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**LOST CHILDREN:
A POSTMODERN NOVELLA**

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August 2023

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By Mania Mohseni

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Hollie Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)
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Many fiction writers have applied postmodernism as an approach to tribute as well as challenge the well-known and hardboiled rules of the genre. “Lost Children” is a short novella written based on Qualitative research done by reading articles, such as “Grammar of the Detective Genre” by Dejan D. Milutinovic, and works of postmodern detective fiction, such as *The Crying of Lost 49* by Thomas Pynchon and *City of Glass* by Paul Auster, to experiment with the genre, character, and narrative in the detective genre. For such a purpose, the story uses various writing techniques to reflect on other modern as well as postmodern detective/mystery works to further develop them in an unprecedented manner.

Using three different types of narratives- first-person, first-person plural, and the third person- diversifies the narrative of the story in a unique way that has never been done before. The fragmentation that is caused by these multiple narratives draws more attention to the story and creates ambiguity that, according to Milutinovic, is needed in the detective genre. However, such a method applies fragmentation in a more complicated and exquisite way. The hallucinatory

narrative used for the main character gives the story a surrealistic tone that is unique to the genre. The “we” voice that has seldom if ever been used in the detective genre adds another significant characteristic to the story while it also gives a more realistic tone to the events reported in a collectively. The rules of cause-and-effect were another subject of the experiment in the story. In the detective genre, the cause of every effect must be explained in a perspicuous manner. However, the story develops a method of breaking the cause-and-effect rules inspired by Pynchon and Auster’s writing style. Such development resulted in an open ending as a form of revelation rather than a solution which is a highly expected ending for most works of the detective genre.

One of the most significant characteristics of the story is its approach to the main character as the detective figure which is mostly a trustworthy character to narrate the story and solve the crime. However, “Lost Children” subverts such a common assumption incomparably. The first-person narrative keeps the audience close to the protagonist while the dreams and hallucinations also make his narrative dubious for the audience. Unlike other works of detective fiction, the controversial nature of the first-person narrative in the story makes the audience put their trust in other narratives, such as the first-person plural reports and the third-person narrative, rather than the detective’s.

Finally, the story uses a convoluted structure inspired by *The Blind Owl*, a modern novella written by Sadegh Hedayat. The story is divided into two parts. While the first part consists of the protagonist’s first-person narrative and a series of reports written in first-person plural, the second part applies a third-person narrative to add a more objective perspective to the incidents of the story. Therefore, the structure is designed in an audacious way to offer a wide

range of innovative possibilities for developing a story in the detective genre to future creative writer.

Critical Introduction

Postmodern fiction has proven itself to be different from traditional, realist fiction by breaking the rules of the genre and playing with them. In *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, postmodernism is defined as “revising tradition” which:

suggests the self-conscious inventiveness that postmodern authors have employed to transform the old stories and prose traditions into new forms...the retrospective nature of much postmodern writing is not perceived by the writers themselves as the product of a lack of originality, but rather as a celebration of the sheer volume of great narrative that readily available to any individual residing in an age characterized by the easy and engaging flow of information of any kind. (393)

Knowing the existing rules and traditions is necessary for transforming old stories into new forms. For such a purpose, my theoretical framework focuses on traditional rules introduced by Dejan D. Milutinovic in his article entitled “Grammar of the Detective Genre” to find ways to transform them into new forms. Moreover, I introduce several postmodern fictional works that helped me in this process and discuss their influence on my work. Milutinovic’s article specifically was selected as the baseline for my theoretical framework work because, in his article, Milutinovic walks us through the tropes and the most ingrained rules of the detective genre which was inspiring to me in so many ways.

Works in the detective genre are mostly known as puzzles, for they raise questions about the circumstances around an incident that disturbs the equilibrium of the world in which the story is happening. In such a world, the detective functions as a representative whose job is to bring back the previous equivalency, or it is better to say set up a new stasis, to such a world. There are

often lessons to learn in such a process. As Milutinovic writes, “The puzzle should have a solution because, in the end, the detective has to solve everything. The riddle must be based on thought and logic, i.e. its solution must be present, but in hidden and encrypted form. If there is no solution, there is no puzzle—that is the rule of classic detective fiction” (43). According to Milutinovic, the puzzle is the central element in the detective genre, and this element necessitates the final solution as the ending so much so that if the ending does not come with complete closure, the entity of the puzzle could be questioned. Milutinovic’s definition is based on classical rules of the genre. Established rules of the genre are defined according to cause and effect. One incident affects the incidents that happen next; everything depends on everything else. “If there is no solution, there is no puzzle,” because a puzzle depends on its solution. The classical rules of cause and effect make every detail in a story related to and dependent on each other. However, postmodernism liberated writers from the necessity of applying cause and effect. Such emancipation gives every element in the story the chance to exist on its own without being dependent on other elements, for in postmodern fiction, writers intentionally move away from the regularity caused by excessive usage of the rules, such as cause and effect, for the purpose of subverting the status quo, or making the reader question the reality of the events. The result is a final piece cannot fit neatly inside the boundaries of a genre. Postmodernism is well known for using methods to subvert the rules of the genre or not following them. Cause and effect is one of the most dominant rules in classical storytelling which has been broken in many postmodern detective fiction works for in postmodernism, puzzles exist for their own sake rather than as an appurtenant element. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon uses the same method for the ending of his postmodern detective fiction. Throughout the novel, the existence of

Trystero/Tristero, a postal service that was defeated by its competitors and was possibly driven underground, is questioned. Pynchon writes:

Either Trystero [/Tristero] did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa, so hung up on and interpenetrated with the dead man's estate. Here in San Narciso, away from all tangible assets of that estate, there might still be a chance of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. (80)

Pynchon ends his novel by not replying to the questions that he raised in his audience's mind about the reality behind Trystero/Tristero's existence. He continues:

Who knew? Perhaps she'd be hounded someday. As far as joining Tristero itself, if it existed, in its twilight, its aloofness, its waiting. The waiting above all; if not for another set of possibilities to replace those that had conditioned the land to accept any San Narciso among its most tender flesh without a reflex or a cry, then at least, at the very least, waiting for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew. (136)

According to Milutinovic, in Pynchon's novel, the riddle is not logical because there are no solutions offered in the end. However, postmodern detective fiction granted the puzzle its own entity by disassociating it from the solution. Such dissociation is offered by many postmodern detective writers such as Pynchon and Paul Auster. The ending of my novella is mostly inspired by Pynchon's novel. All the incidents in my novella are driven by the disappearance and murder of two young girls. The killings initiate a series of investigations which lead us to some assumptions. Such assumptions make us suspect most of the characters and their relations to the murders. However, the story does not end as the readers usually expect as the ending of my novella performs like another beginning to the story. Moreover, the story

suggests many different versions by offering the role that each character could/might have performed in the murders without giving solutions to any of such suspicions.

On December 15, 2023, a body of a young girl was found close to Soldier Pond, Fort Kent, Maine. The victim was a twenty-two-year-old college student with dark curly hair with dark eyes. Her visage was a reminder of Veronica and Nina's. She died of multiple stab wounds. Her hand was cut off from the wrist. At that time, Sam Dickinson was waiting for a trial in prison. (119)

According to Milutinovic, in stories "built on properly constructed plots, the reader intuitively knows what will happen in others" (43). In my novella, I tried to subvert such common assumptions by playing with the narrative and perspective. The story is mostly narrated from two different perspectives with a few clues for the audience to be able to connect them. A big part of the puzzle comes from this disconnection between the two perspectives in different chapters. The first series of chapters tells the story of Michael in the first person. The second part tells the story of a different character named Sam. The two characters seem so apart that it is almost impossible to see any connection between them right away. Michael is a rookie detective who has a strong desire for solving crimes. Sam, on the contrary, is a criminal and a psychologically disturbed individual. The usage of first-person plural is not very common in detective stories and that was an experiment that I did with the genre. As the puzzle unravels, we figure that the first-person plural is a group of doctors who are doing experiments on Sam to find connections between him and the crimes.

Another interesting point that Milutinovic mentions in his article is the detective's credibility. The audience of detective stories is often put into the hands of a trustful and credible character to solve the mystery for us, but what if the character of the detective changes? My

novella does some experimentation with such assumptions by questioning the credibility of the protagonist as the story moves forward: “These three traits [immersion in the ordinary way of life, stereotypical character behavior, and the existence of characteristic rules for the realization of sums] make up the hyperdeterministic world of the detective genre in relation to reality, and it is necessary to set the puzzle...The detective’s primary weapon in this world is opinion, logic, and observation: the detective must come up with a logical method, not accidentally or intuitively, and it is clear why the world in which he moves is hyperdeterministic, of the most precise order” (Milutonic 43). Stefano Tani in his book *The Doomed Detective* refers to the logic and rationality that governs the world of the detective genre and relates it to Enlightenment: “Voltaire and Beaumarchais epitomize the triumph of Enlightenment rationality and in their playful examples of ‘inductive reasoning’ foreshadow the detective’s role” (2). Tani continues his discussion by referring to authors who used Gothic elements in their mysterious stories, such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, but, as he explains, all the odd and mysterious events are explained in the end to rationalize the mysteries in such worlds. However, in my story, the credibility of Michael’s perspective has become more and more questionable to the audience. The odd incidents that he narrates make the readers wonder whether his narrative is a reliable or unreliable one, making the line between dreams, hallucinations, and reality so blurry that the rationality behind his descriptions becomes disputable. As a result, the whole world that Michael sees becomes an enigma. Michael’s hallucinatory and unrealistic narrative was inspired by Sadegh Hedayat’s novella called *The Blind Owl*. In his magnum opus, *The Blind Owl*, Sadegh Hedayat, one of the most well-known writers of 20th century Iran, applies many writing techniques to subvert the rules of the mystery genre. Hedayat’s novella is about the murderous thoughts of an unnamed character followed by the sudden and unexplained death of his lover. As

the story unfolds, we learn more about the lover and her murder through the protagonist's confessions to his shadow on the wall. For the feverish thoughts and confessions of the protagonist, Hedayat applies surrealism. For example, in his novella, Hedayat blurs the boundary between reality and hallucinations and introduces opium as the reason. His writing style is deeply inspired by Kafka. The book opens with the following:

In life there are wounds that, like leprosy, silently scrape at and consume the soul, in solitude—This agony cannot be revealed to anyone, because they generally tend to group this incomprehensible suffering with strange and otherwise rare events, and if one speaks or writes about it, then people, by way of popular perception and their own beliefs, receive it with a doubtful and mocking smile—because man has still found no cure for this and the only available medicine is amnesia by means of wine and artificial sleep brought on by opium and other narcotics... Will there be a day when someone discovers the secrets of these supernatural events, that reflection of the shadow of the soul that manifests itself between awakening and sleep, in a state of purgatory and unconsciousness? (1)

The following highlights another surrealistic moment where the dream becomes reality:

From inside the box, I took out the image that I had painted of her face the night before and compared it to the painting on the jug. They were not the least bit different. It was as if they were mirror images of each other—both were one and essentially the work of a single person, the work of a single hapless painter of pen case covers—maybe the soul of the jug's painter had transmigrated into me during the act of painting and my hand had come under his command. (24)

In this paragraph, the protagonist refers to the painting that he painted before meeting the girl. The painting looks exactly like her as if he painted her after he met her. In surrealistic works, such as Hedayat's, time floats between past and future for there is no boundary for them. One can foresee the future without any logical explanation. In postmodern works, as already mentioned, logic eludes the story whereas it is a necessity in traditional works. Later, in my novella, Michael finds Nina's body without any logical explanation which questions the believability of his narrative as well the sanity of the main character.

I jumped onto my feet. Numbness was all forgotten. The sudden move made my eyes go blank for a moment. I stumbled onto my feet. My vision got back. I walked to the suitcase. It was filled with mud. I dug into it, but nothing. I searched the area a little more. Walked up and down the riverbank till I saw something floating on the icy water. It was a body moving up and down with every wave. (90)

Michael finds himself in the woods lying next to the river where Nina's missing body is. How he ended up there next to the body is a mystery to him as much as it is a mystery to the audience.

In addition, the reliability of the protagonist's narrative is questioned by his hallucinatory perspective. Hedayat's book majorly consists of two different narratives. The first one is narrated from an unrealistic hallucinatory perspective while the second one seems the more realistic version of the events. In Hedayat's book, the hallucinatory narrative limits our perspective to an unnamed narrator. He uses first-person narration to illustrate the murderous thoughts of his protagonist. In his hallucinatory mind, the narrator confesses to a shadow on a wall that looks like an owl. My novella applies a similar hallucinatory perspective to create an unreliable narrative for the detective figure of the story. My purpose was to subvert the common

assumption of the credibility of the main character's narrative in the detective genre. In his article, Milutinovic refers to Donna Bennett and her discussion on confidence and confidentiality.

Confidence is the degree to which the reader can rely on, trust in the truth of the events presented- it controls the quality of the information the reader is conveyed. Confidentiality regulates the amount of information the reader and detective share. While the first procedure, once established, tends to be constant throughout the story, the second is significantly more flexible and depends largely on focalization. (42)

According to Milutinovic's discussion, confidence is less flexible throughout the story so there is a constant trust between the events described by the narrative/narrator and the reader. However, the questionable narrative of my novella subverts the common rule of confidence between the reader and the protagonist by creating moments of distrust between them. The first-person narrative, like Hedayat's story, limits our knowledge to Michael's. On the other hand, Michael's narrative floats between reality and dreams. The boundary between these two is most of the time clear. However, this boundary is disturbed numerous times when some elements in his dreams enter reality. I wrote:

The woods got denser, and a thin fog began to form as we moved deeper into the woods. The trees made it harder to run faster. Branches were whipping my body, holding me back from running faster. I kept running and running till I felt out of breath. I couldn't follow him anymore. I needed a moment. I stopped, resting my hand against the trunk of a tree. Breathing heavily. When I started running again, my breath was the only sound that I could hear. A howling sound was feeling the air in the distance. No footsteps. The fog was making things even worse. (33)

Later, I close the chapter by entering the fog into Michael's real world: "I poured some tap water into a glass and swigged it. Outside, a dense fog was covering the town" (35). Here, the fog disturbs the boundaries of dream and reality, creating a surrealistic effect.

Another postmodern effect that I borrowed from Hedayat is his unique usage of time. In his novella, the boundary between the present, past, and future is disturbed in a complicated manner:

Now I was able to feel the warmth of her body and smell the damp scent that emanated from her heavy, black hair—I do not know why I raised my trembling hands, for my hands were beyond my control, and caressed her hair—the tresses that always clung to her temple, then I ran my fingers through her hair—her hair was cold and damp—cold, completely cold, as if she had been dead for several days—I was not mistaken, she was dead—I placed my hand under her shirt, over her breast and heart—I could not feel the faintest heartbeat, I brought the mirror and placed it in front of her nose but there did not exist in her the faintest trace of life. (13)

In this example, Hedayat jumps from the present to the future by moving from life to an unexpected and unexplained death. In Hedayat's masterpiece, time is floating in the air rather than moving in a linear pattern:

From where must I begin? For all the thoughts that are presently boiling in my head are from this moment, they are without hour, minute or history—an incident from yesterday may be older and less moving than an incident from a thousand years ago. Perhaps it is precisely because my connection to the world of the living has been severed that old memories appear before me—the past, future, hour, day, month, and year are all the same to me. (29)

Hedayat's application of floating time is invigorated by extraterrestrial elements as the narrator constantly refers to them such as his shadow, the owl, etc.: "This shadow must surely understand more than I! I can only talk freely with my own shadow, it is he that induces me to talk, only he can know me..." (29). He also applies a non-linear pattern to his story. Not only do my own chapters follow a non-linear pattern, but they also contain examples of Hedayat's floating time:

"It seemed like you had a very normal childhood. Didn't you?" she said. Another scene flashed in my mind. I was a small kid in the kitchen of the house in the middle of the woods. I saw the woman lying on the ground, smeared in her own blood. I heard another boy yelling at me. The same boy that I used to chase in the cornfield. I could see his face for the first time. He had bright blue eyes. (98)

I mixed reality with dreams and lost memories to create Hedayat's floating time effect. The repetitive appearance of some elements, such as the hooting owl, in various situations also questions the reality of such elements to enhance the delusional effect. My usage of a non-linear narrating system formed a puzzle that needs solving by juxtaposing various parts of the story next to each other. Hedayat uses the same technique to create a similar effect. *The Blind Owl* also inspired the formatting as well as the content in my novella. The story is developed in two major parts. The first part contains feverish nightmares of an unnamed character and the mysterious death of his lover. The second part includes a more realistic version of the story and how she was killed by the unnamed protagonist.

Repetition is another technique that I adopted from Hedayat for my novella. Michael's dreams are repeated over and over throughout the novella, but each repetition adds a new piece of information to the reader's prior knowledge:

“Michael!” I heard a woman calling my name. Loud and clear. I stopped running. My eyes moved far away, searching for her. I saw her in the distance, walking away into the woods. She was wearing a long black dress. Her steps seemed inconsistent. Like she was struggling to walk. She turned her face from me before she disappeared into the woods, brushing her hand against the trunks of the trees. (55)

The scene is repeated several times with different wording and a different ending to give my audience more information about the disturbed mind of my protagonist:

“Michael,” a soft feminine voice whispered into my ears. I looked around, searching for her, but she was nowhere near me. Instead, I saw her standing in a faraway distance. I couldn’t see her face. Just a figure. Standing in the distance. Smiling at me. She waved her hand before she walked into the adjoining woods. Disappearing from my view. (27)

Another experimental element in my novella is the usage of the first-person plural narration in my story. My novella opens with the first-person plural narrative which is seldom used by the authors in the detective genre. The purpose of using such a perspective is to add a new layer to the story which reveals many key factors about the main character and the mystery. The “we” perspective is previously used in a report format by Jeffrey Eugenides. In *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides applies the “we” perspective to tell his story in the form of a collective report about a series of suicides that runs in a neighbor family:

When we talked to Mrs. Lisbon years later, she told us she had no qualms about the date, mentioning in support of this claim the dresses she had sewn especially for the evening. The week before Homecoming, in fact, she had taken the girls to a fabric store...A photo survives of that night (Exhibit # 10). The girls are lined up in their party dresses, shoulder to square shoulder, like pioneer women. Their stiff hairdos (“haidon’ts,” Tessie Nepi, the

beautician, said) have the stoic, presumptuous quality of European fashions enduring the wilderness. (113-114)

I applied the “we” voice for the same purpose: collective reports of the incidents that happen somewhere far away from where Michael’s story is happening:

The case got more twists and turns as the police found out that the blood on Dickinson’s did not belong to any of those female victims. It belonged to an unidentified man. But the DNA results suggested some blood connection between Dickinson and the male victim. As Dickinson’s behavior swung between reticence and delirium throughout the interviews, the police asked us to initiate a study on him. (73)

Using such a technique helped me diversify the voices and the perspectives that I used for the purpose of more dramatic effects. It also adds to the suspense by withholding the connection between the stories and postponing the revelation of key information that will result in some sort of conclusion: that we don’t know the truth and we will probably never know.

Furthermore, Milutinovic writes, “New forms of the detective genre are replacing the logical and orderly world of the classical school with the chaos and violence... This caused the characters of the detective and the villain to change dramatically and get closer, leaving fair play completely aside” (44). Milutinovic’s description of contemporary detective fiction is in line with what I did in my novella in terms of the relationship between the detective and the villain’s character. As the story goes further, we begin to believe that Michael is the killer. The boundary between the detective and the killer is disturbed as the boundary between reality, memory, and dream blurs. In Michael’s narrative, on the other hand, I used the plural first-person (we) to give my audience a more solid and trustworthy narrative in the form of a report. So, this means that

unlike most novels, my audience has to rely more on the “we” narrative rather than on the protagonist’s narrative.

Milutinovic quotes Tari’s introduction of Poe as one of the first authors who brought the irrational into the rational world of detective fiction: “The revolutionary achievement of Edgar Allen Poe (1809-49) was his fusion of the rational and the irrational literary currents in his first three detective stories...” (3-4). According to Tari, irrationality entered the world of crime and detective stories from the earliest appearances of the genre. It was always a part of the genre, but it was seldom used in relation to the protagonist. Not until postmodernism did writers use it for their protagonists.

Moreover, unlike the ending of most detective novels, my ending does not provide closure. Instead, is it a beginning of a new story and a new investigation. This ending does not come with an absolute answer to the mystery. According to what Milutinovic asserts, it is more of a revelation rather than a reasonable solution—a revelation that we held a false assumption of the villain’s identity. Detective fiction usually ends with solving the mystery and explaining all the strange events to the audience: “The last stage focuses on the unraveling the mystery like the relationship between the characters and it becomes a memory of the collective dreams of authors, characters, and readers” (45). The common belief of the ending in the detective genre is the unraveling of the mystery, the secret being disclosed by the discovery of the perpetrator. This discovery is usually followed by punishment to make the audience sure that every perpetrator is going to be caught and punished by law enforcement so the rest of the society can feel safe. We have seen this type of ending/closure in different types of mystery/detective novels and stories, from Truman Capote’s true crime story entitled *In Cold Blood* to classic American noir novels

(like Raymond Chandler's books). In another part of his article, Milutinovic writes about the solution in detective fiction:

A considerable number of works imply that the solution is the most important for the detective genre and that all other characteristics are built on it. Julian Symons (1975) states that for most critics, the detective genre is singled out as central and the one based on which other crime stories and thrillers make variations. Therefore, they sought to set strict rules about what is and what is not a detective story. In this sense, two characteristics are imposed as necessary. The first is that there is a problem, and the second is that it has to be solved by an amateur or professional detective through the deduction process.” (45-46)

Another good example of bending the strict rules that inspired my writing is Paul Auster's detective trilogy. His postmodern detective stories usually go far beyond finding a solution to the puzzle. Instead, they take a detour into philosophical worlds in which solving a crime is meaningless. Auster's protagonists mostly find themselves in a dilemma rather than a puzzle. In *City of Glass*, a mystery writer named Quinn receives a call meant for Paul Auster and later he meets Paul Auster:

The next morning, Quinn woke up earlier than he had in several weeks. As he drank his coffee, buttered his toast, and read through the baseball scores in the paper (the Mets had lost again, two to one, on a ninth-inning error), it did not occur to him that he was going to show up for his appointment. Even that locution, *his appointment*, seemed odd to him. It wasn't his appointment; it was Paul Auster's. And who that person was he had no idea. (12)

In Auster's story, the riddle intertwines with other riddles surrounding the identity of the protagonist. Quinn meets the real Paul Auster later who is basically living Quinn's life. Quinn's wife and son died, and Paul Auster is living his happy life with his wife and son. Also, Auster's son is named Daniel which is Quinn's first name:

“Ah,” said Quinn, struggling to keep himself in check. “That’s very kind. But I really must be going. I’m late as it is.” He made one last-effort, smiling at Auster’s wife and waving good-bye to the boy. “So long, Daniel,” he said, walking towards the door. The boy looked at him from across the room and laughed again. “Good-bye myself! He said” (101).

The protagonists of postmodern detective fiction are not just bound to find solutions for the crimes that are happening in the story world. Instead, they struggle to find themselves in the world. In Auster's postmodern detective fiction, the protagonist is searching for the crime, but he ends up not knowing who he is. For Auster's protagonists, the world is more complicated than just finding a solution to a puzzle that exists in the outside world. For them, some of the puzzles originate inside themselves. Usually, the protagonists in this genre are detectives or reporters who find out more about themselves as they are investigating a crime. They find out about their identity. They figure out who they really are, but Auster's protagonists are getting more and more confused about their identities as they continue their investigation. It seems like in postmodern detective fiction, solving a crime gradually loses its significance.

In my story, Michael is facing the same dilemma. The audience knows the protagonist as Michael who is working with Fort Kent police to solve the mystery behind the disappearance and possible murders of two young girls. As Michael starts to have visions, the readers wonder about his character and what led to such visions. Later, when Michael finds out that his past was not

what he thought it was, Michael's story becomes as important as the story behind the crimes and it shifts to the foreground. Finally, the crimes guide Michael, as well as the readers, to learn about his real identity and its possible connection to the crimes. Here the crimes become a part of the protagonist.

In conclusion, my novella took an experimental approach needed for postmodern detective fiction. Each approach was inspired by a postmodern work, but they have never been used together in one work of detective fiction. My purpose for writing this novel was to experiment with changing the common rules of the detective genre.

In March 2022, a call from Fairland Drive rocked Austin City's police department in Texas. According to the information revealed to us, a woman contacted the station to report an accident with an unknown male individual. The woman said to the officer on the phone that the man seemed hurt, but he jumped on his feet and fled the scene when he figured she was calling the police. At 11:32, two police officers arrived in the area, but they found no trace of the man. Around 12:45, there was another call to the police about a man wandering in the neighborhood. This time the report included a new piece of information. The caller reported a strange man lurking around the area with a bloody shirt. The reason that something like this wasn't reported by the woman the first time is still unknown although the police interviewed the woman multiple times later before we received the full report.

The police got other reports from people living blocks away in the neighborhood, informing them that their kids were so scared by a strange man staggering in the area. The day after, the police arrested the man who matched the descriptions. He introduced himself as Sam Dickinson.

Police arrested him for the complaints that parents filed against him, claiming he was scaring the kids in the neighborhood. But Dickinson's case got more and more complicated over time as more evidence appeared concerning his case.

I had a terrible dream, or better to say a nightmare, the night we found the body. So gloomy, but so real. It woke me up. Sweaty as usual, confused. For a moment, I didn't know where I was, and what I was doing there. It took me time to recover from it. I heard the wind. Blowing outside, battering the tree branches against the glass of my window. I looked out through the glass. I could hear my heart, pumping my blood into my veins. Faster than usual. But outside, tranquility was prevailing as the town was hidden under the cloak of darkness and secrecy. Hidden from the outside world. Not wanting to be found.

The snowflakes were dancing with every flow when a call interrupted everything, throwing me back into reality. I didn't know when it was for I didn't care about the time or date, especially not after that specific night, but the obscurity suggested that must have been some time past midnight. I stumbled on my feet and dragged my heavy body to my phone.

"Mike Kelly speaking," I said into my phone.

"Get ready. I'll come and get you in five minutes," a gruff familiar voice said on the other side of the phone. It belonged to Morin, my partner. I pictured his angular face and his tall body as soon as I heard his voice.

"What's going on?" I asked, but the voice didn't wait for me to finish. The call ended with an incessant beeping sound. His full name was Andrew S. Morin. A 59-year-old detective, a tough family man with three daughters. I remember my late father used to talk about him occasionally, but he hadn't known him well either. He was well-known for being so secretive.

I washed my face, hoping it would wipe away the dismay from my eccentric nightmare. I got ready as fast as I could. When I walked outside, I saw a car waiting for me on the other side

of the road. The two headlights were penetrating the sheer darkness of the night. I ran to the car. My body dug into my coat. My hands tucked into my pockets. I jumped into Morin's car before the cold could get under my skin.

A wave of warmth hit my cheeks as I opened the front door and sat next to him. A soft song was playing on the radio. I looked at him. His puffy eyes were fixed on the front as he stepped on the gas. The silence was broken by the sound of the screeching tires.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To Saint John," his rough steady voice filled the air, not letting the music be heard. His silver hair was shining under the golden headlights of passing cars. His profile in the dark was a reminder of my dad's. His sharp nose and flat forehead made me think of him every time I took a quick peek at him.

"Why?"

"Somebody found a suitcase," he passed for a moment, weighing the heavy words that he was about to say.

"With a body in it," he continued.

"Who found it?" I asked, impulsively.

"We don't know. He didn't introduce himself,"

The rest of the drive was spent in silence. I kept thinking about the "he" that Morin mentioned in my head. Could this "he" be the killer? Otherwise, why he didn't introduce himself?

Outside, the town was in deep sleep, like a black bear, hibernating, waiting for the warm season to return. We kept driving to Savage Street and then to the riverbank. The heavy snow blurred the road in front of us. There were some lights, coming from the houses as we passed

them. But as soon as we drove farther, once more the darkness overtook us. But the lights reappeared on the horizon as we got to the riverbank, defining the Canadian border. The lights revealed a faded vision of the frozen Saint John River. Icicles were floating. Behind us, the trees were rustling, shivering with cold with every blow from the river. Their tall branches were scratching the sky above. The music shut off suddenly when Morin turned off the car. The river was clamorous in the silence.

“Is it here?” I asked.

“I don’t know where it is exactly. We should scan the area,” he replied.

Morin and I stepped out of the car, carrying flashlights in our hands. The wind pushed me back, but I kept going. Everywhere was covered in ice and snow. The white snowflakes were swinging back and forth in the wind. The trees were bending toward the river. Like servants bowing to their master. I was sweeping the area with my flashlight, but I couldn’t find anything significant. I kept looking. I could hear Morin’s going in the opposite direction. The wind and heavy snow were making it impossible to find any footprints on the ground, so I kept looking and looking.

About half an hour passed. My head was still heavy from the nightmare. The flashlight was hurting my eyes, restricting my vision to where the light was. So, I turned it off and the world in front of me turned black. I couldn’t see anything. My eyes were so used to the light, I guess. But as the effect of the light started to fade, I could see better. Suddenly I could recognize the whiteness of the snow, permeating the darkness of the night. As my vision got wider, I saw something, something dark, lying on the white snow. I took several steps further. When I called Morin, I was sure what the object was. It was the suitcase we were looking for. I saw Morin,

struggling his way in the snow toward me. His coat was jolting in the wind. From where I was standing, the object seemed small. Like a black spot of dirt smutching the whiteness of the snow.

I kept walking. Abruptly, I felt taking bigger steps was like an ordeal to me. I couldn't feel my body. The coldness made me numb. I had lived most of my life in Fort Kent, but for some reason, I had never gotten used to the damn cold. Morin finally got to me and passed me as I had difficulty moving closer. Like I was walking to my own grave.

I heard Morin breathing heavily beside me when I finally got to him. A moment passed in silence. We were both staring at the dark thing, unmoving. Afraid to touch it, I guess. The suitcase was almost covered with snow, so we were lucky to find it before it got out of sight.

Finally, Morin pulled his rubber gloves out of his pocket. He took his gloves out to wear the rubber ones. It was when I noticed I couldn't feel the tip of my fingers at this point. The ski mitts couldn't defeat the coldness finding its way inside me. Congelation crawled on my skin, searching for a way to get in. But something distracted me, made me forget all about the coldness. Something moving above one of the trees behind Morin. My partner, enchanted by the black suitcase, acted as if he didn't hear a thing. I looked above. Behind Morin, the trees were shivering in the wind. Shuddering in the cold. The suitcase was resting on the ground between us. I looked back at the suitcase. My head was heavier than ever. I didn't run, but I felt tired. My heavy fast breaths caught Morin's attention. Morin's gloved hand went for the suitcase, unzipped it, and opened it carefully.

"Are you ok Kelly? You look like shit," he asked while putting his gloves on.

"I'm fine. I'm just a little bit tired," my hands went for my collar as I replied, but my collar was already up. I tried to seem as cool as possible, but he kept his gaze on me for a while. Like he knew something was going on with me. He finally squatted in front of the suitcase. His

gloved hand ultimately went for the suitcase. I heard the rustling noise again while Morin was unzipping the suitcase. My eyes darted back and forth among the trees. Wondering where the noise was coming from. Everything was happening so fast. The zipper stuck. Morin, oblivion of the disturbing noise, struggled to fix it. Probably he didn't hear it at all.

“Oh God,” said Morin under his breath, as his eyes saw what was in the suitcase.

Brightness, whiter than the snow, illuminated our eyes as he opened the suitcase attentively. White flesh, stuffed in the suitcase, like a canned fish, appeared in front of our eyes. Cold and dead. Like it hadn't been alive ever. The white flesh, pressed intensely to fit the small space, gradually shaped a meaningful form in my head. I saw hands, feet, and a head all in a deformed position due to pressure. Her wavy wet orange hair was stuck to her body covering her face. Her delicate fingers, elbows, toes, knees, and ankles were as smooth as glass. You could break them even by looking at them. Or you can see through them. Her nails were purple. Like they were polished. Her head was curved intensely onto her belly. One foot was oddly positioned as if the ankle was broken. Her wrinkly skin was a testimony to the time she had spent in the water. The water was cold enough to keep her body intact. At least for now. Morin gently brushed the lock of her orange hair back. A familiar face appeared behind it. Like I had known her for many years. As innocent as her pictures. She did not look dead at all. Instead, she seemed like she was in deep sleep, but the open wounds on her torso said the opposite. Her lips were half open as if she was about to whisper something into our ears. One eye open, like she could see us. Ashamed that we were staring at her naked body. Her curved head was making it difficult to see the other eye. But when Morin threw his flashlight on her face, I could finally see that it was completely shut. She looked like a doll with a broken eye.

My mind was busy absorbing the horrific scene in front of me while the noise distracted me once again from what was lying there in the suitcase. This time louder than before. When I took my eyes off the body, I saw something. Something round. Like two big bright eyes. Looking straight at me from the trees above.

“Something is missing,” said Morin. My eyes moved onto the body again. Not until I turned my flashlight on was I able to see though. A hand was missed. Cut from the wrist.

I don't know how long had passed before my vision started to blur. I had no sense of time as if it became totally meaningless at that moment. I couldn't see clearly. Like the light was too much for my eyes. Cold sweat was rolling down my chest. My heart, racing out of my chest. My hands, numb. The noise came from the trees again. I looked over. The eyes were still there, staring at me. A moment passed before the rustling was replaced by a disturbing one. A loud squawk. Then a figure started to appear in the dark woods. Like an owl, spreading its big wings. Ready to fly. A deafening sound filled my ears as he flew over my head.

Suddenly, I was a little boy again, running in a cornfield. I felt the warmth of the sunlight on my skin. My hands were brushing the tall golden blades. Everything seemed like happening in a flash before I heard somebody calling my name.

“Michael,” a soft feminine voice whispered into my ears. I looked around, searching for her, but she was nowhere near me. Instead, I saw her standing in a faraway distance. I couldn't see her face. Just a figure. Standing in the distance. Smiling at me. She waved her hand before she walked into the adjoining woods. Disappearing from my view.

When I woke up, I was lying on the snowy ground. Still gripping onto the flashlight. Morin was sitting beside me. His lips were moving, but I couldn't hear anything.

"Are you alright?" I finally heard him repeating. I sat straight and stood on my feet quickly, wiping the snow off my clothes. The swift move made my head feel a little dizzy, but I controlled myself. I was embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I just slipped," I said, but he was questioning my words with his eyes.

"Are you ok?" he kept asking.

"I'm fine," I replied.

"Well, you don't seem fine," he said in his bitter tone.

"I am, ok?" I replied. He finally dropped questioning me and went back to the body without saying another word. I looked into the woods. Nothing but sheer darkness.

The first time I looked at Veronica's picture, I was captivated by her beauty. Her orange hair was a reminder of Lilly, an imaginary friend that I used to have as a kid. Her dark eyes were shining with hope. Her lips, wide open with a big smile. She was twenty-one years old, not as young as Nina, the other missing girl, but her face was similar to hers. The only major difference was the color of their hair. Unlike Veronica, Nina had dark hair, a wider face with a round nose. But except that, everything else seemed very close to Veronica.

The day Veronica Amin went missing, the news hit the town with its density. Veronica wasn't the first one, and Fort Kent was a pretty small town for that. Before her, Nina Fischer was reported missing. A seventeen-year-old girl, living with her single mother, coming from New Mexico. Sarah Fischer, Nina's mother, suspected Nina's father. She believed that he stole Nina from her. But the truth was that the father had no interest in his daughter. He was an asshole working for a mob family. But Sarah kept believing that, I think because it gave her some hope that her daughter is alive.

Two weeks later, Veronica Amin was the second girl who went missing. When we found her lifeless body in a suitcase, the town still hadn't recovered from the news of her disappearance.

The news of Veronica's death hit our police department with its intensity. I remember that day after when I stepped into the building. Everybody looked disturbed, nervous by the terrible news. Chief Whitman was the most distressed of them all. Throughout his own career, he had never encountered something like this in his small department. His men were not ready to deal with that amount of hard work and pressure to solve a murder case like this, not to mention

the other girl who was still missing. Morin was his only hope. The only experienced guy he got in the whole department. Morin used to work as an officer in his department before he went to New York City and worked there as a detective for seven years.

Chief Whitman was a sixty-nine-year-old man with white hair and fair skin, spotted and wrinkled with age. He was the chief of police at Fort Kent Police Department. A good friend of late my father. They knew each other since they were little kids, growing up together. Fort Kent was such a small town and finding friends at your age was always a challenge. But when you found a kid your age, you would stick to them for the rest of your life. They become even closer to each other after working together as police officers for more than twenty years, and they maintained their friendship until my father's death.

Whitman was a soft-hearted man, but he was hard to work with. It had been five years since I first started working with him, but for some reason, I could have never found a way to satisfy him. He even got more difficult ever since my father's death and I never knew the real reason behind it.

It was not long after the sixteen-year-old Nina Fischer went missing that I decided to help find her. Sarah Fischer was a good neighbor of my late father. She was a single mom taking care of her only daughter. I knew Nina well. My father was spending his last days with us when he learned about her disappearance, and he asked me to help finding her. It was his last wish when he was dying in bed. So, I promised him that. But it took me a month to convince Chief Whitman let me work with Morin.

Nina was going to Community High School. She was a good student, and her disappearance freaked the hell out of all the students in her high school. But Veronica was a twenty-one-year-old college student. Majoring in Biology. I didn't know her well. According to

her father, Ahmed Amin, friends, and family, she was a very calm and quiet girl. Very smart with the highest grades in her class. Some people referred to her as the most impeccable individual that they had ever seen. A pure angel.

I remembered going for a run one day. The pictures of the two girls were all over the news. Pinned onto every wall over the town. Looking very young and innocent. One day, I even found Veronica's picture on the back seat of my car, wondering who had put it there.

I remember seeing Sarah Fischer walking into our station. Her eyes were swollen and red due to lack of sleep. She walked straight to the officer behind the desk.

"Did they find my Nina?" she kept asking, like a lunatic person. I wanted to walk to her, to calm her down, but the thought of Veronica's dead body kept me from moving. She almost fainted when the officer said no, and how I was supposed to tell her about the dead body. At some point, she drew everybody's attention. Officers were staring at her, all trying to look normal, but one could feel the heavy grief, dangling in the air.

"What did they find then?" she asked, but nobody dared to mention anything about a dead body. Then I saw Chief Whitman through my glassy door, ushering the poor woman into his office. I couldn't stay there any longer. My body was still numb, hadn't recovered from the shocking moment yet, but my brain needed some nicotine to relax. So, I grabbed my coat and headed outside for a cigarette.

I was driving. I don't know where to, and I don't know why, but my right foot was stepping on the gas pedal. As hard as I could. I saw trees passing by through my car windows. Faster and faster till they no longer looked like trees. They became vague figures. Standing on each side of the road. Looking at me. Pointing their fingers at me.

I passed an intersection. The two headlights were the only bright things on the road. I kept driving. As if I just had to go. Without hesitation. As fast as I could. The sound of the roaring engine was the only thing that was disturbing the silence, but after a while, it became a part of the silence. All of a sudden, everything felt so balanced, so peaceful, that I forgot I was passing the speed limit. Or I guess I didn't care anymore.

Then I saw something. A shadow. Moving in the dark till it got close to the middle of the road. I hit on the brakes as hard as I could. The tires screeched. The car stopped in front of a man in dark clothes. The man stared at me for a moment. His bright blue eyes were wide open. He ran into the woods and disappeared from my vision so fast. There was something about those eyes that urged me to run after him. Like I had seen them before. I was so sure of that.

The ice inside me finally started to break. I got out of the car and followed him into the woods, but he was nowhere close to being found. For a moment, I thought I was mistaken, or I had seen a ghost.

I ran a little further into the woods. It was unusually dark. I could hardly see anything. I stopped to reconsider, and it was then that I heard footsteps in the distance. This made me sure what I saw a moment ago was not an imagination. I ran faster, following the sound. When my

eyes were adjusted to the dim light, I could finally see him running. I kept following him. I was a good runner, but he was so much faster than me.

The woods got denser, and a thin fog began to form as we moved deeper into the woods. The trees made it harder to run. My body was whipped by branches, holding me back from moving faster. I kept running and running till I felt out of breath. I couldn't follow him anymore. I needed a moment, so I stopped, resting my hand against the trunk of a tree. Breathing heavily. When I started running again, a hooting sound was filling the air in the distance. No footsteps. The fog was making things even worse. I continued running in the same direction till I could hear him again. I ran faster to get closer. But the footsteps were gradually replaced by some soft music. Then, I could see lights, perforating the dense fog.

Suddenly I stopped running. My body felt so heavy, making every move difficult. My throat was so dry. Like there was no saliva left in my mouth. I walked closer to the lights. A house-shaped figure appeared in front of my eyes. I saw a shadow moving inside. I stalked to the front door. Drew my firearm. Ready to shoot, but my hands were shaking from the long run. I took a deep breath before I yanked the front door wide open. The music was coming from an old radio, resting in one corner of the kitchen. There was no one there, and it made me wonder whose shadow I saw through the window. A small table was located in one corner. Decorated with daisies. There were two chairs at the table. A hallway connected the kitchen to the rest of the house. I heard a child crying. I aimed my gun, and walked in, cautiously, to the room. A baby crib and a rocking chair in front of it were the only things in the room. The chair was still moving. Like somebody had just left it seconds ago. The warmth of a breath was still in the air. The baby kept crying. His hands were moving in the air, searching for his mother's embrace. I took a step closer to him but stopped as I saw a passing shadow in the corner of my eye. Before I

could move, I heard a door squeak closed. I turned and followed the noise. My heart was escaping my chest. Asking for more room. The gun was still in my shaky hands. I saw a door left ajar. I walked toward it. I couldn't feel my feet underneath. Scared. Alert. I slowly opened the door, gripping on the trigger. But I found no one there either. Only dirty trays of food and empty glasses of water. Covering the floor. Nothing else. I wonder if I had seen a ghost again. If all of this was a long dream and nothing more. But to me, it seemed more like reality than a dream.

I heard some noise again. Coming from the kitchen. Gently, I walked out of the room. The floor screeched beneath my shaking feet as I walked into the kitchen with my gun in my hands. There was no sign of the man. Instead, I saw the back of a woman. Her delicate shoulders were covered by her long dark curly hair. She was working in the kitchen. Oblivious to my presence.

I pointed my gun at her. Ready to ask her about the man. But as she turned, I froze at what I saw. She was exactly like Veronica except for her dark hair. Or maybe she was Veronica. When she saw me, she did not react. Like she didn't see me. Like I didn't exist at all.

"Mommy, I can't sleep," a little boy said, clutching a teddy bear to his chest. It looked like the same boy in the crib. Older. About two and a half. I lowered my gun when I saw him as he was in the hallway. She bent over to hug the boy and carry him to the bedroom where the crib was. Her body moved softly like there was no gravity.

The music was still playing. Water was dripping in the sink, and I noticed something inside. A deformed object. Pale as bloodless flesh. I couldn't recognize what it was at first. I flinched backward as it started shaking in the sink. It was a hand. Chopped off from the wrist. The music got to its climax. A rough voice accompanied it by humming the melody.

I jumped into my bed. Startled. Sweaty. Cold as hell. Like my soul had just left my body. My mouth was feeling so dry. I looked around. Happy to learn that I was in my bedroom, safe and sound. I sneaked out of my bed to get another blanket and wrapped it around me. Then I walked to the kitchen, hunched. I poured some tap water into a glass and swigged it. Outside, a dense fog was covering the town.

I don't know when exactly, but it felt like days had passed before Morin and I drove to the University of Fort Kent to check Veronica's locker at the gym. The wind was blowing. Brutal as always. But the shining sun was making the fridity bearable. The unplowed snow made us drive so slowly that it almost took us an hour to get to campus, but I didn't mind. At this point, I was happy that Morin didn't bring that night up again, imagining that he had all forgotten about it. But apparently, I was mistaken.

"I know you don't wanna talk about it, but are you feeling any better?" he asked, eyes on the road. I looked at him.

"What do you mean better?" I asked. I wanted to sound calm, but my voice sound higher than I expected it to be.

"I mean good," he said.

"I am good. What the hell are you talking about?" I turned my eyes from him and looked at the icy road.

"Well, you didn't seem good to me that night," he said.

"I told you, I'm good. There is nothing to talk about," I replied.

"Really?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Cold sweat, heavy breaths, dizziness. Those are clear signs of a panic attack,"

"What are you? A doctor now?" I jumped in.

"Don't worry. Nothing is gonna happen if you tell me the truth," he said the last two words calmly.

“I’m not worried because there is nothing to tell. I just slipped and fell. That’s all,” I replied, but it sounded insincere even to my ears.

“Are you sure about that? Cause you were standing right in front of me, and you didn’t slip. You weren’t feeling good, and I’m sure any psychiatrist can learn about that after several conversations,” said Morin. His tone was more serious now. I stayed quiet. I knew where he was getting at.

“I know if I tell anything to Chief Whitman, he will send you to a psychiatrist to make sure,” he paused for a moment before he continued.

“But if you tell me the truth, I’m not gonna say a word to anyone,”

I threw a glance at him to see what his deal was. His face was emotionless as always. It was almost impossible to understand what was going on in that head. He was very good at hiding his thoughts and emotions.

“If you don’t wanna tell anybody, then why do you wanna know?” I asked.

“Just wanna help,”

Was I supposed to believe that? Did he think that I was that much naïve?

“Why?” I asked.

“Do you wanna continue working with the police department or not? Cause if you don’t solve this you probably can’t do it at some point,”

“You know I really want that,”

“Then quit asking stupid questions instead of telling the truth” he replied quickly. Silence overcame our conversation for seconds. I didn’t know what to say. If I kept denying it, he would tell Chief Whitman what happened and then I was fucked. I studied psychology in college and as far as my education helped me learn about psychiatrists, those goddamn psychos were experts in

coming up with some kind of bullshit about your character or your past. They knew how to screw up your whole future. If they couldn't find anything serious, they were very good at making something up and using it to crucify you.

"I've never experienced something like that before," I said as if I had no control over my tongue. Words were poured out of my mouth and now I was a slave to them.

"Like what?" he said.

"Cold sweat, fast heartbeat, nausea," I said. He stayed quiet. His eyes never shifted from the road.

"You should have someone look at you. You cannot let this happen again while you are working with me. I won't let that happen,"

"Why don't you tell Whitman then? He can set you up with someone else,"

"It takes time. Plus, we don't have that many people around here who can work such a case,"

"And you think I can?" I asked, looking at him again.

"Yes, I think you can," he replied decisively. What made him think like that was a mystery to me.

"Why?"

"You are asking stupid questions again. Just do as I said, and no one will ever know. I set you up with a psychologist. She is an old friend of mine. You can trust her. She is a good person, and she is willing to help you,"

I decided to do as he wanted. So, I kept quiet and let it go. We passed piles of snow as we drove through campus. Morin pulled over in one of the university's parking lots. We walked past

the dining hall and several other buildings as we got to the UMFK Sports Center. It was a pretty small campus.

We stepped into the building. The receptionist was sitting at the front counter. She was a twenty-year-old girl, wearing a hello-kitty sweater with pink trousers. She dyed her hair yellow and pink. A combination of colors that a teenager might choose. But I guess that's fashionable nowadays. She asked for our IDs. When we told her that we were working for the local police, she stared at us for a moment.

“Would you please give me a moment?” she asked politely before she left the counter to inform one of her superiors at the gym. A minute later, a middle-aged woman walked toward us. She was blond. A little out of shape. Her name was Joanna Miles. She was the Assistant Director of the UMFK Sports Center.

“How can I help you officers?” she said. A warm smile was on her lips like it was carved on her face.

After we explained to her the reason for our visit, she said:

“Mr. Hunt is the director of our sports center, and I'm sorry he is not on campus today. He had a family emergency, so I'm going to walk you to Veronica's locker instead.” Morin thanked her.

“How long would it take?” She asked Morin.

“About half an hour,” he replied.

“Ok, so let me inform the students,” she said before leaving us for I don't know how long.

Morin and I took advantage of the situation to look around. It was a one-floor gym with a basketball court in the middle. A group of students were busy, playing basketball. There were

others. Doing all kinds of things. A girl sitting in a corner caught my eye. She was working out alone, far away from all the clamors. She was sitting cross-legged. Stretching one arm above her head while the other was at her waist. Her eyes were closed, relaxing, but they caught us in the mirror as soon as she opened them. I recognized her from the Swamp Buck restaurant. She was a waiter there. Her name was Beth Clark. I talked to her several times. She studied biology, like Veronica, and I'm sure that she must have known Veronica. She kept her gaze on us.

“Gentlemen,” Mrs. Miles called to us as she came back from the locker room in her hand, holding a key.

We followed her into an empty room. Blue lockers were on every side. All identical, except one. Veronica's. It was covered with heart-shaped stickers, colorful flowers, small dolls, and teddy bears to cherish her memory.

The assistant director walked straightly to it. The lock clicked open as soon as she turned the key then she took several steps back, letting on to take it from there.

Inside the locker was just as packed as outside. A big black backpack, a set of women's gym clothes, a towel, and a pink hairbrush. Morin got his gloves on, ready to examine everything carefully.

The zipper of the backpack was left half open. Inside, we found biology books, notepads, and other gym stuff. Morin emptied the backpack on the floor, rearranging all the stuff on the rocker's room bench. Nothing special. Just normal girl's stuff. I went for the other stuff in the locker. Her gym clothes, her towel. Her pink hair hairbrush. I noticed orange hair, stuck in the brush's cushion. I imagined Veronica, holding the brush in her hand. Brushing her long curly hair. It was then I found dark hair. I pulled it out. It was half black-half orange like it was dyed.

When I touched the cushion, I felt something underneath. Something like a small piece of plastic. Inside the plastic, there were pills, different types of them. I held them in front of Morin.

“Take a look at these,” I said. He raised his head.

“Where did you find them?” he asked. I showed him the hairbrush.

“Was she using drugs?” asked Morin. I shrugged.

“That isn’t the only thing. She wasn’t naturally orange either,” I said, holding the hair between the tips of my fingers.

“What?” said Morin.

“Why didn’t the father tell us then?” he continued.

“Probably he forgot?” I replied.

“That’s not possible. When your child is missing you remember every detail about them,” he said, so sure of what he said.

“Well, some people might forget some things,” I replied. He didn’t say another word. We wrapped the drugs and the hair in plastic bags as evidence and left the gym, wondering if Veronica was the person that everybody thought she was.

I spent hours staring at Veronica's picture. Comparing it to Nina's picture. Gradually it became a daily routine of mine. I recalled seeing Veronica in my dreams, pretty much alive. Then I imagined her getting ready to take that picture. She was wearing a navy-blue sweater and white jacket. Her hair looked shiny. She must have used oil that day. To make her hair look good. On her chest, a heart-shaped necklace was shining.

I pictured her putting oil in her hair. Wearing that blue shirt and then the jacket. I pictured her posing for the picture. Smiling to the camera.

That afternoon, Morin and I drove straightly to Ahmed's house, Veronica's father. A forty-five-year-old man. A big guy, masculine. Veronica was his only child. He came to the door wearing a dark sweater with dark pants. His beard had been growing from the last time we had seen him. He didn't expect to see us.

"Sorry that we came unannounced," Morin said. He always did that. He didn't like to tell anyone that he was going to visit them, believing that people are more likely to reveal their real selves when they are surprised. This was a weird thing to do in Fort Kent because Chief Whitman usually wouldn't allow it in the small and friendly community of Fort Kent. But a lot had happened recently, and everything had changed after the girls' disappearance.

"I have a guest, but it is ok," Mr. Amin said in his Eastern accent and stepped aside to let us in. His guest was a man. He looked older than Ahmed but very similar. He jumped on his feet when he saw us.

"This is my older brother, Hamid. He came to visit me. These gentlemen are with the police," he said.

“Oh, from where?” Morin asked.

“Texas,” he said. We shook hands before we settled on the coach.

“You live far away,” Morin continued.

“Ahmed used to live there with us too before he suddenly decided to move up here,”

Hamid replied.

“It is nice and hot down there. He used to love it, but I guess not anymore,” he continued.

“How may I help officers?” Ahmed changed the conversation.

“Do you mind if we talk to your brother privately,” Morin asked Hamid.

“Not at all,” he said before leaving the room.

“We are here to ask you some questions,” Morin said when he heard the door clicked

behind Hamid.

“About Veronica?”

“Yes,”

“Do you find something?”

“Some new information came up about her,” said Morin.

“Like what?” he asked.

“Like the color of your daughter’s hair for a starter. Why didn’t you tell us that she was a natural brunette in the first place,” Morin said.

“She was?”

“Yes, her hair was not orange. She was dark,” I confirmed.

“I didn’t know,”

“And we are supposed to believe that?” said Morin sarcastically.

“Are you saying that I lie?” Asked Amin, taken aback.

“I’m not saying anything. I’m just wondering what kind of father does not know the natural hair color of their child,”

“Her mother and me got divorced right after she born. She lived with her for sixteen years. How did I suppose to know? She wouldn’t let us meet,”

“And I wonder why that was,” Morin added.

He jumped on his feet, offended.

“I think it is time for you to leave,” said Amin.

“Please sit-down Mr. Amin. There is something else that you should know,” I said. Morin just kept his gaze on the guy. His face was expressionless as always.

“I think I heard enough bullshit. You are here to insult me instead of finding the killer who did that to my poor girl,” he said, walking to the front door. I looked back at Morin, waiting for him to say something that would calm Ahmed down. He kept staring at the floor. As he always did.

“I’m sorry for being rude Mr. Amin, now would you please sit down,” said Morin. He was standing at the doorway, pondering Morin’s words.

“It’s important and you have to hear it from us,” I added. Amin stopped and walked back to his chair. He sat on the edge.

“What?” asked Amin sharply.

“We found some drugs in your daughter’s locker,” I said.

“What? What drugs?” he searched my face then Morin’s.

“Different types of opioids,” I continued.

“My daughter did not do drugs,” he insisted.

“Yes, she did,” Morin said when he slammed the plastic containing the drugs on the table in front of Ahmed.

Amin fell quiet. He ran his fingers deeply into his dark hair, sinking the news. His face turned red. His eyes welled up with tears.

“What are these?” he asked, looking at a spot on the wall. The anger that I could see in his face a minute ago was vanished and replaced with sorrow.

“Fentanyl, Demerol... Oxycodone,” I replied.

Amin sank into the chair and sat there emotionless. Like a statue. His eyes were far away. Tears started to fall. Morin avoided looking at him. Amin was finally able to speak. He wiped his face with the back of his hand.

“Nobody should know this,” he said.

“We are not sure if we can withhold that information. It is necessary for our investigation,” Morin said, calmly this time. Amin moved to the edge of the chair.

“Please, I don’t want anybody to think my daughter as an addict. She was a good girl. I don’t want anybody to think she wasn’t,” he said. His voice cracked.

“But this is impossible. We need to know from whom she got the drugs. It could be the people who did that to her,” I said.

“My partner is right. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I think many people already know that,” said Morin. Amin covered his head with his hands, sobbing. Morin stood up and walked outside.

“I’m so sorry,” he said before leaving the house. Amin kept crying. I didn’t know what to do. Leaving him like that seemed inhumane. Hamid heard him crying. He walked to the living room. He put his hand on his brother’s shoulder. Shaky.

“I’m so sorry for this,” I said to both of them and left.

Morin was waiting outside, smoking.

“What is the matter with you?” I asked.

“What?” he replied like nothing happened.

“Running out of the house, like someone came after you?”

“We were there for so long. We did our job, so there was no need to stay anymore,” said Morin. He threw his cigarette away, get into the car, and slammed the door closed.

“What do you mean we were there for so long? It just took two minutes,”

He gave me a hard look without saying anything. The whole day, we were driving around together, asking more and more people about the drugs, trying to find the person who had sold them to Veronica as we avoided talking to each other.

I kept Beth Clark in my mind. I had to talk to her. I went to Swamp Buck but couldn't find her there. Danny Williams, her coworker, told me that she needed some time off after what happened to Veronica. He believed that Veronica and Beth were not that close, but she had needed some time alone to digest the horrible news.

"It is nothing wrong with that officer," he said to me like he was concerned about her. I knew him from before. Not just because it was a small town, but also because his father used to be an officer. Danny left the town years ago, and he came back to take care of his father who had suffered a severe knee injury leading him to his early retirement.

I was hungry. I hadn't had breakfast yet, so I asked for a menu and sat behind a table. Danny brought me the menu. He was wearing a tight green pullover. His sleeve went up when he handed me the menu, revealing some scratch on his forearm. I was about to ask him what it was, but I stopped when I saw a young girl sitting right in front of me at the table. Blond bob hair. She was wearing black gloves, L.L. Bean winter boots, and a jacket. Her cheeks were red with cold. I had never seen her before.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

"Is your name Michael Kelly?" she jumped in. Her voice was tougher than I expected.

"That is me," I replied.

"My name is Rebecca Jules. I'm...I was Veronica's friend" she told me. She was sitting like she was ready to leave any minute. I stayed quiet, confused. We interviewed all of Veronica's friends. Everybody that we knew had a connection with her. But no name such as Rebecca Jules ever came up.

“You were?” I asked.

“I left the town months before Veronica went missing,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Personal reasons,”

“I am assuming you are here to talk to Elizabeth Clark?” she continued. Her eyes kept moving around as if they were looking for something in the room. I could see she was feeling uncomfortable. But didn’t know why.

“I am,”

“I have to leave. I just wanted to tell you something. You should ask Beth about the party,” she stood, ready to leave.

“What party?” I asked before she could leave.

“There was a party the night before she disappeared, You should ask her about that. She knows everything. That big bully girl and her fucking boyfriend,” she said in a lower tone before walking away.

April 4, 2023

When Dickinson was held in custody, more neighbors came forward with complaints. `Later, the police reports suggested that the amount of blood on Dickinson's shirt did not match the injuries that he had at the time, and the blood sample taken proved the same. The police started knocking on every door, asking neighbors about Dickinson, who he was, and where they had seen him for the first time. Some neighbors informed the police that they saw the man leaving an abandoned house near Fairland Drive. As the police got more and more reports from people seeing the man coming and going into the house, they decided to search it. The search turned out to become a turning point in the investigation as it led them to find shocking pieces of evidence.

The police report said that officers felt an abnormal smell as soon as they entered the house. They found missing pieces of jewelry, drugs, and weapons. Different kinds. But the search turned out to become a turning point in the investigation as it led them to find some unexpected pieces of evidence in a hidden room located in the basement. In the most shocking section of the report, the officers found jars filled with a liquid containing severed human hands.

The autopsy report came in. The cause of death was announced by thirteen stab wounds to the abdomen, back, neck, and shoulders, suggesting that whoever killed Veronica, must have hated her so much.

The autopsy pictures made me nauseous, reliving the moment that we found her in that tight suitcase, so I put them back into my desk drawer. Instead, I put her smiley picture on my desk, hoping that it would help me forget the dreary ones. But it didn't. My mind went going and going, picturing her as she got those wounds all over her delicate body.

Suddenly Beth came into my mind. I'd heard that she got back to work, but I had to accompany Morin to the University. We did not have much time. The clock was ticking for Nina if she was still alive. We both knew that it was very unlikely, but we couldn't give up hope. We went through the possibility of finding a list with the name of people who might know both Veronica and Nina, but that was not so helpful since we were in a small town where everybody knew everybody else. We planned on asking people at the university about Veronica again, wandering around to see if anyone remembered something new. This time, our list was longer than the first time. We talked to Veronicas' close friends, but many classmates had skipped the interview, making excuses like sickness, going to a friend or family funeral, and so forth.

Of course, we went there unannounced. The biology department chair was the only person who knew about our visit, and we told her that we wanted to keep it that way. As we started the interviews, we received different reactions from them. Most of them were pissed off about our sudden appearance, saying that they found it inappropriate, and they are going to report it to their parents. Many others were very sad about Veronica's death. Some were crying

during the interview, some others were afraid of even admitting to the fact that they knew Veronica. They were Veronica's classmates, but they said that they'd just heard her name in the class after her disappearance without knowing her or having any interactions with her before. Other than such a disturbingly reaction to Veronica's name, no one said anything interesting or unusual. Veronica was a very quiet girl. In fact, not so many people even knew that she existed before she went missing. No one knew anything about any party either. But Beth's name came up several times when we asked about Veronica's close friends.

“They used to be very closed, but at some point, they drew apart,” one classmate said.

“It must have been Elizabeth Clark who gave her those drugs. She is close to a boy who sells drugs in town,” another student said when we asked her about the drugs and who might have given them to Veronica, but she didn't tell us the boy's name.

I waited the whole day to interview Beth. It was a boring day. Morin was as bored as me, but he was used to the process. We must have interviewed any possible person, but he wasn't as irritated as me, I guess.

I don't know how long had passed, but it felt like forever until we finally got to Beth. I figured Morin was waiting for this moment as much as I was. Beth didn't notice it. I found her a little distanced. Like her mind wasn't there. She had dark hair and blue eyes. I recognized a mole next to her left eye which reminded me of Sherilyn Fenn's character in *Twin Peaks*. I had never noticed that before or probably I hadn't looked at her that closely. Beth had the habit of playing with her fingers. She was fidgety. Her jagged nails proved that she also bit her fingernails.

We were using one of the classrooms in the biology department for interviews. Beth came in and sat down in front of us. Quiet, gentle. Her footsteps did not make a sound. Like she was walking on air. Morin was standing in one corner. I pressed the recording button.

“What is that?” Beth asked.

“A recorder,” I said.

“I know. I can see it is a recorder, but why are you recording this?” she added.

“It helps me remember the details later,” I said. She sat quietly.

“What’s your name?” Morin asked to start the conversation. She cleared her throat.

“Elizabeth Eleanor Clark. Everybody calls me Beth,” she replied.

“Would you please tell us how you knew Veronica Amin?” Morin asked.

“She was my classmate. We shared almost every class. We were both first-year students,” she replied.

“Ok, so do you mean that you were very close to each other?” he continued.

“Not very close, but yeah. We spent so much time together,”

“But your classmates told us that you were close?” I asked.

“I don’t know what other people thought, but as I said, we were spending a lot of time together. We might have looked very close to each other,”

“Were you spending much time together before she disappeared?” I asked.

“Not that much,”

“Why not?” I asked.

“We were busy working on our finals for the past few weeks...before she disappeared” she stopped for a moment. Then continued hesitantly. Like she was afraid of saying the actual words.

“Have you ever noticed something off in her lately? Like something bothering her?” said Morin.

“No, she was the same as usual,” she said as she turned her head to look at me. Her eyes seemed watery, and tired.

“If you weren’t spending that much time together, how do you know that she was like always?” Morin asked.

“I don’t know. I mean I didn’t notice anything unusual,” she replied.

“So, you mean that she seemed like usual the night at the party?” I asked. Beth looked at me, her blue eyes were wide open. Taken aback. She looked back at Morin. Morin stayed expressionless, as usual.

“W...What party?” she said, looking at me again.

“The party the night before Veronica disappeared,” I replied. She kept her eyes on me. Unable to speak a word.

“I...I don’t know what you are talking about,” she finally answered. Her big eyes welled with tears, but she kept them from falling. I leaned toward her.

“People saw you at the party. I wouldn’t lie if I were you,” I continued.

“I’m not lying. Please, I have a headache. I have to go home,” she rubbed her temple.

“Or maybe you gave her the drugs. Did you do drugs at the party? Was your boyfriend with you that night?”

“I didn’t give her the drugs and he is not boyfriend,” she said impetuously, rage surging in her eyes. Tears on her cheeks.

“Who gave her the drugs then?” Morin asked.

“It wasn’t me,” she said. At this point, she was fumbling with her fingers.

“Sorry, I can only believe that if you tell me who it was,” I said.

“David Hall,” she said. I was about to ask the next question, but she interrupted me.

“Probably you have to ask her asshole father about the drugs,” she ranted. Morin walked closer.

“Did he know about the drugs?” asked Morin.

“Well, I guess because he was the reason she got into drugs. He is a piece of shit. Ever since she went disappeared, I always thought that he had something to do with it,” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell us any of these before then,” I accused her.

“Well, as I told you, he is a crazy person. I didn’t want to put myself at risk,”

“Did Veronica tell you that he was treating her badly?” asked Morin.

“All the time. He is a control freak. He didn’t leave her alone even for a second,”

“Did they ever fight?” I asked.

“Constantly. I remember once he hit her so badly. She asked me to spend the night at our place. She was afraid of him. Afraid of going back home,”

“Did you let her stay at your place?”

“I did, but I was the only person who knew about this stuff. She was afraid that her father might have killed her if she had told anyone about not going home some nights,”

Suddenly the door opened and Mr. Chapman, the director of the department, appeared in the doorframe.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you officers, but Beth’s mother is on the phone. She wants to talk to her immediately. She said it’s urgent,”

Beth gathered her stuff quickly and rushed out of the room. Leaving us with more questions than before.

It was a beautiful day, and I was a little boy. Running in a Cornfield. Chasing after another boy. I could just see the back of his head, but that was enough for me to recognize him. To figure that I knew him for a long time. Maybe my whole life. His soft brown hair was jumping up and down in the air. His hands were touching the yellow corn. We were both laughing. We found a butterfly. We went after it. Laughing louder than before.

I could feel the warmth of the golden sunlight on my skin. I looked up. The sky was as clear as crystal. Bluer than the sea. In the woods nearby, birds were chirping, flying after each other. Jumping from one branch to another. Everything seemed calm. Quiet. Peaceful. It seemed like we were the only people in the world, enjoying every moment of it.

“Michael!” I heard a woman calling my name. Loud and clear. I stopped running. My eyes moved far away, searching for her. I saw her in the distance, walking away into the woods. She was wearing a long black dress. Her steps seemed inconsistent. Like she was struggling to walk. She turned her face from me before she disappeared into the woods, brushing her hand against the trunks of the trees. Like a painter rubbing their brush against the canvas. I knew her from somewhere. It was Veronica, but not exactly as she used to be. She looked older. Much older than her. She was standing so far away from me, but I could see her smiling at me before she walked out of my vision. I looked back at the boy. He was still running, laughing, enjoying himself in the golden cornfield. But Veronica kept calling me. Her soft voice was coming from among the trees. Dark. Desolate.

The boy disappeared from vision. Veronica’s voice turned into a scream.

“Michael?” she shrieked. I was about to run after her, but I stopped. I saw a familiar scene. Two eyes. Shining, staring at me from above the trees. I finally took my first step, but I was stopped soon. Something strong grabbed me. Held me by the wrist. It took a moment till I realized the heaviness of a big masculine hand on my body.

I opened my eyes, finding myself lying on the ground in the woods. I don't know which one. My face was toward the sky. Above my head, trees were trembling in harmony, hiding the dark gloomy sky from my vision. My numb hands were touching the snow. I heard the river roaring in the distance. I didn't know where I was exactly. I tried desperately to remember, but I couldn't. It was pitch dark. Like the sun was never going to rise. It took me some time to hear my phone. My hand went into my pocket, but I couldn't find it. My body felt so heavy, Like something was pulling me down under the ground. An acute pain abruptly flashed inside my wrist as I was fumbling for my phone on the ground. I finally found it.

“Where the hell are you? I've been calling you all day,” said Morin as soon as I picked up.

“What's up?” I said.

“Somebody found fingerprints and DNA samples on it,” he said.

“Where?” I asked.

“In a dumpster near where the body was found. The results are gonna take three days. Get back as soon as you can. And don't disappear on me again,”

He hung up before I could say another word. I plopped back on the ground, groaning in pain, but happy that Morin was not with me this time. I didn't know what the hell happened this time. Did I see something again? I struggled to get on my feet. My head was spinning. I looked

around. It was so dark, but my eyes were adjusted to the darkness now. It must have been the woods close to the Fish River. My eyes kept searching around for something more. Finally, I saw a light penetrating the dark in the distance. I followed the light into the woods. As I got closer, I could hear a car running. I recognized the car as soon as I walked closer. It was my car. Left in the middle of the woods. Abandoned. The door to the driver's seat was open. I got into my car and turned the heater on. Then I saw a piece of paper, resting on the front seat. It said, "Doctor Ellen Morgan," with her phone number. It was the psychologist. I remembered Morin gave me her number. I totally had forgotten about her, and I was wondering what it was doing on my front seat. I didn't recall putting it there. I folded the paper and tucked it into my pocket. As I was driving out of the woods, I saw the sun rising on the horizon.

Joe Hall was a jerk and David was his brat boy. My father knew Joe and his family for years. His wife had died three years ago of breast cancer, leaving him and his son behind. David was well-known for being a hard kid, but I guess he got worse ever since his mother's death. He was famous for throwing parties late at night and there were some rumors that people were using drugs in his parties. But it was never proven. Neighbors always complained a lot. Joe had become protective of him ever since. Once Joe's neighbor, a retired couple from Canada, reported some noises coming from Joe's house while young people who were dressed up strangely constantly coming and going to the house, and that made them uncomfortable and concerned about their grandchildren. They used to have a pinto cat that they loved so much. She was called Annie. Not long after they talked to the chief about David and his parties, Annie went missing. A few days later, they found its body on their porch. A few months later, the retired couple, so afraid of Joe's next move, left the town and went back to Canada.

That was the thing about Joe. He had always been a bully, and he had always found a way to escape. Joe and David were known as troublemakers in Fort Kent. Probably worse people who ever lived in the town. No doubt about that, but I had no idea if they were capable of murder or not.

I got back home and walked straightly into the shower. I washed the dirt off my body as I tried to clear my head. The hot water ran into my hair, down onto my torso, then my knees, legs, and toes. A severe pain found its way into my bones as soon as my body surrendered to the heat.

The open wound on my forehead started burning at the touch of the warm water. I examined it with my fingers. The pain made me flinch. My twisted wrist was turning purple and blue.

I couldn't help but think about what was happening to me, struggling to remember the night before. I was wondering what made me go to the woods. How I got the wound on my head. Was I running? Did my head hit something? Why did I pass out? Or how did I hurt my wrist?

I finally got out of the shower. The pain got worse than ever. I wiped the fume off the mirror. The face in the mirror seemed unfamiliar to me. The wound on my forehead and the dark circles under my eyes made my face look like a total stranger to me. The wound was small but deep. I could see the red flesh through the cut skin. I covered it with my hair and checked the cabinet of my bathroom for some sedatives, but I found none. I wrapped the towel around my waist. Got into my workroom and checked the drawers. I always had some painkillers in my work desk drawers. But I found none. Instead, I found a huge pile of newspapers. Old ones. I flipped through them. Some parts were circled. There were notes written next to them. It was my handwriting, but I didn't remember writing any of those. I was frustrated. Embrangled. More than ever. My head was pounding. As if my brain was scratching its way out of my skull.

Reading the notes made me feel even dizzier. Some of them were illegible to me. Like somebody else had written them and I had to decipher them. I read different headings about suspects and crimes that were committed by knives in Austin, Texas. All were published in local papers. I skipped through different papers, but I couldn't even concentrate. My headache was interfering with any mental activity. Then another headline struck me. A report. I circled it several times.

“The body of a young girl, stabbed to death, was found in a suitcase across Colorado River in Austin, Texas,” the headline said. But that most shocking part came in three words, “A Severed Hand,” Highlighted in the middle of the report.

There was a snowstorm warning the whole day. Elina called me and invited me over for dinner that evening. She was my sister, or it is better to say my half-sister. Our father, Edward Kelley, was married twice and we came from different women. After Elina's mother died, he married again to my mother. My mom died when I was a three-year-old boy. He showed me a picture of her when I turned seventeen, telling me that she was a very intelligent and passionate woman. That they were great friends, and she loved me so much.

Elina and I never talked about our mothers. Not that we weren't that close. In fact, we were closer than most brothers and sisters. I guess because it reminded us of sad memories. Of our mothers' death.

Elina was six years older than me. She was an exceptional woman. Blond, tall, smart. I was always jealous of her intelligence although Ed never treated us differently. She was a social person. Somebody that you would enjoy being with. On the contrary, I was a very quiet boy. You couldn't understand by looking at us that we were related by blood. I had dark hair and dark eyes.

Elina was also good at her job. She was a nurse. Probably the best one in town. Working at the local hospital. She was friends with almost everybody.

Anyway, I already had rejected her invitation several times because I was busy with the case. I had to go this time otherwise Brian, her seven-year-old son, would be upset. She clarified that when she called. I was still thinking about what Rebecca said and what Beth said about Veronica's father. It was difficult to recognize who is telling the truth and who is not. What is real and what is made up? Reality had always been elusive. One thing that I learned as a

psychology student was that there was no reality. Just different perspectives. Mostly, I couldn't trust teenagers and young people. Weird things were going on among them that we might never know. But anyway, I had to forget all about it for now; keep them at bay and sit at a dinner table with Elina, Brian, and his father, Charlie.

When I get to Elina's place, it was dark. Almost Seven pm. The sun had set for two hours. Elina asked me to be there earlier, but I couldn't. Reading the files and reviewing the information that we had from Beth took me more than I expected. When I got the chance to look at my phone, I already had two missed calls from Elina. I texted her to let her know that I was going to be late. There was a winter storm warning that night in Fort Kent. Small heavy snowflakes were promising the harsh weather ahead. When my car pulled up in front of my sister's car, I could see a little shadow running to the front door. Brian appeared in the doorway. I could see the excitement in his eyes as my headlights illuminated his small chubby face.

"Brian, Get back inside. You are gonna catch a cold," I heard Elina's voice coming from inside the house.

I got out of my car.

"Uncle Mike," said Brian in his joying voice. That was the moment I realized how much I've had missed him. Behind him, Elina appeared, resting one shoulder against the doorway. I knew what she was waiting for, an apology and explanation.

"Sorry, I'm late. I was busy," I said while slamming my car door.

"Oh yeah, we know that you are always busy," said she, emphasizing on "always." She then stretched her hand toward Brian and tell him to go inside.

“You’re gonna get cold,” she repeated. We walked inside. I kissed Brian on his pink cheek. He locked his arms around my neck and squeezed it as hard as he could.

“Mike, welcome,” said Charlie, walking into the room. He had his usual smile on his face. Charlie was an assistant professor at the University of Fort Kent. He was half American half Canadian teaching Computer Systems Administration. We shook hands. Elina got my coat, and I sat down with Charlie and Brian. It didn’t take Charlie much time since he started asking all kinds of questions about the case when also he was trying not to mention the murder in front of Brian. He was mostly fascinated with the technology used to solve crimes nowadays. Brian was so excited to see me that he didn’t pay attention to any of our words. He showed me different types of Origami that he had learned to make at school. Our conversation was interrupted by Elina.

“Dinner is ready,” she said, carrying a weird smile on her face. She had the habit of doing so whenever she was nervous. I knew that from the old times when we were little kids. But I didn’t know what was bothering her.

My stomach started grumbling. I hadn’t eaten till eleven that morning. I was busy working. All of a sudden, I was so happy to be there. Elina was the best cook ever. I could smell French Onion Soup with buttered toast. It was one of my favorites. Elina made great soups.

We were sitting around the table. Brian sat beside me. Not letting anyone else get close to me while couldn’t stop talking about his new origami skills. I couldn’t wait any longer, so I just dug into the soup and filled myself with chicken and mashed potato.

After finishing our meal, Brian and I went back to the living room. Brian was teaching how to make a bird with a piece of paper. Charlie was helping Elina in the kitchen. I saw one of my old books on the table when Brian was busy making the origami bird. *The Mask of Sanity:*

An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues about the So-Called Psychopathic Personality by Hervey M. Cleckley. One of the books that I used to read for one of my undergrad courses in psychology. I picked it up and flipped through it. Then there was another one. Deckle edged. *Mindhunter*. A book written by John Douglas. I recognized my notes. I almost forgot about these books since Dad's illness. He died less than two months ago, after fighting cancer for more than six years. The pain was as fresh as the day we learned about his diagnosis.

"Where did you get these from?" I asked. Elina walked into the living room.

"What? Oh, I found them at Dad's. Charlie is reading them," she replied. She shook her head as a sign of dissatisfaction. She picked up an empty plate and disappeared into the kitchen again.

"Yeah, I found them very interesting, especially your notes," Charlie yelled from the kitchen.

"Have you been to Dad's house lately?" I asked.

"Yes," said Elina.

"Why didn't you tell me? I wanted to come," I said.

"Why do you wanna come?" she said as she reappeared in the doorway.

"I have stuff there that I can use, you know. Like these," I raised the book.

"Well, I don't think that is a good idea, Mike," she replied, drying a bowl with a napkin.

"I think you went through a lot after father's illness and death," she said, and she went back to the kitchen. But I was ok most of the time.

It was close to nine and I was ready to leave. I had to get up early in the morning, and Brian was only allowed to sit with us till that hour because of me and because it was a weekend.

For a moment, I regretted those days when I could have rested during the weekends, but that was not the case anymore. I had to work constantly. From daylight to nightfall. Even before the sun goes up. Brian taught me a little bit of origami. His eyes were shining with joy as he was doing so. He was in the middle of making a special one for me. I told him that he could finish it the next time I stopped by and gave it to me, but he insisted to finish it that night. I was at the front door, saying goodnight to Elina and Charlie when Brian ran to the door at the last minute.

“I did it. I did it,” he said jumping up and down on his feet. In his little hands, I saw the Origami that he made for me. It looked like a bird. A bigger kind. I asked him what kind of bird it was. He said he didn’t know exactly.

“Look, I finished it,” he said to me. Joyful. I took it. Kissed him on the cheek and got into my car. It was freezing outside, and the snowstorm was just beginning.

The night rushed to take over before the sun completely set. It was a long day. I spent most of it reading pieces of newspapers kept hidden in my drawers. According to what I read, Ahmed could be the killer, but something inside me said otherwise. Was it a sixth sense? I didn't know, but something made me hesitate if a father would have targeted girls like their own daughter and murdered them in that horrible way. It didn't make sense to me. It was obvious that Ahmed was in Texas when similar disappearances and murders happened. Other girls vanished before the last one. They were never found, and it is pretty much likely that they were dead.

"A Serial Killer is Walking on Austin's Streets," another title said after several girls went missing. Ahmed was in Austin when similar cases happened. The police caught him with a knife at a bar. Saying this to others, they would have concluded that it was Ahmed. No doubt about that. But still, I wanted to make sure of other possibilities until the fingerprint results came in. So, I went back to Beth and Rebecca. Something was going on with them that I had to know before accusing Ahmed.

It was past noon when I found Rebecca's place. She was living on Pleasant Street. Not so far away from Ahmed's house. I went to her place. Her roommate opened the door. She was a chubby girl, who hardly fit in the doorframe. She was in the middle of something.

"Yes?" she said.

"Is Rebecca home?" I asked.

"No, she went to visit her parents in Oklahoma for Spring Break."

"When will she come back?" I asked.

"When Spring break ends?" she shrugged.

“Did you know Veronica Amin?” I asked. Her expression changed as soon as she heard the name. Her eyebrows intertwined.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know anything about her. I must go,” she said before she hastily closed the door. The reaction was weird, but it seemed normal to me then. I got used to it after the interviews.

The town seemed empty at this time of the year. Most students left town for the break. I drove to Swamp Buck Restaurant where Beth worked, hoping that she might be there, but no sign of her either. She usually worked there in the afternoons till dusk.

I felt hungry and the pain in my wrist was killing me. I needed to relax for a little bit, so I sat at a table. Danny came to me. The scratches on his arm were healing, but he was still hiding them under long sleeves.

“What happened to your arm Danny?” I asked, out of the blue. He was so surprised that I noticed it.

“Um, just fell down the stairs. Isn’t it silly?” he let out a nervous chuckle.

“Are you here to see Beth?” he continued like.

“Yes, is she working today?”

“She is not here now, but I can ask if she is gonna come later. Do you want the usual?” he said. Like he was in a hurry to go away. I nodded and he walked back to the bar, didn’t wait for me to ask anything new and I didn’t intend to. The pain wasn’t letting me.

I closed my eyes for a bit and listened to the soft music playing in the background. Letting it fondle my ears. Helping me forget the pain. More people were coming for drinks. I saw several young girls and boys sitting at the bar, drinking and laughing. A girl caught my attention. She was sitting at the bar with the boys. Her dark wavy hair came down to her shoulders,

covering her delicate neck. My heart crumpled as she turned her face and smiled at me. She looked exactly like Veronica with dark hair. I couldn't breathe as she kept her gaze on me.

I don't know how long had passed before a touch on my skin startled me.

"Mr. Kelly?" I heard someone saying. It was Danny.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," he continued.

"Oh, it's ok," I said, gathering myself. My eyes interlocked with another woman's gaze, sitting at a table next to me. She laughed softly.

"I think she is not gonna be here today. She has left town," he said. My food was ready on the table. A cloud of steam was rising from my plate.

"Can I have another glass of water please," I asked. Danny nodded and walked away quickly. I looked at the girl with dark wavy hair again. She turned her head completely and called the waiter. When she was talking to the waiter, I got a better view of her face. Beautiful visage. She had a round face with round eyes and narrow lips. Very different from Veronica. I felt the blood running back into my veins when I figured I was mistaken.

I didn't look directly, but I felt a gaze on my body. It was the woman at the other table. She was checking me out constantly. I dared to look at her directly. She threw a flirty glance at me. She looked very beautiful in her red dress matching her auburn hair, parted in the middle. There was a gentle smile on her face. I responded her smile with a smile.

Danny came back with a glassy pitcher full of water, poured some into my glass, and walked away.

"Do you mind if I sit with you?" the woman asked. My mind was still occupied with Veronica's vision.

"Not at all," I said, taking a sip of water.

“Are you new in town? Haven’t seen you before?” I said.

“Do you know everybody in town?” she asked.

“Almost,” I said, digging into my plate.

“Impressive,”

“Not very. This is a very small town and I’ve lived here most of my life,” I said. She smiled.

“By the way, I am Hannah Smith,” she offered her hand for a shake.

“Michael Kelly,” I said. I shook her hand with a swift move.

“Oh, what happened to your hand?” she asked, her eyes fixated on my bruises. I pulled my hand back. Felt the pain. She could see it in my face.

“Can I take a look?” she asked. I looked at her, hesitant.

“Why?”

“I am a nurse. Probably I can help you with the pain,” she continued.

I held out my hand for her to look at, still wondering how I could have got those bruises from my dreams. Or was it even a dream? I threw another glance at the purple flesh. It proved the opposite. Was it real? She took my hand softly and examined it for a moment. Her touch was so warm.

“Do you know my sister? She is a nurse too.”

“I doubt it. I just got in town. I have something that can help you with the pain,” she said.

“Thanks, but I think I don’t need any...”

Another wave of piercing pain went through my wrist into my bones. Acute and sharper than ever. It didn’t allow me to finish my sentence. But the pain was not the only thing that penetrated my body. Her gaze, as incisive as the ache, pervaded my body, cut it open like a

bygone stitched wound. She kept stroking my hand gently. I could feel her finger running in between mine. She held onto my bruised wrist and pulled me up. I groaned gently as the pain stabbed me like a knife and threw some money on the table before I followed her like a subservient to the front door.

Hannah's place looked cozy but unarranged. Her living room was filled with big boxes sitting on the floor, waiting to be opened. Hannah put her purse on the couch.

"Please, make yourself at home," said Hannah before leaving me, prancing into another room. Her bedroom I supposed. The door clicked closed behind her. A dim light was illuminating the place. My eyes examined her apartment. There was a small TV on one side, and a big couch on the other side of the room. A pleasant Vanillin odor filled the air. I felt it instantly as I stepped inside.

I found an open box filled with books. I checked it out. Anatomy stuff. *Gray's Anatomy*, *Human Anatomy* by Martini Tallitsch Nath, *Netter Atlas of Human Anatomy*. Another box was filled with novels. *Crime and Punishment*, *American Psycho*, *Gone Girl*. I took *Gone Girl* out of the box and flipped through it. She walked back into the living room. Barefoot.

"Are you into psychology?" I asked her. She was holding a wooden box.

"Very much," she responded in her normal soft tone. She sat on the couch. I sat next to her. The book was still in my hand. She opened the box and took out an ointment with a bandage.

Her hand was requesting mine. Her face was half-lightened by the side lamp. She looked even more beautiful under the golden light. I felt her familiar touch on my rough skin. The pain made me wince and pulled my hand back. She took it again, gently, and continued robbing. Her soft touch made the pain go away instantly.

"Have you read it," she asked when she opened the box.

"No, did you?" I asked, keeping my eyes on her. She nodded.

“Did you like it?” I said.

“It’s my favorite book,” she replied. I felt the cold ointment as she rubbed it against my purple skin. She stared back at me, moving closer. A golden light was burning in her eyes as she pressed her Vanillin lips against mine. Sweet and smooth. Setting my frozen body on fire.

The evidence found in the desolated house shocked the whole city. The autopsy reports identified five severed hands. All belonged to five different female victims around seventeen to twenty-five. All disappeared around the last five years. The police department was rocked with more complaints against Sam Dickinson. Crazy rumors started to spread. A woman accused him of stalking her daughter, claiming that she caught him watching her daughter walking to school several times. Another family even accused him of attacking their seven-year-old daughter. Even though none of the victims were around that age. Another parent referred to him as a killer who was walking freely in the neighborhood for many years. He claimed to have seeing him around the abandoned house around the time young girls were missing. The police haven't verified any of those claims yet.

The case got more twists and turns as the police found out that the blood on Dickinson's did not belong to any of those female victims. It belonged to an unidentified man. But the DNA results suggested some blood connection between Dickinson and the male victim. As Dickinson's behavior swung between reticence and delirium throughout the interviews, the police asked us to initiate a study on him.

I don't remember what time of day it was when Morin called me.

"Ahmed met with Joe Hall the day after Veronica went missing," Morin said.

"How did you find out?" I asked.

"I'll explain later. Just come to the station. You are late. The fingerprint results are gonna come in today," he said and hung up.

"Shit," I whispered under my breath. Being late was the last thing that I ever wanted. Chief Whitman was already angry about Nina. I washed my face and walked out as quickly as possible. Finally, a warm sunny day. It was so pleasant to see people outside after a long period of cold snowy weather.

Walls of plowed snow from last night defined the edges of the streets. Heavy snow from last night was covering my driveway.

"Shit," I said again. The snow was not helping me to get to the station any time sooner. I got out of my car and started shoveling till I could drive my car out of my garage. I drove into Pleasant Street. Turned into Savage Street. Neighbors were cleansing their driveways. A girl was running.

When I drove into West Main Street, I got a clear view of Saint John River. Icy as always. Even the sun couldn't melt it. Veronica and her frozen dead body in the river came into my mind again. Making me imagine Nina and her frozen body somewhere in the water. Just like Veronica. The clear vision made me get goosebumps all over my body. My eyes avoided the icy water.

When I got to the station, I recognized Sarah's car. She was coming to the station almost every day. Impatient. Disturbed.

As I set foot in the station, I could see her through the glass window. She was talking to Morin and Chief Whitman. Morin's face looked tense. Fretted. He looked impatient too.

Chief Whitman was sitting behind his desk, listening to the conversation. The tension was hanging in the air. They stopped when I stepped inside. Mrs. Fischer turned her head to take a quick look at me. Her eyes were revealing the pain she was carrying inside. I saw pictures of her husband's burial site. He had been dead for at least three years. A car accident. Out of Sarah's curiosity, Chief Whitman contacted his friends in New Mexico to make sure that Nina cannot be there.

"Where is my Nina then?" Mrs. Fischer asked. Whitman threw a glance at Morin. Morin was looking at the floor, hands at his waist. She sobbed.

"We still don't know," Morin said. Mrs. Fischer looked back at me, standing at the door.

"You think she is dead too?" she said.

"We shouldn't give up hope," Whitman stopped, rummaging through every word before it came out of his mouth.

"But that's very possible," he continued. Mrs. Fischer fell on the chair, holding her face in her hand. A tense moment passed in silence.

Morin's phone made noises. He walked out of the room. I followed him.

"Yes?" he said into the phone. His expression changed drastically.

"Let's go," he said to me.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Ahmed's," he replied when he grabbed his coat and walked out of the door.

The cold morning breeze was fondling my cheeks. My body was swaying back and forth in the cool water. I opened my eyes. The water was matching the blue sky. Birds were flying above, and I was floating on the water. Waves were growling on the shore, defining the ocean's boundary. But everything was at peace. The trees surrendered themselves to the wind. Like my body to the ocean. They were dancing with every breeze. My relaxed muscles made me a part of the water. The cool fresh air entered my lungs as I took a deep breath.

I closed my eyes again. Time passed before something broke the peace inside me. A woman splashed out of the water, permeating the glassy surface of the ocean. She glanced at me before swimming back to the shore. It was Veronica. Her long hair was swirling with every wave. Her naked skin started glowing under the sun when she walked out of the water. Smooth. As if she was made of glass. So delicate. Like it was about to shatter under my heavy look.

“Are you ok, Kelly?” I heard Morin, calling me.

“Yes, yes,” I replied quickly. I was staring at a painting in Ahmed's living room. It was a copy of Ophelia by John Everett Millais. It depicted a woman, lying in the water. Eyes were half-open as if she was looking at the sky. Her mouth was just kissed by death. Behind me, two officers were taking Ahmed out of the house in handcuffs. Forensic guys were at work. Turning Ahmed's house upside down for other knives or weapons that could have been used for Veronica's murder.

“I have to tell you something,” I said to Morin.

“What?” he said. I handed him the piece of newspaper that I found in my drawer.

“Where did you get this from?” he asked.

“I don’t know,”

“What do you mean you don’t know,”

“I found it in my drawer. I don’t remember putting it there,”

“Are you serious? Are there more stuff that you can’t remember?” he asked. I nodded.

“Did you call the number that I gave you?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I said as I was about to turn away, but he grabbed my hand. He noticed the bruises when I groaned in pain.

“What happened to your hand?”

“I don’t remember that either,”

“Did you forget about our arraignment?” his voice raised a little bit, but he controlled it.

“I did not,” I said as I pulled my hand out of his and walked away.

We walked into the interrogation room. Ahmed was waiting for about half an hour. He seemed calm and quiet. Looking at a blank spot on the floor. He kept his handcuffed hands under the table, clutched intensely.

“Before we start, do you want anything?” Morin asked.

“No,” he replied, eyes unmoving.

“Ok then,” Morin said. He let out a big sigh.

“But yes. I want water,” he said. Morin left the room and came back with a bottle. He put it on the table and slid it to Ahmed. He took a sip.

“Do you know why you were arrested?” Morin asked. He swallowed the water. Did not say a word.

Morin threw the plastic bag with the knife on the table. Ahmed's eyebrows raised. The muscles in his jaw became tense. His face looked solemn.

"Do you recognize this knife? It has your fingerprints on it. And Veronica's DNA," Morin said.

"I want to talk to a lawyer," he said.

"What did you do after Veronica went missing?" I asked.

"I told you before," he replied.

"Why don't you tell us again?" Morin said.

"I worked until five. Got back home. Veronica was not there. I called her. Many many times. No response. So, I went to her friends. Searched for her everywhere,"

"What did you do the day after?" Morin asked.

"I called the police,"

"What did you do after that?" Morin kept asking.

"I kept searching for her. Asking more people about her,"

"Who did you talk to that day?" I asked.

"I don't remember exactly," he replied.

"Why don't you try?" Morin pressed him. He thought a little bit.

"I went to Swamp Buck. Talked to Beth and the boy,"

"Danny?" I said. He nodded.

"Who else?" Morin said.

"No one,"

"Are you sure? You didn't visit Joe Hall for example?" Morin said. Ahmed fell quiet.

"Yeah, I asked him about her too,"

“Was that all?”

“That was all,”

“But a pal of mine works at Mooseshack. He said he saw you there giving this knife to Joe,” he slid the knife in front of him. Ahmed stayed quiet, looking at his feet.

“Did you ask him to do something to Veronica?” Morin said in an accusing tone. His eyes were filled with contempt.

“No, never,” Ahmed said. He got emotional and his voice raised.

“I think you are lying. You offered him the knife to do something with it. Probably to scare Veronica to come back home. But when Joe didn’t accept, you did it yourself and it didn’t end the way you wanted,”

“No, I never hurt my daughter,” he yelled. We sat there for a while.

“I want a lawyer,” he repeated calmly.

Intense music was playing loudly as we pulled up in front of Joe's house. I knocked on the door. No response. Morin stuck his neck out to look into the garage where a car was parked. I heard jolting noises from inside the house. I knocked on the door again. Harder. Footsteps came to the front door. The door cracked open, and David appeared in the slot.

"What?" he said.

"Hi, David. Is your dad in town?" I asked.

"No, he is not here. What's up?" he replied.

"Where is he then?"

"Canada," he said.

"Actually, we want to talk to you, David," Morin asked.

"What's this about? I have to pick up my friend from the station," David said.

"Nothing serious. Just a few questions about Veronica," Morin said.

"Sorry. I didn't know her," he said as he was about to close the door, but Morin stepped into the doorway.

"Not so fast kiddo,"

"I said I knew nothing about her, now let go of my door," David fumed.

"And I will get you arrested for selling drugs to kids," said Morin. A loud clang noise from inside interrupted our conversation.

"Who is there with you?" Morin asked.

"No one. Just a friend," David replied rashly. I looked through the slot and saw somebody on the floor.

“Step away from the door David,” I said, drawing my sidearm.

“I said step away,” I yelled. Morin lost his patience. He kicked the door open. David fell on the floor on his back. A young girl was lying on the ground. Face down. Unconscious. By a look at her face, I felt that I knew her from somewhere. I turned her loose body aside to get a better look. It was Rebecca Jules.

Rebecca was hospitalized. Multiple drugs were found in her system. The same ones that we found in Veronica's backpack. Doctors banned any interviews with her, so I bought a bouquet of purple tulips and went to visit her as one of her friends, hoping that no one would recognize me there. She was kept in the psychiatric facility at Northern Maine health center, located next to Saint John River. Not so far away from where we found Veronica's lifeless body. I parked my car in the parking lot. The river looked calm. The freezing breeze was a testament to its cold brutality. I rushed to the building, hunched in my clothes. I took the stairs to the second floor where the psychiatric department was.

"Can I help you sir?" said a nurse sitting behind the counter.

"Hello. I am here to visit Rebecca Jules," I replied.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Michael Kelly," I replied. She checked the name in the system.

"I'm sorry Mr. Kelly. Miss Jules is not allowed to visit anyone. Except for close family members," she said. Her eyes were on the monitor.

"It's ok Mary. I know him. He is her brother," I heard somebody said. She was a middle-aged woman, in her fifties, wearing a white uniform and holding a file in her hand. By looking at her, I could say that she was a doctor. She had sharp eyes with a nice motherly smile.

"Sorry, I didn't know that. Let me show you her room," she pushed her chair back to get up, but the woman stopped her.

"No need Mary, I can show him the way," the woman said. She nodded. She walked to the hallway, and I followed him.

“Who are you? How do you know me?” I asked.

“My name is Ellen Morgan,”

“Did Morin talk to you about me?” I said.

“He did. I was waiting for you, but you never showed up,” she replied. We turned into another hallway. The sound of her high heels hitting the floor broke the silence.

“I’ve been very busy,”

“Never so busy to neglect your own health,”

She finally stopped in front of a room, and turned to me.

“This is her room, but before you go in, you have to promise to visit me as soon as you can,” she said.

“Ok,” I replied. She smiled. I thanked her.

“See you soon,” she said as she walked away. I watched her disappear in the hallway before my hand touched the doorknob. I knocked slowly, No response. Then I squeezed the doorknob open and stepped inside.

Rebecca was in deep sleep. I checked out the room when I was waiting for her to wake up. A small table in the corner was filled with flowers. Cards from family and friends. I put the bouquet next to the others and read some of the cards. One of them was from David and Joe.

“Dear Rebecca,

We are sorry.

From David with and Joe with Love” the card said. I was wondering whose handwriting it was. Was it Joe’s? Or was it David himself?

“Oh my God, who are you?” Rebecca almost shouted, ready to jump out of bed.

“Just relax. It’s me. Remember?” I asked her and stepped closer.

“Don’t come any closer,” she said. I stopped where I was.

“You talked to me about Veronica once. You told me about the party. Do you remember?” I said. Her face was ablaze with fear.

“Please, just leave. I don’t know anything,”

“Don’t worry. I can keep you safe. Just tell me what happened with David,”

“Please leave. I can’t help you,” she begged, her face shuddering, sweaty. Tears glittered in her eyes.

“Why not?” I asked. Her lips remained sealed.

“Just tell me what happened?” I asked. She shook her head.

“I don’t want to die,” She said.

“Nobody is gonna do that to you,”

“They drugged me,” she got hysterical.

“What were you doing at David’s?”

“He is my cousin. He asked me to come over. We had some drinks, and used some drugs. That’s it,”

“Is he? Why didn’t you tell me before that you are related?”

“Didn’t come up and I was afraid. I wanted to leave as soon as possible,”

“So, you mean, he didn’t drug you,”

“No, it was an accident, now would you please leave?” she said. I gently walked closer and sat next to her on the bed.

“There is no need to be scared. We can protect you,” I said. She burst into tears and hid her face inside her hands.

“David is in Custody. He can’t get to you anymore,” I said. She wiped her wet face with her hands.

“Oh, David is just a kid. He can’t do anything,” she replied.

“Who are you afraid of then?”

“Joe,” she whispered. Like she was afraid that somebody might hear us.

“And his manipulative girlfriend,” she continued, in a lower voice than before.

“Who is his girlfriend?”

“Beth,” she said. The name resonated in my ears. I pictured them together. Even the thought made me uncomfortable.

“Why are you afraid of them?”

“Sorry, I can’t tell you more and this conversation never happened,” she said.

For almost a week, I followed Beth everywhere. It helped me learn her routine. She had classes at the university every other morning. In the evenings, she worked at the restaurant. She usually was at home before eight pm. She took a shower, had a light meal, and went straight to bed around nine-thirty.

It was Saturday night. People, mostly college students, were going out for the weekend with their friends. I knew that Beth was no different than the others. About an hour after she got back from work, she headed outside. She was all dressed up, wearing a long black dress, mild make-up, and carrying a brown handbag. The weather was better than yesterday. The sky was clear, and the moon was shining.

Little light bulbs from house windows were illuminating the streets when Beth got into her car. I followed her all the way to a far-off restaurant. A Mexican one with huge glassy windows. I could see her easily through them. She took off her coat and sat behind a table next to the window. I waited in my car. My face was too familiar for the place.

About fifteen minutes later, I saw the headlights of an approaching car. It pulled over in front of the restaurant and a broad-shouldered man got out of the car and headed into the restaurant. By looking at the back of his head in the dark I could tell it was Joe. His face was lightened as he stepped inside the restaurant. His hair was turning grey. He was in his mid-fifties now. Beth was a young girl. A college kid. So young for him. Beth wiggled in her chair as she saw him. Her face shined with a wide smile. He bent over and kissed her on the lips. My lips constricted with disgust.

“This is sick,” I said under my breath. Joe in front of Beth. They chatted and laughed occasionally.

An hour had passed before they left the restaurant. They kissed each other and parted ways. I followed Beth when she drove back home, and I pulled up in front of her house. I sneaked out of my car and hid behind the trunk of a thick tree for a better view. She got out of her car. I noticed something flashy around her neck. It was a golden heart-shaped necklace.

On October 15, 2023, Sam Dickinson attacked one of our nurses. The reason for the attack is still unknown. As the nurse, Julie Smith, explained to us, he attacked her when she was about to auscultate him. This is Dickinson's first sign of direct violence since he came to our facility. Surveillance cameras show how the attack happened. While the examination was going on, Dickinson steals a medical thermometer and uses it as a type of a cold weapon against her. After reexamining the tape, it became clear to us that Dickinson's attack was impulsive and not previously planned. He entered the room calmly and sat on the chair. No sign of anxiety was seen in Dickinson during or after the attack. Also, Dickinson was described by several nurses as "distanced" that morning. "He seemed not to be in the room," as one of our team members described him. He did not respond to any of the questions that Smith asked him at the time. He used to be famous for being well-behaved and gentle with everybody in our facility during his stay. He sat motionless for almost five minutes before he suddenly grabbed the medical thermometer and studded it into Smith's neck repeatedly. The result was a messy scene with Smith bleeding while clutching onto her neck. The attack gave Smith five stitches. It also gave all of us a chill. What happened to Dickinson at the time and what is going to happen next is a mystery that needs to be unfolded.

I was in the water, floating under the sky. The sun was burning in the middle of the sky. Tall trees were standing still on the horizon. Birds were sitting on the branches or flying above with their wings stretched open. Staying still in the heart of the sky. Floating. Like a painting.

A bird descended on the water's surface. Flapped its long black wings in the air before finally collecting them. Its body was moving back and forth with every wave. The bird thrust its beak into the water. Looking for bait. But immediately got interrupted by a woman floating in the water. Her dark hair was curly like Veronica's, but her skin was brighter, her eyes were bigger, and her lips looked smaller. Her dark pupils looked like two big diamonds.

She looked at me like Veronica did in my previous dream before she swam to the shore. Water dripped down her wet body when she moved out of the ocean. Her body was so slim. Her glassy skin looked as soft as silk.

A moment passed before a scream scared the birds away in waves. The sky instantly turned orange where it met the water. The leaves started falling down the trees. I looked back at the woman. Her naked skin turned white as she walked away. Like a marble statute. Scars started to appear, like the ones on Veronica's body. They gradually turned into open wounds. Blood streamed out of them. The sky flashed in front of my eyes.

The next thing I felt was the taste of mud in my mouth. Water was flowing next to my body. I was, again, lying down on the muddy snow, in the woods. Faced down. Ice was floating gently on the water's surface. I groaned and rolled in the snow, spitting the mud out of my mouth. A little bit numb. As usual. But I forgot all about the mud in my mouth when I saw an

abandoned suitcase sitting close to the river. My heart started to pump fast again. My hands were searching for my phone, but I remembered leaving it in the car.

I jumped onto my feet. Numbness was all forgotten. The sudden move made my eyes go blank for a moment. I stumbled onto my feet. My vision got back. I walked to the suitcase. It was filled with mud. I dug into it, but nothing. I searched the area a little more. Walked up and down the riverbank till I saw something floating on the icy water. It was a body moving up and down with every wave.

I called Morin as soon as I found my car. It was parked exactly where it was the last time, I found myself in the woods.

“Where the hell have you been again Kelly?” he asked as soon as he picked up the phone.

“Listen, I think found Nina. She is still in the water” I said. My voice was shaky a little bit.

“What? Where?” he said.

“Come to Caribou Road. The body is dumped somewhere next to Fish River. I’ll send you my location,”

“Is she dead?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I waited next to my car for about half an hour. I was impatient, and nervous. I lighted a cigarette to calm myself. I finally saw Morin’s car approaching. Two other cars were following. When I looked at the front see, I figured he was not alone. Chief Whitman was sitting next to him. They got out of the car.

“Jesus Kelly, you look terrible. What happened to your head.

?” he said soon as he got out of the car.

“Shit,” I said under my breath. I was so nervous that I forgot to look at myself. I touched the healing wound on my forehead.

“I bumped into a tree the other day,”

“Which way?” asked Morin. I showed them the way. I ushered them into the woods toward where the body was. Officers and coroners got busy taking care of the body while Whitman was questioning me about my search. By the time we pulled Nina’s body out of water, the night was crawling into the woods.

My chest was heated by the warmth of another body. A nice feeling after a total nightmare. It was a relief to be in bed, not alone, after a bad dream.

Hannah moaned in bed, resting her head on my naked chest. I pushed her aside gently and got out of bed. I checked my phone. A message from Morin.

“Hamid called and said he wants to talk about Ahmed. I’m at Swamp Buck. Get here soon,” the message said. I dressed and drove there.

Morin was sitting behind a table alone. I was happy to get there before Hamid. Not much later, the door opened, and he walked in. Morin thanked him for talking to us when he sat with us.

“I couldn’t keep it to myself anymore. I had to tell it to you,” he said.

“Tell us what?” Morin said.

“I heard somebody said something about Veronica missing a hand,” he said. We confirmed.

“Well, several girls went missing in Austin many years ago and they finally found a dead girl with a missing hand,” he said. Morin looked at him. He remembered the newspaper.

“We know about it,” Morin replied.

“Months before that started, Ahmed started acting weird,”

“Like how weird?” I asked.

“Like getting into bar fights. Drinking a lot and so on. You know, we are Muslims. We never drink. Things that he would never do. He even got into a bar fight with a knife one night

and managed to escape the police,” Hamid said. Morin’s eyebrows raised. He was already sure that Ahmed did it and this gave him another reason.

“The weirdest thing was when he left Texas to come up here about five years ago. It seemed so rushed and with no explainable reason,” he continued.

“What do you mean by no explainable reason?” I asked,

“He had a good job there. His own shop and his job were improving. He also loved the heath, but suddenly he disappeared to come here and carry people’s luggage? It doesn’t make sense to me,”

“Did he tell you where he was going before leaving?”

“No, not a word. And we didn’t hear from him for almost six months,”

“How did you learn where he was then?” Morin asked.

“One day he called and told us he came up to Fort Kent,”

“Didn’t he mention why he left?”

“No, the weirdest thing was that they found the dead girl days after he went missing,”

Hamid’s last sentence lingered in the air while Danny came to take our orders.

On October 17, 2023, the day after Dickinson's attack, an extremely significant revelation changed the course of Dickinson's case. A body of a thirty-four-year-old male individual was found close to Fairland Drive, where Dickinson was found by the police. The buried body was recovered by one of the neighbors' dogs. The autopsy report was sent to us about a week later. The poor dental condition suggested that the deceased was living in a low-hygiene environment. Possibly a homeless individual. Test results proved that Dickinson's shirt was smeared with the man's blood, making him face another murder charge.

The buried body suffered from severe blunt force trauma to the head and three fractured ribs. The decayed flesh made it difficult to detect any sign of hemorrhage, but it was highly possible due to the intensity of the attack. The cause of death was determined as suffocation by strangulation. The MO was still unknown to us. The intensity may suggest that it could have been an act of vengeance. Dickinson keeps denying any relation to the deceased despite DNA results that show Dickinson share genes with the deceased man. There had been no criminal records available of the deceased by the time of his death. Furthermore, Dickinson's reaction to the deceased picture did not show that he knew him at all.

I was sitting behind my desk, in my office, looking at Veronica's file a thousand times. For me, the most captivating part of the file was her picture. Her smile. Her curly long hair went down onto her waist. Her golden heart-shaped necklace. The one that I saw on Beth's neck the other night. I remember the first time that I looked at her face. She seemed like a complete stranger to me, but now she felt like somebody that I knew for a long time.

I pulled out the picture of Nina and put it next to Veronica's. The resemblance was clearer than ever to me now. I threw another glance at Veronica's innocent face. Was Ahmed capable of stabbing his own daughter?

I threw the pictures on the table. Latched my hands behind my head and closed my eyes for a moment. It was the weekend, and the office was empty. I don't know how long had passed before I opened my eyes again. I must have fallen asleep.

My desk was a huge mess at this point. Papers and pictures were scattered everywhere. I had to find something to do to distract myself from all the drama inside my head. I took the files and put the pictures back into them. My phone started buzzing. It was Elina. She sent me a picture of Brian with his teacher, both smiling at the camera. Brian's little arms were wrapped around her neck, so tight. It reminded me of my last visit. I almost felt his little arms pressing around my neck. Like the way that he was pressing them around his teacher's neck in the picture. Behind them, there was a table, full of Origami. Different types, made by different students in different colors.

I remembered the one that he gave me. I must have put it somewhere here. I checked into one of the drawers in my office. There it was. The little bird. The one that he especially made for me.

I took it out and put it on my desk. I looked at it for a while. It made my heart filled with warmth and joy. Then I saw something in it that made me wonder. The paper did not seem new and colorful like the other ones in the picture. In fact, it looked very old. Yellowed with age. I examined it more closely. I saw a word written on the paper, "BIRTH," in capital letters. Almost faded. Like it was written many many years ago. The word didn't make sense to me until I unfolded the paper, and the word "CERTIFICATE" appears next to it. It was a birth certificate of someone that I didn't know. Someone that I haven't heard of before. His name was Sam Dickinson.

I was a kid again, running in the woods, chasing after the same young boy. But no matter how hard I ran, it seemed like I never could get to him. The boy was laughing, jumping up and down, joyful. I ran and ran after him, but every time that I got close to him, he kept eluding me. Sliding out of my hand. Like a fish. It made him laugh louder and louder. Amused by my futile attempts till his laugh got hysterical. Then I saw the same thing moving. Passing in between the trees. My eyes kept darting back and forth among thick bushes till I saw those big eyes again. Huge wings appeared behind them, and the big bird flew right toward me.

“What else do you usually see Mike?” Dr. Morgan said. I opened my eyes.

She was sitting in front of me. She was jotting down in a small notebook resting on her lap. She was wearing a white suit.

“I used to see Veronica in my dreams, but now she is replaced with a woman,” I replied.

“Do you know her?”

“No,”

“How do you describe her?”

“Slim. Bright skin, downward lips, dark curly hair,”

“She looks like Veronica then. Doesn’t she?”

“Yes, she does,”

“How often do you have these dreams?” she asked.

“A lot,” I sighed.

“Like every night?” she asked.

“Not every night, but twice a week,” I replied.

“Does any of these dreams ever get violent?” she asked. I thought of the open wounds and the streams of blood that I used to see in my dreams recently. Then I remembered some other scenes from my other dreams. Or maybe reality. Scenes that I couldn’t recollect before. Scenes I used to forget. I saw the woman’s hand as she brushed the trunk of the tree. Her hand left a bloody residue on the tree.

“No,” I replied.

“It seemed like you had a very normal childhood. Didn’t you?” she said. Another scene flashed in my mind. I was a small kid in the kitchen of the house in the middle of the woods. I saw the woman lying on the ground, smeared in her own blood. I heard another boy yelling at me. The same boy that I used to chase in the cornfield. I could see his face for the first time. He had bright blue eyes.

“Stop crying little mommy boy,” she said as he slammed me in the face. The strike was too strong for my tiny little body. It threw me on the bloody floor.

“Get up and clean this mess. Hurry up. Dad wants this clean,” he yelled at me again.

I jumped straight on the couch.

“What?” Dr. Morgan asked.

“Nothing,” I replied in my normal tone. But the picture seemed very real in my mind.

“Can I go now?” I continued.

“Sure,” she replied, bemused by my sudden request. I took my coat and walked straightly out of the door without saying another word.

Later that day, I received a call from Elina. She wanted to have a drink with me at a bar. I agreed but I told her, I was working, and I didn't know when I would be free. She said I can meet her at her place that night before leaving for my house, and I agreed. I asked her about the birth certificate, and she told me that we can talk about it at a convenient time. This made me think she wanted to tell me something important about it.

The long night was just about to start when I headed to Elina's place. The bitterness of the last Marlboro cigarette was still under my tongue. The lights were on in Elina's living room when I pulled over in front of her house.

I knocked on the door. The door cracked open, revealing her tall slim body. She was wearing a white pullover. Beautiful as always. I kissed her on the cheek and apologized for my delay. She replied with a smile. I noticed that Charlie's car was not parked in the garage.

"Where is Charlie?" I asked.

"He went to Boston for a conference. He'll be back tomorrow,"

"A conference?"

"Yeah, about computer stuff. Something that I'll never understand," she mocked.

"Is Brian sleeping?" I asked as I sat on the sofa. She nodded.

"What do you want to drink?" Elina asked.

"Just water,"

She poured two glasses of water and sat next to me on the sofa.

"When were you going to tell me that you were seeing a psychologist?" she said. Her words hit me.

“What are you talking about?” I said before taking a sip of water. I forgot how nosy her friends were at the hospital.

“And that Episode you had? Why didn’t you tell me about it?” she continued without paying attention to me trying to play dumb. I figured, when it comes to Elina, I’m not good at it at all.

“Jesus, your friends are so nosy” I finally said out loud.

“Well, we are very close,” she said, making face with her mouth. As a sign she knew what she did was wrong, but she did it anyway.

“Wow, can’t I even keep one secret from you?” I said, putting the glass back on the table.

“Well, you are keeping a lot of things from me,”

“Like what? That was the only thing. And you didn’t even tell me when you went to Dad’s place,” I protested.

“Oh, come on, Mike. I can smell cigarettes on you. There is so much going on with you that I don’t know,” she replied. I took the birth certificate out of my pocket.

“Do you what this is?” I asked. She took it from me.

“Oh, this must be a paper from one of those old files in Dad’s basement. Brian must have taken it,”

“Do you who this Sam Dickinson is?” I asked. She put the papers aside, moved closer to me, and held my hand in hers.

“Mike, there is something that I need to tell you,” she said. The smile on her face disappeared.

“What?” I asked. Started to feel scared by her sudden silence.

A hard knock on the door echoed in the room. Elina walked to the door.

“Hi Elina,” I heard the man behind the door say.

“Hey officer, what’s going on,” I sat straight, alert by what Elina said.

“Is Mike here?” I recognized the man’s voice as he said. It was one of the officers working at our station. Elina looked back at me before she replied.

“Yes, what’s going on?” she said. I walked to the front door. I saw the two of Whitman’s officers, standing on Elina’s front porch.

“Oh, hello Mike,” the officer said as soon as he saw me.

“What’s going on officers?” I asked. The two officers looked at each other. One of them spoke.

“I’m sorry Mike, but you have to come with us,”

“What is it? Did you find something?” I asked. They looked at each other again.

“No, we are here to arrest you,”

“What? What are you talking about?” Elina said, totally bemused.

“I’m sorry Elina,” the other officer said.

“Mommy, what is going on?” Brain said, standing in the middle of the living room. His teddy bear was clutched to his chest. Like the boy from my dream. Elina ran to him and take him away as the officer put handcuffs on my hands and pushed me out of the house.

Part II

28

It was an extraordinary day in Fort Kent. The small town was covered in white, but the golden rays of sunlight were melting the ice. Stealing the coldness away from the streets. The wind was blowing mildly, scattering white snowflakes in the air when Elina was walking to the police station. Her steps were steady and strong, but her soul crumbled inside. She chose to believe that Mike was innocent. Chose not to doubt her brother but was afraid that it might not last long.

The sound of her footsteps echoed off the building when she walked into the station and strolled elegantly to the officer behind the counter. The officer peeked over the monitor to take a look at her. Morin, who was sitting in his office, was reading the daily news of Fort Kent. The headline read in bold: “A police officer in custody for Fort Kent murders.” Pictures from the murder scenes were scattered all around his desk. He got out of the chair when he saw Elina. Gathered the pictures quickly. Put them back in the file and walked to her. Elina’s eyes were watery.

“I’m sorry for all of this,” he said, under his breath. Words came out of Morin’s mouth, involuntarily. Like his mouth was taking orders from somebody else. Elina couldn’t hear what he said exactly, but she knew what he meant. The words did not just come out of his lips. She could see the sorrow in his eyes. And he really meant it. At that moment, Elina realized how much Morin cared about his brother, and she hadn’t noticed that before. That made her smile faintly.

Elina looked down as a tear found its way down her cheek. Her hands shivered to her purse in search of a tissue, but Morin offered her one before she could even open her purse. He then ushered her to his office.

“Please sit Mrs. Kelly,” he offered her a chair. Elina looked at his empty desk and sat down. A moment passed in silence. Elina felt a severe pressure in her throat, preventing her from speaking while Morin did not know what to say other than he was sorry.

“Why?” Elina finally managed to speak in her shaky voice. Her mouth tasted more bitter than ever.

“Why did you arrest him?” she continued.

“You probably don’t wanna know,” he responded.

“I do,” she said firmly. Morin sighed with grief. He pondered. Unwilling to speak it but he had to.

“They found pictures of Veronica’s body. The dates show they were taken the day she was killed. There is no logical explanation for that except he did this or was one of the people who did it.”

“What?” Elina said, struggling to believe what Morin said.

“Where did you find them?” she finally asked.

“In his car. He must be the one who called the police. He also knew where Nina’s body was. How the hell did he know that?” Morin replied.

“I can’t believe this,” Elina whimpered.

“Neither do I,” said Morin. Elina stood up.

“I want to see him,” she said. Her voice was shakier than ever.

“Of course,” Morin said, and he asked one of the officers to usher Elina to Mike’s cell.

Elina and the officer walked into a narrow corridor that led to a small jail. Mike was sitting behind bars. He stood up when he saw Elina.

“Ten minutes. And you can’t take that purse inside with you,” said the officer. Elina looked at her, dissatisfied.

“I’m sorry. Those are the rules,” she continued. Elina consigned her purse before going inside. The door clung close behind her. The cell was too small, just enough to fit the two of them. She sobbed although she didn’t want him to see her crying. She wanted him to see her strong. The cell was very cold, and she knew that he hated the cold. They sat on the bench.

“Elina…” Mike said. Elina replied with a smile.

“It’s cold in here,” she said.

“That’s not what’s bothering me now,” Mike said. Elina nodded.

“Where did you get those pictures, Mike?”

“I don’t know,” Mike replied.

“Were you the one who called the police that night? To report where Veronica’s body was?” Elina asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember. There are many things I don’t remember.”

“What do you mean by many things?”

“Was I adopted Elina?” Mike whispered. Elina sat up straight.

“Yes, you were three when Dad brought you in,” Elina replied.

“What was my real name? I mean before dad adopted me. Was it Sam Dickinson?”

“I don’t know. He never said anything to me or anyone else.”

“Would you please go and check Dad’s house again for me? To see if you can find anything else on those files about Sam Dickinson. I wanna know who I was,” Mike said.

“He just brought you home one day and he said that you were my brother. I was eleven. I trusted him so much that I didn’t even ask him about you. He told me you had nowhere else to go and you needed help. We were good Christians. We always went to the church and Dad raised me as somebody who cares about other people’s pain. So, I accepted you as my brother without doubting you,” she said, her last words did not come as strong as she expected. Her hand went for Mike’s.

“No touching,” said the officer. Her voice echoed in the corridor. Cold, emotionless. Mike pulled his hand out of Elina’s and moved a little farther from her.

“One minute,” the officer barked. Louder than before. Elina stood up. Ready to leave in a moment.

“I’ll do it, Mike,” she said. Mike’s lips smiled, but his eyes were filled with sadness by her departure.

“Thank you.” Those were the last words that he said to her. They shared a smile. The keys started tinkling and the door squeaked open. Elina walked out of the cell. Her heart trembled as the officer slammed the door closed behind her and gave her purse back. She walked toward the door on the other side of the corridor without looking back. She didn’t want to see him behind those bars again. Outside, the sun was still shining like it had never been shining in Fort Kent before.

Morin got to the station earlier that day. The sun hadn't been raised yet. The trees were trembling in the cold. He took a file out of the car.

"Goddamn it," he said under his breath as the first wind blew under his jacket and almost scattered the file. He straightened his collar, didn't want the wind to get into him. He had an early meeting with Chief Whitman. Didn't know the reason for it to be at such an early hour. It seemed like it couldn't wait and that pissed him off.

Whitman was already in his office when he walked in, waiting for him. It was so early that nobody else was in the building.

Morin saw the chief through the glassy door of his office. He was sitting behind Morin's desk, exploring his room.

"You should put some stuff in your office. It looks so empty," Whitman said as Morin stepped inside.

"What was so important?" Morin asked, throwing the file on his desk.

"I need your help," Whitman said before he plopped into the chair. Morin's eyebrows raised.

"Help with what?" he replied.

"With Michael's case," he continued. Morin stayed quiet, unmoving. Whitman continued as he received no response from Morin.

"I want you to testify in court," Whitman said. Legs crossed; fingers clutched in front of him.

“Court? First of all, you don’t have enough evidence against him? And second of all, testify to what?” Morin asked. The skin in between his eyebrows wrinkled with distaste.

“To what you saw on the night you found Veronica’s body,” he replied. Morin stared at him, taken aback by his words.

“What are you talking about?” Morin asked. Whitman paused. Like he could read Morin through his eyes. He knew him well. Probably too much. There was no use in lying to him.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Whitman said, his gaze locked on Morin’s face.

“I know why you didn’t tell me Michael lost consciousness that night. You thought if you didn’t help him, he might end up dead, like Ethan, and you couldn’t bear the guilt this time,” Whitman said. The muscles in Morin’s neck got intense at the mention of Ethan’s name. Now Whitman knew that he was like a ticking bomb, ready to explode any minute. His last words hurt Morin as if a blade opening an old wound to cut deeper.

“Shut your mouth! You know nothing about Ethan and me. You didn’t like Michael from the beginning because he came from a family with a terrible past and you still hold a grudge against his dad because he was ten times better and kinder than you. If he hadn’t got sick, you never stood a chance to become a chief. Still, he was good enough to tell you about his troubled kid. And now you are taking advantage of that. You think I don’t know it, you racist old fuck?” Morin yelled. Whitman laughed and gently stood up; eyes flashed with joy.

“You’re right. I used to know nothing until Ethan started talking to me. To him, I was more of a dad than you were, and that’s why I know one thing for sure. That Michael is not your son, in fact, he is nothing like Ethan. He is a murderer. Yes! you are protecting a murderer if you don’t testify and you know it,” Whitman said, his sound echoed in the empty room, but the bitter

silence did not last for long. The front door squeaked open and the sound of high heels, clacking against the wooden floor, filled the room. Louder and louder. A young woman appeared in the doorway, stylish and beautiful. Her name was Hannah Smith.

The landline was ringing as Elina walked inside the house. She picked it up. Charlie was on the line. Elina let her purse slide off of her shoulder and fall onto the ground while she was pressing the phone against her ear.

“Hey, Elina. It’s me. I’m gonna get back tonight. Can you pick me up from the airport?” Charlie said and waited for a response. Elina saw the yellowed birth certificate on the sofa, almost torn apart by age.

“How is Brian doing by the way?” Charlie waited on the other side of the line but still no response from Elina.

“Hello? Elina? Are you there?” Charlie repeated. His voice pulled Elina back.

“Yes, yes, I am here Charlie. Brian is doing fine. Melissa watches him when I’m at work,” she replied.

“What’s the matter, babe? You sound tired?” Charlie asked.

“I’m fine. Listen, I have a shift tonight. I think you better stay one more night with your friends and have fun. How does that sound?” Elina said with a fake smile on her face.

“Are you sure?” Charlie said.

“Of course. Why not? You are gonna have more time visiting Boston. Just reschedule your flight.”

“Oh great. Thank you, babe,” Charlie said, his voice sounding happier than ever.

“Sure, Have fun. I have to go to the hospital very soon. Text me whenever you rescheduled.”

“Alright then. Bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye hon,” Elina hung up the phone, put the paper in her pocket, and left the house.

It was almost noon when Elina’s car stopped in front of her father’s house. An old two-story house, colonial style with a small porch at the front. The dusty swing on it pulled Elina back to when she and Mike used to be little kids. They grew up on that porch and sat on that swing all the time, but the swing mostly took her back to the time when her father told her about Mike for the very first time. It was on that swing that they discussed Mike, who was in trouble, and needed help. How Elina should treat him like a brother and look after him when dad was not home.

Elina walked inside the house. The inside looked dark and cold. The spirit had left the house ever since her father died, but still, she could feel his touch on everything. She could hear herself and Mike, laughing and chasing after each other in the dining hall while her father begged them to stop. Although dust had made everything blurry, memories were still vivid. Fresh like they were carved deep in her head. She walked around the house. The kitchen had a beautiful view of the back yard which was now covered in ice and snow. She remembered Mike, running up and down the stairs as a kid. Every mark on every door and every wall was a reminder of something to her.

Underneath the stairs was the door to the basement. Time had deteriorated the wooden doorframe. She pushed it open. She felt an excessive amount of pain rushing through her heart. With her father’s death and Mike being in jail, that house seemed unbearable to her. She turned on the light and took the stairs down to the basement. There were cobwebs everywhere. She bent down to avoid webs getting into her hair. In one corner stood several old wooden stacks full of books and papers. That was where her father usually kept his old documents. She got to them.

Psychology books from Mike's college years. She went to the next stack. A bunch of old magazines about house decoration, ski gear, and so on. Close to the ceiling, Elina saw a box. The word "Oldies" was written on it. She reached her hand out to get to it. It was a very heavy one. She struggled to get it down, but the bottom broke before she could do it, scattering all the stuff inside on the floor. There were pictures of Elina and Mike when they were kids and pictures with their dad. Old baby pictures of Elina. Pictures of her right after her birth, in her mother's arms. The picture made Elina take a deep sigh. She found other documents. Newspapers with headlines about a man named Dick Dickinson, Mike's father. "Austin's Serial Killer was Killed Shot Dead by the Police after Murdering his Wife," the headline said. Beneath them were drawings and sketches signed by Mike. They gave Elina goosebumps. They were from the time that he was a teenager. Elina had never seen them before. They were drawings and sketches, very good ones, of different female body parts and most importantly hands.

The wind was blowing on the icy Saint John River, messing Hannah's hair before she walked into the Fort Kent police department. She rearranged her untidy hair and brushed it with her fingers when she got inside. The officer at the front desk welcomed her with a warm smile. Hannah was carrying a handbag.

"Am I late?" asked Hannah as they started walking toward the interrogation room.

"Just on time," the officer replied while ushering her down the hall. She stopped in front of a closed door. She looked through the small window. Mike was sitting behind the table with his lawyer. Chief Whitman was sitting in front of Mike. Hannah took a deep breath.

"Are you ok?" the officer asked. She responded to her with a nod. Hannah pulled her dress down and tidied her hair again before entering the room. The conversation stopped as she walked inside.

"This is Dr. Hannah Smith. She is working on criminal psychology," Chief Whitman introduced her as soon as she walked inside. She felt Mike's heavy looks on her body.

"I know who the hell she is," Mike said, a bitter look on his face. Hannah avoided his gaze. Her cheeks felt warm as their eyes met for a second. Hannah sat down on the other side of the table next to Chief Whitman.

"She has some questions—" said Whitman.

"Oh, does she?" Mike interrupted Whitman.

"My client does not need to reply to any of your questions. You still have no solid proof that he has done anything wrong," the lawyer interrupted.

“Where is Morin? Isn’t he still in charge of the case? Shouldn’t he be the one who interrogates me?” Mike asked.

“As I was saying, Dr. Smith is gonna ask you several questions about your past,” Whitman continued.

“You don’t have to respond to any of these questions,” the lawyer said to Mike.

“I think I’ve said enough about my past to Dr. Smith,” Mike said.

“I wanna talk to Morin. Nobody else,” he continued.

“Well, Morin is not here now. That means you have to talk to us. If you don’t, you are gonna stay here forever,” said Whitman.

“As I said, I have nothing to say to her. I only talk to Morin,” Mike said, resting his back and sinking into the chair. Hannah finally dared to take a long look at him. He looked different, tired, betrayed. His tone had switched into a bitter one. That crumpled her heart. She had never felt something like that for him before. But there was no time to be sentimental. Hannah pulled a file and a DVD out of her handbag. She walked to a DVD player.

“What is this?” asked the lawyer. She put the DVD in and played it. It was a video recording of Mike in Dr. Morgan’s office. The video showed Mike getting hysterical and throwing things.

“Where did you get this from? I don’t remember this,” Mike said repeatedly. Hannah then pulled out the pictures of the woman from his dreams and put them in front of him. Dark curly hair, bright skin, and big eyes. She was smiling at the camera. Her hands were positioned on her lap, exactly like Veronica’s hands were. Her smile looked the same too.

“Do you know this woman?” she said.

“Not really.”

“But you told me that you kept dreaming about this.”

“Did I?”

“You also told Dr. Morgan when she showed you the picture.”

“I don’t recall that.”

“I have a recording of it. You told me that you dreamed of this woman many times and you saw her lying in a pool of blood,”

“You recorded my voice?” Mike’s voice started to rise.

“Mike, calm down,” the lawyer kept saying and Mike kept ignoring him.

Hannah put another picture in front of Mike. It was the picture of the body. The same woman, lying in the kitchen in a pool of her blood.

“This is your real mother, Mike. She was the last woman your father killed. Right before he was gunned down by the police.”

“What?”

“Your father had problems the same as you have right now. You must accept it...Sam.”

The name echoed in Mike’s head and was replaced by his dead mother’s voice. The voice that he used to hear in his dreams, or old memories, all the time.

“Sam...Sam,” he heard his name over and over again till his head began to feel heavy. He jumped to his feet.

“This is not me. This is not me,” he shouted repeatedly and punched the table. Two officers walked inside to calm him down and make him sit down.

“Calm down, Mike,” the lawyer kept saying.

But he resisted them. They finally grabbed him by the wrists and took him out of the room. The pain in his wrist came back to him.

Elina's car pulled up in front of Mike's house. Her foot hit something on the floor as she stepped out of the car. It was a bunch of mail and Brochures and papers. She stepped on them. She fumbled in her purse for the key. Finally found it and opened the door. She headed straight to the stairs. Took the steps two at a time and got to Mike's room. Mike's conversation with Charlie about Veronica's severed hand was echoing in her head. She was searching his desk and all the files in the drawers. Wishing what she had heard was wrong. She found newspaper clippings. Old ones. Weird stuff about missing girls and their found dead bodies everywhere. That made her even more scared. She finally found a manila envelope. It was Veronica's file. She emptied it. It was detailed information about the case and some pictures. Veronica's picture when she was alive. She looked like a normal girl to Elina, posing for the camera with a stupid fake smile on her face. That reminded her of her own high school photos. She flipped to the next picture. It was of her body in a suitcase. She flipped to the next pictures, and she finally got to the last one, with a missing hand.

About a week had passed. Elina did not know what to do. Charlie was suspecting that something was going on and she couldn't hold it in anymore. That night seemed like another ordinary cold night in Fort Kent, but for Elina, it wasn't ordinary at all. The cold wind felt colder than ever. Her feet were resisting her by feeling so heavy. Every step that she took to the Swamp Buck made her heartbeat faster and faster.

She searched the restaurant with her eyes. Finally found Chief Whitman sitting behind a table on the other side of the restaurant. She walked to him. Her feet felt numb with each step she took closer to Whitman. He already had ordered waffles with bacon and roasted egg.

“How are you today Mrs. Kelly?” Chief Whitman asked.

“I’m ok,” said Elina, her tone was cold. Her responses were short and quick.

“What happened? What did you wanna talk to me about?” he asked, digging voraciously into his breakfast. Elina was feeling nauseous every time he took the fork into his mouth. She couldn’t look at him eating. She felt she was about to throw up any minute, so she tried not to look at him.

“I found something, in Mike’s room that might help you,” said Elina.

“What?” Whitman said, taking a sip of his coffee. Elina reviewed everything in her head again before proceeding with the conversation. She knew there was no turning back after this.

“Mike is not from here. He was born in Texas. His real name is Sam,” she said to Whitman.

“I already knew that. Is that all that you said you found?” he asked, a little bit disappointed.

“That’s not all of it. He came from a troubled family,” Elina said. Whitman nodded as he knew everything.

“He had a crazy father who killed his mother in front of him, put her in a black suitcase, and buried her in the river. His mother was taking care of him and his abandoned cousin at the time and his father made the children help him clean up the blood and bury the body.”

“Her children?”

“Yes, Sam and his cousin. His name was Ted, nobody knows what had happened to him. He escaped after the police stormed into the house and killed Sam’s father.”

“Oh, I didn’t know about his cousin. But I knew the rest. That is one of the reasons we arrested him. He is violent.”

“I also found these drawings that may help you more,” Elina said as she pulled Mike’s drawings out of her purse and put them in front of Whitman.

“Wow, good job,” he said. His eyes flashed with joy. “You know I always told your father adopting a troubled boy was a huge mistake, but he never listened to me. You can never harvest good crop from a bad seed.”

“You were right. I think Mike is your guy,” Elina said and left the restaurant. She couldn’t even wait for Whitman’s answer.

On December 15, 2023, the body of a young girl was found close to Soldier Pond, Fort Kent, Maine. The victim was a twenty-two-year-old college student with dark curly hair and dark eyes. Her visage was a reminder of Veronica and Nina's. She died of multiple stab wounds. Her hand was cut off from the wrist. At that time, Sam Dickinson was in prison awaiting trial for murder.

The End

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