

*An Excerpt from*  
**Degrees of Separation**  
*by Karen Wiesner & Chris Spindler*

*“A certain period elapses, and some unseen mysterious principle again sets in motion the magic pinions and the wizard wheels. The silver cord was not for ever loosed, nor the golden bowl irreparably broken. But where, meantime, was the soul?”*

~from “The Premature Burial” by Edgar Allan Poe

## Prologue

*I’VE DONE THE right thing*, Stephan Kelley told himself.

Just yesterday, seventeen-year-old Tyaa Savic had given birth to twin daughters. Considering the young girl’s many dangerous addictions, it had been a miracle in itself that Tyaa had managed to carry them for seven months.

“The first little girl that came out was kicking and screaming,” the nurse had told Stephan—the adoption case representative—outside Tyaa’s room. “Healthy as a horse with good lung development. All that blond hair! The second is smaller. Frail. She’ll need to be taken care of ’round the clock for a good long while. I hope she makes it, poor little thing.”

Throughout a sleepless night, Stephan had wrestled with the knowledge that finding parents who would take two newborns at once was difficult at any time. This time it had been impossible. Only weeks ago he’d located two couples, each of whom wanted a single child, and the paperwork and interviews had been completed in record time.

*How do I choose?* Stephan had agonized in the darkness of his living room, his hands clenched into tight fists. *How do I decide which girl goes where? How can I make a decision like that when the worlds are so severely different?* If both couples had been middle class... it would be easier, so much easier.

Stephan had finally taken a deep breath and told himself to be logical, the way his boss was. “Face facts instead of emotions,” Mr.

Corley was always saying. Never mind that the differences in the couples had been antipodal to the extreme.

The fact was, the DeMazzinos owned a chain of posh restaurants around the United States and were in the process of expanding overseas. They literally had servants on every doorstep. They were the type of ideal couple the Second Chance Adoption Agency loved to provide children for.

The fact was, one of the twins was weak and would need medical care for the first few weeks or months of her life to survive. Logic dictated that her parents would need money to afford the expenses. The DeMazzinos had the finances and the love to give this weaker twin everything she needed to thrive.

As soon as Stephan called them with the good news that morning, they rushed to the hospital to meet their new daughter. They insisted that money was no object. She would have the best doctors in the world to nurse her to complete health. While they hugged each other and smiled with tears in their eyes as they viewed their beautiful new child, Stephan reluctantly forced himself to depart.

The fact was the strong twin would survive. She would have to spend her life fighting for everything she got, but she would survive better anywhere than with a mother who cared nothing for her.

Now, with the strong newborn behind him in the backseat of his car, Stephan drove through the precarious streets in one of the worst sections of the city. The Bronstons owned a run-down hotel in this area. Regardless, they'd passed the usual battery of tests required and had three foster children already—all girls under the age of ten.

As he approached the building, a shudder ran through him. He had to ignore the dread that had multiplied with each visit to the Bronstons' home. They'd passed the tests *more* than once. The cold feeling in Stephan's middle had to be nothing serious—a mere reaction to the poverty the family lived in, especially compared to what the DeMazzinos could offer any child.

Jane and Elmo Bronston were waiting for him, looking anxious as he presented the child to them. The little girl was crying with all the gusto of a tidal wave, and Stephan's own instincts were to comfort her. Smiling slightly as he took the tiny child from the

car seat and snuggled her in his arms, he watched her become calm against him.

“She’s ours?” Jane asked, a woman who’d never been able to have children of her own. She’d explained that numerous times during the interviews. She’d said there was nothing more she wanted in this world than a child of her own.

Swallowing with difficulty, Stephan handed the cherub over to her new mother. *Why don’t I believe her?* he wondered. *Why don’t I feel their desire to love and care for this child is genuine? I’m being foolish.*

“Go back in your room!” Elmo shouted suddenly, forcing Stephan’s attention to snap to the doorway behind them. One of the foster girls ducked back into the darkness beyond so quickly Stephan was certain he must have imagined what he saw. *She was probably outside, playing in the dirt. That was dirt all over her face.*

Mrs. Bronston handed the baby to her husband, hurrying through the doorway the girl had disappeared back into.

“Is everything all right?” Stephan asked when the newborn wailed alarmingly.

“Not easy with so many kids. They’re into everything,” Elmo said in a you-know-how-it-is tone. “But we love ’em.”

Stephan nodded, feeling that chill again in his middle when he looked into Mr. Bronston’s eyes. *Cold eyes. Heartless eyes. The eyes of a predator.*

“It’s been hectic this morning. If you wouldn’t mind, Mr. Kelley—” he started pointedly, and Stephan nodded. When he got outside the house, he stood on the doorstep for a minute, wondering if he could get himself to leave here without looking back. At once, he knew he shouldn’t, but couldn’t stop himself from shifting over to the dirty panels of windows next to the door and peering inside.

What he saw there took the air from his lungs. Mr. Bronston had laid the baby on the floor and knelt on hands and knees over it. Though Stephan had told them as soon as he arrived with the child that she’d just been fed and her diaper had been changed at the hospital, the baby now lay naked beneath Mr. Bronston. His lips were curled back like that of a hungry wolf.

Jane Bronston came into the room, barely noticing her husband as she instead hurried toward the window. Stephan ducked his head back quickly to avoid notice and rushed to his car.

He'd imagined it. The man was just checking the baby's diaper. Surely if the wife hadn't noticed anything amiss... The couple had passed the tests. Their other foster children had all looked healthy and claimed to be happy, though their extreme shyness and empty eyes had bothered Stephan on more than one occasion.

*I had no choice*, he told himself over and over until he convinced himself.

And Stephan Kelley washed his hands of it, never once believing it was a decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

## Chapter One

### *Twenty-one years later...*

*IF THIS DAY sucked any worse, it'd have a straw,* Teresa thought, heaving in the fresh air as she stumbled out of *Danse de Minuit* into the darkness. She felt better than she had a little while ago when she'd puked up just about everything that wasn't permanently fixed in place. *Sure aren't gonna tell Andre I feel a world better, though!*

If she did that, she'd be back on stage faster than she could wink. Andre never allowed any of them to “shirk” their duty to him.

Tottering slightly on her stiletto heels, she turned toward the front of the building and headed out onto Third Avenue. Her throat felt raw, and she wished she'd had time for a drink of water before Andre had appeared demanding to know why she wasn't out on stage dancing. She'd run the risk of having to do what her boss expected of her or the even more dangerous task of lying to him. She'd gone against her every instinct and lied, saying she'd thrown up and felt feverish now. The first part was true. Looking peeved, Andre had told Lacey to go get Roy to drive her home.

According to Lacey, Roy had been “throwing some prick out.” Teresa had assured everyone she could walk home; she'd make it somehow. Silently she'd wondered if the truth of the matter was that Roy didn't want to be in that close of contact with her. After all, less than six hours ago she'd told him it was over between them.

*I chose Andre over him; Roy's got a right to be royally pissed at me. Can't blame him... but Lord, I miss him.*

She'd never forget the look on his face when she blurted out that she couldn't run away with him. Lordy, but he'd been

infuriated after that, convinced Andre had brainwashed her, threatened her. Worse, Roy believed she'd used him the whole time.

Teresa pressed a hand gently to her stomach. Roy was no good for her. He was no better than a sugar pimp, using his charm instead of violence to control her—she knew he wouldn't have changed even if they got away. But... she loved him, loved his gentleness, his sweetness. He was a teddy bear encased in armor and she'd found her way straight to his heart. They shared something so vital. How could she have let Andre talk her out of their plans?

*No sense crying over spilt milk, hey. It's all over now anyway. Andre blackmails me with my own emotions, just like forever, no shame for him. He always gets what he wants, one way or another, and you know it, girl.*

A chill went up her spine when she remembered how he'd grabbed her by her arm so hard and yanked her toward him. She'd never forget the look in his eyes as he'd said coldly, "You'll never leave me. I'll never let you get away, baby. Never. If you try—if you even *try*—I'll kill you and anyone foolish enough to go with you."

No, she'd never forget again. She belonged to Andre. *Til death do us part.*

*But me and Roy, we were so close! Ah, damn it, so close. Roy loved me. Somehow I don't believe Andre even cares unless it benefits him somehow. Roy'll never forgive me now. No way. He told me I was one of Andre's stupid bitches, tied tight to the post with a leash. He'll never forgive me—never, never, never.*

*Unless... unless I tell him...*

As she neared the park, Teresa decided to cross the parking lot and sit on a bench awhile, give herself time to think. Maybe she ought to go to Roy's instead of home. Tell him when he got back later that she was stupid—that she'd changed her mind, if he'd still have her. Somehow they'd get away from Andre.

*Yeah.*

She'd made the detour through the entrance of the park and toward the nearest bench overlooking the pond when she felt something come down hard on her neck. For a moment she didn't have a clue what was happening to her. Then she realized she couldn't breathe. Something cold cinched around her throat. Before she could more than grapple for the constrictor, a knee

slammed into her back and a weight came down on her. She was falling, clawing for air.

*Ain't happening... ain't— Not when... my dreams... finally... coming true. My Roy... baby...*

The darkness swooped down from above and swallowed her whole.

## Chapter Two

LIEUTENANT PETE SHASTA glanced at his watch as he waited at the drive-thru window. It was seven o'clock. He'd be home before his wife for once. Tonight *he'd* be there to greet *her* for a change.

Lisa had called him just before he left work to say she'd be late. Pete's first thought had been, *Go through the drive-thru so neither of us has to cook. Something that's good cold.*

Accepting the bag of food from the attendant, Pete grinned crazily again at the idea of being alone with his wife. He'd been married to Lisa Mercer for two years now and had yet to settle into any routine with her. Except when he was on a case, he thought about her constantly, remembering something she'd said, the soft scent of her perfume on his skin, the intensity in her beautiful, burnt-sienna-colored eyes when he kissed her.

Ah, hell no, the newness of being free-fall, don't-catch-me-I'm-gone in love with a woman as incredible as Lisa hadn't worn off at all. She wasn't like his ex-wife. She had her own career, a demanding one even if it couldn't equal the strain his job posed on their lives. Pete knew Lisa came home at 6 o'clock almost every night, something she hadn't done until they met, just in case he got off early. She brought work home with her, but dropped it the second he walked in the door.

Pete rubbed at the gnawing in his gut, leaning forward to punch on the radio—anything to prevent the appearance of a fear that always seemed to come whenever he realized just how deep he was in love with Lisa. If he lost her he'd never survive it. It'd taken him years just to get involved with a woman again after Donna left him. With Lisa, he'd had no choice in the matter. None whatsoever.

He'd gotten just far enough into the house to set the bag in the front hall so he could remove his jacket when his doorbell rang. He didn't know any of his neighbors, and Lisa wouldn't ring her own doorbell. Frowning, he went to answer it.

His partner, Danny Vincent, stood on the doorstep. At twenty-eight, Danny still had a boyishly expressive face that spoke volumes to Pete at the moment.

"Ah, say it isn't so, Van Gogh," Pete groaned.

In addition to being an investigator at the Falcon's Bend Police Department, Danny was an amateur artist who'd once had the ambition to make it his career. Now he did it as a hobby and occasionally worked as a sketch artist for the department when they needed one.

For all of two seconds, Pete got the chance to pray fervently that the call was just a bunch of kids desecrating graves, breaking into some abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town, or spreading graffiti around the eclectic mix of buildings. In the summer they got a lot of those calls. Any of the officers could handle a call like that. Then Danny shook his head soberly. "Murder. DCDS. Witmer Park."

Pete swore under his breath—*Deceased Confirmed Dead at Scene*. The last murder they'd had in Falcon's Bend had been over a year ago and that'd been some drunk out of control who'd regretted his anger the instant he'd sobered up—too late.

Falcon's Bend was a small town in Wisconsin on the Falcon River with just under 8000 Green Bay Packer football-loving folks. The town had more taverns than churches, but filled both on the appropriate days. Teenagers talked of escape from a one-horse town like Falcon's Bend, but transportation in or out was limited if you didn't have wheels. No train, no commercial flights, one bus stop, and one taxi service that only took calls from around town and some of the nearby areas. For Pete, Falcon's Bend was the only home he'd ever known, the only one he cared to know.

The Falcon's Bend Police Department employed twelve full-time officers, six qualified reserves, along with the patrol sergeant and chief, an administrative assistant, and two investigators. It was a good thing murder happened infrequently here; they didn't have the manpower for excessive crime.

"Who called in to confirm it?" Pete asked.

"Lambert. He secured the scene."

Dennis Lambert was one of the full-time officers.

“ID?”

“Nobody knows at this point.”

Pete nodded, shucking his jacket back on. “You call DCI?”

Danny nodded. “They’ll be here as soon as they can, and Cora will meet us at Witmer Park on the double.”

Cora Kingsley wouldn’t be too happy about the call. She faced the same potential Pete did—calls at any hour of the day. Lately, the calls for him came in the ungodly hours of the night as well.

“You need to leave a note for Lisa?” Danny asked.

Pete glanced back longingly at the bag of food. Only twenty minutes ago he’d been promising Lisa he’d be home when she arrived and she’d been promising him something a whole lot sweeter than that.

“I’ll call her later, from the car,” Pete said with a grimace. *Ab, baby, don’t give up on me*, he thought, then cursed again under his breath.

### Chapter Three

“THIS WAS DEFINITELY not a suicide, boss,” Lambert said as soon as Pete and Danny stepped out of their unmarked, department-owned car—a beige Caprice.

Witmer Park was at the end of the street, not more than a block from the main business district of town. With all the usual playground equipment toddlers loved—swings, jungle gyms, sandpits, and a merry-go-round—and a couple amenities for the grown-ups like benches, a baseball diamond with bleachers, and a small bridge overlooking a duck-filled pond, the park rolled out into a good size field in the background, edged by a patch of woods with a trail that looped back on itself. In the summer, the park was usually filled with people every day.

It was hard for Pete to believe that there’d been a dead body here for most of the day—had to have been, yet no one had seen it. He scanned the area, looking for a place it could have been hidden. The shelters? They were locked. Under the merry-go-round? Not enough room there.

“It’s under the bridge,” Danny said just as Pete considered it and concluded that it was actually possible. Not easy, but it could be done. The bridge was made of iron with a treated wood deck, curving up slightly in the middle. Below, surrounding it on both sides, were rock and grass-lined banks that bordered the stream which emptied out in the Falcon River half a mile away.

“Yeah,” Lambert said quietly. “Hard to believe someone would even think to put it there.”

Lambert had taped off the scene. Both Pete and Danny ducked under the yellow line.

“Who found the victim?” Pete asked as they moved carefully around the perimeter of the park toward the bridge. Dozens of

patrons had been in the park throughout the day. The chances of finding any clues at all would be slim, but Pete examined each inch nevertheless.

“Kid. Davy York. Eleven years old. Came over on his bike to feed the ducks. Rosch went with him to get the parents. They only live four blocks from here.”

Pete nodded. “Call Dispatch. Tell ’em to get everybody on duty over here to canvass the area.”

Lambert nodded, handing Pete his flashlight since Pete had left his own in the car, and said, “You’ll need this.”

About three feet from the bridge, Pete and Danny saw that the grass was torn up for a couple yards in two jagged but otherwise parallel lines. “Dragged,” Pete said. “Just before the perp stopped and took the victim’s shoes off, probably.”

Danny murmured agreement. The two of them continued on, being even more conscientious in studying the stone rip-rap along the stream on both sides of the bridge. Nothing out of place. No blood. Nothing obvious except one hot pink shoe lying on its side on the rocks under the well-shaded underpass of the bridge. Any further to the edge and the stream would have washed the pump away downstream toward Falcon River.

From Pete’s angle on the north side of the bridge, across from Danny, he still couldn’t see the victim. Danny stepped into the middle of the stream and muttered, “Clever.” As Pete did the same, he was glad he hadn’t asked Lambert to show them exactly where the body was. If not for the shoe that had obviously tumbled away from the body stuffed so far under the crossbeams of the bridge, they might not have found it until the smell drew attention.

“Looks like the perp dragged her under here, stuffed her in, and then tucked the shoes in around her. Probably this one fell after the perp took off.” Danny swore colorfully under his breath as Pete climbed the bank under the bridge next to him. The body was wedged in tightly, in the darkest shadows beneath.

Pete trained his flashlight on the head. “She hasn’t been dead that long,” Pete said softly as he stared at the bright purple band around the victim’s neck, the bulging eyes.

“Yeah,” Danny agreed. “You know her?”

Pete shook his head. “I’ve only seen her around town.”

“Can’t really miss her.”

The girl was African-American. Pete had noticed her around town because Falcon's Bend was not a culturally diverse place in any sense of the word. At least 90 percent of the population was white, for the simple reason that most of the community had lived there all their lives. People more often moved *out* of Falcon's Bend, not *in*.

Outside of that, the girl was so striking because she had waist-length blond hair. Even in death, she was exotically beautiful—wide, heavily-lined brown eyes tilted up at the outer corners, high cheekbones, and fine arched brows. Her makeup was heavy—showgirl style—with glittered cheekbones and bright colors on her eyelids, cheeks, and mouth. Her nails were like daggers with glitter and jewels sparkling in the polish. She looked tall, at least five eight, and voluptuous without being overweight. Her clothes would certainly also make her stand out in a small town like Falcon's Bend. She wore a bright orange, skimpy top with a plunging neckline and a hot pink mini skirt. The one pump that remained against her back had an extremely long stiletto heel—what some of Pete's college dorm-mates had crudely called fuck-me pumps. There was no sign of a purse anywhere near the body. Did she carry one? Had it been stolen?

“How old do you think she is?” Danny asked.

Pete glanced at his partner, shaking his head. “She doesn't look more than sixteen.”

He knew the hard look on Danny's face. Danny had spent five years on the mean streets of New York City, seeing every twisted kind of crime a man could commit. The ones that still haunted and infuriated him the most were the crimes against children.

Pete and Danny climbed out from beneath the bridge when they heard the arrival of Cora Kingsley. Pete already knew she'd give them an earful for even looking at the body, which they were supposed to do. Cora just liked to be the one to figure it out first.

“Why wasn't I notified sooner?” she demanded, stalking toward them. Cora was in her forties, tall, lean, with short, no-nonsense brown hair and a booming voice that sounded like she'd swallowed a tuba.

“You were notified minutes after I was notified,” Pete said calmly.

“Minutes? In minutes, the entire world could blow up.”

Pete wanted to shake his head at her in disbelief, but simply handed over the flashlight. She yanked it out of his hand with a “humph” of fury. “Where?” she demanded, and Danny told her.

Putting aside thoughts of gentlemanly behavior she would have cut him off at the knees for anyway, Pete watched—with a small degree of satisfaction—Cora slip and slide, tumbling once, until she got up the bank and under the bridge with her medical bag and the flashlight in tow. After her initial once-over, she asked Pete to hold the flashlight while she worked. She then proceeded to detail her findings as if she was the first who’d seen the body. Pete listened circumspectly, nevertheless, especially when they emerged and Cora announced, “Strangulation was achieved by a flexible, extremely strong chain approximately eight millimeters wide. The chain had no links or texture to distinguish it. Were you able to locate a murder weapon?”

“Not at this time,” Pete said. “DCI’s due to arrive in about two hours.”

Cora nodded. “Throttling is generally caused by a man against a woman.”

“But an extremely strong woman would be able to do this,” Danny added. “And, if this goes against type and isn’t a heat-of-the-moment strangulation, an average woman might also be able to do it if the victim was drugged beforehand.”

Pete nodded approvingly. He’d always said the devil wasn’t in the details—Danny was. His analytical mind went over every problem from all possible directions. Pete usually formed an impression early and was rarely wrong about it even if it was out of focus for awhile.

Cora glared ruthlessly at him as if Danny had interrupted her to say the very thing she’d been about to say, stealing her thunder. “Yes, it’s possible,” she agreed tightly. “She’s been dead a little more than fourteen hours. Time of death could have been anywhere between 2:00 and 4:30 this morning. You’ll have my report in the morning. I don’t know why the hell these things always happen so late.”

As she stalked off, Danny jotted down notes and Pete called cheerfully after her, “Thanks, Cora. Night.” She didn’t bother to turn around or return his farewell.

Lambert joined them to say, “Confirmed DCI’s ETA—hour and fifty minutes.”

“No leads on who she is?” Danny asked, and Lambert shook his head.

Dennis Lambert had been on the force for over thirty years and was closing in on retirement soon.

One of the cop cars and a red Sedan pulled up outside the tape. “That the kid who found her?” Pete asked of the boy who sprung out of the backseat of the Sedan.

Lambert nodded. “Davy York.”

As Pete and Danny approached the yellow tape, the boy’s mother joined her son and put both hands on his shoulders protectively. “Mrs. York?” Pete said after ducking under the line of tape. “I’m Lieutenant Pete Shasta, and this is my partner Danny Vincent. We’re investigating a body that was found in the park today—”

Mrs. York paled as if someone would accuse her son. Her hold on Davy tightened, and she eased him further back against her. The kid with a baseball cap mashed down over most of his red hair and freckles scattered over his nose and cheeks stared up at Pete and Danny in awe. Pete wasn’t surprised by Davy’s excitement. Kids’ reactions to death were almost always inappropriate, yet somehow understandable, because almost everything fit into one of two categories to them: it was either a game or it was boring. This was clearly not boring.

“I understand that Davy was the one who found the body,” Pete continued, hunkering down in front of the boy. He knew Danny would be taking notes as they talked. “Davy, you think you could answer a couple questions for us?”

“She was actually murdered?” Davy asked, more excited than sad.

“Yeah, she actually was.” Pete kept his tone friendly. “How’d you find her, Davy?”

“I rode my bike down here after supper to feed the ducks. Mom gave me some stale bread—”

Pete glanced up to see the mother blushing, as if it was a crime to be caught giving ducks day-old, instead of fresh, bread.

“—and I saw the shoe lyin’ there under the bridge. People are always leavin’ things behind in the park. I found a pair of girl’s red underpants once. I think they were Melissa Dalton’s. My friend Putter says she’s always foolin’ around with guys out in them woods—”

Davy's mom gave his shoulders a hard squeeze that made him squeak and look up at her with annoyance. "Anyway..." Davy turned back to Pete. "I go to pick it up and I thought I saw somethin' up above, under the bridge. Somethin' shiny. So I climb up and I see them fingernails, long as knives, with all that shiny stuff and jewels on 'em and I thought 'Holy shit on toast! It's a dead body!'"

"Davy!" his mother scolded.

Davy didn't miss a beat. "I didn't touch nothin'. I know you're not supposed to touch nothin', so I just backed up and got on my bike and jammed it for the booze store over there and tol' the owner."

Pete glanced down the road. In the distance, about a long block away, was a building with a wood sign that said Osbourne Liquor.

"Well, Davy," Pete said, "you did good. The Falcon's Bend Police Department owes you a debt of gratitude."

"Do I get, like, a reward or somethin'?"

Pete chuckled, standing and patting Davy's hat with one hand. "Have your mom bring you by the station one of these days and we'll get you another baseball cap or something. Okay?"

Danny got Davy's phone number and address from the mom while Pete turned and viewed the park again. He had fond memories of this place. He'd rode here on his bike himself when he was a kid, played baseball with his brother and Danny, fed the ducks. He and Lisa had come here once, too, in the dead of the night, back when she was a suspect in a case he was working. It'd been kind of a neutral ground for them—not the adoption agency where she worked and not the FBPD. She'd agreed to meet him here. He couldn't even remember now why he'd asked her. Something legitimate; something for the case, he was sure. But he did remember fighting with her... and wanting her so damn much he'd hardly been able to take a breath. They'd had their first savage kiss here. He'd almost made love to her in this parking lot. He'd damn sure known at that moment that his case was compromised and his heart wasn't his own anymore. And now someone had been murdered here. *Hell.*

"Remember that time you hit the ball so hard it went into the woods and we couldn't find it, even after looking for it for two hours," Danny said almost reverently. Sadly.

Pete nodded. “I remember you and me playing cops and robbers here. We always fought about who’d get to be cop. Whoever got stuck playing the robber always ended up being an undercover cop.”

Danny laughed at the memory that was possibly part of what led them both to law enforcement careers. “I made out with Danielle Rutherford in that field when I was fifteen.” Danny glanced at him. “Got to second base.”

“Only second? The playboy wasn’t trying very hard,” Pete teased instinctively. Danny attracted women like flies, but he’d never had a relationship he couldn’t walk away from.

Instead of answering, Danny sighed.

## Chapter Four

PURPLISH-GRAY FINGERS of darkness descended in the sky above Witmer Park, but DCI—the Department of Criminal Investigation out of Madison—had set up perimeter lights as soon as they arrived. They worked their way painstakingly and methodically over every inch of the park. Pete and Danny stayed out of the way.

They'd had a shock only minutes after the body was removed from under the bridge to be sent to Wausau in preparation for the autopsy scheduled for tomorrow morning. On the way up the shifting rip-rap of the bank, the victim's long blond hair had fallen off her head to reveal closely-cropped, kinky black hair. Officer Don Rosch had almost dropped his end of the body with a girlish shriek at the sight, and Pete and Danny had had a good laugh at his expense.

"Looks like they're gonna be finished up here soon." Pete glanced at Danny who watched silently though Pete had no doubt his mind was working like a computer on what little data they'd accumulated.

Jeff Chopp, the patrol sergeant, approached. Chopp was a massive guy over six three with red-blond hair, square, tinted glasses that hid his eyes, and a bushy moustache. He'd been with the force for as long as Pete could remember, though he didn't look any older than he had the day Pete joined.

Pete read his answer before he could say a word. "Nothing?"

"Nothing," he confirmed. "With so many people through here today, any clues we might have had are long gone. No sign of a murder weapon."

"Any witnesses? Anything on the victim?"

Chopp adjusted his glasses. “Had some contact with people who were in the park today and we’re checking those out, but so far, no one saw anything amiss. Outside of the fake hair on the victim that Rosch so cleverly discovered, we don’t have anything on her.”

Pete grimaced.

As soon as DCI packed up their equipment, he and Danny headed back to the station, grabbing a quick, unsatisfying sandwich from a machine. They ate standing near the coffee station as they tossed back and forth ideas of who the victim could be.

“I better call Lisa and tell her I’m gonna be late,” Pete said after washing down the last of the stale sandwich with even more stale coffee.

Danny gave him a crooked smile. “Gonna be?”

It was after eleven o’clock. Lisa had probably gotten home before seven thirty and wondered where the hell he was. But then she’d figure it out fast. They’d been through this routine for two years. She’d probably called the station, talked to someone to find out what was happening, but told them not to bother him. Donna had never been that lenient.

Lisa was always glad to see him when he got home—always warm and sweet, regardless of the time and promises he might have made... and unwillingly broken. He’d never walked through his front door and had her scream full in his face that he’d missed dinner *again*, then proceed to toss the meal in the garbage or across the room. God help him, but he never wanted to face a time when he dreaded going home, dreaded realizing she wasn’t there *again*. Never wanted to walk into his bedroom and find his wife in the arms of another man, agonizingly aware from the get-go that she’d *wanted* him to find her that way.

“Tell Lis I said hi,” Danny said.

Pete nodded, moving into their cube-shaped office and closing the door. He wasn’t willing to risk anyone eavesdropping since they’d start teasing him at the first possible moment if they heard his conversation. One time, about three months after he and Lisa were married and made love every single time they got five minutes to themselves, Lisa had called him. Dispatch had patched her through to the car on the radio—and deliberately did it on an open channel. He’d bemoaned the fact that he’d been called away for a burglary while they’d been making love and both were left

unsatisfied. Little did he know that his officers were converging in Dispatch Center at that moment, listening to every passionate word he and Lisa spoke. When he got back to the station, he'd been treated to an ungodly amount of razzing from his men. Now every time he was called in during off-duty hours, Rosch would tease, "Hey, Shasta, called away from makin' love to your wife and get caught halfway toward the moon?" Didn't matter now whether or not they heard anything he said; they'd be on him anyway.

At this moment, Pete didn't care about anything except connecting with his wife.

*What I wouldn't give to be there instead of here*, he thought upon hearing Lisa's soft greeting. God, he loved her voice. She had no idea how many of these late nights he'd gotten through just because he'd heard her voice for a few minutes.

"Hi, baby."

"Pete," she breathed, and he inhaled at the mere word from her lips to his ear.

"They told me there was a murder," Lisa said softly.

"Yeah. Witmer Park."

She knew better than to ask him direct questions about a case. "Oh God, we had our first kiss there."

"I know."

Her sigh made him close his eyes and imagine where he could be now instead of here if things had gone according to the plans they'd made at seven o'clock. "I'll wait up for you," she said finally.

Pete glanced out the windshield to see DCI packing up their equipment. "Better not. It's already late and it'll be a lot later before I'm outta here. By the way, Danny says hi."

He half expected her to say, "I'm getting tired of this," even knowing Lisa never would do that to him. "Tell him hi back," she said.

Sighing appreciatively at her willingness to put up with the burdens his job placed on their marriage, Pete shook his head, lowering his tone confidentially as he said, "Not likely. Not when I had a night planned somewhere along the lines of turning on the air conditioner, lighting a fire in the fireplace and making love to you 'til neither of us can move."

Like a spark in a gas-filled room, her plaintive moan instantly ignited him. Pete clenched his teeth, heat coursing like a restless river, hardness behind his fly, tenderness enough to make his heart

feel like it could burst in his chest. And, more than that, he felt *comforted*. Lisa didn't retaliate with threats or cruel words, didn't play on the fears that he'd assured himself a hundred times weren't valid anymore. God, he loved her.

"Ah, baby..."

"I think this new nightgown can wait for another time," Lisa said, obviously disappointed but also understanding in that amazing way of hers. "I love you, Pete."

"I love you, too, Lisa Mercer-Shasta. 'Night, baby."

"'Night."

Pete hung up reluctantly, torturing thoughts of *black lace? pink satin?* running through his mind.

Hours later, they were having no more luck identifying the victim. Pete emerged from the locker room after splashing his face with cold water to see everyone standing around the coffee station.

"Jensen IDed the victim," Danny told him.

Warren Jensen had been on the force for the last eight years. He'd been a reserve officer while working as a guard at the prison. When a full-time position opened up in the department, he'd gotten the job. He was in his early thirties, in good shape. His wife, who'd been his girlfriend throughout high school, had died a year and a half ago of ovarian cancer. As far as Pete knew, he hadn't dated since.

Chopp had said they couldn't reach all the officers for canvassing; Jensen had been in Minneapolis but said he'd head back immediately.

Jensen turned to them. "She's a dancer from the strip joint."

*Danse de Minuit* had opened about eight months ago, right off the heart of the town—from Pete's way of thinking, entirely too close to Witmer Park, which was a favorite spot of local mothers with toddlers. Though there'd been talk at council meetings about shutting the strip joint down before the renovations to the building were even completed, it'd opened right on schedule and business was good.

As far as the FBPD was concerned, the "gentleman's club" was just like any other business in town. All its papers were in order, licenses in place, and no problems had arisen from it. The department had kept an eye on it because of the potential for trouble, but everything appeared to be legitimate so far. Nor had Pete had any cause to do a background check on the owner, Andre

Trelawney, who'd moved to the area a year ago with his own troupe of dancers in tow. All of them kept to themselves. Again, no problems.

"How do you know the victim was a dancer at *Danse de Minuit*?" Pete asked, unable to shake the need to be gentle with Jensen.

A flush of red stole into Jensen's face and neck, and he averted his gaze as he admitted haltingly, "I've been there. Only once. In citizen attire. When the place first opened up. I saw this girl dance." He glanced back to add, almost in a begging tone. "It wasn't a hardcore show, boss. Not then, at least. Mostly just on the stage, table dancing, pole tricks, floor work. Nothing cheap or illegal. I don't know what they're doing now, though."

Jensen looked down again, as if waiting for an official reprimand. "Happen to know the victim's name?" Pete asked instead.

Jensen swallowed. "I'm not sure, but I think it was Teresa. But maybe that's just her stage name."

Outside of visiting *Danse de Minuit* in connection with this murder, they would be making sure no underage girls were stripping there, considering how young the victim had looked.

Chopp wrote in his notebook. "We'll check to see if she has any accounts in town, but so far she doesn't seem to have any contacts outside *Dan... Dans...* How the hell do you pronounce it?"

Danny shrugged. "I had French, but my specialty was the kissing variety."

"Daws de minoo-ee. *Danse de Minuit*," Pete supplied. "It means 'Dance of Midnight.'"

Pete had always thought the name of the strip joint was too esoteric and fancy to paint the picture of sexual suggestiveness to men. Not that it really mattered. It was the only strip joint for sixty miles around and everyone in Falcon's Bend and the surrounding areas knew exactly what it was, regardless of the fancy name. Certainly hadn't stopped its popularity.

Chopp shrugged. "In any case, she doesn't seem to have a life outside of that club."

"So what now?" Jensen asked.

Pete and Danny looked at each other and said at the same time, "*Danse de Minuit*."



## Chapter Five

*DANSE DE MINUIT* was located at the end of the block in a building that had once been a large, family-owned grocery store that went out of business after the first all-in-one superstore took over most of the shopping in Falcon's Bend.

Damned if he wanted to admit it, but Pete couldn't deny that the outside of the nightclub was classy—tastefully renovated and sophisticated instead of living up to the expectations of cheap and tacky. The white wood had been overlapped with brick veneer in arching patterns coming up from the coordinating base. Even the neon business sign was exotic-looking instead of cheesy. The nightclub was situated a mere two blocks from Witmer Park, just off the Main Street, yet slightly secluded from the rest of the businesses further up. The club sat alone at the end of Third Avenue.

*Owner's no fool*, Pete conceded. Here the club commanded attention from the night owls in town, but it was settled so discreetly on the back of the street that potential patrons wouldn't be afraid to approach it in fear of being caught entering by a neighbor. It even offered a parking lot around the back for the really skittish.

Pete climbed out of the passenger's side of the Caprice just as two patrol cars pulled up beside them. Reluctantly, he slipped the gray suit jacket on over the white T-shirt and faded jeans he wore. He'd shrugged out of his jacket as soon as he and Danny got in the car at the station, given the warmth of the evening and his tendency to sweat in the damn thing. The jacket had been something of a compromise between him and Chief Sobczynski. No way would Pete put on a business suit and tie; no way would the chief allow him to conduct investigations in just jeans and an undershirt. Danny had no problem with wearing a suit jacket, and

also wore a white button-down shirt beneath it, though he wasn't willing to put on slacks either. He wore black jeans.

Danny, Chopp, and Jensen approached Pete first, awaiting instructions. When Rosch and Officer Roger Bradley joined them, Pete said, "Customers are gonna be leaving in droves as soon as they realize there're cops on the scene. Chopp and Rosch, scope out all back and side entrances and make sure no one leaves without giving their names and contact information. Don't detain them in any other way. Jensen, you take the front door. You've been here in the past, so I'll want a report when we leave as to whether they do business any different in the present."

Pete turned to Bradley. "You're with us. I might need you to collect IDs before we leave or to run a license. Do that right away and come back when you're done relaying the information to Dispatch. All right, let's do it, boys."

Chopp and Rosch separated and moved around the building while Pete and Danny took the lead toward the front door. Pete caught his partner's eye and saw the on-edge expression there, tightening his face. Neither of them had been inside the establishment and neither knew what to expect.

The music coming from inside seemed to be doing its darnedest to burst through the walls and break up the ground. It belted past them like a sonic wave when Danny opened one side of the steel double doors. Inside was darkness threaded through with gleams of soft, sensual red light. For a minute, Pete felt blinded and reached for his flashlight instinctively. But then he saw shapes and movement, and the spotlight seemed to center directly on the stage dead-center in the room. The stage might have been a runway for models as it outcropped into the middle of grouped round tables scattered around it, except for the poles at the base of the stage and the woman strutting down the runway to the raucous cheering of the crowd. She was naked, save for a red feather boa and a necklace gleaming against her bare, high breasts.

Like a deer caught in the headlights, Pete stared in dumbfounded shock as the tall blonde stopped walking and grinded her hips slowly to the pulsing rhythm of the music, her hands traveling slowly up to the center of her thighs, holding there for but a moment before they continued higher to cup and caress her own breasts.

The dancer's eyes seemed to zone in on Pete—cold, hard eyes that didn't even vaguely say what her body did. Those eyes hated every testosterone-charged man who screamed and begged for her attention in the audience.

Pete forced himself to look away and scope out the scene. On the right of the stage, there was a manned booth for the music and public restrooms. On the left was a long, straight bar, and behind it, a door marked PRIVATE. Recessed and shadowed in the far left behind the stage were two more doors with signs Pete couldn't read from the distance. A large man stood near one of them as though on guard duty.

With his eyes more adjusted to the darkness, Pete saw other nude dancers within the randy throng. Colored lights flickered on and off over them. Another blonde danced above the customers on table tops. Not ten feet from him, Pete saw another dancer actually sitting naked as the day she was born on a customer's lap, facing him, her hips swirling over his tent-like lap. The customer's face was buried in the extremely thin, African-American woman's breasts. He wasn't touching her outside of that, wasn't exposed, and she didn't touch him in any other way. Yet Pete had a strong feeling that if they'd walked in the door a few minutes earlier, they would have caught some illegal sexual conduct.

Pete turned when he saw someone approaching from the corner of his eye. The guy had been standing at the door, a bouncer no doubt. The diamond stud in the bouncer's ear winked at Pete just before the man saw Jensen's and Bradley's uniforms. They'd apparently only been here less than a minute, but it'd felt like an hour to Pete.

The bouncer's expression hardened into pure defense mode. Behind them the crowd became quiet as the news that police officers were on the premises spread quickly. The music cut off abruptly; bright overhead lights came on while the dancers on the stage and mingling fled. A handful of customers bee-lined toward the door only to be stopped momentarily by Jensen and Bradley.

"We need to speak to the owner of the club," Pete said to the bouncer. On-edge as he was by the things he'd already seen, his voice remained calm and authoritative.

The door marked PRIVATE behind the bar opened almost as if on cue.



## Chapter Six

*“WE’RE IN LOVE, Andre. Don’t... don’t take it personally, but me and Roy love each other. We wanna be together.”*

Andre Trelawney pressed his fingers against his temples at the memory. For once, Deidre’s big mouth had come in handy by averting him from what could have been a disaster.

Teresa had betrayed him, and even though he’d put her in her place yesterday, the realization that one of his girls could do something behind his back for so long, something so deceptive... He couldn’t accept it, couldn’t tolerate it. Her punishment had been harsh, but considering his state of mind at the moment, she’d gotten off lightly for her crimes against him.

What had made her think for one moment he’d let her go? What made her consider it in the first place? Would the other girls follow her shameful example? He couldn’t risk that, not for anything.

Andre raised his head suddenly, realizing he couldn’t hear anything. His office behind the bar gave him a measure of quiet while he could still supervise that everything went exactly the way he wanted them to.

Standing, he cursed. The music *had* stopped. Generally, the closer he got to the door, the louder the music was. If the music had stopped, it meant the girls weren’t dancing.

He didn’t need this tonight. He hated it when things didn’t follow his definition of order. What possible reason would there be to stop the show now? There would be hell to pay when he found out why.

Stalking to the door, he yanked it open and stepped out. The stage was empty, the dancers gone. The customers were obviously unhappy in the deathly silence.

Andre searched out his head of security, but then remembered with a curse that Roy had the night off. Near the front door, he spotted a group of police officers.

*Merde*, why now? He'd been expecting them. Not this soon. Not tonight. It was the last thing he wanted to face.

But face them he must. He had to do it with a calm, cool, collected demeanor. He couldn't allow them to perceive his anger, impatience. He couldn't give anything away.

His consolation was that he'd prepared for this inevitability. He had nothing to fear.

## Chapter Seven

PETE COULD FEEL the tension pervading the room from the remaining customers and the security team who were standing at points all around the club. The man who appeared out of the door behind the bar started to speak, his expression one of angry dismay at the scene before him.

Pete recognized him as Andre Trelawney, owner of *Danse de Minuit*. The man looked to be in his mid-thirties, six feet even, and a lean 175 pounds with a golden boy tan. His well-cut, dark brown hair had blond highlights at the top where it parted off to the side.

As Pete, Danny, and Bradley moved toward him, Pete saw the narrow black eyes—eyes that looked like they were habitually trying to shield the sun by squinting—beneath thick blond eyebrows. The expression of infuriated annoyance on his face etched lines between his eyes and bracketed his mouth. His long nose flared territorially at Pete’s approach, even as he smiled calmly.

“Lieutenant Shasta, Lieutenant Vincent, I hope you’ve come to join in the festivities... not to break them up, *n’est-ce pas?*” Trelawney said in a thick accent.

Pete and Danny exchanged a glance. How had Trelawney known them by name when they’d never been face to face before?

Summing up the guy’s character didn’t take Pete longer than those few minutes. Women would find Trelawney irresistible for his good looks, his accent, his manners, his charming tone of voice, his pearly-white and ready smile, and his obviously well-off style of dress. Though Pete rarely felt out of place dressed so casually, he nevertheless had a momentary twinge of embarrassment that this nightclub owner looked like he’d stepped off the pages of *GQ* while he could have made the worst-dressed list.

Beneath the surface, though, Trelawney was no prize. Pete pegged him, even at this first, close-up glimpse, as a selfish control freak who always expected to get what he wanted and would make life hell for those who stood in his way.

For the first time, the esoteric name of the club made sense to Pete. Generally, a strip club was named something suggestive that would appeal to a man's base instincts, not his intellect. In this case, the owner's self-perceived sophistication explained the name of the club—Trelawney believed he was selling more than mere sex here. He believed he was offering men some sophistication.

Before Pete could respond, Trelawney signaled to his DJ. The lights went down and the music began once more. Another employee scrambled up on stage and announced, "And now, let's give a warm welcome to the delicious Dee!"

Annoyed, Pete turned back, pulling the Polaroid print of the victim out. He handed it to the club owner. "Do you know this girl?" he asked, shouting over the music and subdued cheering. He watched Trelawney's expression carefully and saw genuine horror upon recognition.

"Teresa." He pronounced it "Ta-ray-sa," in a weak, disbelieving tone. He gripped the edge of the bar. "One of my dancers." Trelawney glanced up, his dark eyes proving his shock. "She didn't come in tonight and no one could find her. *Mon dieu*, what happened?"

Rather than answering, Pete asked, "Was she scheduled to work tonight?"

"Of course. She wasn't—"

After a few seconds it was obvious Trelawney wasn't going to continue. From an investigator's point-of-view, Pete always became wary when a person didn't finish a sentence. It told him they were holding back on telling him something, something that had to be important, otherwise they would continue.

"She wasn't what?" Pete prodded.

Trelawney shook his head, refusing to complete his sentence. He ran his hand through his immaculately feathered hair.

"Officers, shall we go into my office where it's quieter and the music isn't so raucous?" They filed into the office where it was indeed much quieter. "I prefer Prokofiev myself, you understand, but the music does fit the medium, *n'est-ce pas*, gentlemen?" Trelawney said with irresistible charm that grated on Pete's nerves.

Pete found himself in the uncomfortable position of realizing that he and this pompous jerk had the same taste in music. Grimacing, he did a quick, thorough scan of the office, noting it had a back way out.

Standing authoritatively behind the massive oak desk, Trelawney turned his gaze on Pete. "And now, Lieutenant Shasta, will you please tell me what's become of my missing dancer?"

"Teresa is dead."

With another squeamish look at the Polaroid, Trelawney seemed to realize the reality of such a picture for the first time. It wasn't a pretty picture, and it was obvious that the person in it was dead after a violent attack. Under his breath, Trelawney said, "*Qu'est-ce qui se passe?* What happened?"

Not knowing what to make of Trelawney's surprise, Pete took the picture and tucked it into his jacket. "She was killed. When was the last time you saw her alive, Mr. Trelawney?"

"Yesterday... yesterday morning. We close at four a.m., except on Sundays. She walked home."

"You actually saw her leave the club?"

Trelawney shook his head, seemingly distracted by the details. "No. I didn't see her. I work in my office most nights, coming out periodically to make sure everything's running smoothly. I distinctly saw Teresa a number of times, either dancing on stage or among the patrons. One of the employees mentioned she walked home because she wasn't feeling well."

Though getting witnesses at four a.m. in the morning wouldn't be easy, Pete knew they'd have to figure out as accurately as possible when Teresa had left the club. At this point, it was more than possible that she might have left earlier than closing time.

"You were here the entire time, Mr. Trelawney?" Danny asked, gazing up from the notebook he was scribbling his shorthand in. "From open to close on Wednesday evening, early Thursday morning?"

Pete had no doubt Danny had also glimpsed the hours of operation on the glass pane near the door before they'd come in. The club was open from seven p.m. to four a.m. Monday through Saturday, seven p.m. to two a.m. on Sunday.

Trelawney smiled indulgently at Danny. "*C'est ça!* This place doesn't run without me, Lieutenant."

“We’ll need the deceased’s full name and address, sir.” Pete gave Bradley the signal to collect the information before they left. On Bradley’s nod, he faced Trelawney again. “Did Teresa usually walk home or drive?”

“She walks home or we drive her home. She doesn’t have a car. Roy or I take the girls wherever they need to go.”

“Roy?”

“Roy Ormond, my head of security. He isn’t working tonight.”

Why wouldn’t she have a car? Pete wondered. Unless she and possibly the other dancers were underage, the fact that *the girls* had to be escorted around by the club’s head of security or their boss was definitely strange. What if they had a date? Needed to go shopping? Wanted to visit relatives or friends? Chopp’s earlier implication that the victim seemed to have no life outside her place of employment seemed disturbingly accurate.

“How many dancers work here, and what are their names?”

“Six... five,” Trelawney corrected himself in convincing disbelief. “Ah, Dee, Vanessa, Sugar, Lacey, and Cherry.”

“Do the dancers have a regular schedule for dancing that they follow?” Pete asked.

“Yes, they have a set rotation that changes weekly. Sugar, one of my dancers, is in charge of scheduling as well as choreography. I leave it up to her to decide who’s on stage, who’s mixing with the patrons and who’s taking a break. Of course, there are fixed times for fifteen minute breaks. We must always have someone on stage and mingling, you understand, so only one girl can be on break at a time.”

Teeth clenched, Pete wondered if the dancers were allowed to take a pee when nature called or only when the boss dictated they could make it so. Keeping his voice level, Pete continued, “You knew the victim pretty well then?”

“What are you implying, *monsieur*?” Trelawney’s tone of wariness and distress could have been genuine or fake. At the moment, Pete wasn’t inclined to be generous with his assessment. Something about this guy was just too slick. He’d recovered from viewing the disturbing picture of his recently deceased employee a little too fast.

“I’ll ask the questions, sir. How old was Teresa?”

Trelawney's spine straightened almost as if someone had slapped him and told him to shape up. "Twenty-one. All the dancers are twenty-one. *At least* twenty-one. I know all of my girls very well, Lieutenant. And, if you must know, Teresa and I... had *une petite liaison* once upon a time. I assure you that it was as brief as it was harmless."

Yeah, right. Obviously there was a lot more going on beneath the surface of this establishment than Pete had assumed since it'd opened.

"Besides," said Trelawney, his smooth-as-honey voice drawing Pete's attention back to him, "I'm a married man."

Although there was certainly no reason Pete should know this information, he was surprised nevertheless. "Is that right?"

Trelawney beamed proudly—either because of his wife or Pete's reaction. "*Happily* married."

"Is your wife a stripper, Mr. Trelawney?" Pete asked, only getting mild satisfaction out of the instantaneous fury that leaped unexpectedly out of Trelawney.

"*Jamais!* Melody will *never* get up on that stage!" Trelawney's sophisticated accent waned, but returned as he seemed to realize that his reaction had been too violent. He spoke again in a calm yet protective tone. "She's an angel. Please leave my wife out of this. She has nothing whatever to do with my business. You must understand and respect that, Lieutenants. I will not have her drawn into this mess."

"Did Teresa live alone?" Pete asked in a pacifying tone as Trelawney slipped his trembling hands into his crisply ironed slacks. "Do you know any of her relatives and where they might live?"

Trelawney merely shook his head.

"Do you know whether she had any problems? Did she talk about feeling threatened at any time?"

"Not to me, no."

Pete could feel the resistance coming off the guy and sensed he wouldn't get much further with him right now. "You said you were working in your office during regular hours of business Wednesday evening and early this morning and came out a couple times. Is that right?"

Trelawney nodded.

“Where were you between 4:00 and 8:00 a.m., Mr. Trelawney?”

“Closing up the club until near 5:00. Roy took the girls home last night. I went straight home to my wife after that.”

“Can your wife substantiate that?”

“Of course,” Trelawney said confidently.

Danny lowered his notebook. “We need to talk with all of your employees, sir. Right now, if you don’t mind.”

Knowing he really had little choice in the matter, despite Danny’s subtly sarcastic politeness, Trelawney’s eyes narrowed further even as he smiled irresistibly. “As long as you don’t interrupt the show, you shall have my full cooperation, *messieurs*.”

And the man obviously wouldn’t mind if they choked on his cooperation in the process.

*End of Excerpt*

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