

In the Shadows

By Kate Simon

Detective Jim Pearson looked at the stack of files on his desk. He was missing something, he had to be. He steadied himself before he opened a file. The images never failed to turn his stomach. He didn't understand how someone could get pleasure from doing this to another human being.

Jim and his partner, Charlie Furth, were brought in on the Buck Hill serial killer case three weeks ago. The press had christened the killer with the name. His first victims had been dumped his victims along the back roads of Buck Hill area of Newbury. There were four cases in their jurisdiction when they were brought on to the investigation. The previous team had been put back into the pool of detectives, much to their pleasure. They'd been on the case for three months and had gotten nowhere. They thought the case was a career black hole.

Jim and Charlie had questionable success. Rather than solve the murders, they'd discovered seven more cases in Prescott township's jurisdiction. Some of the victims were technically still missing persons, but the circumstances of the disappearances were too similar. The killings had expanded from the Prescott area to Buck Hill, twenty miles away. It was unusual for a killer to move that far out of his hunting ground.

"You can't keep staring at those pictures. They'll give you nightmares," said Charlie.

"Too late," said Jim. Charlie had been his partner for more than ten years. No one knew him better. "We're missing something. This guy abducts these women. The early ones he strangled, some of the later ones were stabbed. Then he pushes them out of his vehicle wrapped in garbage bags. It makes them look like the trash bagged by community service workers."

"Has the chief approved us looking into the Prescott cases?"

"Only as it pertains to our cases."

"What about the Prescott department? What do they have to say about it?"

"Their chief doesn't think it's a case."

“What? He had three women found on the side of roads in desolate areas. Four are still missing. He doesn’t see it a case?”

“The women from Prescott were prostitutes. He writes it off to the hazards of their profession.”

“What?” Charlie yelled. “These women were murdered and thrown out on the side of the road. He hadn’t started using the trash bags yet, but there were still multiple victims. That doesn’t merit an investigation?”

“Prescott gave it a cursory investigation and then dropped it when there was no clear suspect”

“Why?”

Jim looked at his partner and sighed. “The victims were black.”

“Ah, Christ,” said Charlie as he sat on the edge of Jim’s desk. “I thought we were past all that shit. These women were someone’s mother, sister, daughter. They deserve justice.”

Jim smiled. His partner was a good man. He stood and patted him on the back. “We’ll find it for them. All of them.”

They sat at their desks, picking at their lunch. “The victims in our patch were black, Latina and white,” said Charlie.

“He’s changed his victims, his m.o. and his location,” said Jim. “That’s really unusual. Maybe they aren’t connected.”

“Or maybe he moved.”

Jim looked at him and smiled. “Yes, and he’s evolving. Our victims weren’t prostitutes. He’s gone from victims that were easy prey to victims that are more of a challenge. We got to figure out from where they were taken.”

Charlie opened a file. "Victim one, Theresa, was a law clerk at Munson and Jones. Her car was found at the Baylor mall."

"Would it be normal for her to shop there?" asked Jim.

"It is on the other side of town from her home, but not out of the realm of possibilities."

"Did we find any evidence of her shopping there?"

"Nothing in her financials and no shopping bags in her car."

"Victim two?"

"Elena. Worked at the local dollar store."

"Her car?"

"She didn't have one. She lived within walking distance."

"Victims three and four, Carol and Diane. Both housewives. Cars found in the Walmart parking lot on Main Street. Both had shopped there in the past, but nothing in their cars or financials."

Jim sipped his soda. "I think we can assume he's dumping their cars."

"What about victim two?" asked Charlie.

Jim grabbed her file and looked at the coroner's report. "Huh."

"What?"

"I'm not sure." He picked up his phone and called the coroner's office. "Doctor James, this is Detective Pearson. Detective Furth and I have taken over the Buck Hill case."

"Good luck. Phillips and Lansing got no where."

"Thanks. I was hoping you to take a look at the report on Elena Diaz."

"Sure, give me a second. Okay, I have the file."

Jim put the call on speaker so Charlie could hear the conversation. "I'm seeing a broken hip. Everyone assumed it was from being tossed out of a car. Could it be from being hit by a car?"

"It's possible. I assumed she'd been thrown with a great deal of force. The bag was torn up more than the others." She paused and sighed. "I should have looked further."

"Don't beat yourself up, doctor. You had no reason to look for it."

"Well, I'm looking now. I assumed the torn-up bag and rolling into the gully was the reason she picked up debris."

"What kind of debris?"

"Metal shavings. Some were dark blue."

Jim smiled. "Thank you, doctor. You've been very helpful."

"If there is anything else I can do, please let me know."

Jim disconnected at Charlie. "Well, we know he hit Elena with his car."

"And we know it's an older model."

"How?"

"What car in the last ten years had a steel bumper? Mine's plastic."

"There is a steel support rod inside them."

"But they wouldn't be painted," Charlie smiled.

"So, we're looking for a blue, older model car with front end damage."

"That's not much to go on," said Charlie.

"It's more than we had this morning."

Jim hadn't slept well, but that wasn't new. Ever since they took on this case, he spent his nights staring at the ceiling and wondering what he was missing. There had to be something else. They would make the rounds of auto repair shops to see any older cars had front end work done.

He poured himself a second cup of coffee and forced himself to eat a bagel. He needed some extra fuel. He poured the last of the pot into his travel mug. He would need the internal heat. The temperature had dropped to below freezing last night and it didn't show signs of warming much today.

He met up Charlie at their first auto body shop. They chose to go with the national chains first. Charlie had the idea that the larger shops would have more work and therefore, less likely to remember repairing a front end. They'd worked their way through three shops when Jim got a call.

"Pearson." He listened to the caller and closed his eyes. "We'll be right there." He disconnected the call and looked at Charlie. "We have another one."

Jim made his way up Oak Avenue. The road had been plowed from the snow two nights before, making the potholes a little easier to traverse. Oak was a seldom used road and seldom repaired.

Charlie dialed a number. "Yo, Phillips, it's Furth. We need some help."

"Aw, hell no, Charlie. "We've moved on to other cases."

"We've determined our second victim, Elena Diaz, was hit by the suspect with his car. We're looking for auto shops that may have repaired front end damage on an older model, dark blue car."

"How do you know that?"

"The coroner confirmed it. I'm going to send you the list of shops. We've done the first three."

"Why aren't you two doing it?"

"We have another victim. We're on our way to the scene."

"Ah, Christ. Yeah, send me the list."

"Thanks, Peter." He disconnected the call and sent the list to Phillips. "I think he feels guilty they gave up."

Jim saw two patrol cars on the side of the road. He pulled in behind them and they got out of his car. "Where's the victim?"

One patrolman walked beyond both cars and pointed down the embankment. There was a woman with blood smeared in her blonde hair. Her top was gone and he could see blue skin. "Where's the ambulance?"

"They're on they're way but I told them it was a recovery."

"You did what?" Jim looked around the body and saw no footprints. "Did you go down and check?"

"Look at her. She's covered in blood and all blue. She's been dead for hours."

Jim and Charlie ran down the hill. Charlie checked her pulse at her wrist and shook his head. Jim put his fingers on her neck. He thought he felt something. Maybe he just wished he felt something. "Turn her over."

"We can't disturb the crime scene," said Charlie.

Jim reached for her shoulder and moved her on to her back. Her face was bruised and her eyes were swollen. She had a stab wound to her stomach but it was no longer bleeding. Maybe the patrolman was right.

"Ow," the woman murmured.

Jim looked up at the patrolman who had turned green at the sight of the woman. "She's alive!" he screamed. "Tell the ambulance to hurry the hell up." He pulled off his coat and put it over the woman. "Charlie, call CSU and get them out here."

"We've already contaminated the scene by walking through it and moving her."

"They'll have to make do." He leaned over and spoke softly. "Can you hear me, miss? Can you tell me your name?"

"Cold," she whispered.

"We're going to take care of you. I promise. You're safe now. Can you tell me your name?" He barely heard her whisper.

"Caroline."



Caroline had never been this cold. Not skiing, not when her heater broke down on Christmas and she couldn't find anyone to fix it. She could feel herself shivering. She tried to move but she couldn't make her muscles cooperate. Even her eyes wouldn't open. She could hear noise in the distance. She was in a hospital. As she became more aware of her body, the pain washed over her.

"Owww."

"Caroline?"

She heard a deep voice close to her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Detective Jim Pearson."

"Police?"

"I'm here to figure out what happened to you."

"Hurts."

"Yes ma'am. I'll get your nurse." She felt him move something on the bed.

"Can I help you?" The voice came over a patient call button.

"This is Detective Pearson. We need some pain med in here."

"I'll be right in," said a female voice.

"Caroline, can you tell me your last name?"

"Hunt." She heard someone come in and a moment later a warmth ran through her arm and up to brain.

"Do you remember what happened?"

"No."

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"I don't know." She could hear her words slur.

"Get some rest. We'll talk later."

She smiled at the man's gravel voice. At least she thinks she did.

Jim followed the nurse out to the hall. "Excuse me." The nurse turned and her badge. "Mary. I'm Detective Pearson."

"Yes, I know. She's another Buck Hill victim, isn't she?"

"That's what I want to talk about. She's the only survivor of this guy. We want to keep this quiet. We don't want him or anyone to know she's here. She needs to stay a Jane Doe."

"I understand."

"She will be under police protection at all times. No one goes in her room that shouldn't be there."

"Yes, sir. I'll put it in her chart. Everyone will assume that she's a suspect."

"Thank you, Mary." He looked at Caroline and she appeared to be asleep. He pulled out his phone and pressed a contact button.

"Hey," said Charlie. "Anything new?"

"Yeah, she gave me her last name. Caroline Hunt."

"Did she give us anything about the suspect?"

"No. She can barely speak and she's in a lot of pain. They gave her a shot and she's out for now. I've told the charge nurse she stays a Jane Doe for now."

"Good. I think what to do now is find her car."

"Agreed. I'm going to stay here incase she wakes up."

Charlie gathered as much information as he could about Caroline Hunt. She was forty-three, single, no significant other. She was the only child of Geraldine Hunt, the head of what passed for society in Newbury. That could be a problem.

She drove a late model BMW. He'd put the word out with the patrols to search for her car. Another problem was Caroline Hunt was Dr. Hunt, an orthopedic surgeon with a practice in the hospital where she was currently a patient.

"Jim, has she woken up?"

"Not yet. What have you got?"

"I have the patrols on the look out for her car but we may have a problem."

"What now?"

"She's an orthopedic surgeon at Newbury General."

"Ah, crap. No one recognizes her now but when her face starts to heal, they will. I've got the nursing staff to keep her a Jane Doe for now, but that won't last long."

"There's something else. She's the daughter of Geraldine Hunt."

"Damn it. A surgeon can take time off but the daughter of Geraldine Hunt can't disappear. Come back to the hospital and we'll figure it out."

Jim looked at the picture of her drivers license Charlie had sent him. Caroline Hunt was a beautiful woman, even on a drivers license picture. He listened to her even breathing. No one would believe that the woman in the bed was the woman in the picture. The door opened and he jumped to his feet. A doctor walked in and barely acknowledged him. "Excuse me. ID please?"

"Who are you?" he asked.

Jim opened his jacket and flashed his badge. "Detective Jim Pearson."

"I'm Dr. Evans. I operated on this patient."

“Kurt?” Caroline whispered.

The doctor walked over to her bed and looked close at her face. “Oh, my God! Caroline! What happened?”

“Don’t know.”

Evans grabbed a penlight and looked at what he could through her swollen eyes. He listened to her chest. He opened her gown and removed her bandages. Jim blinked back tears at the sight of her wounds.

“Report,” she said with a small smile.

“You came into the ER this morning with several stab wounds, two cracked ribs and facial trauma. Thank God you were also hypothermic.”

“Why?” asked Jim.

“If this was summertime she would have quickly bled out.” Evans turned his attention back to Caroline. “You’re in for a long recovery, but you will recover.”

“Guarantees, doctor? You know better than that, Kurt.”

“I know you, Caroline. Nothing stops you.” Then he did something a doctor never does. He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Try not to worry. You had an excellent surgeon. I’ll have the nurse come in and change your bandage.”

“Doctor, we are investigating her case. In the meantime, we need to keep her identity a secret,” said Jim.

“I understand but what about her practice? I’m sure her office is trying to reach her. She’s the best orthopedic surgeon on the East coast.”

“Thanks,” she said with a small chuckle.

“Can you tell them she’s been called away?”

“Yes, yes, that would work. She’s often called to consult on difficult cases.”

“Would they take your word for it?”

“Yes. I’m a friend. We dated in medical school.” He looked over at Caroline and back. “Has anyone told Geraldine?”

“Not yet. We’ll be notifying her as soon as possible.”

“Okay, I’ll stop by her office now. Otherwise, they’ll be calling everywhere looking for her. I’ll check in on her tonight.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Jim closed the door and moved to her bed. “The doctor seems pleased with your condition.”

“Whoopee,” she said.

He couldn’t help but chuckle. Evans was right. She was a tough cookie.

“Talk to me. What do you know?”

“You were found off the side of Oak Avenue.”

“Car accident?”

Jim took a breath. He hated he had to tell her this. “No. You had been stabbed and dumped.” He heard her gasp.

“Buck...Hill?”

“We think so.”

“Oh God,” she gasped and started weeping. She cried so hard she gasped for air.

Jim pushed the call button.

“This is Mary.”

“Good. Mary, we need you.”

The nurse came in and grabbed Caroline’s hand. The vital signs on the monitor were spiking. “What happened?”

“I just told her how we found her.”

“She’s due for her pain med. That will calm her.” Mary left the room and came back quickly with a syringe. She injected it into her IV and Caroline’s sobs lessened. “I’ll get her bandages for the change. Then she should be set for a few hours.”

“Thanks, Mary,” said Jim. “I have to ask. Nurses don’t normally identify themselves on the call.”

“I figured you’d want to know who you were talking to.”

“Very smart. How did you explain that to the other nurses?”

“I told them I’m the charge nurse and you requested me specifically.”

“Thank you, Mary.”

“You’re welcome.”

He grabbed some tissues and dabbed at Caroline’s tears. “I’m sorry this has happened, but you’re safe now.”

“Promise?”

He took her hand in his. “On my life.”

Jim was still holding her hand when Caroline drifted off to sleep. He took a deep breath and tried to pull himself together. This case was ripping him up from the inside out. When he did manage an hour or two of sleep, he had awful nightmares. He had to get this guy. Charlie knocked before he walked in the room.

“What have you got?”

“Hello to you, too.”

“Sorry. It’s been a little rough. She figured out this is about the Buck Hill killer. They had to sedate her.”

“Poor kid. I don’t have more than I told you on the phone. We haven’t found her car. We have to figure out what to do if we don’t want this guy to realize she’s still alive.”

“We’ve got her office covered. She recognized her surgeon. Turns out they dated in med school and are still friends. He’s going to tell her office she’s been called away on an emergency consult. Apparently, she’s a big deal so that wouldn’t be uncommon. He understands that we need to keep her identity a secret.”

“That’s good. Now what do we do about her mother?” asked Charlie.

“Mom? I need to talk to her,” said Caroline.

“Dr. Hunt, we are trying to keep your location a secret for now.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Charlie Furth, Jim’s partner.”

“Why am I a secret?”

Jim wanted to keep her calm. He took her hand. “Caroline, this guy assumes no one’s found you. We’d like to keep it that way until we catch him.”

“You mean he thinks I’m dead.”

He took a breath and said softly, “Yes.”

“Oh God.”

“Do you remember anything about last night?” asked Charlie. Jim shot him a look. He didn’t want to push her.

“Nothing yet. It’s not uncommon with this kind of injury. It could come back in an hour, a month or never.”

“Are you diagnosing yourself, doctor?” Jim smiled.

“I did go to medical school.” She managed to smile. “I heard what you said about Kurt. He can handle my office. My partners can take my cases. I need to see my mother. She’ll be so worried if I disappear.”

“If she comes here the word will get out,” said Charlie.

“How about a phone call?” asked Jim.

“I can’t just call her and say ‘Hi, Mom. I was attacked by a serial killer’.”

“I’ll go talk to her and explain what’s happened.”

“No, Jim! I want you to stay.”

“I won’t take that personally,” said Charlie.

“I’m sorry. I’m used to Jim.”

Jim chuckled. “Thanks, I think.”

“I’ll talk to your mother and explain what’s going on. I’ll call when she’s ready,” said Charlie.

Jim walked Charlie into the hall. “Step careful. This woman has a lot of friends in this town, including our boss.”



Caroline looked out her window. The swelling in her eyes let her see only a part of the view. Her memory filled in the rest. She rarely got the chance to admire the view. She was too busy with patients. Newbury was set in a valley surrounded by mountains. Now she could see the snow that covered the mountains. The snow that saved her life.

She watched Jim as he came back in her room. He had a kind face. She trusted him. He said he would protect her with his life and she believed him.

“You seem to be feeling better.”

“I have a snoot full of morphine. When it wears off, I’ll be back to miserable again.” She rubbed her nose, a sure sign they had her lit up. “Ouch.” She looked at her hand. She’d scratched herself with a broken nail. “Oh, damn. My nails are ruined.”

Jim stared at her like she’d lost her mind. “You’re upset over a manicure? Now?”

“Again, snoot full.” She rubbed her nose again, this time keeping her broken nails out of the way. She stared at her bright pink nails, now broken and sharp. “Do you know how much fake nails cost? Damn. They looked so pretty.”

“Since when do surgeons have long nails?”

“We don’t. I was going to a fundraiser on Sunday and I treated myself.”

Jim touched a nail. “These seem pretty tough.”

“They are. I would have had them ground down before my next surgery.” She didn’t understand Jim’s smile. She closed her eyes and wondered what she would say to her mother. “Can we FaceTime with my mother?”

“Ah, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Am I that bad?”

“You’re alive.”

“Wow, that bad. Show me.”

“What?”

“Turn on your camera and show me.”

She could see he didn’t want to do this. He paused and looked at her.

“Are you sure?”

“If you can stand to look at me, so can I.” He handed her his phone. She couldn’t withhold her gasp. Both her eyes were black and blue. They were starting to turn yellow, a sign of healing. She had a cut on her forehead that had a few stitches. Her hair was still tucked into a surgical cap, but she could see streaks of blood still there. She handed back the phone. “No FaceTime.”

“Are you okay?”

“I will be. Kurt is an excellent surgeon. I’ll have to ask someone to wash my hair and file down these nails.”

Jim’s phone rang and he connected Charlie. “Hi. Is she ready?”

“She’s very upset, of course.”

“So quick?” asked Caroline. “He just left.”

“You fell asleep for about an hour.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I’ll put her on speaker. Hello, Mrs. Hunt. I’m Detective Pearson.”

“Where’s my daughter?”

“She’s right here.” He nodded at Caroline as he set the phone on her chest.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Bunny! Baby! They told me you’re hurt but they won’t let me see you.”

“I’ll be okay, Mom. I promise. Kurt was my surgeon.”

“He is such a nice man. I don’t know why you didn’t marry him?”

“Really, Mom. Now?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Tell me why he had to operate on you.”

She took a breath. There was no hiding from her mother. “I was stabbed.”

“Oh, dear God. This cop didn’t say that.”

“He’s a detective. He and his partner, Detective Pearson are trying to find who did this to me. They believe the guy who did this thinks I’m dead. If it stays that way, that may give them a better chance to find him.” She could hear her mother crying. “Mom, I promise I’m getting the best of care. I’ll be okay.”

“How do I know that?”

“Mom, try to calm down. You’re on the board of this hospital. You know how good it is.”

“You’re in Newbury? I’m coming.”

“No, Mom, you can’t. Please. It’s important. Why don’t you go visit Aunt Catherine?” She looked at Jim. “I’ll call you every day.” Jim nodded.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Very well. The first time you don’t call, I’m coming back.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I love you, Bunny.”

“I love you too, Mom.” She disconnected the call and handed the phone back to Jim.

“Bunny?” he smiled.

“Shut up,” she smiled.

A knock at the door was followed by Kurt Evans sticking his head in the room. “Can I see my patient?”

“Come in, Kurt,” said Caroline.

“I see you’re still here, detective.”

“She’s not going to be left alone.”

“Good.” Kurt turned his attention to Caroline. “You look better.”

“Not by much. The morphine’s wearing off.”

“I’ll make sure you get your next dose.” He checked her heart and breathing. He took a look under the dressing. “It looks good. How is it feeling?”

“Like I’ve been stabbed, jerk wad.”

Kurt chuckled and turned to Jim. “She gets like this. Mostly when she’s been deprived of chocolate.”

Caroline held up her hands, showing her broken nails. “Kurt, can you get a grinder and take care of these? I’m scratching the hell out of myself.”

“Sure. I’ll grab it and come back.”

“Can you get me a shampoo cap?” Her voice caught. “There’s blood in my hair.”

“Of course. I’ll get a nurse.”

Jim watched as a nurse used a plastic cap to shampoo Caroline's hair. It didn't need water so they could clean her hair in bed. The nurse removed the cap and dried her hair with a towel. She ran a comb through Caroline's hair. He could see the beautiful woman in the picture start to emerge. Unfortunately, so did the nurse.

"How's that, honey?"

"Much better. Thank you."

The nurse gasped. "Doctor Hunt? Oh my God. What happened to you?"

Jim stood and put his hand on her shoulder. He looked at her badge. "Chris, I'm Detective Pearson. We need to keep Dr. Hunt's presence here quiet. It's critical. As far as anyone knows, this is Jane Doe. You can't tell anyone."

"Yes, sir," she said quietly. "Dr. Hunt, I'm here until midnight. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you. Anything at all."

"Thank you, Chris."

The nurse left, looking a bit shaken.

Jim stood outside Caroline's room while she slept. He should assign a patrolman for security, but he couldn't. Not yet. Charlie came up the hall.

"How is she?"

"Better," said Jim "but she's still in a lot of pain."

"I'm not surprised. It's only been twenty-four hours. Speaking of which, we both need to get some rest. You should go home. I'll stay."

"No. I'll stay."

"Look, Jim, I understand. I do. But we won't do her any good if we wear ourselves out. Why don't I see if we can get a spare room to rest?"

"Good idea. Have you heard anything from Phillips and Lansing?"

"They hit every auto body shop within ten miles. Nothing."

"So, he's driving around with a damaged bumper and maybe no headlight."

"Probably."

"There's something else. Remember how broken her nails were?"

"They didn't get anything from under them. The snow wiped any DNA away."

"True, but the nails were artificial and strong. The doctor had to grind them down so she wouldn't scratch herself," Jim smiled.

Charlie got it and smiled. "He's got scratches."

"They're probably deep. She fought hard to break those nails."

"Speaking of DNA, I got the results of the rape kit."

Jim took a breath. "And?"

"They're negative. She wasn't raped."

Jim looked at the closed door and imagined giving Caroline this small piece of good news. "But that makes her different from the others."

“Something stopped him.”

“Maybe she scratched more than his face.”

Charlie winced. “Ouch.”

“Or maybe he was interrupted.”

“On Oak? Everyone avoids it because it’s such a crap road,” said Charlie.

“It would explain why he didn’t make sure she was dead.” Jim’s phone rang. “I was expecting this sooner.” He answered the call. “Hello, Chief.”

“Pearson, I just got a call from Geraldine Hunt. She told me her daughter was the victim from Oak Avenue. Do you have any idea on how much I hate being blindsided? She called me on her way out of town. Said she was leaving to protect her daughter’s anonymity. She wanted my assurance that her daughter’s case was my top priority.”

“I’m sorry, sir. We’ve been a very keeping a very tight circle on this.”

“I’m always in the circle, detective.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I should have been informed that our victim was Caroline Hunt and that she’s still alive!” he yelled.

Jim held the phone away from his ear. Charlie shrugged. “Sir, we are keeping Dr. Hunt on a Jane Doe status. We don’t want the suspect to know she’s still alive.”

“Tell me you’re getting somewhere.”

“We believe the suspect was interrupted on Oak but we don’t know why. It’s a rarely used road.”

“I can answer that,” said the chief. “There was a jackknifed tractor trailer on Main Street that night. They shouldn’t be allowed on a two-lane road. All traffic was redirected. It had to go up Oak and over Keyser. It took me two hours to get home.”

“That explains it, sir.”

“That’s why I’m in the circle, Pearson.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Keep me informed.”

Jim’s ‘Yes, sir,’ was said to a dead line.

“How much trouble are we in?” asked Charlie.

“No more than usual. Apparently there was an accident that night. It rerouted traffic up Oak.”

“That’s why he was interrupted. He didn’t expect the traffic.”

“Now we just have to find him,” said Jim.

“Jim, we’ve made more progress today than we have in weeks. Why don’t you get some food. I’ll stay here with Dr. Hunt.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. You haven’t been sleeping and you’re living on coffee.”

Jim knew he couldn’t argue with his partner. Charlie knew him too well and would call him on his shit. “Fine. I’ll bring you something back from the cafeteria.”

He didn’t realize how hungry he was until he got his cheeseburger. Charlie was right. This case was wearing hard on him. Now that his hunger was satisfied, exhaustion overwhelmed him. He would find a bed to sleep in for a few hours. He grabbed his take-out bag and made his way back to Caroline’s room.

He handed the bag to Charlie. He handed a large cup to Caroline.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“A chocolate milkshake. Dr. Evans said you like chocolate and I thought a shake would be okay.”



She took a deep sip and smiled. "You are officially my favorite person, Detective Pearson."

Charlie stood and smiled. "Again, I won't take that personally."

"Sorry, Detective."

"It's Charlie. I'm going to find a place to eat this." He pointed at Jim. "Then I'm getting you a bed before you collapse."

Jim took Charlie's seat and saw her smile at another sip of her shake.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You do look very tired."

"I guess I shouldn't pretend with a doctor. I've been putting in a lot of hours on this case for weeks. Charlie is getting a bed so we can take turns getting some sleep."

Caroline set down her shake. "Have you made any progress?"

He stood and moved to her side. "There is something you should know. We did a rape kit when you came in." He took her hand when she gasped. "It was negative. You weren't raped." Tears slid down her cheeks.

"I suppose I should be grateful."

"I'm not going to hide anything from you. We think he was interrupted."

She looked at her fingers and made claw motions. Her breath became rapid as she moved faster and faster. "I remember fighting," she whispered. She kept moving her fingers. "I can see my hands moving and I hear screaming. Not just my voice."

He took her hand in his. "You fought hard enough to break your nails. You may have done some damage to him."

"I hope so," she whispered.

Jim didn't like being this far from Caroline's room, but at least it was on the same floor. He took a shower and changed into the scrubs Charlie had managed to get for him. He got under the sheets and laid back, staring at the acoustical tiles. The sheets had the feel of dried leaves and the pillow wasn't much better. His bed at home was much more comfortable, but that didn't help him sleep. Maybe a vinyl covered mattress would.

He kept running the case over and over in his head but that wasn't helping. Charlie was right. He had to sleep. He turned on the TV and looked for some mental valium. A home restoration show looked like a good bet. He tried to focus on a pair of really tall twins ripping down some drywall. His eyes began to open and close until darkness finally took him.

*"Jimmy, Jimmy where are you?"*

*"Kathy! I'm right here." He couldn't see her through the fog*

*"I can't find you. Please help me. Jimmy please. Where are you?!"*

*"Jim, why can't you help me?" The fog cleared and he saw Caroline, standing in front of him. She was covered in blood and blue from the cold. She held out her hands.*

*"Jim, help me."*

*"Caroline!"*

Jim woke up to the sound of his own screams. A nurse ran into his room.

"Are you alright?"

"What?" he asked. His heart was still racing.

"We could hear you up at the station." She reached for his wrist. "Your pulse is racing."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"It's okay. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks." He looked at his watch and saw it was two thirty in the morning. He'd slept for five hours, but he was just as exhausted as he was when he laid down. He got

out of bed and redressed in his suit, skipping the tie. He'd need new clothes soon. He walked down to Caroline's room. He was surprised to find them both awake.

"What the hell?" said Charlie

"Are you alright?" asked Caroline.

"You heard?"

"The whole building heard."

"Sorry. Any more news?"

"Excuse me," said Caroline. "Is anyone going to talk about your blood curdling scream?"

"No," said Jim.

"No more news," said Charlie.

"I think we should do a press conference. We ask for anyone who was on Oak Avenue that night to call in with information on a parked car on the side of the road," said Jim.

"It's a good idea. We got nowhere with the auto body shops. But you know the chief hates involving the public in a case."

"He won't hate it if we ask him to do it. Put him in front of the cameras. It makes it look like he's leading the investigation."

"Excuse me!" yelled Caroline. "Are you putting my name out there? Will I be in more danger?"

"No," said Jim. "We'll only say we're looking for the car and driver. We won't mention Buck Hill." He turned to Charlie. "I slept longer than I expected. You should go get some rest. There's a second set of scrubs in the room."

"You're right." He put his arm around Jim. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Go get some rest."

Jim closed the door behind Charlie only to find Caroline getting out of bed. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to use the bathroom and then you’re going to take me for a walk.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need to walk. I can’t stay in bed too long after surgery. It causes blood clots. Very few people are around at this time of night.”

“Fine.”

Caroline took Jim’s arm as he led her out of her room. He led her down the back hall, away from the nurse’s station. “Why did you put on your suitcoat? Expecting someone?” He opened his jacket to show the gun at his waist. “Oh.”

She didn’t want to talk about the reason for carrying his gun at three a.m. “Tell me about your nightmare.”

“Excuse me?”

“I assume you had a nightmare.”

“You’re not a shrink.”

“No, but I am a doctor and I did my psych rotation. It’s obviously causing you pain. Talking about it might help.” They turned a corner and went down the next hall.

“You aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

“No. You’re hurting, I’m a doctor. It’s in the job description.”

He stopped walking and took a breath. “My kid sister Kathy disappeared ten years ago. Her car was found abandoned in a warehouse parking lot. There were signs of a struggle. I wasn’t allowed to work the case because I was too close to it.”

“That didn’t stop you, did it?”

“No. I used all my time off to search the woods near the warehouse. I ran down every clue they had. Charlie kept me updated.”

“They never found her?”

Jim shook his head. “No. This valley is surrounded by undeveloped mountains. She could be anywhere.”

“What happened in the dream?”

“I could hear her calling for me and crying. I couldn’t find her. Then…”

“Tell me.”

“Then I heard you calling for me.”

Caroline felt horrible. Her pain had now added to his. She rested her head on his chest. “If it helps at all, I feel very safe with you.” She glanced up and saw his unshed tears.

“Thank you,” he whispered. Then he kissed the top of her head.

Charlie found both Jim and Caroline asleep. He tapped Jim on the shoulder. He startled awake and reached for his gun. "Whoa. It's just me."

Jim rubbed his eyes. "Sorry. What time is it?"

"Seven. Let's get some breakfast and we'll call the chief."

He handed Charlie him a yellow legal pad. "I've been working on what we need the chief to say."

"Or not say."

"True. The calls will have to come into the station. We'll need someone to follow up on any calls."

"Phillips and Lansing?"

"I'll make the call."

"Is it time for breakfast?" asked Caroline.

"I'm sorry," said Charlie. "We didn't mean to wake you."

"What time is it?"

"A little after seven."

"My breakfast tray won't be here for two hours. Do you think you could bring me something too? I'm craving orange juice, and maybe a nosh."

"A what?" asked Charlie.

"A little something to hold me over until breakfast."

"Sure thing," said Charlie. "I'll go to the cafeteria and be back soon."

"Thanks, Charlie," said Caroline.

Jim looked at Caroline. "How did you sleep?"

"It's amazing what a snoot full of morphine will do for you."

"How's the pain?"

"It's not great but I don't want anything until I've eaten. Vomiting will hurt my stitches." She smiled at Jim. "More importantly, how did you sleep?"

"I was supposed to be watching you."

"Save the guilt, Pearson. The fact that you're still upright after all this is freaking amazing. I have no doubt that if a bad guy came into the room, you would have defended me."

Jim managed a smile. "Well, I did just nearly draw my gun on my partner."

"My point is proven. Now tell me about this press conference."

"We'll have the chief ask for anyone who was on Oak Avenue two nights ago to come forward. They may have seen something they don't realize would help in the investigation."

Caroline was looking for a channel to take her mind off of the pain in her torso. She was lucky the guy didn't puncture anything that couldn't be readily fixed. Kurt put her on a full diet, although she wasn't sure that was a medical decision or his knowledge of how she got when she was hungry. She turned on a home restoration channel. Jim looked up.

"I was watching some of that last night. It's pretty good."

"I never get a chance to watch things like this."

"Well, now you do"

"Hell of a vacation."

"Agreed," he smiled. She decided he had a very nice smile

Charlie returned with a large bag. He handed her a cold bottle of orange juice. "I got you a chocolate croissant."

"Ahh...Charlie, you are my new favorite person."

Jim looked at her and smiled. "I thought I was your favorite person. Are you that fickle?"

She took a bite of the still warm pastry. "When it comes to chocolate, yes."

Jim took a fork full of a passable omelet. "What's the plan?"

"I've spoken to Phillips and Lansing. They'll be at the station early. We just have to get the chief to agree."

Jim's phone rang. "Speak of the devil. Good morning, chief."

"Fill me in."

"I was about to call you. We have a plan. We'd like to ask the public for help. There was more traffic on Oak than usual. We want to talk to anyone who might have been on the road. They may have seen something they don't realize would help us."

"You know how I feel about bringing in the public."

"We were hoping you would make the appeal from the station. Phillips and Lansing have agreed to field any calls."

"You two are supposed to be running down leads. And where will you two be? Let me guess. Sitting in Dr. Hunt's room."

"Sir, if the suspect finds out she's still alive, she would be in a great deal of danger." Jim knew the chief winding up for a lecture. "You did promise Geraldine Hunt that her daughter's security would be her top priority."

The chief made a noise like a dog interrupted in mid bark. "Fine. If this comes back to bite me you two will be back in uniform."



“Yes sir.” Jim paused knowing her was about to push his luck over a cliff. He sent the chief a script for the conference. “Chief, I have a list of things that need to be said and to avoid.”

The chief paused to open the message. Then he spoke very slow and clear.

”Pearson, if this doesn’t work, you better just put in your papers.”

“Yes sir.” Jim disconnected the call.

“Are we still on the payroll,” asked Charlie.

“Let’s just say this better work.”

“Don’t worry,” said Caroline as she finished off her juice.

“Excuse me?” asked Jim.

“I don’t use my family name to my advantage that often. But if I ask my mother, she’ll ground your chief to a powder and throw him into the wind.”

“She sounds terrifying,” said Jim.

“She is,” Caroline smiled. “I want to be just like her when I grow up.”

Jim sat with Caroline as she finished her lunch. The doctor had already been in and declared her fit to discharge tomorrow. He didn’t like that. He wanted to be to keep a close eye on her. Hopefully this hail Mary pass with the news conference will give them the break he needed.

Charlie entered the room. “I’ve talked to Phillips and Lansing. They know what to look for.”

“How’s the chief?”

Charlie grimaced. “I really don’t want to go back to patrol. It’s time for the afternoon news.”

Caroline turned the channel and waited for the news. A blonde with a too white smile came on the screen.

*“Welcome to the News at Noon. I’m Carla Lamb. Today we are going live to the Newbury Police Department where Chief Thomas Connelly is ready to give an update on the victim found on Oak Avenue on Thursday.”*

The scene changed to the front of the police station. The chief looked nervous but had a sheet of paper with him. Jim hoped it was the notes he’d sent him and he’d stick to the script.

*“Last Wednesday night there was an accident on Main Avenue. Traffic was rerouted up Oak Avenue. We are looking for anyone who saw a car parked on the side of Oak. Contact the Newbury police department with any information. Even if you think it’s nothing, it could be important to solving a case.”*

Reporters started peppering him with questions.

*“Is this the Buck Hill Killer?”*

*“Who was the victim?”*

*“Why haven’t you release her name? Is she still alive? She was alive when you found her on Thursday.”*

The chief glared at the reporters. It didn’t have the same effect as it did on his police.

*“Once again, I am asking the public to come forward. Any information can be helpful.”*

The chief turned and walked back into the station. The anchor repeated the phone number that was on the screen. They moved on to the next story.

“Well, shit,” said Charlie.

“What?” asked Caroline. “He didn’t say my name.”

“No. He didn’t say anything wrong. I didn’t count of the reporters. That was my stupid error.”

“Jim, Charlie, you’re doing your best.”

“Thanks, Caroline,” said Jim. He looked at Charlie. “I want the patrolmen and the EMTs in front of me. I want to know who’s talking to the press. Then I want their head on a pike.”

“We can deal with impaling later,” said Charlie. “Right now, we have to see if we get any good leads.”

Jim waited for hours while Charlie, Phillips and Lansing went through leads and interviewed people who’d been on Oak Avenue on Wednesday night. Fortunately, Charlie had brought him a change of clothes. Three days in the same clothes was getting old. He had his gun holster visible over his polo shirt, but that would have to do. Everyone on the floor knew he was a cop. They just didn’t know why he was still here.

He'd gotten a separate dinner tray for himself. The food wasn't that bad. He wouldn't go to a restaurant for it, but it was serviceable. He gotten one of the nursing assistants to go to the cafeteria and get them both some milkshakes. He tried to tip her but she refused. She said her brother was a cop. Jim knew him and he was a good guy, young but focused. Jim walked back into the room and handed Caroline her chocolate shake.

“Oh, you’re too good to me,” she smiled as she held out her hands.

He didn't leave go of it for a moment and looked into her eyes. “You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Jim,” she whispered.

Charlie burst in without knocking.

“What the hell?” yelled Jim.

“We have a name.”

“What?”

“A trucker brought in his dash cam video. We got a clear shot of his license plate.”

“Let’s not get too excited. It could be a stolen plate.”

“The plate is registered to a dark blue 1970 Plymouth Barracuda.”

“Hot damn! yelled Jim.

“What?” asked Caroline.

“We determined that one of the victims was hit with a dark blue older car.”

“We’re waiting for Judge Carey to sign off on the search warrant.”

“You know his name?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Charlie.

“Who is it? Maybe I know him.”

“We can’t tell you,” said Jim. “It could alter your memories when they do come back.”

Charlie’s phone beeped. “That’s it. We’ve got the warrant. I have a team assembled. Are you ready to go?”

Jim looked at Caroline. “No, I’ll stay here until you have him in custody.”

“Jim, you’ve worked so hard. Don’t you want to be there when they get him?” she asked.

“It’s more important to keep you safe.”

Jim flipped channels, trying to keep his mind off of what Charlie was doing. He would make the collar. Charlie would get the guy while he was sitting in Caroline’s room.

That didn’t matter. All that mattered was keeping Caroline safe and keeping the guy from getting more victims.

“For God’s sake will you just pick something!”

“Sorry.” He stopped at the home network. Charlie finally rang his phone. “What have you got?”

“Good news and bad news.”

“Just tell me!”

“It’s definitely him. His name is Michael Miller. He’s an accountant for a company called Northeast Billing. They have offices all over.

“Including Prescott?”

“Including Prescott. We’ve found souvenirs of all the victims, including the ones from Prescott.”

“Bad news?”

“He’s cleared out. He must have figured after the press conference that it wouldn’t be long before we caught up with him. We did find the car. Front end damage like we thought.”

“Any evidence of another car?”

“A neighbor said he’s just got a BMW. He saw him driving it less than an hour ago.”

They were so close and they’d just missed him. “He’s driving Caroline’s car. That’s why we never found it.”

“What the hell is going on?!” yelled Caroline.

“Just a minute,” he said to her. “No point in keeping this hidden anymore. Release his name and picture to the news. Get every cop in the city on this! I want this guy before he gets away.” He heard screaming in the background.

“Get out, Get out! Everyone move!”

He heard an explosion. “Charlie, Charlie, talk to me.”

“Head count,” yelled Charlie. “Did everyone make it out?”

“Charlie! What the hell happened?”

“What’s going on?!” asked Caroline.

Jim opened the window blinds and saw smoke and flames a half mile in the distance. “Shit! Charlie!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m here,” he said through a cough. “He booby trapped the house. It must have had a delayed timer. He wanted to make sure he had as many casualties as possible. Fortunately, Phillips spotted the device and got us out in time.”

“Is anyone hurt?”

“Bruises and some cuts and scrapes. I don’t think it’s anything bad.” The sound of firetrucks and ambulances got louder. “Before you feel like shit for asking, yes, I’ve got some evidence. He kept their licenses on his living room coffee table, right next to the TV Guide. CSI photographed it before I bagged it.”

“It was a lure. He didn’t care what you found because he wanted you all dead.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Have patrol do a search for Caroline’s car. He may have been watching before he set off the bomb. Get CSI to log the evidence and then I want everyone in the ER to be checked out.”

“You do realize, you’re not the chief, yet,” Charlie chuckled.

“I’m sorry, Charlie.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll see to it that everyone gets checked out.”

“Not for that. I’m sorry I wasn’t there with you.”

“It wouldn’t have changed the outcome. Maybe you would have made it out, maybe you wouldn’t.”

“You’re right, of course. Once you get checked out, come up to the room. We’ll call the chief together.” He disconnected the call and stuck his phone in his pocket.

Caroline saw the look on Jim's face. This was more than not being with his men. "Come here," she said and held out her hand. He took her hand in his. "Tell me."

"His name is Michael Miller. He left evidence out in the open for the men to find. He wanted to kill as many cops as he could."

"Is everyone okay?"

"It seems like it."

"What was that about my car?"

"We never found it. He'd damaged his own car so he's been using yours."

"Ewww. Straight to the crusher. I never want to see it again."

"Understandable. We still need to find it for evidence."

Caroline squeezed his hand. "Kathy would be proud of you," she said softly. She was worried when he didn't respond. "You figured out how to find him when no one else could."

"We haven't found him yet."

"But you will. You have a name, a photograph. He won't be able to hide for long."

"Thank you." She could see his eyes tear. She was afraid she'd overstepped.

"Why were you asking about Prescott?"

"We identified seven victims in Prescott before he moved to Newbury."

"What kind of sicko does this?"

"An accountant."

"Seriously?"

"He works for a company called Northeast Billing. He's the kind of guy who hides in the shadows. No one would suspect him. They never do."

"Oh my God," she said as she gripped tight to his hand.

“What is it?”

“Northeast Billing is a medical billing company. They handle bills from my office.”

“Your office doesn’t know where you are. You’re here as a Jane Doe.”

There was a knock at the door. A man in scrubs backed into the room, pulling a nurse’s computer cart. Everything seemed to slow down. Jim turned and reached for his gun as the man brandished a knife. The knife. She remembered. The man thrust his knife before Jim could fire his weapon. Caroline tried to scream but nothing came out. Jim slid to the floor and Miller stabbed him again. “Stop,” she managed to say.

“Oh, I’m not here for him.” He smiled at her and her stomach turned. “I’m here to finish what I started. I owe you.” He turned his head and she saw scratches on his neck. They hadn’t been treated and they were as deep as they were wide. She’d done permanent damage.

“How did you find me?” she asked, trying to keep him talking.

“Once I saw that news conference, I knew you were still alive. You should have died in that snow. You’re one tough bitch. The closest hospital is Newbury. You’re the only Jane Doe currently on their billing system. My company gives me access.”

She looked down and saw Jim trying to lift his gun. He looked up at her and nodded. He couldn’t move. His hand dropped down into the pool of blood that was getting bigger. If he didn’t get into surgery soon, he would bleed out.

“Don’t think of pressing the call button. You don’t want to be responsible for more deaths.”

Caroline slid to the opposite side of the bed. “You’re responsible for the deaths of all those women. You tried to kill all those police.”

“Tried?” he laughed. “I used enough C-4 to turn them to dust.”

“Well, you failed. They found your bomb. They all got out in time. All you did was blow up your house.”



He went to the window and pushed the blinds aside. "Shit!" The fire was still blazing. She pushed down her railing and jumped out of the bed. She fell on the floor, slipping in the blood. She crawled to Jim's side as Miller came around the side of the bed. Jim pushed the gun toward her. She grabbed the gun and fired. Miller looked shocked, but kept moving toward her. She fired twice more until he fell to the ground. She pulled herself high enough to see what she'd done. Miller was staring at the ceiling; his eyes were clouded over. She seen that look enough times in her career to know he was never going to hurt anyone again.

Caroline turned to Jim and applied pressure to the wound.

"Damn, that hurts."

"Yes, that's it. Stay with me, Jim."

"Okay," he smiled before he passed out.

People rushed into her room. They stood frozen at the sight. "Get a gurney, now!" she shouted.

"Doctor Hunt?" asked a nurse.

"Not now. This man is going to bleed out. Find Doctor Evans and tell him to get an operating room ready for a critical patient. A hospital security guard pushed into the room.

"What the hell?" He looked over at Miller.

"He's not going anywhere. Go to the ER. Find Detective Charlie Furth. He should be there with his men." The guard kept staring at the body. "Move! Now!"

Two nurses got Jim on a gurney while a third kept pressure on the wound. Caroline was left alone in the room with a dead body and a pool of blood. She pulled herself up so she was sitting on the bed. She was getting very dizzy. She saw blood spreading out over the sheets. When she jumped off the bed, she pulled out her IV. Her arm was pumping blood. She felt her gown sticking to her body. She'd ripped open her stitches. She was in trouble. She ripped off her heart monitor pads. The machine showed flat line and gave off a loud alarm. She hoped someone would hear it over the chaos of a shooting. She closed

her eyes and said a prayer for Jim's recovery. She never prayed for herself. She thought that was selfish. Caroline laid her head on the pillow. She thought she heard someone say "It's okay to be a little selfish," Just before she passed out.

Jim opened his eyes and saw machines all around him. He looked toward a chair and saw Charlie. "Hey."

Charlie stood "Hey. It's about time you woke up. Do you know how much paperwork is sitting on our desks?"

The fog began to clear. He closed his eyes and fought the pain. He remembered Miller plunging the knife into him again and again. His eyes snapped open. "Caroline."

"Don't worry, buddy. She's fine."

"Did he hurt her?"

"No," said Charlie. He glanced away and Jim knew that was his tell. He was a lousy poker player. Something was wrong.

"What happened? Tell me."

"I'll tell you." Jim looked over and saw Caroline in the doorway. She was wearing a hospital gown, and one in reverse, acting as a robe. She was holding on to an IV pole.

"Caroline," he whispered.

"I'll give you two the room. I'm going to the cafeteria," said Charlie as he headed to the door. Caroline grabbed his arm.

"Milkshake?"

"Sure thing," he smiled.

She walked to his bed and looked at his vital signs. She grabbed a stethoscope a nurse had left on his tray table. She put it to his chest. "Take a breath for me."

He took a breath, then chuckled. "You really can't help yourself, can you."

"I need to know you're okay," she said quietly.

He took her hand in his. "What's your diagnosis, doctor?"

"Your lungs are clear. That's good. Your heart sounds great."

"Great?" he smiled.

“It’s still beating.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “I was so afraid I wouldn’t see you again.”

“I’m still here. I’m a tough old bird.”

“Not so old,” she smiled.

He took her hand and held it to his chest. “I only remember Miller stabbing me. Everything else is a blur.”

“I tried to keep him talking, hoping someone would come in. I looked down at you and you nodded at me. I knew what you were saying. I told him his plan to kill the police had failed. He went to the window and he could see the fire. He was really mad. I used that to jump out of the bed. You pushed the gun toward me with everything you had left. He came after me and I shot him. He didn’t go down at first so I shot twice more. I looked and I knew he was dead.”

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have to carry that. I’m the one who should have taken him down.”

“Don’t. Just don’t. I will not tolerate any blame game.”

“You’re pretty pushy,” he smiled.

“I get that from my mother. Jim, you were bleeding to death and managed to get the gun in my hands.”

“What?”

“If this had happened anywhere but an elevator ride to an OR, you wouldn’t be here. Just like I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for the snow.”

“Damn.”

“Exactly.”

“You look too pale, like when they first brought you in. Tell me what happened.”

“When I jumped out of the bed, I dislodged my IV and opened up my stitches. They had stitch me up again. I needed a couple of pints of blood.”

“What?” he tried to sit up and instantly regretted it.

“Stay put, cowboy. I only need three pints. You needed six. That’s almost a complete oil change.”

Kurt Evans opened the door. “Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised you’re here, Caroline.”

“I won’t stay long.”

“You’ve had two major surgeries in less than a week. You lost a lot of blood.”

“I’m aware.”

“If it wasn’t for your excellent surgeon, you might not have made it the second time.”

“What?” asked Jim. “You didn’t say it was that bad.”

“I had to go back in and repair all the work I’d done before. Now you on the other hand...”

“Caroline said I’d be toast if it wasn’t for you.”

“She’s right.”

Jim looked at Caroline and smiled. “Not very humble, is he?”

“We’re surgeons. We don’t do humble.”

“She’s right. Now, if she wants to wait outside while I talk to my patient?”

“She can stay.”

“Okay. He got you in the kidney. It was too damaged to save. Don’t worry. You’ll survive just fine with one. I’ve repaired everything else and you have a butt load of stitches.”

“Is that the official medical term?”

“Yup,” said Kurt and Caroline.

“So, restrict your feats of daring do until I give you the all clear.”

“Thank you, doctor,” he let go of Caroline’s hand long enough to shake Kurt’s.

“You’re welcome.” He looked at Caroline. “I mean it, get back to bed. You’re white as a sheet and your body needs to make more blood. You’ve reached your limit at the blood bank.”

“Yes, doctor,” she smiled. She reached up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Kurt. For everything.”

“You’re very welcome.” Kurt glanced at Jim then back at Caroline. “It’s about time.”

“What’s about time?” asked Jim. Kurt just smiled and left the room. “What did he mean by that?”

“Kurt knows me too well. He meant this.” Caroline leaned over and gave Jim a gentle kiss.

Jim smiled despite the pain. He put his hand to her cheek and pulled her close for another kiss. Charlie picked that moment to walk in with Caroline’s milkshake. He handed Caroline her shake and looked at Jim.

“It’s about time.”

Spring had come early for a change. It still wasn't warm enough to swim in the lake but his lake house made for a peaceful place to recover. Jim had been judged medically fit to return to duty but he'd decided he'd had enough. Catching the Buck Hill serial killer wasn't a bad way to end a career. He was offered a great early retirement package. He had a feeling Geraldine Hunt had something to do with that.

He looked out of his back door to the beautiful sunrise. They spent a lot of time in Adirondack chairs just watching the water in silence. This was peace. But one of the chairs wasn't empty. He walked outside in the damp grass. Caroline was wrapped in an old afghan.

"You're up early," he said.

"I remember," she whispered as she stared at the water.

"What?"

"It all came back. I had just finished a late surgery. I remember him grabbing me in the hospital parking lot. He put a cloth over my mouth and I passed out. It must have been chloroform. Who uses chloroform?" She looked at Jim. "Isn't that kind of old school?"

He didn't answer, he just let her talk.

"I woke up when he was trying to get my slacks off. I could hear car horns beeping. That's when I started scratching him. He called me every name in the book and then he punched me in the face. I kept scratching but he punched me again. That's when I blacked out. The next thing I remember is seeing your face." Caroline turned to him and placed her hand on his cheek. "It's such a nice face."

He took her hand and kissed her palm. "Thank you, sweetheart. Are you okay?"

"I think so. It might not hurt to have a few sessions with Carol Walsh."

"She's helped me," said Jim

"After I made you go," she smiled.

He pulled her to her feet and wrapped her in his arms. "All my tossing and turning was keeping you awake."

“She’s very good.”

“She is. My nightmares are few and far between now.”

Caroline rested her head on his chest. “I’m so glad.”

“She also made me realize something.”

“What’s that?”

“I told her when I started seeing you, I was afraid it was white knight syndrome. It happens a lot to cops. I was afraid I was still trying to save you. I was trying to make up for not stopping Miller myself. You had to save yourself.”

“What did Carol say?”

“She asked me to tell her about you.”

“Why? She knows me.”

“She wanted to know what I saw in you. I told her about your wit, your strength, how you can be kind of scary when you want to be. I told her how much I liked that. Of course, I mentioned how beautiful you are. How you make my heart pound with just a smile. I told her being around you was the best feeling in the world.” Even in the dim light, he could see her eyes well with tears.

“What did she say?”

“She said I was in love with you and I should get used to it.”

“Did she now?” she chuckled.

“Yup.”

“Did you agree with her?”

“Yup,” he grinned.

“You know what I tell her about you? I’d say I see my hero.” Jim turned his face toward the lake. She reached up and made him look at her. “I mean it. I remember when you first found me. You told me I was safe and you would take care of me. When I was in



the hospital, you promised to protect me with your life. I knew you meant it. I knew in those moments that you are a man who keeps his word.” She chuckled. “Okay, we’ve covered the noble, honorable, selfless part. Let’s talk about the other stuff.”

“Other stuff?”

“You weren’t the only one who was worried about starting a relationship after what we’d been through. There was just something I couldn’t get past.”

“What?”

“Your eyes.”

“My eyes?” he smiled.

“The windows to the soul. I could tell when you looked at me how much you really cared. Not to mention they are a killer shade of blue. And your smile. When you really mean a smile, it’s a little lopsided and sexy as hell.” She rubbed her hands up his chest.

“Jim, you’re no white knight and I’m no damsel in distress. I’m a woman who has fallen in love with a very good man.”

Jim leaned down and gave her a tender kiss. “I guess we both figured things out.”

Caroline smiled. “It’s about time.”