doc, I saw you on CNN the other night. A show about that kidnapping in Miami. You ain't gettin' famous, are ya?"

"Hardly. They just needed some talking heads for a panel on trauma. The after-effects on the victims. Since I'd been consulted on the Florida case—"

He shook his head. "Man, I don't know how ya do it. Those poor kids...what they went through..."

"Yeah," was all I said. Lenny didn't know the half of it. And like the rest of the public, hopefully never would.

We exchanged brief good-byes, then I took the stairs down to the parking garage. The stairwell was damp and concrete-cold. My footsteps echoed, a hollow sound that only emphasized the silence as I descended to parking.

Briefcase in one hand, jacket in the other, I shoved the heavy metal exit door open with my shoulder. A blast of cold air hit me as I stepped into the near-vacant garage.

The dim, cavernous structure was criss-crossed with shadows and damp from the rain. Shallow puddles had formed here and there on the uneven concrete.

Then I saw it.

Or thought I did. A flicker of movement, a shadow flitting against the far wall...

I tensed, senses alert. A surge of adrenaline. I peered into the darkness. Nothing.

I glanced over at the attendant's booth near the exit, though I knew he'd be gone for the day. And he was. His little overhead light was out.

I looked around. Not a thing. Probably never was. I'd had a long day, my brain was fried. And yet.

Ignoring my every instinct, I started walking. Most of the other tenants kept banker's hours, so it wasn't unusual for me to be the last one out. I was used to walking across the deserted parking structure, past no more than a dozen remaining parked cars, to get to my assigned space.

So why this prickling at the back of my neck? This sense of foreboding?

“Jesus,” I said to myself, aloud. “Get a grip.”

~~My voice echoed off the slab pillars and the scalloped ceiling, absorbed by the deep shadows.~~
headed toward my car that was parked around the corner, hidden from view by a double column. As I approached the turn, walking briskly, I heard—something.

Someone. Crying out. Choked, guttural, in agony.

I dropped the briefcase and coat, took another step—

And heard something else. Behind me. A staccato beating of footsteps, running fast to my left.

I whirled in time to see another access door, at the far wall, closing. It clanged noisily.

I turned back in the direction of the cry. At first I saw only my car, a green reconditioned '68 Mustang, half in shadow, parked in its usual spot. In the space next to it was a beat-up looking Nissan.

As I approached the vehicles, I heard the sound again. I broke into a run, looking wildly about.

Where the hell—?

He was in the darkened space between the two cars. Body crumpled on the cold asphalt. Covered in blood.

It was Kevin Merrick.

Panic tore through me in a fluid rush, as though my heart was pumping ice water. For a moment I couldn't move. Or breathe.

Forcing myself, willing each step, I came toward him, crouching beside him. I reached down and lifted his head, cradling him...for the second time that day.

His eyes were wide, white with horror. His mouth moved, lips trembling, trying to form words. Only a scarlet foam trickled out.

I looked down at his chest, at the spreading rivulets of blood. My mind raced blindly, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

He'd been stabbed. Repeatedly. Savagely. The blood was...everywhere. Seeping, lava-like, wet and dark. Pooling beneath us.

Finally, as if tearing myself from a dream, I laid him back down on the asphalt and rummaged through my pockets for my cell phone. I found it and dialed 911.

After leaving the address and confirming that an ambulance had been dispatched, I turned back to Kevin.

But it was too late.

Crouching again, I peered down into sad, lifeless eyes. Only his blood, forming an ever-widening circle on his chest, was moving.

I sat back on my heels, stunned. I couldn't swallow. Couldn't think. I just sat there in the awful concrete silence, staring down at him.

Then, through a fog of pain and shock, I became aware of something. Noticed something for the first time.

Kevin was wearing my jacket.

Chapter Five

Sergeant Harry Polk, a beer keg in a wrinkled blue suit, stared at me as I sipped strong, hot coffee. He had the opaque eyes and dour expression of your basic middle-aged civil servant, a man who'd long accepted that most things in his life weren't going to get much better.

I met his gaze through a cloud of steam rising up from the mug. He then glanced at my hands, now washed clean. Only an hour before, amid the chaos of the parking garage, I'd stood in a taped-off corner, numb as a stone, while a Crime Scene tech wiped Kevin Merrick's blood off my hands and deposited the swabs in a plastic evidence bag.

The memory flickered in my mind. Patrol units with flashing lights. A crime lab van with blackened windows. CSU techs in jump suits. An ME wagon, whose bored driver leaned against the hood listening to blaring hip-hop music. His partner, equally bored, zipping Kevin's body into a large plastic bag.

Polk was openly staring at my hands, with a cop's interest. I'd wondered when he'd notice the purple marks, the discoloration around the knuckles.

"You box?" Surprise etched his florid, drinker's face.

"Golden Gloves. Pan Am Games. A million years ago."

"You any good?"

"Coulda been a contender." My voice had an edge. Not a conversation I wanted to be having right then.

"Why'd ya quit?"

I shrugged. "Marriage. Grad school. Life...Now I just fool around a little in the gym."

He digested this in silence. I guess the picture didn't quite fit the frame. I get that a lot.

Polk nodded at the cassette recorder on the table between us. "Ya mind?" he asked.

"I know the drill."

"Nothin' to worry about. You're a witness, not a suspect. Got a consultant's contract with the brass." An insincere smile. "Hell, you're practically family."

It was going to be a long night. I rubbed my neck, feeling the tight knots like lug nuts under the skin.

Polk and I sat across from each other in a cramped, windowless interrogation room. There were four such rooms sharing the top floor of the old precinct house. A century of brutal Pittsburgh winters had etched huge worry lines in the face it showed the world.

I thought of the rooms below us, the pallid faces of the uniforms on night-shift, the morgue-like ambiance. Old coffee, leftover sandwiches, fading careers.

"Sorry you caught this one," I said to Polk.

A shrug. "Luck of the draw." He looked at his watch. "Where the hell's Lowrey?" His partner, assumed.

The closeness of the room was stifling. The pea-green walls, water-stained ceiling tiles, linoleum floors. The smell of sweat, cigarettes, and fear.

I glanced at the thick mirror to my left. One-way observation window. Were we being observed? Hard to imagine the precinct captain and some Assistant DA coming down here in the middle of the night. Kevin Merrick was a poor college student with a psychiatric history and no family consequence in the area. Nobody but a homicide detective on night shift, like Polk, would get out

bed for that. If the victim hadn't been white, I doubted whether even Polk would've shown.

"Fuck Lowrey," Polk said. He turned on the recorder. "This is a preliminary interview with Daniel Rinaldi regarding the murder of Kevin Merrick, Case File Number 772-33. The time is 12:30 AM, Tuesday, October 12th."

His voice had become oddly stilted, formal. Being on tape made Polk nervous, I noted. After all his years on the force.

"The victim was in treatment with you, Dr. Rinaldi?"

"Yes, he'd been referred to me by Angela Villanova."

"The Chief Community Liaison Officer."

"That's right. She refers crime victims to me when there's concern about the person's mental well-being."

"And what were you and Kevin Merrick working on? I mean, what was the problem?"

"Sorry. Villanova referred him, so that's already in the record. Beyond that, I can't talk about it."

"Patient confidentiality, eh?"

"In a situation like this, it's called privilege."

His voice hardened. "Yeah? Well, in a situation like this, a trial judge can revoke that privilege."

"Fine. Let me know when one does."

He swore under his breath and stopped the tape. "What the fuck's up? This is a goddamn murder investigation."

"I know." I narrowed my eyes at him. "Look, I want to nail the bastard who did this more than you do. And there *are* things I can tell you that might help. But most of the content of Kevin's work with me has no bearing here. Not that I can see. Family stuff, childhood stuff."

"The usual therapy bullshit, eh? No offense."

"None taken. But—"

"Look, Doc." Polk's face flushed with anger. "I know a judge who's a real night-owl. How 'bout I call him and get a phone authorization to revoke privilege? How 'bout I do that before I bust a blood vessel or some fuckin' thing?"

Before I could respond, the door swung open and a tall, well-built black woman in a gray suit entered. She was very pretty, with close-cropped hair and violet eyes. Without a glance in my direction, she slid into the empty seat next to Polk and handed him a file folder.

As Polk flipped through the pages, the woman extended her hand across the table. Her handshake had a lot of muscle behind it.

"I'm Detective Eleanor Lowrey," she said, with a quick, business-like smile. Her lips and nails were painted the same shade of burnt red. "Sergeant Polk's partner."

"Where you been?" Polk said to her, eyes scanning the folder's contents. Papers, plastic pouches, newspaper clippings.

"Forensics. The ME's. Lieutenant Biegler's office. Ya know, just screwin' around." She regarded him coolly. "It's a slow night, murder-wise, so we caught a break. Fast turnover in the lab."

"Yeah, some break." But Polk's face had tightened. Slowly he closed the file and lay it next to the legal pad.

"You've been holdin' out on us, Doc." He was smiling.

"No shit. I think I told you why." I was tired, and Polk's attitude was wearing a little thin.

He tapped the file. "Says here the victim was wearing eyeglasses, but the lenses were just clear glass. Crime scene photos show his beard looks kinda like yours. Same with his jacket. Funny, too, about the jacket. About three sizes too big. Lab also found *this* in his pocket—"

He tossed a thin plastic envelope on the table between us. Inside was a monogrammed pen. The initials *DR*, in gilt-edged gold, were visible through the plastic.

“Yours, I assume.” Polk was enjoying himself.

“Yes. Kevin took it. During the session. He often...took things like that. Personal things of mine.”

“Like the jacket?”

“Maybe. His was hanging next to mine on the coat rack. Though he may have taken it by accident. I didn’t realize till I saw his body that the one I was carrying was *his*. In my rush to get out of the office I just grabbed the jacket hanging on the rack and left. I assumed it was mine.”

“Jesus,” Lowrey said, with such quiet intensity that Polk and I both turned to her. “You know what this means?”

I knew only too well.

“I was the killer’s target, not Kevin Merrick.”

Polk shrugged. “The kid’s about your height, with a beard and glasses, wearin’ your jacket. He was walking through a dark parking garage toward his car—”

“Which is parked next to mine. So it looks as though Kevin is in fact me...”

Lowrey cleared her throat. “The ME reports multiple stab wounds with a long, thin blade. Knife, or pick, no way to tell. Brutal, vicious.”

She looked at me.

“What pathologists call a ‘pattern of rage,’” I said.

“It’s just the preliminary autopsy report,” she went on. “Gonna take another couple days to get the drug panel, hair and fiber, the works.”

Polk angled back in his chair. “So the killer jumps Merrick, starts slicin’ and dicin’. Even if he realizes by then that he’s got the wrong guy—”

“He has to finish the job,” Lowrey said quietly.

No one spoke for a full minute. Meanwhile, Polk began spreading the crime scene photos before us. I forced myself to look. Kevin’s dead, sad eyes stared up at me from the blood-soaked asphalt.

The two detectives seemed to fade from my field of vision. I picked up one of the photos, staring now myself, as though to burn the image of Kevin Merrick into my brain.

“*Arrogant...*” Riley’s words echoed in my ears. There had been a real psychological risk in allowing Kevin to identify so intensely with me. He’d so hungered for a model, a paternal image to relate to. I’d reasoned that we’d work through the identification, give him the confidence to let go of needing to be like me. In time, he’d be able to claim a more authentic sense of himself.

In time. Except that he’d run out of time. By becoming me, he’d intersected with a part of my life neither one of us knew about. By becoming me, he’d died the horrible death that was meant for me.

Lowrey sensed my thoughts. Her hand touched my forearm. “Whoa, you can’t blame yourself for this.”

I met her gaze. Then I pulled myself out of my chair, looked down at the two detectives.

“Where you think you’re goin’?” Polk said.

“Out. I need some air.”

Chapter Six

I stood in the precinct parking lot, unmindful of the cold and the continuing drizzle. Headlights twinkled in the night. A few pedestrians hurried by, heads ducked low in their coats or under umbrellas, hands jammed into pockets.

A sudden smell of tobacco hit my nostrils. When I turned, I found Polk and Lowrey standing beside me. Polk's unfiltered Camel glowed dully in the wet gloom.

"Lieutenant says we can cut you loose for the night," Lowrey announced. "But if you remember anything more—"

"I wish I did. All I heard were footsteps running away. All I saw was a door closing."

The three of us stood there, listening to the sounds of the Steel City at night. Car horns, the splash of a rain puddle. A distant chorus of drunken laughter. Students, probably, coming out of a bar. Kids who couldn't imagine that they wouldn't live forever.

"So this Merrick kid," Polk said off-handedly. "He wanted to turn into you, or somethin'? *Be like you?*"

"Not exactly." I thought about saying more, somehow explaining myself. But no words came.

Polk grunted. "Shrinks. Christ."

"Look," I said, "why the hell are we just standing here, wasting time? Kevin's killer is out there somewhere."

He bristled. "You tellin' us how to do our jobs now?"

"Yeah, if that's what it takes."

Polk showed me a lot of teeth. "Geez, Doc, ain't you done enough already?"

I felt anger boil up in my throat.

"Hey," Lowrey said sharply, taking a step between us. Polk and I still glared at each other.

Lowrey glanced at me. "Look, there's not much we can do before we get the forensics, anyway. Maybe run a back-ground check on Kevin Merrick, his family, friends..."

"You won't find much," I said.

"I had that feeling," she replied. "We're havin' a helluva time just finding any next-of-kin to notify."

"He's got a father who could be anywhere. And a sister in Tucson. But I don't know her married name."

"Poor kid." Lowrey shivered in her coat. "Sounds like the proverbial little boy lost."

"Yeah," said Polk, "only now he's little boy dead."

I sat in the passenger seat as Harry Polk drove his blue Ford sedan up the winding streets toward Mount Washington, just south of the city. I had a trim two-story house near the Duquesne Incline overlooking the Point. Sergeant Polk was driving me home.

We'd sat in an awkward silence for five minutes, the only sound the slap-and-swish of the windshield wipers. The wet, gloomy streets were nearly deserted.

"Must be nice havin' all that juice downtown," he said absently, lighting another cigarette from the butt of his last one. Acrid smoke drifted in the air between us.

“What do you mean?” I watched the row of World War II-era brownstones and duplexes, gabled and weather-beaten, caravan past my window, against a backdrop of deep Pennsylvania woods.

“Angela Villanova,” Polk said. “Community Liaison. I hear you and her are pretty tight. *Paisano* eh?”

I shrugged. “She knew me from years back, sent some people to me for help. Just started from there.”

“I remember. I read about you in the *Post-Gazette*. ‘Shrink Turns Personal Tragedy Into Personal Mission.’ Somethin’ like that, right?”

“You know reporters.” I said nothing more.

“Fuckin’-A,” he replied. I thought he was going to lower his window and spit.

I wanted to change the subject. “By the way, I’m not a psychiatrist. I’m a clinical psychologist.”

“Who gives a shit?”

“The AMA, for one. State licensing boards.”

“Uh-huh. That’s real interesting. Listen, those people Villanova sent you...that was about the Handyman, right?”

“Yeah. A couple people he grabbed got away. But even so, you’re looking at major trauma. Nightmares. Flashbacks. I worked with one of those survivors.”

“Yeah, well *I* worked with the victims.” His voice grew bitter. “What was left of ’em.”

“You were on the Task Force?”

“Me and every other cop in town, plus the FBI, the ATF...Man, if it had initials, it was climbin’ up our ass, tellin’ us how to do our jobs.” He looked over at me. “It was a local cop who finally got him, ya know that? Kranksi. Another big dumb Polack, like me. Brought the guy in.”

“I remember.”

“Christ, what Dowd did to those poor people...Women, kids, he didn’t care. One truly sick fuck that guy...”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Hear who’s playin’ him in the movie? DeNiro. Can you *believe* they’re makin’ a *movie* about that piece o’ shit..?”

“I heard. Serial killers are big box-office.”

“Well, ain’t that nice.” He shook his head. “Tell that to the vics. And their families.”

He gave a hacking cough, a sputtering of rage. Fished in his pocket for another Camel. Came up empty.

I said nothing. If he wanted to say more, he would. I knew he wouldn’t. He was a cop. He’d had nightmares, an alcohol problem, a busted marriage, and an early death by colon cancer. But he wouldn’t talk.

We made the turn onto my street, whose edge fell away onto a panoramic view of the Three Rivers and the glistening lights of contemporary Pittsburgh. Gone were the steel mills and factories; in their place stood razor-thin buildings of glass and chrome, of software and bond trading.

The city had changed a lot since I was a kid, a shot-and-a-beer town colliding with the Information Age. Though sometimes, like tonight, I missed the Pittsburgh I grew up in. Forged by immigrants. Musty like the smell of damp wool. A mosaic of thick accents and old neighborhoods, clanging trolleys and cobblestone streets. Before mini-malls and decaf lattes. Before spaghetti became pasta.

Polk slowed the car, as I pointed up ahead to my place, freshly painted a quiet yellow a few years back. I’d also added a rear deck that jutted over the edge of the hill. The houses on either side, my neighbors, were coal-dark, except for tiny porch-lights that made them seem somehow more vulnerable, not less.

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