

SHADOW  
TAG  
PERDITION GAMES

BY L.E. FRASER

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## ALSO BY L.E. FRASER

Shadow Tag, Perdition Games

Frozen Statues, Perdition Games

Red Rover, Perdition Games

Skully, Perdition Games

Simon Says, Perdition Games

*“The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.” —Albert Einstein*

## PROLOGUE

ANNALISE COULD FEEL his eyes on her, the way a rabbit senses a stalking predator. As she tried to hurry across the icy sidewalk, the skin at the back of her neck prickled. Intuition was screaming at her that the drone was above her again. She froze and searched the midnight sky. Piercing needles of freezing rain pelted her face. She couldn't distinguish anything through the storm, but low visibility didn't guarantee her safety. She'd read that drones could be equipped with thermal vision cameras. It didn't need to see her. It could pick up her heat formation, record her movements, and send her GPS coordinates to him. He could be hidden anywhere—peering into a monitor and plotting where to intercept her.

Shivering, Annalise dropped her gaze to scrutinize the large park that surrounded the winding residential street. Eerie shadows moved in and out of the spaces between the dense treeline. Early April branches snapped under the violent wind, and gunshot cracks echoed through the night. Tension sliced through her chest and her breath caught in her throat.

The last words Robbie had ever spoken to her rang in her ears: “*Love you?*” he had scoffed. “*You’re a bully—a small and vacuous*

*person. I detest everything about you.” Hate had contorted his face into an ugly mask. “You’re an entitled bitch, and you’ll pay for the appalling things you do to people. Everyone would be better off if you were dead.”*

She wouldn’t be out here alone—trying to catch a bus like a loser, no less—if it weren’t for Denise. Her so-called friend had coerced her into staying at the bar when she knew Annalise was broke and couldn’t afford an Uber. Angry tears mixed with the frosty rain hammering her face. She wouldn’t be in this predicament if it weren’t for Denise, who had insisted on buying bottomless Bellinis. It had all been show, so everyone could watch in awe when Denise had presented her black American Express card to the bartender. Fat girls were such attention-seekers.

The warm afterglow of the alcohol had dulled Annalise’s paranoia for a few blessed hours. She’d been flippant and alluring in her skin-tight black skirt, sexy fringed jacket, and gorgeous suede sandals. As usual, everyone had flocked around her, eager to join her elite circle of friends. It had been great, except now she was out here alone and vulnerable to attack.

As she picked her way across black ice that coated the sidewalk, Annalise mulled over another enraging incident. At a party last week, someone had asked about her ex-fiancé. Denise had interrupted the private conversation, claiming Robbie hadn’t stolen anything and Annalise had made it all up. Everyone had treated her as if she was unhinged for using social media to accuse the cheating prick of maxing out her credit cards and emptying her bank accounts. The posts should have incited disgust toward him and a flood of sympathy for her. The friends she’d handpicked as her worshiping entourage should have rushed to offer financial

aid. Because of Denise, and her big mouth, Annalise's plan had backfired and making rent had required selling half her belongings on Kijiji. That was after a pawnshop owner had announced that the three-carat diamond engagement ring, nestled in an iconic blue Tiffany box, was paste. The box was a nice touch, he'd told her sardonically. Denise had had the audacity to laugh, as if the ugly creep was a shoo-in to win the next Canadian Comedy Award.

Hail the size of golf balls was now plummeting from the heavens, and her anger toward Denise shifted into high gear. If the heifer didn't appreciate how lucky she was to be included, she'd expel Denise from the group. Annalise managed multiple social media accounts for large corporations around the Greater Toronto Area. She was skilled in the nuances of engagement, and her personal accounts also had a ton of followers. Making Denise's life miserable would be a cakewalk, and she'd enjoy every second of publicly humiliating the traitorous bitch.

She suddenly heard a noise behind her and stopped under a streetlight's weak circle of light to listen. It sounded like the roar of an engine. Her fear rushed back and she spun around, gasping when she saw a large truck speeding toward her. The vehicle swerved toward the sidewalk and a set of headlights blinded her. She uttered a strangled whimper and lifted her arms across her face, cringing at the terrifying sound of squealing brakes. A volcanic spew of ice water soaked her and her eyes snapped open. Choking back tears, she wiped muddy water off her face and stood trembling on the sidewalk, staring helplessly as the truck reversed and rolled to a stop beside her.

The passenger window rolled down. “Hey, sorry about that. I couldn’t stop,” a man said. “It’s nasty out. You want a ride?”

Water dripped from her soaked blouse and she clumsily tried to shield her breasts with her arms. “Like you have a hope of getting with me, take a look in the mirror, asshole.”

He grunted something and again drove through the large puddle beside the sidewalk. The truck’s spinning tires drenched her bare legs with another shower of frigid water.

“Too old. It can’t be one of his friends,” she whispered, but she didn’t know for sure. She’d never bothered to meet her ex-fiancé’s friends and wouldn’t recognize a threat until it was too late.

Robbie’s harassment had started with juvenile annoyances. He had called late at night and muttered threats, he’d hurled eggs at her house, he’d called the cops and made noise complaints—just irritating pranks that illustrated his immaturity. Then, about a month ago, things changed. On two cloudless days, Annalise had detected a drone above her. It flew too high for her to identify anything about it, but a primitive instinct had warned her it was stalking her. Last week, she’d come home and someone had been in her house. There wasn’t any evidence of an intruder, but she knew someone had invaded her home and poked around her private belongings. That’s when she started to take his threats seriously. She knew he didn’t have the money to buy a drone or the technical skills to operate it. The only thing that made sense was that someone was helping Robbie exact his revenge, and Annalise didn’t know how far that person would take the game.

From behind her, she heard the grumble of an approaching bus. She quickened her pace towards the bus stop but knew she’d never make it in time. Turning seductively, she waved her arm and



gave the bus driver a good view of her naked breasts pressing against her rain-soaked blouse.

The bus lumbered by, leaving a plume of exhaust fumes in its wake. She stared after it in shock. Seething, she plotted the best course of action. A tear-soaked email to Toronto Transit, describing her fear and misery during a brutal ice storm, would work. After she sent it, she'd manipulate social media to provoke community outrage for the transit driver's reckless endangerment of a woman. By this time next week, the asshole would be unemployed. But that didn't solve her immediate problem. She had to get home. Her ex and his friends could be out there, following the drone, and waiting for an opportunity to grab her. To do what, Annalise didn't know, but she didn't intend to find out.

Taylor Creek Park was to her left. If she took the large city park, she'd cut the walking distance to her house in half. But she'd have to venture off the park's lit main path and navigate a steep hill that cut up to her road. It wasn't the safest route in the pitch dark, and it wouldn't be possible to climb in her heels. She'd tucked Prada flats into her shoulder bag in case the group went dancing after dinner. The inclement weather would ruin them, but at least she wouldn't snap an ankle. She unzipped her bag and dug around to find the shoes.

Balancing on first one foot and then the other, she changed shoes. Her feet were completely soaked now, but she was past caring. Once she'd packed her heels into her oversized Coach bag, she put her phone on voice command. If she saw anyone suspicious, she'd scream *911* and her cell would connect to emergency services. Gripping the phone in one hand and her canister of pepper spray in the other, Annalise scuttled into the park.

Her eyes scanned the fringe of trees that crowded against the cement path. Ice-encrusted branches extended into the inky sky like skeletal arms scraping free from a grave. Did he anticipate she'd use the park route? They'd often taken this shortcut when they were together. A chill slithered down her spine. She couldn't see through the shadows cast by the trees. She wouldn't hear footsteps over the white noise from the rain. A flight sensation consumed her and she ran blindly, expecting to feel a hand against her back at any moment. Her pepper spray fell from her hand but she kept running through the park, too terrified to even stop and catch her breath.

*The hill—there's the hill. Just a few more minutes to the safety of the street.*

She dashed off the path, her shoes skidding on the frozen grass of the slope. Whimpering in terror, she scrambled up the steep incline to the sidewalk and stood panting beneath a streetlight.

"You're fine," she whispered. "Everything's fine."

Her clawing fear receded and her heartrate slowed. Now she was in her own neighbourhood, she felt safe and continued toward her house, fuming at Denise and plotting her revenge. As Annalise passed a small public school, there was movement in her peripheral vision. She turned around, clutching her thin jacket against her chest.

"Help a veteran?" a voice snarled from beneath a dark hooded coat.

Terror and panic coalesced into rage. "If your free disability doesn't pay for your booze, get a job like the rest of us," she yelled.

The vagrant skulked back into the shadows and Annalise hurried to her house, disgusted and angry that she had to deal with dirty homeless people in her own neighbourhood.

Inside her front hall, she stripped off her wet clothes and dropped them in a soggy pile on the wood floor. Shivering, she trudged up a circular staircase to the second level. The two-bedroom semi was narrow and the living space was small, but the iron banister on the upstairs landing was unique and the western light was wonderful. She didn't want to move, but if she couldn't make rent next month, she wouldn't have a choice. The daunting process of finding an affordable rental in Toronto loomed over her like an executioner's axe. There was no option but to ask her mother for another loan. With the earlier time difference on the Pacific coast, it was eleven o'clock in Vancouver. She hoped her mom was still awake. Annalise could care less about dragging her out of bed, but it would be easier to manipulate her if she was in a good mood.

She stood under a hot shower for ten minutes, turning off the water when she thought she heard something in the hallway. She listened for a minute, but the house was silent. The sound must have come from the other side of the Victorian semi. She toweled off and pulled on a pair of warm leggings and a plaid flannel night-shirt. Admiring her reflection in the full-length mirror, Annalise thought she looked remarkably cute given the harrowing experience she'd just suffered. It all seemed so silly now but she'd play it up on social media. Her followers loved drama. Downstairs, she curled up on her leather sofa, steeling herself for *another* lecture from her mom.

It took seven rings before her mother's sleep-slurred voice answered. After Annalise assured her that she wasn't critically ill, the conversation went south fast.

"Why on earth did you allow that man access to your finances?" her mother asked.

"I didn't," Annalise said impatiently. "He hacked into my accounts. I told you all this."

"I'm concerned about what you're posting on social media," her mother said. "Your politically incorrect statements about the less fortunate are upsetting."

"It's called engagement," she snapped. "You don't understand how social media works."

"I understand that it's dangerous to make offensive remarks online to anonymous people," her mother retorted. "You're a twenty-two-year-old woman living alone."

"No one's going to attack me because of something I posted," she said with an exaggerated sigh.

"Did you really need to make all those disparaging comments about that barista?" her mother asked with disapproval.

"The whore seduced my fiancé," Annalise shouted.

"You don't know that," her mother calmly insisted. "And even if they are involved, the names you called her crossed a line."

It was infuriating that her mother wasn't on her side. She still couldn't believe that Robbie had left her for a one-legged coffee server. Her mom should be showering her with sympathy, not attacking her for getting some well-deserved revenge.

"I want you to come home," her mother stated. "You're making poor decisions and putting yourself at risk. You're going to lose your clients."

Here her mom *might* have a point. Last week, a marketing company had cancelled her contract because they objected to the content she had posted on her personal social media.

“Look, spring is beautiful in Vancouver,” her mother continued. “I’ll email you plane tickets for tomorrow. Come home and we’ll figure everything out together.”

A free holiday wasn’t a bad idea, Annalise conceded. She could work from Vancouver just as easily as Toronto. By the time she returned, maybe immigration would have followed up on her anonymous tip and Canada would have shipped her loser ex back to the States.

“A mini-vacay sounds awesome,” she agreed.

“Fabulous. I’ll see you tomorrow, darling.”

Annalise disconnected the call and cranked up the stereo. The noise would piss off her neighbour but she could care less. She opened Facebook and Instagram. Maybe a YouTube video would be best to influence the masses. She looked cute enough to get a lot of engagement. She could weep a bit. Hey, maybe she could feign concern for the one-legged bitch and pretend to warn the twat about Robbie by using *#metoo* to garner tons of sympathy. Tapping her foot to her favourite heavy metal band, Annalise deliberated over a narrative that would put her in the best light.

Her head snapped against the sofa back. She couldn’t breathe and dropped her phone. Her hands flew to her neck. She felt her fingers clawing at coarse fibres. Gagging, she tried to force a finger between her throat and a thick rope.

Annalise’s bulging eyes glimpsed a shadow silhouetted outside the sheer living room drapes. It had to be her neighbour arriving

to complain about the music. He'd witness her attack and call the cops.

Desperate to hang on, she bucked against the sofa and fumbled at the rope. The sofa tipped backwards, crashing onto the hardwood floor. Her shoulder hit the circular staircase. Dazed, she felt her body lift off the ground. Her body rose metre by metre and the noose tighten against her neck. Her feet jerked uncontrollably as she swayed helplessly above her living room floor.

Below her, a figure sauntered into her sightline. A long black coat covered his body and a hood shadowed his face. Annalise gurgled, her vision blurring and doubling as she fought for air.

"I am your shadow," a voice said. "I see inside the darkest part of you. I am the omnipotent judge and executioner of the unworthy. For the atrocities you commit against the innocent, you're sentenced to death."

The last thing Annalise saw before she surrendered to the encroaching darkness was a hand reaching for her phone.

# CHAPTER ONE

## SAM

SAM MCNAMARA LINGERED outside an attractively renovated four-storey brick building from the eighteen hundreds. The clear July sky was a vivid blue, but she'd have preferred rain today. It was too hot for business attire, and she hoped her deodorant would stand up to the heat and stress. It had been nine years since she'd suffered a job interview, back when she was twenty-five and had joined Toronto Police Services. There was a lot of murky water under that blown-up bridge. Two years later, the media had drawn and quartered her after she'd shot a gang-banger who'd killed her partner in cold blood. It had been a righteous shooting. If she hadn't fired, he would have killed her, too, but he had been just fifteen. The ensuing scandal had closed the door on her dream of following in her father's footsteps and honouring his illustrious police career. The public believed doctors could save psychopathic adolescents, and so she had given the pandering upper echelon of the police force what they wanted: her resignation.

Did she still believe mental health experts could save all the broken children? She shaded her eyes against the brilliant sun and gazed up at the private psychiatric hospital. Over the past five years, while operating a successful private investigation agency,

she'd worked hard to earn a PhD in clinical psychology. Her thesis had centred on the detection of pre-existing psychiatric disorders in children. After everything she'd encountered over the past year, the only thing Sam knew for sure was that evil existed in human form and it didn't discriminate when it came to age.

She wandered down the street, killing time until her interview. Outside a quaint bistro, she saw a uniformed veteran sitting in a wheelchair with a cardboard sign around his neck—*I lost my leg to an IED. I don't do drug & I'm hungry. Please help.* People were giving him a wide berth as they walked past. One woman, Sam noticed with disgust, scowled at the soldier and muttered something under her breath. The insensitive behaviour reminded her of a bumper sticker with a sentiment she loved: 'If you can't stand behind our troops, feel free to stand in front of them.' If she'd had one in her pocket, she'd have given it to the woman. People's ungrateful entitlement worried her sometimes.

Sam went into the restaurant and bought a coffee and a sandwich. Outside, she handed both to the man and dropped a ten-dollar bill into the hat he held.

"Thank you for your service," she said. "I should have asked how you take your coffee." She gave him some packets of sugar, a few creamers, and a stir stick.

"God bless you," he replied, and eagerly unwrapped the sandwich.

There was still ten minutes before her interview. She didn't want one of her prospective employers to catch her loitering around the front entrance, so she ventured down a narrow opening between the west side of the clinic and a neighbouring structure. A metre into the mouth of the alley, the modern stone façade



stopped. Grubby old cellar windows dotted the aged brick at ankle height. The historic building had once housed one of Toronto's first department stores. It had changed hands multiple times over the past century, until Serenity Clinic had saved the derelict structure from demolition five years ago. She'd read that it had taken over two years to refurbish it into a functioning private hospital. Admiring the back ambulance bay, Sam couldn't imagine what the price tag had been for such a massive renovation. No wonder they'd neglected a useless stone cellar.

She swiped fawn-coloured dog hair off her black dress pants and checked her watch. It was time to go in. She needed this clinical practicum to complete her doctoral degree. That required wooing the two pioneering neuropsychiatrists who had rejected public health care and opened Serenity Clinic, a private inpatient facility. A bit of an anomaly in Canada, but an aging population had crippled the health care system. Mental health services lacked funding. Families faced daunting waitlists and minimal options when seeking help for an array of adolescent addictions and disorders. Serenity Clinic provided an alternative, and Sam desperately hoped to be part of what they were achieving. This was a coveted internship, and she didn't want to blow her opportunity.

In the lobby, a security guard took her name and asked her to have a seat. A few minutes later, a tall, dark-haired woman in her early-thirties marched up and shook Sam's hand. She was unremarkable in appearance, other than the difference in colouration of her eyes—the right was blue and the left was brown.

“Sam McNamara? Ophelia, head psychiatric nurse. I'll take you up to Dr. Armstrong's office.”

Sam followed her through two sets of keycard-locked doors, and they continued down a long white corridor with a seamless, poured floor in a mosaic of teal and seafoam. Ophelia chattered endlessly about the clinic, the renovations, and the patients.

Annoyed by the stream of inane babble, Sam stopped walking and interrupted the woman's complaints about black mould in the cellar. "Wow. This is gorgeous."

She admired the stunning figurative watercolour of three women. Her best friend had finally recognized her dream and was studying at the Ontario College of Art. As a show of support, Sam had grown better at appreciating art.

"Is it an original Guity Novin?" she asked.

Ophelia's shoulders tensed. "Dr. Beauregard's a collector. He lends us some of his private collection." Her lips pursed together and her nose crinkled. "He has a Picasso etching in his office," she stated with undisguised disapproval. "He likes nice things." She unlocked a heavy stairwell door, letting it swing closed behind her.

Sam caught the door just before it smashed into her face. "There are about sixty residential patients, is that right?" Sam asked.

"Fifty-four, mostly in recovery from drugs, alcohol, eating disorders, and self-harming. We can accommodate seventy-five inpatients, but that includes the ten beds in the lockdown unit. We have five patients there now, including the one they want you to work with."

"They want me to work with a specific patient?" Sam asked with a frown. "Why?"

Ophelia stopped abruptly and Sam plowed into her back, grabbing the bannister a second before they both tumbled down the stairs.

The nurse spun around, glaring at Sam. "I shouldn't have said that. Don't mention it, especially to Dr. Beauregard."

Something strange in the woman's mismatched eyes unnerved Sam. "No worries. But can you tell me anything about this patient?"

Ophelia unlocked the fourth-floor stairwell door, shoving it so hard it bounced against the cement wall. "No. It's not my place." She practically jogged down the corridor.

Sam trotted after her, feeling flustered and irritated. Neither emotion was optimum when trying to impress a prospective employer. She straightened her jacket as she came up beside Ophelia, then jerked in surprise when the nurse grasped her shoulder. Hard.

"Not a word about what I said." She hissed the words into Sam's face, spraying her cheek with spittle. Then, as if nothing at all had happened, Ophelia flung open the office door. "Dr. Emily Armstrong, Ms. Sam McNamara, a clinical practicum candidate."

Sam reached up and wiped her cheek, cringing in disgust.

The doctor glanced up from her computer screen. "Thank you, Ophelia."

Dr. Armstrong was an attractive woman in her mid-fifties, tall and thin with shoulder-length black hair that framed her oval face. A neatly trimmed fringe fell just above her large hazel eyes.

She picked up a blue file folder from her desk and motioned toward a cozy seating arrangement under a large corner window. "Sam, please have a seat." Dr. Armstrong sat on a small sofa and

dropped the file onto a teak coffee table. “Can we offer you coffee?”

Eager to see the last of Ophelia, Sam shook her head. “I’m fine, thanks.” She sat in a sand-coloured armchair and placed her leather satchel on the table beside the thick blue folder.

Dr. Armstrong smiled at the nurse. “Thank you,” she repeated.

Ophelia backed out of the office, closing the door behind her, and Sam experienced a clairvoyant certainty that the peculiar woman was eavesdropping just outside it.

“You attended my seminar last year on bi-polar disorder,” Dr. Armstrong said. “We spoke after the lecture and you exhibited enthusiasm about our work here.”

Sam laughed. “Well, I’m not surprised you remember me. I accosted you. I don’t like to let opportunities slip away.”

Dr. Armstrong crossed her legs and smoothed her lab coat over her charcoal dress. “Your letters of reference are impressive. Dr. Roger Peterson is a highly regarded psychiatrist,” she said. “You assisted in his murder acquittal a few years back, yes?”

That sounded bad, as if Sam had strong-armed Roger into writing a glowing recommendation because he wasn’t wasting away in prison. They’d been friends since childhood. She needed to correct the misunderstanding.

Before she could respond, Dr. Armstrong continued. “Let me speak frankly. I didn’t invite you here because of your application,” she said. “I’m in need of your assistance. In exchange, I’m prepared to offer you the clinical practicum you need to complete your PhD.”

Stunned, Sam leaned back in her chair. “I don’t understand.”

“You graduated from Queen’s University with a double major in criminology and psychology. When you were twenty-one, a drunk driver killed your father. You moved home and did your masters at University of Toronto. Your GPA for your undergraduate and graduate work was above average but not within the top five percent of your class.”

Sam was about to defend her respectable 4.0 GPA, but Dr. Armstrong didn’t give her the chance.

“You joined Toronto Police Service at twenty-five, left two years later, and opened your private investigation agency,” she recited from memory. “You and your fiancé, Reece Hash, run it together with one employee, Elijah Watson. Reece recently completed law school and is articling at the Crown attorney’s office.”

Sam studied her silently, annoyed but not entirely surprised by the intense research the doctor had clearly done. She wanted to add context to some of the dispassionate remarks but felt it prudent to let Dr. Armstrong finish uninterrupted.

“Regardless of your arduous study schedules, you’ve managed to work multiple cases,” Dr. Armstrong said. “At the inception of your career, you were instrumental in apprehending Incubus, the serial killer who murdered your sister. Last year, you solved the Frozen Statue murders. I’m fascinated by your knack for attracting antisocial personalities.”

Sam wondered if her aptitude for drawing psychopaths to her was the neuropsychiatrist’s motivation for the interview. That was depressing.

Dr. Armstrong leaned forward, and her tone became more intimate. “But I want to talk about Bueton Sanctuary. Specifically, I want to talk about Mussani.”

Sam sucked in her breath. Bueton Sanctuary was the cult she had exposed almost five years earlier, and Mussani had been its leader. Seventy-two people had died. It had been Sam's first real case—a missing sixteen-year-old girl who had been discovered living among the cult members. She and Reece had met during that case, when he was an inspector with the Ontario Provincial Police detachment in the town of Uthisca.

“Dr. Armstrong, why do you want to talk about Mussani?” Sam asked, not bothering to hide her suspicion.

“Call me Emily. Everyone does,” Dr. Armstrong said warmly. “Is Mussani truly dead?”

“He fell from the Bunda cliffs in Australia.” Sam removed her suit jacket and folded it over the arm of her chair.

“Ah, but authorities never recovered his body. You were there, yes?”

Sam nodded. “I witnessed him fall.”

He hadn't actually fallen, but Sam would never admit that truth. It had taken her and Reece six months to track the sociopathic mass murderer. Reece had left the OPP after the Bueton massacre. She harboured no regrets for what had transpired on that cliff, but it had taken her law-enforcing, moral fiancé a long time to reconcile what had happened.

“How sure are you he's dead?” Emily asked.

“Very,” Sam answered. “You mind telling me what this is about?”

Emily slid the blue folder across the table. “Fadiya Basha is a seventeen-year-old patient who presents with severe erotomanic delusional disorder. I believe you can help her, which is why I'm offering you the internship here.”

Sam scanned the patient file. “She survived Bueton.”

Emily nodded. “Authorities found her hiding in a generator shed. She was twelve.”

“That can’t be,” Sam said softly. “There were no survivors.”

“Fadiya’s parents are very wealthy. They went to great lengths to protect her identity,” Emily said. “Their daughter disappeared eight months prior to the massacre. They were staying at a lake house in Uthisca. Her brother, Aazar, took Fadiya to the train station to visit their aunt in Hamilton, and that was the last anyone saw of her for months. Evidently, she’d gotten off the train and ran away to Bueton.”

Sam thought back to the case. The women of the cult had run a shop in town that the male followers had used as a front to recruit young girls for their leader. Fadiya could have heard about Bueton there. She shuddered. If the girl had been at Bueton for over six months, Mussani would have initiated her. The ceremony had been a degenerate ritual of sexual assault, in the guise of their Messiah cleansing the victim prior to transcendence.

A light went on in Sam’s head. “Patients with erotomanic delusions believe someone is in love with them. Fadiya believes Mussani is alive,” she guessed. “She thinks they’re in love.” Her stomach roiled.

“It’s a bit more complicated. Fadiya believes Mussani visits her at night. Here in the clinic. In the lockdown unit,” Emily said. “You lived at Bueton, yes?”

“I was inside the gates for a short time during my investigation.”

Sam studied the picture in Fadiya’s file. She was a beautiful girl with enormous eyes the colour of warm chocolate. They were

soulful eyes that mirrored the pain the girl had endured and the horrors she'd witnessed.

"I don't recognize her," Sam said unable to look away from the photo. "It's doubtful she even knew I was there."

Emily leaned forward, her eyes intense. "But you know more about the cult than anyone left alive. You have the information required to challenge her convictions and convince her to renounce the cult's ideologies."

"You want me to act as a thought reform consultant? I'm not a cult expert," Sam said. "Other than my inside knowledge of Bue-ton, why come to me?"

Emily licked her lips and reached for a crystal pitcher. She poured each of them a glass of water, picked hers up, and sipped it, studying Sam over the rim. "Two reasons. The first is to deprogram the cult's brainwashing. I recognize the negative connotation with the term 'deprogramming', but Fadiya didn't leave the cult willingly."

Sam had no familiarity with deprogramming, other than knowing it was an extreme and sometimes violent method of intervention. It had nothing to do with her field of study as a psychologist.

"And the second reason?" she asked.

"That's highly confidential. If you're willing to accept the internship today, I'll confide in you."

Sam's distrust ramped up to high gear. She wanted the position but she wasn't negotiating blind. "Look, Emily, I don't know what's going on here, but I suspect it hasn't much to do with a clinical internship. If you need my help, you have to tell me the truth. All of it."



Dr. Armstrong took another sip of water and regarded her coolly for a moment, considering.

“Fadiya is pregnant.”

“And...” Sam prompted.

Emily dropped her eyes. “She’s in a lockdown unit with no patient fraternization and supervised visitation. The entrance to her room is under twenty-four-seven surveillance. There’s no indication on our security footage of any unauthorized personnel accessing her room. She’s legally incapable of giving consent.”

“Someone raped her,” Sam stated.

Emily nodded. “Over the past four months, Fadiya’s condition has deteriorated. She’s rarely lucid. Her regression baffles me. But every time she’s aware, she insists that Mussani comes to her.”

Sam contemplated various scenarios. “The most obvious explanation is that whoever raped her told her he was Mussani. It would play into her delusion and keep her quiet.”

Sam refrained from pointing out the other logical conclusion: that Fadiya’s rapist was someone inside the clinic with access to the girl’s private case notes.

“That’s my guess,” Emily agreed. “But she’s only eight weeks pregnant and her insistence that Mussani visits her began four months ago. If our supposition is correct, it means this person has been impersonating Mussani and assaulting her repeatedly over the past four months.”

“How many male employees have access to the lockdown unit?” Sam asked.

“My partner, Dr. Beauregard, one psychologist, two nurses, and five security officers. Once apprised of this... this horrific crime, all nine volunteered to do a DNA test. A prenatal paternity test last

week proved that none of them fathered Fadiya's baby. I need to know who did." She sipped from her glass of water and dropped her eyes. "My hope is to identify the father before I'm forced to disclose the pregnancy to the family." Emily looked up and held Sam's gaze. "Can you help?"

Disappointment flooded over Sam. Emily Armstrong, a highly respected expert in her field, didn't want her as a clinical psychologist. She wanted her as a private investigator.

"You want me to investigate the rape," Sam stated flatly.

"In part, yes," Emily said. "But the salient need is to help this girl. Three years ago, the Ontario court ruled Fadiya mentally incompetent. Last year, her parents entrusted her to my care. The family situation is complicate, but it's imperative that the federal court overturn the incompetency ruling." Emily took Sam's hand and held it tightly between her own. "I've dedicated my life to studying severe psychiatric disorders and improving quality of life. Given the fact that Fadiya is pregnant and a victim of foul play, I genuinely believe you're her only hope. If you can challenge the brainwashing and convince her to relinquish her beliefs, we can begin trauma work to help her heal from what happened at Bueton."

Sam extracted her hand. "And she can identify her rapist." She picked up her satchel and stood, reaching for her suit jacket. "An unknown security breach that led to the rape of an underage patient by an unidentified subject will provoke a Ministry of Health investigation," she said. "Health advocates who object to private hospitals in a public health system will use it as leverage to demand the closure of your clinic. That's really what this is about."

Emily's eyes widened. "Of course not! It's about the violation of a vulnerable girl I promised to protect." She stood and faced Sam. "Yes, I'm asking you to use your investigation skills, but I'm offering you a legitimate clinical practicum. Much of psychology is investigative. You have experience in both disciplines."

"What you're asking is for me to go undercover and lie to a patient, possibly damaging her in the process." Sam struggled to keep her voice level. "In exchange, you'll sign off on a bogus internship, and I'll receive my PhD under duplicitous circumstances." She laughed bitterly. "No thanks."

Emily took Sam's hand again. "The practicum is genuine, I promise. Regardless of the outcome of the investigation, my expectations around your clinical performance here will be identical to those regarding any other intern. My mentorship will be identical to what I offer any other intern. Should you not meet my expectations, I will not provide you with a favourable review. I'm not proposing anything deceitful."

Sam stood with one hand on the doorknob, deliberating. On the one hand, she desperately wanted to learn under the talented neuropsychiatrist. On the other hand, she felt manipulated. Yes, Emily had shaken her confidence by admitting that she hadn't earned the spot based on her academic achievements. But was her disappointment making her cynical, clouding her judgment? Sam gave her head a figurative shake. A sexual predator was raping a teenage girl, whom doctors might have misdiagnosed with a mental illness she didn't have. That illness had been the court's justification for suspending her legal right to make decisions regarding every aspect of her life. Did anything else matter?

“I’ll take a look into the security breach,” Sam said. “If we can recover even a partial frame of the obstructed data, you may be able to identify the rapist.”

“Will you think about the internship?” Emily asked. “Maybe meet Fadiya?”

Sam opened her wallet and found one of Eli’s cards. “I’ll brief our IT expert and he’ll expect your call. Introduce him to your security specialist and they’ll sort out the system access details.”

Emily took the card. “I’ve handled this dreadfully,” she said with a frown. “I’m so sorry. I hope you’ll consider me as your mentor. It would be an honour to help you complete your PhD.”

“Why?” Sam demanded.

Emily smiled, “I believe you possess the inherent ability to intuitively understand people’s unconscious needs. You proved me right this morning.”

“How?” Sam asked.

“Life has a way of stripping people’s dignity,” Emily said. “I was outside the bistro this morning and watched you. You saw a way to give that veteran what he truly longed for.”

“I gave him a sandwich,” Sam said.

Emily shook her head. “No. You acknowledged how much he’d sacrificed. You gave him gratitude.”

Sam stepped into the hallway. “Have your security person contact Eli.” She turned back to face Emily, struggling to keep her disappointment at bay. “Thanks for meeting with me.”

“Please consider working with me,” Emily said softly. “Please help Fadiya. You may be her only hope.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### REECE

REECE PULLED INTO his reserved parking space at the back of a converted warehouse in Corktown where he shared a thousand-square-foot loft space with Sam. At least a faint hint of colour still painted the western horizon. These days, it was unusual for him to get home until well after sunset.

He turned off his Honda and sat quietly in the car, reviewing the multiple tasks on his to-do list that he'd failed to accomplish. He hadn't checked-in with Eli on the office renovations, and he'd promised Sam that she wouldn't have to be involved. His promise was why she'd reluctantly agreed to the massive project. Sam didn't like change, even positive change, but Reece couldn't stand another freezing winter in their dilapidated, miniature office in Little Italy. Not that he'd have an opportunity to visit it. Especially not now, since his articling principal had given him an odious, time-sucking task.

He popped the sedan's trunk and circled the car to retrieve two large file boxes. Closing the trunk with his elbow, he trudged to the building's back entrance, trying to balance the heavy boxes in one arm so he could negotiate the security lock with the other. They were on the top floor of a thirty-thousand-square-foot

warehouse with eighteen-foot ceilings, but he wasn't going to risk the unreliable elevator. Reece plodded up the stairs and shuffled down a long corridor to the front of the converted warehouse. The wide hallway was suffocating. Scorching July sun had flooded in all day from the three-storey glass front of the building. He hoped Sam had surrendered to practicality and had put on the air conditioning. She disliked AC, but between the floor-to-ceiling windows and multiple skylights, the loft would be sweltering tonight.

A quiet evening with Sam—with any luck in air-conditioned comfort—was just what Reece needed. He considered various dinner options and settled on Thai coconut chicken curry. He'd grind his own garam masala and make ghee. Cooking always lowered his stress. After dinner, he'd share with Sam the horrible conflict he felt over his new assignment.

Outside their front door, his heart dropped. Voices—one male and two female. The last thing Reece felt like was entertaining. He hoped it wasn't Sam's best friend, Lisa Stipelli, and her husband Jim. Reece enjoyed Jim's company, but at only thirty-nine, Jim was Toronto's most prominent criminal attorney, while Reece was a forty-year-old articling student. The fact Reece had risen to the impressive rank of inspector with the provincial police, didn't assuage his sense of failure tonight. If he hadn't dropped out of law school to pursue law enforcement, he wouldn't be a middle-aged articling student. Maybe he should have accepted the Toronto Police Services' offer and joined their homicide squad. Inside that chaotic bullpen, working with the blue brethren, was where he'd felt at home. Instead, he now faced the loathsome task of betraying colleagues he respected. He kicked one of the damn file boxes.

Childish, sure, but it made him feel better. He took a deep breath, plastered a smile on his face, and flung open the door.

A flash of fawn zoomed across his peripheral vision and a solid mass plowed into his legs, knocking him off balance. The boxes flew from his flailing arms, and file folders scattered across the glossy hemlock floor. As he fumbled to grab a box, sharp teeth nipped at his scrambling fingers.

“Pepin escaped his puppy crate. Again,” Sam said from the gourmet kitchen.

Reece squatted to pat the French bulldog. “You have to latch it,” he said in Pepin’s defence.

She adjusted the heat under one of the six burners on their Viking gas range. “Locking that thing requires a PhD in robotic engineering. Besides, it wouldn’t matter. He’s Houdini.”

Reece caught a note of distaste in her voice. He’d bought her the puppy after Brandy, her golden retriever, had died. It had seemed like a great idea at the time, something to help her deal with her crushing grief. Now, though, he was having second thoughts. Sam was kind to the puppy, but he sensed a growing dislike for the chubby little firecracker.

“He ate one of your slippers.” She chuckled maliciously.

“Not the Mukluks! I love those.” Reece sighed and turned to their employee, Eli, who stood impatiently by the large kitchen island. “How’s everything going with the renovations?”

“It is not good. It is very bad. Removing the wall between the two office spaces is a problem. It is load bearing. We must have an engineered support beam. It will be costly. There is a problem with the flooring, and—”

“Forget I asked.” Reece groaned, tugging off his tie, and rolling up the sleeves of his white dress shirt.

Eli, who had Asperger’s, had reported this spew of bad news with his usual lack of expression. But Reece had learned to read nuances in the young man’s body language that precipitated a meltdown. Right now, Eli’s rigid stance, twitching index finger, and roaming eyes suggested he was a heartbeat from freaking out. They could deal with the reno glitches after dinner.

“You’re cooking,” Reece said to Sam, careful to inject enthusiasm into his tone. Sam was a terrible cook.

“My dad’s chili.” She held out a wooden spoon.

He tentatively licked it and tried not to gag on the overpowering salt.

“Yummy,” he murmured. When she wasn’t looking, he’d try to sneak in some lime and fat to neutralize the salt. “How was the interview?”

She turned her back and rinsed the spoon. “She offered me the clinical practicum, but there are strings.”

“Strings?”

“Yup, and I consider them unethical.” She nodded her chin at Eli, who was watching the two of them uneasily, waiting to hear all about it. “We’ll talk about it later,” she said calmly, then turned back to Reece. “Any chance of bread sticks?”

“Sure.”

“The ones with cheese inside?” She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “If I pretend I don’t notice, will you fix the salt in my chili?”



He laughed and kissed her. "Pour me a glass of wine, please." He pulled out a mixing bowl and began assembling the ingredients.

"What's this?"

Reece turned to see Danny, Eli's sister, rummaging around the spilled file boxes.

"My boss asked me to audit police due diligence in those closed sudden-death cases." He swallowed his disdain. "She ordered me to question every ruling and to investigate discreetly."

"Ouch." Sam handed him a glass of red wine. "How do you feel about sneaking around examining the proficiency of officers you respect?"

Leave it to Sam to cut straight to the heart of the problem, he thought wryly.

"Not good, but I don't have a choice. I'm her articling student." He set aside his yeast to bubble. "Gretchen claims she received an anonymous tip that over the past three years, a serial killer has hidden murders as suicides, accidental mishaps, and natural deaths."

"Hmm... So, we can rule out a subject who achieves pleasure from showcasing extreme violence." Sam paused in thought. "Cops and coroners misjudging cause of death might satisfy abnormal gratification." She picked up one of the files. "The question is how we figure out which ones are possible homicides." She flipped through the folder she held. "Studying victimology will be helpful. There might be a profile pattern."

"Why didn't your boss turn this so-called tip over to the cops?" Danny asked. "Shouldn't homicide investigate?"

Sam looked up with a frown. "Good question."

Reece finished grating the smoked cheddar and took a sip of his wine, appreciating the vibrant plum note on his palette. “She wouldn’t tell me. She wants the audit to stay off Toronto Police Services’ radar,” he said with a grimace.

“Maybe Gretchen wants to validate the tip prior to proceeding through usual channels,” Sam suggested but her green eyes looked doubtful.

“I can’t figure out her agenda. I guess it’s above my paygrade,” Reece said, trying to curb his bitterness. He mixed the dough and turned it onto the counter to knead.

Gretchen had told him there would be ‘dire consequences’ should he breach her trust by disclosing any aspect of his assignment to anyone employed by or associated with the police department. Reece didn’t know what was going on, but the lack of transparency didn’t sit well with him.

“We will help you investigate these files,” Eli announced. He placed a box on the dining room table beside the ladder staircase that led to the elevated bedroom loft.

Reece finished kneading the bread dough and set it into the proofing oven, wiping down the Carrera marble countertop. None of his team was associated with the police department, but Reece suddenly felt uncomfortable sharing what he had. If a Crown attorney terminated his articling position with cause—especially due to breach of confidentiality—that would end his law career before it had gotten off the ground.

“Look, I appreciate it, but involving outsiders is against protocol,” Reece stated, wishing he’d kept his mouth shut and had spoken to Sam in private.

Danny turned from the eighteen-foot-high windows across the long south wall. “Then don’t tell anyone,” she retorted, and crossed the large open space to the table. “For a smart man, you can be remarkably stupid.” She opened her laptop, which she never went anywhere without, and stared with disgust at the boxes of files. “Any chance your office joined the twenty-first century and you have this in electronic form?”

He opened his laptop bag and pulled out a hard drive. Danny had a PhD in computer engineering and a master’s in computer science. She was a world-renowned white-hat hacker on the deep web. She was also a hermit with an off-putting personality who lived with her brother and had an unhealthy distrust of everyone else. She’d grudgingly accepted Sam and Reece into her inner circle, but that had only been because of her brother’s devotion to them. Danny could break any encryption and access any system. Although she was just twenty-five, experts considered her a prodigy and she had collaborated with multiple government agencies during the year Reece had known her. She never spoke of her highly confidential projects. Might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, Reece thought resignedly. He’d intended on soliciting Sam’s help with the psychological profiling, which also broke procedure, so he might as well have Danny on board too.

With a twinge of guilt, Reece handed her the portable hard drive.

“I’ll design a database and code an algorithm to manipulate the data to search for commonalities in the cases,” she said. “You old folks can hunt through mountains of paper.” She snickered and attached the drive to her computer.

Sam took his hand. “I know how uncomfortable this assignment makes you,” she said sympathetically. “Maybe the tip is bogus. It’s possible that the original officers and detectives didn’t miss anything.” She patted the pile of folders. “Every one of these could be legitimate accidents, suicides, and natural deaths.”

“That would be brilliant,” Reece said. “Fingers crossed you’re right.”

“Annalise Huang, a social media consultant,” Eli read. “Investigators ruled her death as a suicide three months ago. She hanged herself from her staircase after a breakup.”

Danny snorted in contempt. “I hate that ‘gotta-have-a-man’ type of woman. Who kills herself over a douche-bag?”

Eli ignored her. “According to Mrs. Huang, her daughter’s ex-fiancé financially ruined her and was stalking her with a drone.” He scrolled through his cell phone, rubbing the six-centimetre scar across the right side of his face. “Annalise posted her suicide note on Facebook. That was after she posted a ton of things about her ex.” He passed his phone to Reece. His sleeve rode up and he quickly tugged it down to cover the puckered cigarette burns on his forearm.

Reece scrolled down and read a string of slanderous posts. “Wow, putting all this online seems unstable.”

“You can’t judge someone’s mental stability based on reactionary behaviour after a hurtful breakup.” Sam took the file from Eli and read. “Hmm... her mother adamantly argued that her daughter was not suicidal. She was flying home to Vancouver the next day. Phone records confirmed they’d spoken less than an hour prior to Annalise’s death.” She flipped the file around to show Reece. “Mom’s a therapist.” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“And aren’t you the one who said that therapists often have the most messed-up kids?” Reece ran his fingers through his thick black hair and tempered his tone. “Sorry, I sound defensive but I read that file and the cops couldn’t find anyone who saw this alleged drone,” he said. “And they did a thorough investigation, even confirming her ex’s iron-clad alibi.” He pointed at a line in a statement report. “Her friend, Denise, was with Annalise earlier that night and told police she was depressed.”

Sam shrugged. “Her other friends denied that. They referred to Annalise as self-important. One described her as a ‘quintessential mean-girl’.” She paused. “The drone *is* weird, Reece. It’s a handy tool for a stalker. Let’s put this one in the investigate pile.”

They’d just started, and already Reece felt like a traitor, nitpicking at an accomplished officer’s investigative prowess.

“Why does this one have a green sticker on it?” Danny asked.

“I vetted it and there’s a suicide motive,” Reece said. “The woman ran down a pregnant mother and two toddlers in a grocery store parking lot. The heel of her flip-flop doubled back and she couldn’t pull her foot off the accelerator. One of the toddlers died at the scene, the other sustained permanent brain damage, and the baby died ten hours after an emergency C-section.”

Danny highlighted one line in the middle of the electronic file on her screen. “Did you see this?”

With growing dread, Reece read the notation. Prior to her alleged suicide, the woman had filed a legal appeal, stating that a ten-year licence suspension was unreasonable punishment.

Sam read over his shoulder. “She killed two children, left the third with acquired brain injury, and she considered a licence suspension too harsh?”

“My point exactly,” Danny said. “What’s the likelihood of someone with no remorse killing herself?”

“Not good.” Sam closed the file. “It’s not surprising that the investigators missed a note buried in a pile of court documents.”

Reece disagreed. Death investigations followed rigid procedures to eliminate the risk of reaching erroneous conclusions. This was a careless oversight by a detective with too high a caseload.

Sam plopped down another file in a separate pile. “This one is natural causes. Cause of death was a pulmonary embolism.”

Danny made an odd growling noise in the back of her throat.

Sam rolled her eyes at Reece and then scrutinized Danny. “Out with it. That growl always means you have something to say.”

“Potassium chloride,” Danny mumbled.

“What about it?” Reece was certain he didn’t want to know.

“Leaves no trace and presents as pulmonary embolism,” she said. “Buy potassium chloride pills in the vitamin aisle of any drugstore, compound a high concentration into a liquid, pick an obscured site, and inject your victim intravenously. Easy-breezy.” Without shifting her eyes from the code on her screen, she reached for another file.

“Danny has been studying medicine as a hobby,” Eli announced proudly.

“Fantastic.” Reece wondered why anyone would read *Gray’s Anatomy* for recreational purposes.

“My main interest is bioinformatics,” Danny said. “But George Church’s lectures on genetics are interesting so I’m studying that, too. I’m enjoying all the Harvard classes.”

“Harvard?” Sam asked, looking as confused as Reece felt.

“Danny is very smart,” Eli said.

“But Harvard is in Boston and you’re in Toronto,” Sam said. “How does that work?”

“Some of the courses are online with edX,” Danny said. “For others, I have to get a bit creative to access the professors’ lectures and course materials.”

Reece scowled at her. “You’re hacking, breaching the professors’ privacy, and stealing material other students pay a fortune for. You’re breaking the law.”

“Knowledge should be shared,” she answered heatedly. “If I don’t want the stupid piece of paper, what’s the difference?”

“You’re stealing,” he retorted. “There’s no moral ambiguity around it.”

Danny glared at him, her eyes narrowing behind her thick spectacles. “Society is drifting back to an eighteenth-century class system where your family’s socioeconomic position impacts your educational opportunities. Harvard and MIT hire brilliant professors and researchers, yet they deny the masses access to the knowledge. How is that moral?”

“If you don’t like the system, work within the law to change it,” Reece countered, realizing too late that he sounded like a bourgeois prig.

“Both of you take a breath.” Sam turned to Reece. “You’re cranky because you don’t want to admit that some of these files require a closer look. There are inconsistencies that the first responders failed to examine.”

Feeling ashamed by his outburst, Reece laid his hand gently on Danny’s shoulder, feeling her tense under his touch. “I was out of line. If you’re still willing to help, I’d appreciate it. Your algorithm idea is good.”

“Yeah, it is,” she mumbled, clearly not mollified by his apology.

Reece sighed and gazed at the boxes of files. If even one of these sudden-death cases was a homicide, he had a responsibility to uncover the truth. There was no moral ambiguity around that, either. But the Crown attorney’s office investigating closed cases would incite rampant suspicion in the police department. He’d be the target of that suspicion. Reece saw no scenario in which the blue brethren wouldn’t brand him a traitor. He’d feel the same in their shoes.

A backstabbing turncoat was exactly what he was. He wished he’d never gone back to law school.

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