

A MISSING PIECE OF SKY

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BY BUD SIMPSON

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**This is for my wife, Margo, and
especially for my sister, Dolores.**

PROLOGUE

The first thing, as a reader, you have to realize, before my characters take you down the winding roads of the following, twisted tale, is this: This is a novel! A novel is nothing but a pack of lies masquerading as truth. As you read these lies, you might think, that's not how the police really do things. Well, have I got news for you! You are entirely wrong. In Barton, Maine, this is exactly how the police department does things. If you could ever visit the fictional city of Barton, you would see right away I'm entirely correct. There are no mistakes in this novel. Well, maybe some typos or no-so-correct English, but, fortunately for me, only the characters themselves make the mistakes. Therefore, I am error free.

The best thing about writing lies is your characters are much freer to be themselves. They're not held to the same standards as real-life people. They are, at times, much more believable than the real people in true crime stories. At other times, you might say, No one would believe that! This time you are correct. It was a lie! Even better than that, is this! I don't have to hire a bunch of "experts" to make my stories "believable." I actually don't care if you believe anything at all about the characters or "facts" in this story. It doesn't bother me, or them, a whit! Go ahead! Act superior! I'm sure that at least one or two of my characters might feel they themselves are superior to actual people. Possibly, even you.

So, don't worry about the believability of this tale. As I said, no one believes lies. Except, possibly, in Washington DC.

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PART ONE:

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CHAPTER ONE

It was a very early morning for Johnny Reagan. Unable to sleep, he had driven around Barton, Maine for a while and, in his meandering, found himself near a water filled quarry. He and his buddies used to dive into its depths during the summer months ... back when he was a daring teenager. He stepped out of his camo-colored Jeep and stared into the false dawn of a barely lightening eastern sky. Dark, thin clouds layered the morning sky. They would soon turn red as the dawn approached. The sparse remains of a thin crescent moon was just now pushing above the horizon. Its remaining sliver was fainter than the bright planet glowing just above it. In a few minutes, the moon would disappear completely, snuffed out by a rising sun, and minutes after that, he would be blinded by that same morning sun. He turned to his left and looked up at the northern sky. All the stars in the sky were fading now, turning from celestial wonders of the darkness and melting into the growing brightness of a clear, fall sky. A new day was close at hand.

Johnny shook his head. This scene before him seemed to be a metaphor for his life at that moment. A fading moon; fading stars; a sun not yet risen; he nodded. Yes, he thought, a perfect metaphor. The more he thought about his life, the angrier he became. Last year he was the Cop-of-the-Year ! He had made detective only a year before that and his career had been flourishing. He could do no wrong. Each case he had been assigned, except for one, had been solved in less than a month. He was the Golden Boy!

Of course, success can cause rifts. Being a new detective and suddenly up on a pedestal had pissed off some of his fellow officers who thought the Lieutenant had assigned only

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easy cases to him. It wasn't true, of course. Just because a case got solved fast, didn't mean it had been an easy case. Johnny Reagan had always had an inquisitive mind. Some might say he was born to be a detective. He could put two and two together faster than most and had an intuition that let him know that sometimes two plus two did not add up to anything at all. The same cases in another detective's hands might not have been solved at all or any where near as quickly.

But, jealousy is a powerful thing. It bends the mind and blinds it to reason. No rational explanation can break through its powerful bonds. Which is one of the reasons why Johnny was standing here right now; staring at a fading moon and wondering if he shouldn't just jump back into his Jeep and drive it over the steep edge of this jagged quarry and into a hundred feet of icy water. Circumstances from the job had his honor and integrity in question, so how could he face all his friends?

Friends? What friends? If they had been true friends, he might have gotten some backing when he needed it. Friends stuck by you. Friends didn't leap off the ship just because it appeared to be sinking, did they? Didn't they lend a helping hand? He had no friends! Then, he shook his head. Except Hoppy. Eugene "Hoppy" Harris. His partner in crime. Crime solving, that is. Hoppy had stuck by him. He was called Hoppy because he didn't hesitate when the going got rough or even dangerous. He leapt in and put himself on the line for you. Hoppy had stuck by him even when the evidence against him seemed overwhelming. Johnny wondered what Hoppy was doing at this moment.

CHAPTER TWO

Hoppy Harris sat alone at a table in the Golden Griddle. The intermingled aromas of coffee and bacon filled his nostrils. His very soul! He loved simple things. Scrambled eggs; crisp bacon; rye toast with real butter dripping from it; again, crisp bacon; a steaming cup of coffee ... and crisp bacon? What more could a guy ask for on a cool Maine morning? More bacon? He knew the answer to that question. A good partner to swap lies with; that's what. He slowly shook his head. He missed Johnny. A good and true partner was all a detective could ask for and Johnny had been a lot more than just that. If you had a partner like Johnny, all the inevitable daily shit that was thrown in your face became bearable.

Hoppy was the physical opposite of Johnny Reagan. He was shorter than Johnny by two inches. His hair had become so thin, he had it shaved off and his baldness seemed to glow now in the overhead lights. He was slightly overweight, but he was still strong as a bull. Shake hands with him at your own risk. His slight pot belly was deceiving. If you hit him in the gut, but he knew it was coming, you would feel as if you had hit a board wall. He was ten years older than Johnny, but could still hold his own in a melee.

He didn't have a new partner yet. It seemed that the stigma on him from Johnny Reagan's problems was too much for the others. After all, where there's smoke, there could still be fire. Where there was fire, maybe it had scorched the partner, too. After all, how could Hoppy be Johnny's partner for over a year and not have known about it? Right now, Hoppy didn't give a damn. That's probably why he was eating alone. They couldn't can him. Not a shred of evidence pointed in his direction. Innuendo would have to do. Make his life miserable enough

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and he would quit. He was expecting the first moves against him any day now. He was sure he would be back in uniform and pounding a beat very soon.

"Fuck 'em!" he muttered under his breath. "Fuck 'em all!"

"What did you say, Hoppy?" The waitress, Dolores, was standing over him. He had been so absorbed in self-pity he hadn't seen her arrive.

"Oh ... nothin', Dolores. Just mutterin' to myself."

Dolores giggled. "Darn! I was hoping it was a proposition. I should have known better. What are you having this morning? The usual?"

"Why not? I'm into precaution these days. Any sudden change might throw me into a mid-life crisis or worse. The usual's good enough for me."

"Okay, Hoppy. Heard anything from Johnny? I sure hope he's okay."

"I doubt he's really okay right at the moment, but he'll show up again one of these days, as soon as he gets pissed off enough. I miss him, too. He's the best partner I ever had. Fuck 'em all, goddam 'em!"

Dolores giggled again. "You silver tongued devil. I accept."

"Get outa here, Dolores! I'm a happily married man. Of course, if Mama kicks me out, I know where you live."

Smiling, Dolores giggled, turned, and walked away. Hoppy looked after her. Sweet gal, He thought. It's a good thing I'm a happy, loyal husband with a fantastic old lady.

Hoppy had been on the Barton police force for almost twenty years now. Several times he had thought of giving it all up and retiring. Too much shit to put up with nowadays. All that political correctness drove him nuts. Shoot some druggie who's trying to shoot you and you might be the one who goes to prison instead of the offender. It almost happened to him once. The person who went to bat for him back then had been Johnny Reagan. Johnny had been a patrolman at that time.

Hoppy had been walking home when it all came down. As he passed this very diner at closing time, he had glanced in and

had seen the scruffy looking druggie with a gun pointed at the cashier. He had drawn his 9mm Glock and eased his way inside without the perp noticing him. With his gun pointed at the robber, he had told him to drop his weapon. Instead, the asshole had turned in his direction with his Saturday Night Special now pointed in Hoppy's direction. Hoppy had fired at the same instant as the robber. The robber had missed, but Hoppy had not. His bullet hit the robber in the side of the neck and down he went as if he had been pole axed. He had fallen on his gun and was trying to get to it as Hoppy jumped on him. Hoppy had reached for the robber's gun, grabbed it away from him, and instinctively put it in the pocket of his jacket. Then, he heard a voice behind him. It was Johnny Reagan.

"You okay, Hoppy? I saw it all go down through the window as I pulled in. I was hoping I could get a cup of coffee before the place closed. Guess not, huh?"

"I'm just fine now, Johnny. I almost wasn't but this little prick missed me. He killed the wall over there instead."

The drugged up; now wounded, robber was moaning and writhing on the floor.

"Where's his gun?"

Hoppy reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the pistol. "Right here. He was trying to get to it again and I grabbed it before he could get his hands on it again."

Case over, right? Wrong! Later, after the robber had lawyered up; been cleaned up and bandaged up, and told his version of the incident, a lawsuit had been brought against Hoppy by the perpetrator himself. His claim was that it was all a huge misunderstanding. He had only been asking the cashier for a little loan; being down and out and all. The cashier was no longer any help as a witness. The sight of the gun in his face and the shooting had given him a heart attack. He died before they could get him to the hospital.

According to the asshole, Hoppy had come into the diner and had started an argument with him. Then, for no good

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reason on God's green earth, had shot him in the neck with an untraceable junk gun. All cops have them, you know. They carry them hidden somewhere on their bodies for use in situations like that. Hoppy had then accused him of trying to rob the place. As the perp was lying there in a pool of blood, in agony, in fear of his life, Hoppy calmly took out his Glock and fired it into the opposite wall! To top it all off, Hoppy had said the very gun he had used to shoot the robber belonged to the robber himself!

The lawyer had tried to discredit Johnny as a witness. He stated that Johnny had come in after the fact and saw nothing at all. Johnny was lying through his teeth and was just trying to help his friend, a fellow officer, beat the rap. Reagan was just trying to explain away Hoppy's fingerprints all over the gun. The whole thing was a police cover-up.

At first, the city was going to settle out of court. But Hoppy insisted on a trial. A jury found in his favor thanks to Johnny Reagan's testimony. By the time charges were to be brought against the robber for robbery and possible murder, he had disappeared. They never did find him. Not that anyone had really tried.

Hoppy's radio signaled. "Yeah! What's up!"

"Got another one. The Captain wants you here ASAP!"

"Shit! Dolores! Can I get this put in a doggy bag for me? I gotta get outa here, pronto!"

CHAPTER THREE

A sun dappled grove of trees ... tall, slender white and grey birches, some scattered poplars, a few alders bringing a verdant, deep shade to the edges of a small brook running along its border. The early autumn day matched the grove's beauty. The high, nearly cloudless sky, with its bright sun imparting its warmth to the back of the slightly sweating man as he worked in the shade of the grove.

The metallic, scraping sound of the spade's sharp, steel blade as it was driven hard into the mound of soft earth next to the excavation was a satisfying sound to the ears of the man. The quiet, almost loving, crump-thump sounds as the shovel-loads of dirt hit the clear sheet of plastic covering the small white body was even more satisfying. He had been grateful for her, of that there was no doubt in his mind. He had been appreciative of the two others before her ... all in his own way, of course. This gratefulness of his was impermanent and fleeting, but very passionate ... to an extreme. But then, it disappeared as quickly as a will-o-the-wisp. The urge for this ... vengeance, if you will, that reappeared at unexpected, but not unwanted, intervals within his mind was as irresistible as the siren's call had been to the ancient mariners. When the calls came, they moaned softly, urgently, and persistently within his mind and, as always, lured him from his humdrum, everyday existence. His inner demons forced him to answer those calls. The urge for this thing within him had to be answered or, if not, those persistent, luring voices would haunt him until he was forced to give in once more.

Finally, after his fiendish act was completed, the body was in the ground. He carefully trod on the earth to firm it down. He never enjoyed this part. The earth was never firm beneath

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his feet. It felt spongy and springy, almost alive, as if the grave's occupant were pushing back at him. An involuntary shudder quaked through him and he stepped back. Casting his eyes around, his gaze rested upon a withered branch from one of the white birches. He nodded and picked it up. Using it as a rake or broom, he brushed it over the last resting spot of the girl, smoothing it level with the surrounding ground. He walked farther away and brought back several armfuls of dead leaves and grass and strew them about, camouflaging the scars of his labor. With a little touchup here and there, the spot blended almost into invisibility to even a discerning eye ... except for the cold, white hand. It protruded from the grave site as if it were pleading to be released. The man wanted this place to be found. He wanted it to appear somewhat hidden, but not too hidden. The protruding, lifeless hand would bring a sense of horror and drama to the pastoral scene and his cause.

The man walked to the brook and washed the soil from the shovel and hands. He tossed the spade in the brook's cool waters. He placed some fist-size rocks along its handle to disguise it somewhat. He was certain that a few days after being submerged in its waters, nothing of value to the police could be found on it. Not that he really cared. He just didn't want a man with a shovel in his hand to be noticed while walking away ... at least, not this time. He wanted those stupid cops to find only his carefully selected clues. It was part of his plan.

Then he gathered up a small handful of wild asters from the edge of the brook. He walked slowly back to the grave site, trying not to disturb the area too much, and placed them in the cold, pleading hand and closed its stiffening fingers around them. He squeezed the fingers firmly in place and then, satisfied with the overall effect, stood erect.

"You're in a better place now, darling," he whispered hoarsely. "Thank you for all your help. It won't be much longer now. I can feel it!" Turning, he slipped quietly from the grove and headed for his car parked a quarter of a mile away. No one had seen him arrive and no one had seen him leave.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hoppy arrived at the park ten minutes after the call. Several official cars with flashing red and blue lights were ahead of him. He parked behind the last one and headed towards the spot enclosed in yellow crime scene tape. Several uniforms made way for him. He saw his Lieutenant, Byron King, in the grove and walked towards him.

"What have we got, Loo?"

"More of the same, Hoppy. More of the same. Young girl, carefully posed, relatively easy to find. No one saw a thing, of course. I'm sure the same guy did it. We got us a serial killer on our hands, for sure now."

Hoppy walked over to the now exposed body and looked down. A hard lump formed in his throat. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. A dead kid was always his worst nightmare. No cop liked it. The violent deaths of youngsters struck too close to their own lives. Almost any one of them could picture the victim as one of their own children or niece or nephew. He kneeled over the grave. There it was, A small amount of blood staining the front of her dress near her throat. The killer's trademark. He had no doubt that the signature semen stains would be found, also. He gave a quick glance at her face, but looked away quickly. Taking a deep breath, he stood and turned.

"What do you think, Hoppy?"

"The same as you, Loo. Our worst nightmare. The worst thing is, this sicko is bound to do this again. We got DNA from the last two and I'm sure it'll match what's on this poor kid. This guy's an arrogant prick! He wants us to know he's the one and only. If we could get prints from the body, I'm sure

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they would be all his. The big mystery is, what in hell he's doin' this for."

"Yeah, find the motive, and we'll find the killer. Hop to it, Hoppy. As soon as the public finds out what we know right now, all hell is gonna break loose. Those boys down at the Barton Daily will be all over us. Let's hope we can give them something. Nothing panics the public like a serial killer in their midst. Can't say as I blame them. It makes me nervous, too. I've got kids her age. My wife's going to have a fit. I'll bet she'll want to take the kid away from here. Maybe I'll let her."

* * * * *

The man secreted in the bushes on the hill across from the park looked down on the scene. He peered at Hoppy and Lieutenant King through his binoculars. He chuckled to himself. Stupid bunch of assholes, he thought. They still have no clue as to whom they're dealing with. And they won't! Not until he was good and ready. He would let them know exactly what he wanted them to know now and more when the time was correct. Then they would be in for the shock of their lives. A shock to everyone in the whole damn city of Barton, as a matter of fact. He leaned backward and laid down on the cushion of leaves and grass and stared up at the sky through eyes that were almost bluer than the sky itself. He ran his fingers through his dark hair. Revenge was going to be much, much more than merely sweet! It would be sublime!

CHAPTER FIVE

Hoppy had to wonder no more about how Johnny Reagan was doing. Johnny had called him and they were to meet at the Silver Dollar Saloon in downtown Barton. Johnny was there when he arrived at eight o'clock ... right on time. Johnny signaled to the waitress. "Another one of these for Hoppy, Sweetheart."

Hoppy sat down opposite Johnny in the back booth. "What are you doing so far from the front door, Johnny," he asked with a grin on his face.

"I wouldn't want to give you a bad reputation, Hoppy. If one of the boys in power saw us together, you might be pounding a beat again. What's up in the business?"

"Nothin's changed. It's like a fuckin' soap opera. Stay away for a month and you would never know anything else happened. Just pick right up where you left off."

Johnny laughed. "I didn't know you were a soap opera fan, Hoppy. How'd you learn all that great information?"

"My wife. She's addicted. Every friggin' evenin' I get the latest updates. They sound interestin' though. Maybe I'll take up watchin' 'em with her after I get fired."

"They won't fire you, Hoppy. Just put up with their crap for a year or so and retire. Like me. Well ... maybe not like me. We'll start a private eye business together. The John-Hop Detective agency. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

The waitress brought Hoppy's beer and set it down in front of him. He thanked her and brought the frosty glass to his lips and took a deep swallow. He set it back on the table and sighed. "Damn! At my age, a cold beer's almost as good as sex."

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Johnny shook his head and looked Hoppy in the eye. "At your age, even ice cream's better than sex."

"Depends on the flavor, you asshole."

They said nothing for a few moments. Then, Hoppy looked over at Johnny and asked, "Any real plans for your future?"

"Well, I was sort of joking about the private eye thing, but what do you think about it? Is it too stupid an idea?"

"Hmm. You couldn't use that name you mentioned, though. Sounds too much like a hospital. How 'bout Harris and Reagan? Sounds more sophisticated; a little like a law firm. Might sound like you actually knew what you were doin', don't cha think?"

"Well, maybe. Reagan and Harris sounds better to me, though. After all, I'd be the real brains of the outfit."

"Real brains? If you had a real brain, you'd still be a cop!"

Johnny laughed and took a swallow from his glass. "You're right there, Hoppy. I should have seen it coming. You tried to warn me. But, here I am. Sucking up beer and living on early retirement. What more could a cop ask for. I should consider myself lucky, I guess. I could be sitting in jail right now."

"True enough."

"By the way. How's that limp dick, Rod Evans, doing? Have they promoted him yet?"

"Nope! Even though he framed you good, there are still a few people in the upper echelons who know you were set up and who might have done it. In case you don't know it, that's the reason why you got early retirement and not a prison cell. It's not good, but it's still better than time in prison. It's also why Evans is still just an ordinary prick and not Sergeant Prick."

"Maybe. I saw him last week driving out my way. The urge to pop a bullet through his windshield was almost overwhelming! I may not be in jail, but most people think I'm a cop gone bad. Not a good feeling at all, Hoppy. Definitely not good."

Hoppy waved to the waitress and put two fingers in the air and pointed to the booth. "By the way, Reagan, what were you goin' to do with all that pot they found in your trunk? You don't even smoke, for crissake!"

"I was going to make brownies with it, you stupid asshole! You know I'm a good cook. Besides, if they hadn't run across all the other stuff I had tucked away in my garage, it would have kept me in high octane brownies for a couple of years. If you weren't such a dick head, I might have let you try some. I was going to use my poor departed Mom's recipe, too. You'd have loved them."

They were quiet again for a few moments. The waitress brought them their beers and clunked them down on the table in front of them. Hoppy smiled. It was good to hear Johnny talking trash like that. It was good to be sitting there with him. It was just like old times again. Well ... almost. He looked across the table at Johnny. "I've got a couple of guys diggin' around. Maybe we'll be able to put a hard knot in Evans sphincter one of these days."

Johnny laughed so loud, the waitress looked over. "That would be quite a knot, Hoppy. Can you imagine how humongous that big asshole's sphincter must be?"

Now Hoppy was laughing, too. A few minutes later, they had calmed down to only an occasional chuckle. Hoppy looked at Johnny. "It's good to hear you laughin' again, Johnny. Now, all you hafta do is to get mad. Then maybe we can work this mess out."

"No problem, Hoppy. I'm mad. Plenty mad. I'm just holding it in for a while."

"To change the subject, I guess you must have heard about that poor kid they found buried along the bike trail, huh?"

"I sure did. Same as the other two?"

"Yup. Carbon copies, almost. It's gotta be the same guy. The details were too close to being the same for it to be a copy cat thing."

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Johnny shook his head and the smile left his face. "A little blood on the front of her blouse and semen stains on her?"

"Exactly. All the bodies covered with a plastic sheet before burial. Almost as if to make sure the DNA evidence wouldn't be ruined. I wonder what this psycho is doing. What drives him along? Why little kids? Why all this easily found DNA evidence? He's gotta get caught. It's almost like he wants that."

"He does, Hoppy. He's making a statement every time he does this. All you have to do is figure out what he's saying. Easy, huh? The only problem is, there's going to be more victims before we understand his language. It's really scary. I wouldn't want any kid I had to even step out of the house right now."

"Well, after this one, no one does. You can almost sense the panic. The parks are almost empty in the evenings now."

"I hate to even think this, Hoppy, but no matter what, he'll find a way. They always do."

CHAPTER SIX

Jeffery Tripp had been a star athlete at Barton High School. Quarterback of the football team; fantastic first baseman and first string basketball player. His baseball skills had been so good that he had been offered tryouts on several major league baseball teams. Even though his athletic skills were that good, he didn't want what many good athletic kids wanted; a career in professional sports, a life as an athlete. Coaching was what he wanted to do and had already achieved. He coached the boys Little League ball club and the girls junior high basketball team. Jeff, as everyone called him, was one of the most highly respected and sought after young men in Barton. His still being "available" kept the hearts of many women in Barton pumping with hope.

He was not what you would call handsome; the description, ruggedly good looking, fit him better. His thick, dark brown hair and sky-blue eyes caught your attention immediately. He was a quiet sort of guy but still had a good sense of humor. The ladies all adored him; young or old. He was five foot ten and weighed almost two hundred pounds, all of it well-toned muscle. He had never had a steady girl friend; even at the age of twenty-five. That didn't mean he didn't like women. He did, but in a different way. He told people he wasn't ready for a steady relationship. He had his own small book store in a town twenty-five miles away and his coaching jobs kept him too busy for steady romance, not that he actually wanted it. Fortunately for him, the book store allowed him a lot of flexibility in his other working hours.

Apart from those activities, for all intents and purposes, he was a quiet, likeable, well mannered homebody. He enjoyed his times with his father, an avid fisherman and hunter. His mother

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didn't enjoy the great outdoors at all, so it made these times together even more valuable to them both.

Jeff stole a glance at his father sitting there in the back of the old wooden rowboat. He smiled to himself. His father, Bobby Tripp, was almost asleep again. For the last hour, he had kept dozing off and catching himself at the last moment. Jeffery could see how it could happen. It was a gorgeous early fall day. The sun was high and warm and the pond was a mirror. Not a breath of wind marred its surface. Fishing for White Perch was Jeffery's favorite pastime with his father. Perch were plentiful in this pond and they already had about a dozen on ice in the ice chest. The fishing had slowed down now. High noon wasn't the best time for perch in a small, relatively shallow pond.

As he watched, the tip of his father's rod twitched and, suddenly, the man was wide awake. He set the hook and moments later, a ten inch White Perch was flopping on the wooden planks of the old boat's bottom. His father reached for it and, avoiding the sharp gill covers and spiny fins, soon had it flopping on ice with the other twelve.

"Not a bad fish for this pond, Dad." Jeffery said.

"Nope! Not bad at all. How many do we have now?"

"That made thirteen, I think."

"Bad luck, thirteen. We better catch a few more." He reached for the bait can and threaded a squirming worm onto the hook. He leaned over the edge of the transom and washed the dirt and slime off his hand. Then he let the un-weighted bait slowly sink out of sight, headed for the pond's bottom.

"You know, Jeff? It's hard to believe there's evil in this world when you're out here on a warm, sunny day like this. No noise, no problems. Just us and nature. It's truly a great world, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Dad. You're right there. This is great. Too bad we don't get to do it more often. My jobs keep me away more than I want, but, I guess that's the price you have to pay for the time we do have together."

His father shook his head, almost afraid to bring the subject up. "Have you been following the newspapers down there in Ellsworth?"

"Yes, I have, Dad. Are you talking about our new serial killer?"

Bobby Tripp nodded. A faraway look came into his eyes. "The last victim was the daughter of one of your Mom's old friends. She's all broken up over it."

"Oh my god, Dad! I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear that. Is she going to be alright?"

"Your mom will, but her friend is under the care of Doctor Wallace now. It was very bad for her. The kid was her only daughter."

"When I read the name in the paper, it didn't occur to me who she was. She lived just down the street a ways, didn't she, Dad?"

"Yes, she did. A beautiful child."

"I think I remember her now. She had long blond hair and was always laughing. She had tons of friends, too. I always thought she was a very attractive kid. She was going to be a real heart breaker when she grew up."

"That's right, Jeff. Well ... let's not dwell on that right now. It's too beautiful a day and we've got to catch a few more fish for dinner tonight."

This talk of the murders had brought a frown to Jeffery's brow. His smile was now gone. He ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair and watched with unseeing eyes as the tip of his rod dipped towards the water.

"Hey! Jeff! Don't fall asleep on me," yelled his father. "You've got a bite."

Jeff snapped back to reality and set the hook. Another nice ten inch perch flashed its silvery sides in the sun and landed, twisting and squirming on the deck. Bobby was on it immediately and soon had it in the ice chest and thumped the lid closed. He reached into the worm can and baited his son's hook.

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"There you go, Jeff. Back at it again."

"Thanks, Dad. Let's get one more and head for home."

Bobby looked hard at his son. This was a very unusual thing for Jeff to request. He never wanted to leave early once they were out fishing. He knew Jeff loved the sport as much or more than his he did. He watched as Jeff lowered the bait into the water. Jeff seemed to be deep in thought once again. The line slackened as the bait hit bottom and Jeff reeled it back up a foot or so.

Bobby shook his head slightly and asked, "Is there anything wrong, Son? Something you want to talk about? I've never heard you ask to leave a good fishing spot early before."

"Huh? Oh! No, no Dad. It's just these deaths. For some reason talking about them caused a dark feeling to come over me. Don't ask me why. I really don't know. I guess it's because they were all kids and one of them lived so close to you guys. When something like that happens, it seems somehow to be worse than if it had all happened to an absolute stranger. Not that it's really any worse. Just in my head, I guess."

"Try not to let it get you down. It's bad enough on me with it bothering your mother as it has."

"I'm sorry, Dad. You're right. It's too beautiful a day to drag yourself down into the dumps. Let's just concentrate on fishing and stay until evening. Perch always bite better in the evening, don't they? I'm sure there must be a twelve incher in this pond somewhere."

CHAPTER SEVEN

As Lieutenant King walked by Hoppy's desk, he slowed, turned his head to him, and said, "Hoppy. I want to talk to you for a few minutes. When you're free, come into the office."

"Okay, Loo. Just a few more minutes. I'm almost finished here."

Hoppy didn't like the sound of that invitation. Of course, a visit to any superior's office didn't appeal too much to any cop. Hoppy took his good time in finishing his paperwork before he sighed and pushed his chair back. He couldn't delay it any longer. He stood, hitched up his pants a notch, brushed a few imaginary crumbs off the front of his shirt, shook his head, and strode towards the Lieutenant's lair. He pushed the door open and stepped in.

"Close the door, will you, Hoppy?"

Another bad sign. King motioned to the chair in front of his desk and said, "Sit down, Hoppy."

"What's up, Loo? Am I getting a promotion, a raise in pay, or my ass reamed?"

A slight grin appeared on King's face. "Guess again, Hoppy. This is just a talk, that's all. A couple of your fellow officers saw you the other night having a beer with Johnny Reagan. That's what I want to talk to you about."

Hoppy frowned. "So what? We been friends for years. Can't I have a beer with an old friend without being ratted out by some of my 'fellow officers'?"

King held his hands up in front of him, palms pointing toward Hoppy, in an almost defensive gesture. "Take it easy, Hoppy! Take it easy! I don't give a shit who you're out on a date with. You know as well as me, that I didn't totally agree

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with what happened to Johnny Reagan. Would you mind if I asked what you were talking about?"

"Would I mind? Of course I'd mind. No disrespect intended, Loo, but that was on my own time and it's my own business."

"Of course it is, Hoppy. Of course it is." King eased back into his chair. Then he leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk and brought his long, tapered fingers into a tent shape and rested their tips against his chin. He stared directly into Hoppy's eyes for what seemed to Hoppy to be a hour.

"I want to ask a favor of you, Hoppy. This is a favor you gotta keep secret. Understand me?"

"Secret? Sure, I know what a secret is, Loo. That's when you tell me somethin' and I promise not to tell anyone else, or it's not a secret anymore. That what you mean?"

"Don't be so goddam sarcastic, Hoppy! You know as well as I do, that Johnny Reagan is persona non grata around here. You know as well as I do, that Johnny Reagan was one hell of a cop, too. You also know as well as I do, that what happened to him sucks loud and clear. So, I want to make a deal with you, Mr. Mouth-all-mighty. Want to hear it or not?"

Hoppy was stunned. He blinked as he stared back at King. Then, he smiled and said, "I love it when you talk French to me, Loo. I didn't know you spoke another language besides English and swearin'. Sure! Fire away. I'm listenin' "

"Okay, you asshole, Here it is. For your edification, that was Latin, not French. So ... here it is. I want Johnny Reagan on our serial killer case. I want you to convince him that it's in his best interest to help us out. I know that you and a couple of other guys are working behind the scenes on getting him reinstated. I want you to tell him that another cop is looking, too. That's me. Share info with me and I'll share info with you on that one. It's in everyone's interest. But, if we don't stop this asshole kid killer soon, we'll probably all be looking for new jobs ourselves. You in or out?"