

CHRISTOPHER FLORY

*a Paul Dodge novel*

**THE**

**SAVIOR**

Advance  
Reader Copy  
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***THE***  
**SAVIOR**

*a Paul Dodge Novel*

CHRISTOPHER FLORY

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*The Savior: a Paul Dodge Novel*

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# CHAPTER 1

THE STREETS OF THE SMALL EAST COAST CITY were oddly clean. A week of summer rain had forced the dirt and grime into the gutters and eventually to the sewers, out of sight. Unfortunately for Sarah, it hadn't taken the meanness with it. In her world, the streets belonged to the night dwellers. She was a guest here, making a living walking the same streets as murderers and common street trash, selling her body, her pride, one trick at a time.

The rain and lower-than-normal temperatures made it hard for Sarah to earn a living, and the growling in her stomach bared witness to the lack of money she had earned over the past week. Her rent was due at the motel. The manager would trade sex for rent if the girls couldn't pay for their roach-infested rooms, but Sarah swore she would never stoop to that level. Sure, she sold her body to pay the rent, but her body—her choice. Having a man that smelled of old fish and curry force her to pay off a debt by spreading her legs, or worse, her lips, made her physically ill. Acid shot from the pit of her stomach into the back of her throat, causing a gag reflex. It was all she could do to keep from vomiting at the very idea of his hair-covered, sweat-drenched body pinning her to the bed for even one second.

She washed her mouth out with the small flask she topped off with vodka every morning and kept stashed in her purse for such emergencies. The burn from the alcohol helped kill the taste of vomit in her mouth. The clear liquid also rinsed away the thoughts of the men she would have to be with tonight. It was only a job; she kept telling herself. No different from that of a secretary or a waitress. Her whole life, she had heard stories of powerful men

using secretaries to fulfil their deviant desires and then discarding them like an empty beer can tossed to the side of the road. The thought spurred a memory of the time even she had to drop to her knees, to avoid from getting fired from a greasy spoon where she worked as a waitress for about two months. The smell of grease clinging to the owner's clothes resurfaced every time she was with a customer. That was the moment she decided if she had to endure disgusting men invading her personal space to keep a shitty job, it might as well be on her terms. Sarah took another swig of vodka. It did little to drown out the horrible memories racing through her head.

It had been a slow night. Higher than normal temperatures paired with oppressive humidity were keeping people indoors, in the cool grips of air conditioning. Her first actual customer approached at half-past eleven. He stopped his decades old BMW ten feet short of where she stood. It was part of the game for many of the men that frequented prostitutes. They felt as long as the woman had to approach them, it wasn't their fault they were cheating on their wives and girlfriends. His eyes scanned every inch of her thin figure, like he was assessing if she was good enough for him. Did she meet his stringent requirements for anonymous sex in the front seat of a car in an alley? She already hated him and wanted another swig from her flask as she approached the passenger's door.

"What'll it be, sweetie?"

The man was nervous. His eyes darted left and right, as if he expected someone to jump out from behind a building, or parked car, gun drawn, screaming he was under arrest.

"Come on, baby. I don't have all night," she said.

"How much?" he asked.

"That depends on what you want."

"I'll give you fifty to watch me."

Sarah thought about the offer. She had heard about men like this. The ones that would get off making women watch while they took care of business. It made her nervous. It didn't seem right. But fifty bucks was fifty bucks, and she needed to make some money if she wanted to avoid the nightmare scenario with the



hotel manager for one more night. That was all she would allow herself to think about.

“Whatever floats your boat.”

The thin, attractive prostitute opened the passenger door, climbed into the front seat, and the man drove two blocks before turning into an unlit alley, stopping the car between two dumpsters. The performance was over in ten seconds after the man unzipped his pants. Once finished, he tucked in the front of his shirt, tossed the wad of napkins onto the back seat, and screamed at Sarah to get out. Then he threw a wad of money through the open door, forcing it to slam shut as he sped away.

Sarah bent down to pick up the money which had landed at her feet in the street. The bills were wet, dirt and pieces of leaves stuck to their face. She counted the money. Thirty dollars. He had shorted her twenty.

“What an asshole,” she said to no one, before stuffing the bills in her bra and returning the two blocks to her corner to wait for the next customer.

It turned out she didn’t have to wait long as a white van eased up to the curb and stopped. The van had a metal ladder strapped to the roof and no windows. The owner secured the side doors with padlocks, the kind you see attached to the outside of a shed, or basement door, to keep people from getting in. This trick was over before it started. She had a rule about vans. There were too many shows on television about hapless women who willingly got into white windowless vans and were never heard from again. She swore that would not happen to her, so she waved the driver away.

“Whore,” he yelled, as he sped off. Sarah couldn’t help but think the driver would easily find a girl willing to get into his mobile crime scene. Money was more important to some street girls than safety. She shuddered at the thought of the next person he solicited.

She watched as the van slowed, coming to a stop a few blocks from where she stood. A young girl worked that corner. New to the game. Like many of the girls on the street, she was a runaway, abused by her father and ignored by her mother. Sarah spoke to her occasionally, even offering to buy the inexperienced girl

breakfast after one particularly slow night. More streetwise, Sarah gave her tips on surviving a rough trade — the first being: Don't go with customers in windowless vans. But who could blame her? In this line of work, you never knew when your next hot meal might come, and rarely did anyone do you a favor without wanting something in return. Apparently, the girl hadn't listened, too busy gobbling up the free meal plopped in front of her.

Concerned, Sarah rose to her tiptoes and waved her arms frantically. The young prostitute never turned her head. Her focus stayed on the customer. The light from the brake lights faded, and the van pulled away from the curb with its new passenger, turning right on the first street and out of Sarah's sight. She went back to her curb, leaned against the brick wall of the storefront, and waited for her next customer to arrive.

An hour later, the same white van rounded the corner and crept past her. The driver's icy stare as he passed sent chills up her spine. Once the van reached the corner where he had picked up the young girl, the driver hit the brakes. Only he didn't stop to let her friend out. Sarah watched nervously as the van's taillights faded into the distance and out of sight. She didn't see the young girl for the rest of the night.

By morning, exhausted and hungry, Sarah had enough money for breakfast and two more nights at the motel. She walked to a diner popular with women of the night and ordered a large breakfast of eggs, toast, pancakes, and bacon. She turned down the free coffee, as she didn't want the caffeine to keep her from falling asleep.

After filling her need for food, Sarah took a short walk to the corner where the young girl usually stood. The spot was empty. Full of breakfast and tired, she made the walk back to the motel. Pulling wadded bills from her bra, she paid the manager, who still offered himself as payment, which she declined. Again. She was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Not a thought of the young girl or the white van until later that night.



The images on the computer screen put his mind into a

relaxed state. It was the same routine every day. A quick glance at the police blotter to check for offenders on his caseload arrested the night before. Next, he would type the violation reports and request arrest warrants from the parole board if any names matched the ones in his file cabinet. Parole violators were not eligible for bail, but it was often a race to get the warrant signed by the parole board and served at the jail before some low-level magistrate who didn't know the law cut the offender loose.

On this day, he didn't see a single name he recognized.

Two hours passed and Parole Agent Paul Dodge had suffered through an appointment with a parolee who refused to admit his child pornography addiction was a problem for his recovery efforts. Another appointment with a convicted rapist was scheduled in thirty minutes. It was looking to be a busy day, and busy days were bad in the law enforcement business. Slow days were good. *People don't get shot on slow days*, he thought. Dodge had a few minutes before the next appointment and opted for a cup of coffee from the mobile coffee truck parked in the street in front of the building. He stood and made his way through the bullpen area toward the elevator, but before he got there, the booming voice of his chief echoed through the maze of desks and cubicles.

"Dodge, get in my office."

The tone in the chief's voice was familiar, but he couldn't think of anything he had done recently to warrant a scolding by his boss. Turning back toward the door, he walked past the other agents working in their makeshift cubicles, all eyes upon him as he stepped into the chief's office.

"What can I do for you, Chief?" Dodge asked.

"You can start by closing the door," Chief Johnson said, as he eased into the seat behind his desk.

The door creaked as it swung closed, catching the attention of another agent sitting close by. Dodge winked at him through the glass as the door latched shut.

"This seems ominous," he said.

Chief Johnson was scanning a file on his desk. He was one of the few people Dodge had difficulty getting a read on. There was

rarely a hint of emotion, other than anger. Formerly a parole agent for over two decades, the chief had seen just about everything. When you are shocked by very little, emotional responses are few and far between.

“How’s your caseload look?”

Dodge leaned forward. “It’s fine. I have a few guys I am paying a little more attention to than normal, but overall, most of them are squared away. Why do you ask?”

“I’m the chief. It’s my job to ask.”

“True story, but normally you yell at me from across the bullpen. You don’t have me come to your office and shut the door.” Dodge used his thumb in hitchhiker fashion to point at the door behind him. “So, why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind, so you can scold me? I can apologize, and then get back to work.”

Chief Johnson was an old head of the department. He didn’t tolerate sass from his subordinates, even if it was coming from a highly respected and decorated agent. Dodge knew something was wrong when Chief Johnson glazed over the comment.

“The locals found another body this morning,” Chief Johnson said.

“Another prostitute?”

“They didn’t say, but based on where they found her, I would guess she was a working girl.”

The idea of another dead anyone bothered Dodge. He shifted in his seat and ran his hand through his slightly graying hair. “How many does that make?”

“Three.”

“Who has the case?”

“That’s why the door is closed,” Chief Johnson said. “The task force caught the case.”

“Are the suits downtown at police headquarters requesting me? I’m not sure a dead prostitute, or even three, is something I can help much with. I mean, the other bodies didn’t show any signs of sexual assault. Is this one different?”

“They haven’t done the preliminary autopsy yet, but I was told there are no apparent signs of sexual assault. The first officers on

the scene said the girl's body was fully clothed. Not even a tear in her underwear."

"So, why call me? They have plenty of detectives in homicide capable of handling a murder."

"Your buddy Renquest drew the short straw on this one. He's the one asking for you."

Dodge couldn't think of a reason Renquest would want him involved in a straight murder case. The task force normally called him in when there was a sexual component to the crime, opting to leave the spouse killings, murder for hire, and myriad of other killings to the six detectives not assigned to the task force. Maybe it was because there were multiple victims now, but he had never worked a serial killer case before. Why would they ask now?

"Why don't I call him and try and figure out what is going on?"

"That's a negative. They want you at the crime scene now," the chief said. His eyes met Dodge's in a Mexican standoff. "Personally, I would rather have you doing the work the state pays you for."

"You should try telling them that," Dodge said.

"That is exactly what I told the sons-a-bitches."

"I feel a *but* coming on," Dodge replied.

The chief leaned back and glanced at the phone on his desk and then back at Dodge. "The Secretary of the Department of Corrections called me shortly after my conversation with Renquest. He said you were to report to the crime scene and to do whatever the locals ask of you. And it wasn't a suggestion, Dodge. It was an order."

"The Secretary asked, ordered, me to interject into a local murder investigation? What, was this girl a daughter of a senator or something?"

"I don't know what is going on, but I plan to call in some of my markers and try to find out," the chief said. "As for now, you better get to the crime scene. Detective Renquest should have sent you a text with the address."

An unopened text icon flashed on Dodge's phone. He realized he had muted his phone during his last appointment and turned the phone back to ring mode. "Anything else?"

“Yeah, one more thing. The secretary said you were to be attached to the task force full time on this. You don’t come back to the office until the locals say you are no longer needed.” Chief Johnson stood. “Give me your gun and badge. You won’t be needing it for the foreseeable future.”

The chief’s request for his firearm alarmed Dodge. An agent working a series of homicides without a weapon seemed ludicrous. “What the hell is going on? Turn in my weapon? What am I supposed to carry, pepper spray?”

“There will be a State Police Captain at the scene, and he will provide you with more details.” Chief Johnson held out his hand, signaling for his most trusted agent’s ID and weapon.

Dodge pressed the magazine release button, dislodging the magazine. He then slid the weapon from its holster, and ejected the round from the chamber, leaving the slide locked to the rear. The weapon clanked on the hard surface of the desk’s wooden top as he slid it over to Chief Johnson.

“Dodge, one last thing. Be careful with the state police. They tend not to play well with others.”

Feeling naked without the weight of his duty weapon strapped to his side, he nodded and headed for the elevator. Once on the street, he stopped at the coffee truck parked outside and ordered two black coffees, one with sugar for himself and one without for his partner Detective Renquest. It was a ritual he had become accustomed to when the task force caught a new case and requested his assistance. Then he walked into the parking garage, climbed into his truck, and headed in the direction of the address Renquest had texted him.

# CHAPTER 2

ORGANIZED CHAOS SEEMED TO RULE the crime scene. Patrol officers directed traffic away from the alley and tried to keep the growing crowd of gawkers from pushing forward to catch a glimpse of whatever was happening behind the yellow caution tape. Crime scene techs placed numbered yellow placards by everything in the alley that might be evidence, then took photographs. They then placed every piece of scrap paper and empty beer bottle into clear plastic bags. Detective Renquest stood right in the middle of it all, like a general commanding his troops, using his hands to guide each soldier exactly where he wanted them. Dodge loved watching his partner work. *He was good*, Dodge thought. Though he would never say it out loud.

Dodge carefully walked the perimeter, noticing a woman standing on the sidewalk about a hundred yards south, and a rusty white van parked up against the curb. Dodge guessed the van belonged to a construction worker working in one of the many buildings on either side of the street. He couldn't read the license plate from such a distance, so he focused his attention back toward the crime scene.

Dodge approached his partner, offering out the cup of coffee in his left hand.

"Two sugars?" Renquest asked.

"Yeah, but it might be cold by now. What have you got?"

The detective took a sip from his cup and used his thumb to point over his shoulder. "We have one dead girl and very little to go on. The heavy rains for the past week have kept everything drenched. The print boys don't think they can pull a single latent from anything other than the body."

“What do you have on the victim?”

The two men walked toward the white sheet spread out over a mound of cardboard left for the recycling truck to pick up. Renquest asked the medical examiner to pull the sheet back—the body of a young woman lay beneath. Marks on the neck and the purple specks in her eyes, also known as petechial hemorrhaging, showed signs of strangulation.

“May I?” Dodge asked the medical examiner, as he reached to move the sheet so he could see more of the body.

The coroner nodded.

After carefully pinching the sheet between his fingers, making sure not to touch the body, he slid the white covering all the way to the victim’s waist. “All of the clothes appear to be intact,” he said.

“Same as the other two vics,” Renquest said.

Dodge reached backward, over his head and snapped his fingers.

Renquest pulled a pair of black surgical gloves from his jacket pocket and placed them into the outstretched hand. “I hate when you do that.”

Dodge smiled, though his partner couldn’t see his face, and stretched the gloves over his hands. He then slid his index finger across a small section of her stomach exposed from when the medical examiner lifted her shirt to insert the thermometer to gage liver temperature and estimate time of death. The body was pale and cold. Her skin flexed under the slightest pressure and returned to its original shape after a few seconds had passed. It reminded Dodge of how a stress ball reacted after being squeezed. The whole thing seemed unnatural for such a natural process. Death, not how she died. That was humans at their worst.

When he pulled his hand away, Dodge noticed a shine on the glove of his index finger. He brought his finger up to his nose and sniffed. Nothing. “What the hell is this smeared all over her body?”

“You saw that too?”

“It’s hard to miss. When the light hits her the right way her entire mid-section shines like a new penny.”

“The medical examiner thinks whoever killed her, wiped the



body down with some sort of oil. Maybe mineral oil or another odorless product.”

“Why? And was it applied pre or postmortem?”

“Your guess is as good as ours. Once she is on the slab, we should know more. But I got to say. I hope it was after, because I can’t imagine anyone letting someone smear oil, or whatever the hell that stuff is, all over their body for any amount of money. Especially a working girl. They work on quantity, not quality. She would be in the shower for a week trying to get that off. Her night would have been over after this trick.”

Knees popping from kneeling on the hard ground, Dodge grunted as he stood. “It’s called splashing, and there are plenty of people that enjoy it as part of their bedroom ritual. Just be glad it’s oil.”

The detective stared at his partner. “What else could it be?”

“Some people use water. Others are darker and use animal blood.”

“Jesus Christ, Dodge. You need to stay off the internet. No one should know that.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to know half the stuff I do. But I had a guy on my caseload once who was into that sort of thing. And he didn’t use oil, water, or blood.”

“Do I want to know what he used?”

“Probably not, but you asked,” Dodge said as the medical examiner pulled the sheet back over the girl’s head. “The guy kept all his semen in mason jars for a month. He would then pay a hooker to come to his house for a splosh party.”

“That is the sickest thing I have ever heard. I don’t know how you do it. I would want to shoot every one of them in the head at the first meeting.”

Dodge shook his head. “Someone must do it. If not me, who?”

Renquest nodded. “I’m glad it’s you and not me. I just arrest them, and I’m done. I don’t have to get too deep into their sick little minds. I need just enough to justify a charge and a cell.”

“Sometimes I envy you.”

Dodge carefully slipped off the gloves and placed them in a brown paper evidence bag. He then passed the bag to an evidence

technician that had been watching him examine the body. It was important to keep everything from the crime scene, even the little blue booties you had to put on before going into an indoor crime scene. The items the police and crime scene people wore could be tested if there was DNA contamination of the site.

He looked around at all the people bustling about. He noticed one man leaning against the front fender of a late model sedan. The man wore a black suit with a red tie over a white button-up shirt. But it was the shoes that caught Dodge's attention. On his feet were white sneakers with the letter "N" on the side. It wasn't odd for people to have sneakers on with dress clothes anymore. People did it all the time at the courthouse. Staff would go for walks on their lunch breaks, and it was more comfortable than dress shoes. A lot of the secretaries Dodge knew kept a pair of running shoes under their desks and would put them on while doing filing and other tasks that required them to get up and down repeatedly. Dodge also imagined the sneakers had to be warmer than open-toed heels. As common as the practice was at the courthouse, Dodge had encountered no one in the field wearing athletic shoes with a suit. Then he remembered Chief Johnson told him there would be state police at the scene. It would be just like a state trooper to pair a suit with white sneakers in the field.

"Is that the Statie?" Dodge asked, tilting his head in the man's direction.

"Yep. That's Captain Blanchard. He's just been waiting over there, leaning against the hood of his car. Typical trooper behavior. Park his ass on a cruiser while we do all the heavy lifting."

"I was told a State Police guy wanted to see me."

"I'd bet he is the one that asked for you. I believe he's the point person from the state police working the other two murders."

Dodge shifted his gaze from the trooper back to the white sheet on the ground. "Why do the state boys care about a couple of dead prostitutes?"

"Normally, they wouldn't. But they found the second body outside city limits, in the Sheriff's territory. Only the good sheriff didn't want to deal with a murder, as it's an election year and unsolved murders, even those of prostitutes, don't play well in the

press. So, he put in a call to the state police, and we get Captain Comfy Shoes over there.”

Renquest had clearly noticed the shoes. *Nothing gets past him*, Dodge thought.

Dodge approached the person responsible for his being at *this* crime scene and stuck out his hand. Captain Blanchard took his hand and squeezed tight. The man’s grip was powerful. It was like having your hand inserted into a vise. Unable to pull free, Dodge winced, and the state police captain let go.

“Agent Dodge, I assume.”

“Nice to meet you. And you can just call me Dodge.”

The state police captain pushed away from the front of his cruiser, leaving only a foot of distance between the two men. Dodge stood close to six foot two, and the man towered over him by a good three inches.

“So, you are probably wondering why I asked the Department of Corrections for your help.”

Dodge, a little humiliated by the handshake earlier, tried to regain his alpha status by taking over the conversation. It was a kind of job interview, only he didn’t want it to seem like he was the applicant.

“I more wondered why the state police would want in on a prostitute? Not a case an outsider usually likes to get involved in. Unless there is a sexual component to the murder you aren’t telling me about? Other than the vics occupation, that is.”

If the comment had gotten under the captain’s skin, he did nothing to show it riled him. He was quiet for a moment. Dodge assumed he was sizing up his new partner. After a moment the tall, well-built man in sneakers spoke.

“Honestly, I thought the same thing. But the brass didn’t want to be left out of a serial killer case. Told me to work with the task force on the other murders and keep them apprised of the investigation. Which reminds me...” Blanchard turned and reached in through the passenger side window and grabbed a black leather bi-fold wallet and handed it to Dodge. “Inside you will find credentials, a badge, and an access card to the state police post off Highway 22. I have a small cubical set aside for you with

a laptop and phone. The IT team is getting you hooked up with accesses to all our systems so you can get working on this as quickly as possible.”

“Accesses to your systems? When I’m called in on a case, I usually work out of city police task force office.”

“Didn’t your chief or Detective Renquest tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“The head of DOC assigned you to me on this one. You will report directly to me and will work out of the state police post.”

The idea of being a statie, even for a few weeks, annoyed Dodge. By statute they were the ones tasked with maintaining the Sexual and Violent Felon Registry. The registry was a list of people who were convicted of a sexual or violent crime and therefore had to register their addresses and employment with the state. Any member of the public could then look up an address and see if any sex offenders or murders lived in their neighborhood. The whole thing was a feel-good publicity law meant to make the state appear tough on crime, while doing nothing to prevent future transgressions. A dirty secret known to those in the field was that for every person on the registry, there were ten that had not been caught. The point being that even if the search results said no predators lived in the area, chances were there were going to be a few peepers, pervs, and wife beaters living next door. Besides, people should be looking from within the family and household. That’s where most of the sexual assaults came from. Crazy Uncle Chet or Cousin Bobby. Those are the real threats.

Running the registry fell under the prevue of the state police by statute. It was one of the worst jobs in the state police and assigning troopers to oversee the massive list of sex offenders was usually a punishment rather than a promotion. While it was the responsibility of the convicted offender to provide certain information by law, the troopers overseeing the registry had to ensure the home addresses and employment status supplied were kept up to date. The troopers were also tasked with making sure the addresses reported by the sex offenders met the mandatory distance requirements from schools and parks, using mapping software, and many times, they had to drive to the locations in

question for a more accurate measurement. Due to those facts, most troopers once in charge of the program in their area of responsibility did just enough work to not get into trouble and get reassigned as soon as possible. Always someone *new and learning the system*. It was a colossal bureaucratic mess.

On top of issues with the way the state police handled their duties concerning the administration of the registry, Dodge also didn't like being treated like a commodity—his services sold to the highest bidder. He was comfortable with the people on the task force and trusted the officers he worked regularly with. He didn't trust anyone with the state police because he didn't know them well enough. So, when in doubt, follow the rules. Trust no one and play it close to the vest.

“When do I start?”

“You already have. Which reminds me, do you need a weapon?” Blanchard asked. His eyes glanced at the empty spot on the right side of Dodge's waistline.

“I have my own. I didn't have time to go home and get it.” Dodge said, his hand reaching over the spot where his weapon usually rested.

“That's fine. You will need to come down to the post and qualify with your own. State police rules.”

Weapons qualification was never an issue for the veteran parole agent and at this point in his career, he felt it was more of an annoyance. A slap in the face, really. He taught firearms at the corrections academy, and he never understood why state agencies wouldn't have a reciprocity agreement in place. It all seemed like a huge waste of resources and money. It was difficult but the veteran agent choked back his indignation before answering.

“I'm free tomorrow morning.”

“Good. Be there at seven and we will take a cruiser over to the range,” Blanchard said. “What caliber? So, I know which ammo to bring.”

“Forty.”

“Good. That's what we carry as well. I've got plenty of that caliber lying around. The whole thing shouldn't take more than half-an-hour. Depending on how much warm up you need.”

“I prefer to shoot cold,” Dodge said.

Blanchard shook his head and patted Dodge on the back before circling the car to reach the driver’s side. “Alright then. I’m going to go back to the post to see how the IT department is coming with your accesses. You can hang out here and help with the crime scene. Call me later today and let me know how things are progressing.” He stopped and glanced back at his new employee. “Don’t forget, you work for the state police now. You take the orders we give until we decide you are no longer needed. Understand?”

Dodge said nothing. He didn’t like being given commands. And being reminded how to do his job plain pissed him off. He took a deep breath in. The stench of rotting trash was beginning to fill the air. The crime scene team had cordoned off the alley early that morning before the trash collectors could empty the dumpsters. Trash continued to pile up as businesses opened for the morning rush of customers, adding to the already growing odor. He blew out his breath, regaining his composure before returning to where Renquest was still barking orders to the crime scene techs.

“How’d it go?”

“About as good as can be expected.”

“He’d heard of you, huh?”

“Funny. What do you know about Blanchard?”

Renquest was still sipping his coffee. “Not much. He has only been with the state police for about a year. He came here from out west somewhere. California or Arizona, I think. You want me to ask around?”

The two men watched as Blanchard’s car turned right, disappearing into the mesh of buildings and traffic.

His eyes were still fixed on the spot where the state police captain’s car sat a minute ago. “I suppose I’m being paranoid is all. No need to make any more enemies than necessary. Catching this perp is going to be hard enough without starting a ruckus over my feelings being hurt.”

Renquest let out a howling laugh.

“What’s so damn funny?”

Renquest washed down his laughter with the last swig of coffee. “Nothing really. Just the thought of the great Paul Dodge having feelings is funny to me. More like ego, I’d say.”

What his friend said wasn’t all a lie. It *was* more likely his ego was hurting than his personal feelings. Unfortunately, with his success in clearing cases over the last few years, his sense of self-worth had only grown larger, and he was keenly aware of that fact. It was only a matter of time before something, or someone, took his legs out from under him, putting him back in his place. Rolling with it this time seemed like the prudent course of action.

“Where you headed after this?” Dodge asked.

“Back to the office to oversee the techs while they log evidence. Then I’ll a head over to the medical examiners to watch the initial autopsy. You?”

“I’m going to head to the house to grab my back-up weapon and vest. I’ll meet you at the ME’s office around noon. We can get some lunch after the cut.”

“Sounds good,” Renquest said.

Dodge walked to his truck for the quick trip back home, but as he sat in the driver’s seat staring at his phone, he scrolled through names in his contact list until coming to the S section. He looked at the third name on the list, Beth Samuels. She was a state investigator in Arizona he had worked a case with when he was in the Air Force. She had extensive contacts all over the west coast and could easily check on Captain Blanchard’s past. His thumb hovered over the call button as he wondered if she would have any memory of him. It had been over ten years since they last spoke, and he didn’t leave the situation with her on the best of terms. After several minutes of back and forth in his mind, he decided not to make the call. Yet.

Flipping the phone shut, he turned the key in the ignition and the engine came to life. Then, at a break in the traffic, he pulled into the street. The trip home took less than ten minutes, but his mind was working overtime. He needed to concentrate on the death of the young girl, and the autopsy room was a good place to start.

# CHAPTER 3

THE MAN IN THE WHITE PANEL VAN sat parked two blocks down from the alley where hours earlier he had placed the young girl's body. A makeshift curtain made from a surplus green wool army blanket, purchased at a surplus store two towns over, stretched from the driver's side to the passengers behind the front seats to block any curious eyes from peeking into the back where he did his work. The blanket darkened the interior more than he liked. He enjoyed gazing into their eyes while he worked, but what he was doing demanded privacy and compromises had to be made when using a mobile workspace. It really wasn't any different from that of a dog washers or companies that drive to your home and fix damaged windshields. Although, his van was different in one aspect. Once a customer was inside, they never left alive.

He never thought of himself as a psychopath. The killing brought him no joy. Nor did he have any empathy for his projects. Simply put, the expiration of life was an unintended consequence of his work. He had to test the ones lucky enough to be chosen. To make sure they were worthy of his services.

He was a free-er of tortured souls. The girl last night, Monica, appeared more lost than the rest. Such a young girl, doing such horrible work. The pain she endured before he set her free must have been an unbearable burden. He didn't believe in heaven or hell, though he did believe in God. To him, life was about peace and suffering, and his girls were at peace when he finished.

He liked to return to the drop site, once someone found the body and police arrived to admire what he had done. At first, he thought the daring move a risk, staying far away from the scenes. But as time passed, his confidence grew and so did his curiosity.



After all, doesn't an artist enjoy seeing their creations hanging in a gallery? He was an artist of sorts. A Michelangelo of corrupt souls. Besides, if he were to continue cleansing the souls of troubled girls and not have his work interrupted by being arrested and jailed, he needed a better understanding of how the police examined and processed the crime scenes. He had watched every show imaginable on television but knew none of that replaced actual life experience. Over the years, he had found much of what he saw on television crime shows was exaggerated for effect. Capabilities police didn't actually have. Why spend time planning for an eventuality that would never come?

He always left the newly saved in a place to be found easily by a passerby or early morning delivery driver making his rounds at the local businesses. He didn't pose the body. Only those who enjoy the act of killing complete such an act. Egomaniacs who want the attention cast upon themselves. His was an act of compassion. He was helping the people he chose, not trying to feed the monster inside himself. People consumed with themselves infuriated him, driving him into an almost rage-like state. He took a deep breath and continued watching the scene unfold a few blocks away.

The hardest part of his work involved figuring out how to work out of a vehicle in plain sight that most people associated with child molesters. A white, windowless panel van was necessary, but it drew attention everywhere he went. Television shows and movies always showed the abductor pulling up in a big, white windowless van and snatching children off the street. In reality, it wasn't something that happened often. But when people are continually shown the same information, real or not real, they begin to believe it, leading to personal bias. He noticed it soon after purchasing the van that police would take notice and follow him for several blocks before ultimately losing interest. He always obeyed traffic laws, used his turn signal well in advance, and drove just under the speed limit. But he couldn't control everything. And being followed by police was an unacceptable consequence. He needed anonymity.

Then one day, a flash of genius struck, and a solution was born. It was simple and cheap, and he could perform the work himself.

He bought some tubular aluminum pipes at the hardware store, paying in cash to leave no paper trail. Fashioning the metal into two long runners, connected in three spots with cross members, he installed the contraption as a ladder carrier on the roof of the van. He found a couple of old metal ladders at a garage sale and bolted them down. He never needed to use the ladders, so permanently fastening them to the rack was not an issue. And it kept them from sliding off if he had to slow or speed up quickly. Now he could park in front of any rundown, dilapidated building. No one would give him a second look, thinking he was simply another painter or carpenter trying to squeak out a living in the city.

“Sheep, only concerned with themselves,” he mumbled.

This day, he parked further away. The streets were empty, leaving his view of the scene unobstructed. But there was something different about today. A new face caught his eye. He knew the other cops at the scene, but the one who brought coffee to the fat one, he had never seen before. Oh, how he hated the fat cop. He was a walking cliché, exuding all the characteristics of a television detective. Overweight. A cheap suit haphazardly put together from mismatched pieces, and most of all, he appeared to be lazy. Unwilling to do any of the work himself. A person who rode the coattails of others to success.

But the new guy seemed different somehow. There was an air of confidence about him. Others watched with intent when he examined the body. Even the state cop, Blanchard, seemed to give up some of his usual dominance to him. That surprised the man. He had never seen the state police captain act this way before. Finding out who this new player was would be a necessity. Someone new in the game could alter everything. He didn't fear change. In fact, change was a necessity. He just hadn't planned on doing it so soon. Had he been too good? Did the local police need to bring in an outside expert?

“Who is he?” he murmured under his breath, mesmerized by the others' reactions to the newcomer.

He watched the man work for a little while longer, then decided, in the end, it didn't matter. His work would continue.

Souls needed to be cleansed.

Then a young woman approaching his van caught his eye. At first, he didn't recognize the face, but as she drew closer, he knew the face. It was the slut that waved him away last night, denying him his first choice. His face flushed with anger. He wondered if he could grab her right there. Would anyone even notice? Certainly not the cops down the street. Not the fat one. He forced his urges back down. It was a bad idea to break away from the plan. He needed to make sure she was worthy of his service before releasing her tormented soul.

He had thought it out so meticulously and it worked. It was important to never allow his emotions to take over. It was not personal. Making it personal will get you caught. But he couldn't forget about her either



Fear for the girl she watched get into the van the night before had kept Sarah from sleeping more than a few hours after returning to the motel. Awake and anxious, she threw on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, then made her way back to where she spent her nights to see if young Monica had returned.

As the corner the young girl worked came into view, Sarah saw the police and fire trucks. She didn't need to see a body to know why they were there. Sarah stopped and watched the scene from a distance. Years of working the streets had provided her with a sixth sense of sorts. A gut feeling, really. She remembered the man who tried to pick her up last night. The man in the van that picked up Monica. And she always listened to her gut. It was kind of a rule.

She watched as officers pulled more yellow crime scene tape across the mouth of the alley, tying it to the mirrors of the patrol cars parked on both sidewalks. Then the cops, one man and one woman, stood guard. She imagined there were two officers recreating the identical scene at the opposite end of the alley. The ambulance drivers stood by their rigs. She knew that meant the person the ambulance came for was likely dead. Her fears were

confirmed when one of the EMTs pulled a white sheet out from the back of the ambulance and disappeared into the alley, only to reemerge a few moments later, his hands empty.

She couldn't see the body in the alley, but she knew the body now covered in a sheet was Monica. She could feel it in the pit of her stomach. A street girl's intuition. The reason she had never been found face down on the cold ground and covered with a white sheet.

"That poor girl," she whispered.

Two unmarked police cars approached the yellow caution tape and parked. She recognized a cop car when she saw one, lights or no lights. Two men climbed out, one from each. The first man was heavysset and looked a little disheveled. His shirt was wrinkly and the tie he wore didn't match the rest of his suit. If she had gone out each night looking that way, she would have to pay her rent the same way the other girls did. The second man was tall and lean. He reminded Sarah of a cowboy in one of those black and white westerns shown on TV every Sunday morning, right after the preacher's shows ended. Instead of going into the alley, the second man leaned up against the front of his car. Not a single person approached him, and he spoke to no one. He just stood there, watching everyone else work.

She was turning to leave and head back to the dirty carpets and the chemical smell of her motel sheets when a third man arrived. He stepped out of his big black truck, his eyes scanning the streets and sidewalks, appearing to look for nothing, but at the same time looking at everything. He locked eyes with her for a second before turning and disappearing into the alley. She waited a moment, but when the man didn't come back out, she walked away. About halfway back she passed a van that looked like it belonged to a house painter or handyman, parked on her side of the street.

She continued to the end of the block and turned left toward the motel.