

The Elephant Bowl

The Endearment Diary

Between the Trees

# The Elephant Bowl

A Short Story

Part of the Detective August Miller Series

by Charles Prandy

This short story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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# Chapter 1

January 7, 2016

The first time I met Shelton Sewell in 2004, he was handcuffed to a table in one of our interrogation rooms. When he spoke, his voice was soft and tepid, and he was polite, calling me ‘ma’am’ after every question I asked. His answers seemed relatively forthright, with none of the signs of deception that so many others had shown in his position – perfect behavior, especially considering it was the first case to which I’d been assigned as a detective. Before that, I’d worn a uniform like every other cop fresh out of the academy. But I didn’t wear it for long. Three years into my career, I applied for the detective position and was accepted. The process was rigorous and seemed to take an eternity, but in the end I became the youngest woman to earn a detective’s badge in Montgomery County, Maryland. The Shelton Sewell case was my congratulations, awarded by my supervising detective.

Twelve years ago, now, but I remember meeting him like it was yesterday. We were similar in age and

demographics, and I'd even heard of him before. He'd gone to Sherwood High School, a rival to my own high school, and had been the star linebacker for their football team. His name used to float from school to school, and paper to paper, as he was touted as the next star athlete to come from our area. Despite all that, I didn't hear his name again until he became my prime suspect. His interrogation didn't last long; he admitted his crimes quickly. When we were done, I asked him to stand and told him that he was being charged with the murder of Payton Wells. He nodded and looked down at the floor. His arrest was over a decade ago, and I hadn't seen him since his conviction, but here I was about to see him again.

I sat with a dozen or so people, and light chatter bubbled around the small room. That stopped abruptly when two guards opened the door to the chamber and Shelton Sewell quietly walked in. He was smaller than I remembered; almost like he'd lost a part of himself over the past twelve years. The guards stopped him in front of a gurney, and he was visibly shaking. His head hung low, and it took him nearly thirty seconds to look up through the glass wall that divided us. Over the years since we'd last met, I'd grown as a detective and learned to harden my emotions, but knowing that Shelton wasn't going to leave the chamber alive tugged at my heart a little.

Shelton's eyes searched the room, and when he saw Payton Wells' husband and daughter, his hands came together in prayer, and he nodded to them and mouthed, "I'm sorry." At that gesture, Payton's daughter began to sob. Her

father placed his arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead.

The guards motioned for Shelton to lie on the gurney. My heart began to flutter, my palms became moist and I had to take deep breaths to slow down the anxiety that was washing over me. The guards strapped Shelton's arms and legs to the gurney, and as they did, a priest read a verse from the Bible. The doctor in the room said something to Shelton and he nodded. A few seconds later, he inserted the first needle into Shelton's left arm. Shelton Sewell's case was the only death-sentence case I'd been part of, but I knew that the state of Maryland administered three drugs to end an inmate's life. This was the first; a sedative that the doctor slowly pushed in. Shelton's eyes began to close. The second was pancuronium bromide, which induced paralysis, and the third was potassium chloride, which stopped the heart. Shelton coughed a couple of times and then his stomach stopped rising. The doctor looked at the clock and pronounced Shelton Sewell dead at 12:15 a.m.

The room remained quiet for a few seconds. I guessed that even though Shelton had been convicted of premeditated murder, there was a sense of respect for death. A minute later, murmurs started and people began to stand. I walked over to Payton Wells' husband and shook his hand. He nodded and thanked me. I turned to her daughter, her eyes still red from the tears that stained her face.

"Thank you, Detective Miller," she said softly.

"Please, call me August. And it was all I could do for your mother."

We embraced for a moment and she squeezed me tighter than I'd expected.

"Thank you, August."

"It's finally over, now."

"After all these years, it still hurts," she said, her voice cracking, and I felt warm tears against my neck. I looked through the glass as the guards pulled a sheet over Shelton's lifeless body. I had to blink a few times as my eyes started to moisten. As I slowly pulled back from our embrace, I reached into my pocket and handed her my card.

"Call me anytime, day or night. Even if you just want to cry on the phone. I'll be there."

She nodded and turned towards her father. I took in a deep breath and canvased the room before I left. People hugged and shook hands with each other. That was the first time I'd seen a death sentence fulfilled, and I hoped it would be the last.



# Chapter 2

Nine Months Later

The handle of my service revolver was gripped tightly in my hand. My right pointer finger rested on its side, directly under the barrel. My left hand cupped the other side of the handle, steadying my aim on Rodrigo Fuentez's chest. My heart raced as sweat dripped down my face. My breaths were beginning to calm, but my lungs still burned from having to sprint nearly half a mile through old town Gaithersburg, Maryland.

"Rodrigo, I'm only going to tell you one more time," I said between deep breaths. "Put your hands above your head."

We had him trapped behind the Gaithersburg Equipment Company building on East Diamondback Avenue. I was with two other detectives, and we had planned on bringing Rodrigo in for questioning in relation to a shooting two days earlier. But as soon as we turned into his driveway, we saw him dash across the street.

"I didn't do anything," he shouted.

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Raise your hands!”

His eyes were wide and glossy. They kept shifting back and forth between me and the other detectives. He wore baggy clothes, so I couldn't tell if he was armed. His hands fidgeted by his side, and his knees were slightly bent, as if he was going to try and run again.

“It's not going to end well for you, Rodrigo, if you don't do as I say.”

“But I didn't do anything!”

“All we want to do is talk to you.”

“It wasn't me.”

“Rodrigo, please put your hands above your head and we'll square this off.”

He didn't respond. I looked at the other detectives and then I lowered my weapon, placing it back into its holster. Unarmed, I raised my hands.

“Okay, look,” I said. “I know you're scared. I'm scared, too. I don't want anything to happen to you. But if you don't raise your hands, these guys might think that you're carrying. And if you're carrying, then you're putting our lives in danger.”

I took a step closer. His knees bent a little more.

“Rodrigo, look around,” I said. “There's nowhere for you to run.”

He looked around and realized that, with his back to the rear of the building, we had him surrounded. Once the realization that he couldn't escape us set in, he stood up straight and raised his hands above his head. I darted forward and wrapped his wrists with my handcuffs. When I

patted him down, I found a loaded .22 caliber pistol in his front pocket. Rodrigo Fuentes was a member of MS-13, a gang who were becoming a major problem in Montgomery County. I booked him for unlicensed possession of a firearm, knowing that if the bullets matched those used in the shooting two days earlier, he'd be booked for attempted murder as well.

After interviewing Rodrigo, I started filling out paperwork, not realizing my shift was coming to an end until I noticed sunlight seeping through the windows. Saturday morning, I thought. After a twelve-hour shift, I was ready for my head to fall into my pillow, but I stopped at McDonald's and downed a pancake platter before heading home. Chewing sleepily, I checked the time, and saw that it was just past 9:30 in the morning. Fed and a little refreshed, I got back to the drive home, but I hadn't been at it for long before I saw a sign that piqued my interest. Anyone who knows me knows that I love yard sales; I like to think that a part of us is tied to our belongings, and that there's no better way to give a house some character than by filling it with things that once belonged to someone else.

I followed the signs that led to the yard sale on Norman Drive in North Potomac, Maryland. The owners had only just started bringing their belongings outside. I hopped out of my car and greeted them gently.

"Morning," I said. They were an older couple and looked as though they could have been friends with my grandparents.

"Morning," they both replied.

"Open for business yet?"

“Soon. We’re just getting settled in.”

I extended my hand and introduced myself. “I’m August. I saw the signs driving home from work.”

“Frederick. And this is my wife, Olivia.”

“Looks like you guys have some great stuff.”

“Years of hoarding,” Olivia said with a smile.

“Me too,” I joked. “Mind if I look around?”

“Most of the stuff is still inside, but be my guest,” Frederick said.

“Thanks.”

I strolled through their front yard, admiring the pieces on display. Most of their belongings were antiques; no real surprise, given their age. I asked after a few prices and was ready to tell them that I’d come back later in the day when I saw a plastic bowl. It had a green elephant’s face on the front and a bright yellow handle. I picked it up and smiled, thinking of a similar bowl I’d had as a child.

“I love it,” I said.

“That was our granddaughter’s,” Olivia said. “She’s in college now and has outgrown all of her toys.”

“Amazing you still have it.”

“Hoarders,” Olivia smiled, nudging my arm.

“It’s beautiful. How much?”

“For you, two dollars.”

I paid and thanked them for their time, telling them that I’d probably be back again later. As I drove off, I yawned and looked at the bowl sitting on the passenger seat.

“Nostalgia.”

# Chapter 3

Two days later

I pulled off my gun holster, dropping it onto the coffee table as I plopped onto the couch. It was Monday, and I'd just finished my shift with another arrest in the gang-related shooting case. My feet were tired and my brain even more so; I wanted to shut it off for a few hours, but I also wanted to soak in a bath and shave my legs before I rested. Sleep would have to wait at least another hour.

I picked up my tablet and sifted through various newsfeeds before heading to the bathtub. Most of the news was my everyday life: violence and murder. I looked at the date and was surprised that I hadn't realized what day it was. September 6, twelve years to the day that Payton Wells had been murdered. Usually, I'd have sent her daughter a card, letting her know I was thinking of her. But business had been busier than normal, and I'd forgotten.

I set a reminder on my tablet to get her a card the next time I was out, then placed it down and closed my eyes. Images of Payton Wells' lifeless body came flooding in. She

had been shot in her upstairs hallway, her body right next to the stairs. From her position, it had looked like she'd tried to make a run for the front door, but Shelton Sewell had shot her in the back three times before she could reach it. I shook my head at the thought of a person dying for a few measly pieces of jewelry.

Then I thought of the way Shelton had looked right before they put him to death. He was frail, a shadow of the star athlete I remembered hearing about. During the investigation, I learned that his promising football career had taken a wrong turn when he was caught snorting cocaine with some other college kids. The other kids got a slap on the wrist, but Shelton was expelled from the university, and his scholarship had been revoked. He took a job with a delivery company in Rockville, Maryland that delivered furniture to Payton Wells' neighbor a week before her murder. Three days before she was killed, witnesses saw his delivery truck in the neighborhood again, even though there were no scheduled deliveries.

Shelton admitted to the crime and said that he hadn't thought the victim would be home; it was the middle of the day and he'd expected the house to be empty. He'd grabbed a few things, and then Payton had surprised him. He said he hadn't known what to do, so he'd pulled out his gun and shot her. The jury didn't believe him, agreeing with the D.A.'s assertion that the murder was premediated.

Senseless, I thought. Payton Wells died over a ring, two bracelets and a credit card. I shook my head again, then stood up to get ready for my bath. Before going to the bathroom, I stopped in the kitchen and poured a glass of

white Moscato wine. I turned on the faucet and let the water run over my fingers until it reached the right temperature, then I undressed and exhaled as the warmth of the water relaxed my body. I took a sip of wine and let its sweetness play over my taste buds before allowing it to slide down my throat. I rested my head on a bathtub pillow and closed my eyes, allowing Payton Wells' case back into the forefront of my mind. I suddenly remembered a statement her husband had made; I'd been making no effort to recall it, in fact it appeared as if it had been waiting to be unearthed.

"What else is missing?" I'd asked.

"A notebook that you can get from any Staples or Office Depot."

"Was anything written in the notebook?"

"No, it was blank."

"Anything else?"

"My daughter's elephant bowl."

"Elephant bowl?"

"Yeah, just a plastic bowl with an elephant's face. It had a yellow handle."

"Was there anything significant about the bowl?"

"No, nothing at all. You could get it from any toy store. Only cost a few dollars. There was even a little crack at the bottom of the bowl, so we never put anything in it."

We never found those missing items, not even when we searched Sewell's home, and I'd never brought it up again. I sat up in the bathtub, my hands shaking. When I'd seen the elephant bowl at the yard sale, it had reminded me of one I'd had when I was a child. But maybe it had resonated with me for another, subconscious reason. I leapt out of the

bathtub and wrapped a towel around my body. Water dripped on the floor as I swiftly made my way to the kitchen.

Resting on top of the refrigerator was the elephant bowl with the yellow handle. I froze for a second, wondering if there was any chance that it could have been Payton Wells'. What are the odds? I walked to the refrigerator cautiously, barely breathing, as if I had to sneak up on the bowl. I reached for the handle and carefully pulled it down, inspecting the bowl as I turned it over. My eyes widened and I covered my mouth with my left hand.

I rushed to find my phone and, when I did, I dialed the station.

“Hi, this is Detective August Miller. I need the files pulled from storage for the Payton Wells case from 2004, and I need it today.”

Oh well, I guess the bath will have to wait.



## Chapter 4

When I got to my desk, there were two cardboard boxes waiting for me. Each had its lid taped shut and the words ‘Payton Wells’ written across the top. I sifted through the first box and found the notepad with which I had taken Payton’s husband’s statement. On page three, I found it. I underlined the word ‘crack’ without being able to explain why. It was just a missing child’s bowl, after all. Why would Shelton Sewell have taken it? After we couldn’t find it in Shelton’s house, I assumed that Payton’s husband had just misplaced it.

I set the bowl on top of my desk and looked at it, and then back to the notepad. There was definitely a small crack in its base. Can this be the same bowl? If so, what does this mean? Maybe it means nothing – maybe the older couple got it at a yard sale, just like I did. They did say it was their granddaughter’s; it’s totally possible that they picked it up somewhere for her. My thoughts then shifted to Shelton Sewell. There was no reason for me to entertain any doubts;

he'd admitted to the crime, and bullets from her body were matched to his gun. Items belonging to Payton were even found at Shelton's residence; the case was airtight. So why did I have this sinking feeling that I'd missed something?

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was 9:53 p.m. The couple lived fifteen minutes from the station. I wondered if I should go to their house straight away. I could wait until the morning, but there's no way I'll be able to sleep with so many questions running through my mind. Intrigue got the best of me, so I decided to go to the couple's home.

I reached it in twelve minutes. The house was dark. I got out of my car and approached. I moved quickly, almost sneaking, but the doorbell sounded so loudly that it chimed throughout the quiet neighborhood. Thirty seconds passed with no answer. I assumed that they were asleep and was about to turn back to my car when a light came on in the foyer and the front door opened slowly.

Frederick stood behind the screen door wearing a blue robe. His hair was a little disheveled, and it took him a moment to recognize my face. I smiled and waved politely.

"Sorry, miss, but the yard sale ended a couple of days ago," he said with a kind smile.

"I know, and I'm sorry to show up at this time of night." I pulled out my detective's badge and showed it to him.

"Oh, you're a police officer."

"Detective, actually."

"That's mighty fine. I hope we weren't breaking the law with our yard sale."

“No,” I replied, holding out my purchase. “I just had a question about this bowl.”

“Oh, yes, that was my granddaughter’s. Something wrong with it? Are you looking to get your money back?”

“No, the bowl is fine. I wanted to know if you remember where you got it from.”

Frederick scratched his head and pursed his lips, saying, “Not that I can remember. She was only a child when we gave it to her. Has to have been more than ten years ago.”

“That’s understandable,” I replied, nodding. “It’s hard for me to remember where I bought something two weeks ago.” We both chuckled. “How about your wife? Think she’d remember?”

Frederick smiled, but the innocent and caring look he’d given when he recognized me had changed slightly. He was still pleasant, but he took a small step backwards and his right hand began to fidget. The change gave me pause and made me wonder what he was keeping from me.

“Oh, my wife’s not feeling well,” he murmured.

I tilted my head to the right and blinked a couple of times. “Sorry to hear that.”

He leaned in a little and said, “She’s in the beginning stages of Alzheimer’s.”

“Oh, I’m truly sorry.”

He nodded and lowered his eyes, adding, “She’d been showing symptoms for the past few months. I knew something wasn’t right with her. One day she couldn’t find her keys, and then she couldn’t find her glasses. Sometimes, she’d lose her train of thought. The signs were there, but I guess I was in denial.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about that. Listen, I can come by another time. I won’t hold you up any longer.”

“That’s okay, Detective. People like you are what make our streets safer.”

I nodded and thanked him. I handed him my card and told him that if anything came to mind, to give me a call. I turned to leave but paused for a moment.

“Did you know a Payton Wells?”

Frederick scrunched his eyebrows. He hesitated a moment before he spoke, but when he did, I sensed a slight quiver in his voice.

“Who?”

“A woman named Payton Wells used to own a bowl like this.”

“Sorry, the name doesn’t ring a bell,” Frederick replied, shaking his head. I smiled and again thanked him for his time. As I walked to my car, I got the feeling that Frederick was still watching me.

## Chapter 5

I tossed and turned throughout the night. I may have dozed a little between the hours, but for the most part my conversation with Frederick kept my mind spinning. Did he and his wife know Payton Wells? If so, does it mean anything? Of course it does! When I noticed the first rays of the sun through my window, I decided to get out of bed and go to the precinct.

I ordered a venti coffee with two shots of espresso from Starbucks. My eyes burned from lack of sleep, but I wanted to dig into the Payton Wells boxes to see if there was something I'd missed twelve years ago. What should I expect to find? Truthfully, I hoped it would be nothing. Shelton Sewell was dead and gone, with no reason to suspect anyone else was involved in the break-in and murder. Frederick had said that he didn't know Payton Wells, yet the investigator in me sensed that something wasn't finished.

When I entered the precinct, I headed to my desk, but an officer stopped me to say that a woman was waiting for

me in the lobby. I walked to the door that separated the lobby from the back offices and peered through a small, square window, and spotted Olivia reading a magazine. I furrowed my brow and was nearly at a loss for words; I didn't know what to make of her showing up so early in the morning, or at all for that matter.

"Olivia?" I said as I walked to her. She raised her head and smiled.

"Detective Miller. My husband said that you came by last night."

"I did. You... I'm sorry, I'm surprised that you're here."

"Well, I figured that if you came back, it must have been something important." She pulled out the card that I'd given Frederick. "I took a cab right over. I would have driven, but I'm not so good with going places that I've never been before."

"You didn't have to come here," I said politely. "I would have come back to you if you called."

"I'm sure you would have, but this gave me a reason to get out of the house. We don't get out much anymore."

"I understand," I said, motioning for her to stand. "Please, let's go somewhere and talk."

She stood slowly and followed me to a conference room a few halls away.

"Can I offer you anything to drink?" I asked.

Olivia smiled, but shook her head. "Oh, no, I'm fine."

I nodded. "So, how are you?"

"I'm fine."

Her hands rested on top of the table and her shoulders slouched. Her demeanor changed drastically, and her eyes fell to her lap.

“Is there something I can help you with?” I asked.

She looked up, and the sparkle that I’d seen in her eyes was gone.

“I’m worried about Frederick, that’s all.”

“Is something wrong with him?”

She exhaled, and as she did her eyes started to tear.

“He’s not well.” She took a handkerchief from her purse and dabbed her eyes. “This year will be our forty-third wedding anniversary. We met when we were teenagers.”

“I’m sorry to hear that he’s not doing well. May I ask what’s wrong with him?”

“Doctors say it’s Alzheimer’s.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, scrunching my eyebrows, “what’d you say?”

She dabbed her eyes again, saying, “Sometimes, when he looks at me, I don’t think he knows who I am.”

“Did you say Alzheimer’s?”

She nodded. “I started noticing it about a year ago. I was too afraid to confront him about it. I mean, how do you say to someone you love, ‘Honey, I think you’re unwell?’”

I sat for a moment, not sure how to respond. Unless my memory was playing tricks on me, Olivia was supposed to be the one suffering from Alzheimer’s.

“Olivia, did Frederick tell you why I came by last night?”

“He did.”

“What did he say?”

“That you were asking about the bowl you bought from us.”

“Do you know Payton Wells?”

She looked as if she was lost in thought and then said, “Name doesn’t sound familiar.” A second later, her voice perked a little and her eyes widened with a glimmer of excitement. “You know, I may have something at home!” She leaned closer in her seat. “I was kind of joking when I said I was a hoarder... I’m not, but I do have tendencies. I keep a lot of stuff, and I may have a receipt or something from when I bought that bowl.”

“Really? You keep receipts from that long ago?”

“Part of my OCD. I always think that I’m going to get audited by the IRS.”

I nodded.

“If you want,” she said, “you can come by and help me look. Maybe it’ll help you find this Payton person.”

I smiled and said, “Sure, whenever you and Frederick have time, I’d love to come by.”

“We’re retired. All we have is time.”

“Oh, you want to go now?”

“No better time than the present. Frederick should be up by now; I can make us a big breakfast.”

“Thanks, but coffee is fine for me.”

Olivia smiled again.

“Then coffee it is.”



## Chapter 6

Twenty minutes later, Olivia and I walked through her front door.

“Fred,” she called out. Frederick didn’t answer, and there was no sound to suggest he was up. “For the love of the Lord, he’s still sleeping.” She led me through a short hallway and into their living room, gesturing for me to take a seat. “I’ll get that coffee brewing.”

As I sat, I looked around the room and noticed all of the family photos; the walls were nearly covered with happy memories. A few moments later, Olivia returned to the living room, and I started to smell the aroma of coffee.

“Lovely house,” I said.

“We moved to the neighborhood in the late seventies and we never left.”

“Wow, that’s a long time to stay in one house.”

“This is where we raised our family. So many memories here that I’d lose my mind if we moved somewhere else.”

“Speaking of family, I see that you have a son,” I said, pointing to the pictures on the wall.

“He’s my angel.”

“He was a handsome kid,” I replied, and she nodded happily. “So,” I continued, “last night when I came to your house, Frederick and I spoke for a few minutes.”

“Yes, I know, you asked about the bowl.”

“I did. But, and I’m sorry to be saying this, Frederick told me that you were the one suffering from Alzheimer’s.”

“I figured as much. I noticed your expression when I said that he had Alzheimer’s.”

“So you understand my confusion, then?”

“We haven’t told many people about his condition, but the ones who do know, they’ve come back to me on a few occasions and said that Frederick has told them the same thing. But those people are close friends of ours, so they know the truth.”

“Oh, I see. My apologies again for your troubles.”

We fell silent for a moment, edging into awkwardness. I looked at the framed pictures on the wall and asked Olivia the age of her son.

“His forty-sixth birthday passed earlier this year.”

“I’m sure he’s a fine man.”

“He’s beautiful, if you ask me. But then again, I’m a bit biased.”

We both chuckled at the comment.

“Was the elephant bowl his daughter’s?” I asked, but Olivia was staring at one of the pictures and didn’t seem to hear me.

“Excuse me?” she asked, after a moment.

“The elephant bowl. Was it his daughter’s? You said at the yard sale that it was your granddaughter’s.”

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry, I was caught in a thought. It was her bowl.”

The coffee pot beeped and Olivia broke into a wide smile.

“Coffee’s ready. How do you like it?”

“Two sugars, please.”

Olivia left for the kitchen and returned moments later with a cup of coffee. She looked towards the ceiling and frowned.

“Let me check on Frederick. Sometimes, he’s been known to sleep through the entire morning. Make yourself comfortable, I’ll be back shortly.”

I took a sip of the coffee. It was a little stronger than I liked, but it definitely gave me the kick I needed. Energized, I stood up and took a closer look at the pictures on the walls. Most were of their son when he was younger, but as I walked around the room, I came upon a table at the far wall, a white photo album sitting in pride of place. I opened the first page and saw more pictures of their son when he was a boy. As I flipped through the pages, I began to realize that all the pictures were of their son. At first, it struck me as strange, but then Olivia had already told me that all she had was time. If she wanted to spend it leafing through images of her ‘angel’, that didn’t seem so unreasonable.

Several pages into the album, I came across a picture of the son with a girl. They seemed to be in their late teens or early twenties. I was getting ready to flip the page when

something about the girl struck me as familiar. She was blonde, tall, lean and beautiful. I couldn't be sure, but she looked like a young Payton Wells. My heart fluttered a little and goosebumps immediately formed on my arms.

"Can't be," I said to myself. I turned the page and gasped. A funeral program took up the entire page, Olivia's son plastered across the front cover. His name was underneath, 'Frederick Brownstone Jr.', followed by the span of his life, 'March 16, 1970 – June 4, 1993'. Twenty-three years old, I thought to myself. I turned back to the previous page and studied the girl's image a little closer. I remembered pictures I'd seen of Payton in her home. There was one in particular that had hung over the fireplace; an image of her and her husband. I remembered him telling me that the picture was taken when they were both twenty-eight. Comparing the images in my head, there was no doubt the girl before me was Payton Wells.

"He was my life," Olivia said from behind me. I hadn't heard her come down, and when I turned around, I nearly stumbled back. I grabbed for my sidearm, feeling like my lungs had been entirely emptied of air, but fumbled with the latch. Olivia stood across the room with a bloody machete in one hand and her husband's head in the other.

# Chapter 7

The shock of seeing a decapitated head in someone's grasp caused me to struggle with the latch on my holster, but I was finally able to remove it and pulled out my sidearm. I quickly raised it, aiming at Olivia's chest.

"What have you done?" I cried.

She stood across the living room, smirking cruelly. Blood dripped from Frederick's neck, soaking into the carpet.

"You did this when you came back with that bowl," she said. Her eyes appeared vacant, almost as if her soul was no longer there.

"Put the blade down, Olivia."

"My son was perfect in every way."

"Olivia, please, put down the blade."

"Frederick and I struggled for the longest time to have a child," she continued, ignoring my instruction. "Then, one day, He came to me in a vision and told me that I was going to have a son who would change the world."

"Olivia—"

“We were such a happy family.” She paused for a moment, and the smirk became a preoccupied scowl. “Then that demon came into our lives and took him from us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Payton. She wanted him for herself.”

“Payton Wells?”

“Payton Mueller,” she said, and I recognized the maiden name. “He met her at that godforsaken university.” The longer Olivia spoke, the more distant her gaze became. “He stopped coming home on the weekends and spent all of his free time with her. Then the week before graduation...” Her voice trailed off and her hollow eyes started to tear. “He hit a tree head on and died instantly.” For a second, life seemed to reappear in Olivia’s eyes and I felt like she was looking at me for the first time since she’d left the room. “That demon killed him.”

“Olivia, you need to put the blade down. Now!”

“She killed him. Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Payton killed your son?”

“She put the poison in his body,” Olivia continued, nodding, “and then he got in the car!”

“Your son was drinking and driving?”

“No, you stupid bitch,” she screamed, veins bulging in her neck. “He would never drink on his own! She forced him to drink and she forced him to drive.”

“Was she in the car?”

“No,” Olivia replied, shaking her head. “She knew what she was doing. Since she couldn’t have him all to herself, she killed him.”

“Olivia, I’m sorry for your son’s death, but you aren’t making any sense. Now, I’m only going to tell you one more time. Put down the blade.”

“Shelton knew she was a demon, too,” she said, slowly raising the machete to eye level.

“What do you know about Shelton Sewell?”

“Shelton was like the son I lost. He loved us dearly and wanted to help make amends for our son’s death. And he did, by ridding the Earth of that demon.”

“You told Shelton to kill Payton?”

“It was his desire to help us.”

I wanted to ask more, but words failed me. Questions flooded my mind as I held my aim. Why didn’t I know about this couple during the investigation?

“How did you know Shelton?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter anymore. The demon is dead, and Frederick and I are at peace.”

“You killed Frederick.”

She pointed the machete at me, growling, “No, you did.”

Without another word, Olivia dropped Frederick’s head and charged, screaming at the top of her lungs. The instant move caught me off-guard, but I managed to squeeze off two rounds. Her face tightened and she grunted with each shot to her chest. She fell to her knees a few feet away, dropping the machete and toppling forward like a felled tree. I kicked the blade away and took a few steps back to see if she would move again. She didn’t. I reached for the phone in my back pocket. My hands shook and my fingers trembled, but I was able to dial ‘9-1-1’.

# Chapter 8

Two Days Later

I'd slept poorly over the two days that followed, if I'd slept at all. The horror of seeing Frederick's severed head dangling in his wife's hand haunted me, flooding my mind whenever I closed my eyes. I'd been a part of the police force most of my adult life, and I thought I'd seen everything, but nothing I'd experienced came close to what I'd seen in Olivia's house.

Once the media found out that an elderly woman had beheaded her husband, it caught the attention of every news outlet in the country. Our department's phone lines buzzed with reporters wanting to talk to me, hopeful of getting the inside scoop on what had gone down. I cared more about finding out what I'd missed twelve years ago. With what I now knew, it only took a little digging to discover the connection between Shelton Sewell and Frederick and Olivia.

Shelton had first met Olivia and Frederick the summer before his freshman year of college. At the time,



Frederick owned a small ice cream parlor, and he hired Shelton to work part-time, saving a little money before he left for college. His time there didn't last long, as freshman football players arrived on campus early to begin practicing for the upcoming season, but according to Shelton's friends, he stayed in touch with the older couple.

When he lost his scholarship due to the cocaine incident, they mentored him. He even attended their church from time to time and helped them around the house whenever he was asked. Despite what seemed like a close bond, Olivia and Frederick were never called as character witnesses during Shelton's trial. There was nothing to tell me why Shelton took the elephant bowl. Sometimes, I wonder if it was an awful trophy. Other times, I hope that some part of Shelton knew how monstrous his actions had been – that he'd taken the bowl to show Frederick and Olivia the true horror of a murdered mother; the innocence which, together, they'd stolen forever. Perhaps their hold was too strong for that. Whatever lies Shelton was told through those dark years, I'd never know.

But the one thing I did know was that they'd found a way into Shelton's head when he was at his weakest, turning a misguided former athlete into a murderer.

The End

# The Endearment Diary

A Short Story

Part of the Detective August Miller Series

By Charles Prandy

This short story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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# Chapter 1

The early-morning sun was bright, and the temperature steadily climbed to a comfortable forty-seven degrees. Justin Clark stood at the sliding-glass door, sipping coffee as he peered out into the backyard. Steam from the mug spiraled into the air, fogging up his glasses when he brought it to his lips. Five men shuffled about in the backyard, performing the various tasks that would prepare the ground for penetration. One of the men stepped into an excavation tractor and fired it up. Briley Clark, Justin's wife, stood next to him as the tractor's engine roared across the yard.

"This is exciting," she said, and Justin nodded. "I mean, two years ago, who would have thought we'd be putting a pool in our yard?"

"Two years ago, who would have thought that we'd be able to afford a house like this?" he replied.

"I know, right? Sometimes I still pinch myself when I pull into the driveway."

The Clarks had moved into their dream home six months ago, taking up residence in a suburb in North Potomac, Maryland, about twenty-five minutes outside of Washington, D.C. Their realtor had received a tip that the house was going to be an estate sale, bringing it to them before it hit the market. The money they'd saved on the purchase price meant they could add the pool.

Their foreman, Eddie, turned and gave them the thumbs up, and Justin returned the gesture. Eddie nodded, and the excavation tractor plunged its plow into the ground.

“Well, we can't turn back now,” Justin said.

“Why would we want to?”

The tractor dug up the first bits of earth and dumped the dirt a few feet away from the hole.

“You know, the girls kept asking if the pool would be ready by the time they're home from school,” Briley said.

“You should have messed with them and said, ‘Of course it will.’”

“Yeah, try playing like that with a seven and nine-year-old and tell me how it goes.”

Justin nodded. His girls meant everything to him; they were the reason they'd bought the pool at all. It was early March, and the pool company they'd hired had said it would take nearly two months to complete. Just in time for summer, he thought.

“Hungry?” Briley asked.

“Yeah, I thought the coffee would do the trick, but it's not.”

She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, saying, “Pancakes and bacon, then.”

“You read my mind.”

Briley moved to the kitchen, and Justin watched the excavator work on a little longer before following. He looked at his watch and noted that it was 8:35.

“I’d be in the middle of my morning lecture, right about now. It was a good day to play hooky.”

“And I’d be starting some godawful report.”

Briley reached up into the cabinet and grabbed a mixing bowl. Justin brought his mug to his lips and was getting ready to take another sip when he heard yelling from the backyard.

“Stop! Stop!”

The two looked at each other inquisitively and then heard the tractor’s engine cut off.

“Look, there!” came another voice.

Justin and Briley dashed to the sliding door, looking out at where Eddie and his crew were huddled around the fresh hole. He turned and motioned for them to come outside.

“What’s wrong?” Briley asked.

“Not sure,” said Justin, opening the glass slider and looking to Eddie. “What’s going on?”

“You gotta see this,” he responded.

“What is it?”

“We need to stop,” Eddie said. “We just found bones.”

“Bones?” Briley shrieked.

“Are you sure?” Justin asked.

“Take a look for yourself.”

Justin peered into the hole and saw what looked like the side of a human skull.

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Eddie agreed.

Justin fumbled his phone out of his pocket, already dialing 9-1-1.

## Chapter 2

Sweat dripped from her chin, her heart raced, her legs were on fire. She could barely breathe, but when August looked at her stopwatch and saw that a minute had gone by, she raised her voice over the blaring music and shouted, “Done!”

Twenty-five indoor cyclists cheered with gratitude, their last sprint finally over.

“Great ride, everyone. The hour flew by, didn’t it?” The group replied with a torrent of sarcastic comments, and she smiled. “Just remember, change doesn’t happen unless you want it.”

Detective August Miller taught indoor cycling once a week, before her shift, and regularly enjoyed exercising in the morning. She showered, changed her clothes and was in her car within thirty minutes. She stopped by Starbucks before heading to the station, and received the call that human bones had been found in a nearby backyard. Ten



minutes later, she turned onto Everglade Court, where the house was at the end of a cul-de-sac.

Two Montgomery County police cars and a news van were already on the scene; it wasn't every day that human remains were found on private property, so August wasn't surprised to see the news van. As she got out of her car, a uniformed officer met her and led her to the backyard.

"So, what do we got?" she asked.

"Pool company had just started digging when they saw the skull."

"Sure it's human?"

"Yeah, it's pretty obvious."

They walked around the house to the backyard, where a group of men were giving preliminary statements.

"Pool company?" August asked, and the officer nodded. She looked to her left and saw a man and woman standing on a deck. The man was tall, with dark wavy hair, and wore dark-framed glasses. The woman was of average height, with long, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"And there are the homeowners," she said.

She introduced herself to the workers first and then looked down into the hole. The skull is obviously human, she thought. Outside of biology class, it was the first time that she'd seen a human skull in person. Dirt covered a lower part of the chin, but there were still strands of brown hair attached to the dome. She turned to the workers and they retraced how the skull was found. After hearing their statements, August walked across the yard to the deck.

"Hi, I'm Detective Miller," she said, extending her hand to the homeowners.

“Justin Clark, and this is my wife, Briley.”

“Mind if we go inside and sit for a moment? I just have a few questions.”

“Of course,” Justin responded.

He and Briley turned towards the sliding glass door and went inside, where Briley motioned for August to sit.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” she asked.

“No thanks, I’m fine.” August took out a notepad and pen. “I understand that you guys haven’t been living here long?”

“About six months,” Justin said.

“Is that really a human skull in our backyard?” Briley asked, and August nodded.

“It is.”

“I can’t believe this,” Briley breathed, shaking her head.

“Have you guys been in the backyard much, since you’ve been living here?”

“No,” Justin said. “It was a pretty cold winter, so we haven’t really had a chance to use it. We wanted to have the pool ready for the summer, so our girls could enjoy it.”

“You have kids?”

“Two girls,” Briley replied. August jotted some notes in her notepad.

“Have you seen anything unusual, since you’ve been living here?” she asked, but they both shook their heads.

“We love the neighborhood,” Briley said. “It’s quiet, and everyone knows each other. A lot of good families. When we first moved in, three neighbors had us over. Kind of took

us aback that people really do that for strangers, but those are the kind of people who live here.”

“What do you know about the people who used to own this house?”

“Not much. We got this as an estate sale,” Justin said. “I believe the husband died a couple of years ago, and then the wife, sometime last year. I think they were an elderly couple.”

“Do you know if the house had been vacant for a while?”

“I believe so.”

August wrote in her notepad again and, as she did, she thought about how there wasn’t any decaying skin on the skull. She wasn’t an expert on human anatomy, but she did know that it took quite a while for flesh to completely rot off bone. Unfortunately, since the ground had already been disturbed, she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to find out how long the body had been there.

“Okay, I think that’s all, for now,” she said. She pulled out her card and handed it to Justin. “If anything comes to mind, or if you guys have any questions, call me any time.”

They both thanked her. As they stood, August took notice of Justin’s t-shirt for the first time.

“Cool shirt,” she said. Justin looked down and smiled.

“Oh, thanks. It’s pretty old.”

“We have matching ones,” Briley said. “We’re kinda superhero nerds.”

“You kinda look like him.”

“That’s what I said,” Briley responded. As August walked out of the house, she chuckled at Justin’s shirt, ‘I’m her Superman’.

## Chapter 3

August walked out of the Clarks' home with enough questions to fill a book. Who was buried in the ground? How long were they there? As she headed to her car, a small crowd of neighborhood onlookers gathered near the house. Across the street, near her car, three middle-aged women talked amongst themselves. As August approached, their glances fell on her.

"Morning," she said, and they returned the greeting. August pulled out her badge and showed it to the women. "I'm Detective Miller."

"Is everything okay, over there?" one of the women asked.

"With the family? Yes, they're fine."

The women exhaled or placed their hands over their chests, expressing relief.

"You ladies live in the neighborhood?"

"Yes," they answered.

"Been living here a while?"

“We’ve been here about fifteen years,” one woman responded.

“Did you know the previous owners?”

“Yes, Martha and Craig Rubenstein. They were great neighbors.” The women looked at each other. “Lovely people.”

“Do you know how long they owned the home?”

“Probably around twenty years. Did something happen?”

August turned towards the house and then back to the women.

“The remains of a body were found in the backyard.”

All three women gasped and raised their hands to their chests again.

“Oh my,” one of them said. The three looked at each other again, but there was a caution in their eyes that made August think she was being left out of a secret.

“Anything you gals want to tell me?”

One of the women stepped closer and lowered her voice, as if she was afraid to be overheard. “We never cared for him much.”

“Cared for whom?”

“Marshall. Their son.”

“The previous homeowner’s son?” The women nodded. “Why? What was wrong with him?”

“He was trouble. Always getting into trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“He was arrested a couple of times. Broke his parents’ hearts. They did all they could for him, but he just wouldn’t leave trouble alone.”

August pulled out her notepad and wrote down Marshall's name. She made a mental note to check the database for him; if he'd been arrested, the department would have information on him.

"Do you know where Marshall lives now?"

"Last I heard," one of the women said, "he was at Seven Locks."

"Seven Locks?" August asked, and the women nodded as she wrote it down. She thanked them and then headed to her car. 'Seven Locks' was a nickname given to the detention center for Montgomery County, located on Seven Locks Road. Inmates there served a range of time that didn't exceed eighteen months. She fired up her engine, drove away from the house and wondered if her murderer was already behind bars.

## Chapter 4

A couple of hours later, August was at her desk looking through the database for Marshall Rubenstein. When she found his mug shot, he wasn't at all what she expected. Given what the women had said about him liking trouble, August had imagined a rougher-looking man, possibly with a scraggly beard and some tattoos. What she found instead was a handsome man who looked like he belonged at Harvard or Yale. He was clean-cut and wore his hair, a dirty blond, short. He smiled at the camera, blue eyes sparkling over a cleft chin, and August reflected that, if she didn't know she was holding a mug shot, it could have been a head shot for a Hollywood actor.

She pulled up his profile and saw that he'd been released from the detention center three months earlier, after spending nearly eleven months inside for armed robbery and aggravated assault. His past was checkered with incidents, mostly related to theft. She wondered if he was a drug user. His parents lived in a nice house, in a well-



to-do neighborhood, which meant he probably hadn't wanted for much growing up. There were numerous reasons why kids from the suburbs stole, but from August's experience, it was generally because they were addicts.

His rap sheet chronicled a decade of incidents, but nothing as violent as murder. If he was the killer, what had driven him to take another's life? She found the number to his parole officer and gave her a call.

"This is Ms. Pryor," said the woman on the other end of the line.

"Hi, this is Detective Miller from Montgomery County PD. I'm calling to inquire about one of your parolees, Marshall Rubenstein."

"Yep, he's one of mine. How can I help you?"

"Have you heard from him, lately?"

"He just checked in with me two days ago. Anything wrong?"

"I just came from his parent's old place. The remains of a body have been dug up in the backyard."

"Jesus," Ms. Pryor said. "Was Marshall involved?"

"I don't know. The remains look pretty old. What can you tell me about him?"

Ms. Pryor ran through the same information that August had just read on her computer.

"I know he's been in and out of the system a lot," Ms. Pryor said, "but I think this last time got to him."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you know how it is. A lot of these guys suddenly find God once they get locked up, and then when they get out, they're back to their old selves. But Marshall's been

steady. I check up on him regularly, and he has people around him to keep me in the loop. So far, he's been attending church regularly and goes to his meetings."

August nodded to herself. She used to say that if anyone was struggling to find God, they should check jail.

"So, based on what you know about him, do you think he could commit murder?"

Ms. Pryor exhaled over the phone.

"Honestly, I don't think so. I don't like to vouch for a lot of people, but I don't think he could kill someone."

"So what was his deal? Why was he stealing?"

"Heroin," Ms. Pryor said matter-of-factly. "Before he found religion, heroin was his god. And he'll be the first to admit that."

August thanked Ms. Pryor and then hung up. She looked at his mug shot again, his blue eyes staring back. Maybe he's a believer now, but that doesn't mean he was back then. If he'd been in the throes of addiction, there was no telling what state of mind he might have been in. The more she thought about it, the more August believed that she may have found her killer. Marshall had the means and at least half a motive; he had been a drug user, which widened the field of 'reasonable' behavior. She copied down his listed address and was getting ready to get up from her desk, when Nate Green from forensics stopped by.

"What's up, Nate?"

"You're not going to believe this, but the remains from this morning still had the clothes on."

"Really? Good news, no?"

"Good and bad. The victim's ID was in her pants."

Nate handed August a driver's license.

"Mia Matthews," she read.

"Yeah, she was only seventeen."

"Why does that name sound familiar?"

"She went missing about seven years ago. It was all over the news." August looked at the ID, vaguely remembering the coverage. "Now you've got the awesome job of contacting her parents," Nate added sarcastically. "We need dental records to confirm, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

As Nate left, August went back into the database and typed in 'Mia Matthews', finding the initial missing person's report from September 2009. She looked back at the ID, and her heart sank a little. A seventeen-year-old girl had lost her life for God knew what reason. She looked back at the mug shot of Marshall Rubenstein and began to feel resentment fester. There were now two jobs at the top of her list: go and talk to Mia Matthews' family, and find Marshall Rubenstein.

## Chapter 5

The Matthews family lived across the county in Takoma Park, Maryland. The small city rested near the D.C./Maryland state line and was a mix of old-style Victorian and bungalow houses. August turned onto Sycamore Avenue and parked on the curb in front of a brown bungalow. She looked towards the home and saw a heavy-set woman sitting on a rocking chair under a covered front porch. When she got out of her car, the two smiled at each other.

“Morning,” August said.

“Good morning.”

“Are you Mrs. Matthews, by any chance?”

“I am. Can I help you?”

“My name is Detective Miller,” said August, raising her badge, “and I’m with the Montgomery County Police Department.” She stepped closer to the porch. “I was wondering if I could have a word with you.”

“Is this about my daughter, Detective?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Matthews had been smiling, but when August said yes, her face turned pale and the smile vanished.

“You found her, didn’t you?”

“I believe so, ma’am.”

Mrs. Matthews motioned for August to sit in the rocking chair next to her.

“I knew one of you guys would show up, one day, because I knew in my heart that she was gone.” Her voice quivered and her breathing became heavy. “She never would have left on her own. She never would have left me.” Her eyes started tearing.

I’m sorry that I couldn’t come with better news.”

“At least now I can put her to rest.”

August reached out and took Mrs. Matthews’ hand. At that gesture, tears streamed down the broken-hearted mother’s face, and a moan erupted from deep inside. August moved from her seat and wrapped her arms around the grieving mother. She hugged her for several minutes, until Mrs. Matthews slowly moved away.

“I’m sorry. I made a mess of your shirt.”

“No worries,” August smiled. “It’s only a shirt.”

August moved back to her seat, but continued to hold on to Mrs. Matthews’ hands.

“I know this is tough, but do you know anyone who’d want to harm Mia?”

Mrs. Matthews’ shook her head.

“I’ve been asking myself that for the past seven years. Mia was a sweetheart. Everyone loved her.”

“Did she have a boyfriend?”

“No, not Mia. I didn’t allow her to date. I wanted her to concentrate on school, more than anything. Now, I’m not naïve. I know her and her friends talked about boys. But we had a close relationship, and I told her that if a boy was ever interested, we’d talk about it. So, Detective, if there was someone, I would have known about it.”

“Does the name ‘Marshall Rubenstein’ mean anything to you?”

“No. Was he the one that, that—”

“I don’t know,” August cut in. “Just someone I want to talk to.”

A moment of silence fell upon them.

“Do you want to see her room? I haven’t touched it in seven years, except for the occasional dusting.”

“I’d love to.”

Mrs. Matthews led August to a rear bedroom. It looked like any seventeen-year-old girl’s room. The walls were covered in a light pink, with posters of Justin Timberlake and Beyoncé. The closet was full of teenager-style clothes, and a white dresser had perfumes and other accessories on it.

“Can I get you anything to drink? Water? Juice?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I think I need something. Please take your time and look around.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Matthews left the room leaving August alone with Mia’s personal items and memories. She took in a deep breath and felt a sense of nostalgia as Mia’s room reminded her of her own when she was a teenager. On a mirror, Mia

had taped pictures of herself with some of her girlfriends at various school settings. Her smile was vibrant and August sensed that Mia was a ball of energy at seventeen.

August slowly walked around the room looking at various things before taking a seat on Mia's bed. A sense of personal sadness overcame her; perhaps it was seeing Mia's pictures and meeting her mother, but August's heart felt heavy for her mother's loss. She'd heard it a number of times by grieving mothers that a parent should never have to bury their own child. She suddenly felt like she wanted to cry when she remembered hearing that expression from a mother whose voice sounded a lot like hers.

August took in another deep breath and steadied her emotions. She stood from the bed and wiped the moistness away from her eyes. She looked around the room one more time thinking that if she swapped the Justin Timberlake and Beyoncé posters for Michael Jackson and LL Cool J, this could have been her room twenty years ago. The sudden memory made her remember that when she was around Mia's age, she kept a diary that she hid from her mother. The reasons may have been different, but August knew that a lot of teenaged girls kept diaries. Maybe Mia had one, too.

August kept her diary duct taped underneath her dresser because she knew that if it had been anywhere else in her room, her mother would have found it. She walked over to the dresser and bent down, placing her hand underneath. She felt the base of the dresser and was a little disappointed that she didn't feel a book. Not everyone had to hide it the way that I did, she thought. She then went over to the night stand next to the bed and felt under it, but

nothing was there. She looked around the room again, and then up, noticing the attic door. Perhaps?

She walked out into the hallway and saw a chair in the bedroom across the hall. August grabbed the chair and placed it directly underneath the attic's door. Upon stepping on the chair, she was a finger's length too short to reach the door. Damn. She stood on her toes and was able to reach just enough to pry her fingers between the door and ceiling.

"My word," Mrs. Matthews said as she walked into the room. "What are you doing?"

The chair tipped over causing August to have to hang on to the base around the door. She hadn't done anything like that since her gymnastics days when she was a pre-teen. She was able to push open the door enough that she could feel around the base. She knew that she could only hang on for a few more seconds as her hand was quickly losing its strength. Just as she was getting ready to let go, she felt a book and quickly grabbed it.

She landed on her feet, sweating and breathing heavy. Her hand ached and was tired from holding up her weight.

"What were you doing?" Mrs. Matthews asked again.

August looked at the book and held it up. "Looking for this." She handed it to Mrs. Matthews who inquisitively took it.

"A diary?"

"What better place to hide it if you don't want anyone to know you have it," August said.

"Why would Mia hide a diary from me?"

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Matthews, I'd like to read it and maybe I can answer that for you."



“Do you think it would help you?”

August looked up to the ceiling again and then nodded, “It might. Mia hid it up there for a reason.”

Mrs. Matthews slowly handed it back to August, but didn’t immediately let it go when August tried to take it. “Will I be able to get it back?” She started tearing.

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, August sat in her car in front of the Matthews’ home. She looked at the diary and opened the front cover, reading the title that was written in cursive handwriting.

“The Endearment Diary.”

## Chapter 6

August drove away from the Matthews' home, intrigued by the diary but more interested in talking to Marshall Rubenstein. She typed his address into her GPS and started the journey to his residence. His PO had told her that Marshall worked nights at a construction company, so it was a good bet that he was home, probably sleeping. August liked the idea of catching him off guard and waking him up. If he was her killer, she doubted he would have enough time to conjure up a believable story after just waking up.

Marshall lived in a townhouse off Muncaster Road, in Rockville, Maryland. His address was listed as Rockville, but August knew the sleepy little area as Derwood. Two winding roads connected neighborhoods via a shopping center and a 7-11. August turned into the neighborhood and parked in front of the townhome. She looked around and noted that not many cars were in the parking lot. The neighborhood was quiet, and she assumed that most were at work.

She looked at Marshall's home and didn't see anyone looking out of the windows, or any other movement, for that matter. She got out of her car and walked up to the front door, ringing the doorbell. A minute went by without an answer. She rang the doorbell again and, moments later, she heard the top lock being turned and the door slowly opened. Marshall Rubenstein stood inside; his eyes were only slightly open, and his hair was a bushy mess. He scratched his head and yawned.

"Mr. Rubenstein?"

"Yeah."

August raised her badge.

"I'm Detective Miller from the Montgomery County PD. I'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

Marshall looked at the badge and then back at August.

"Yeah, sure. Come in."

He led her to a small kitchen and offered her a seat at a table.

"Want anything to drink?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine."

"So, what can I help you with? Since you're here, I assume that you've spoken with my PO and already know my background."

August nodded, saying, "You're right. I've already looked you up."

"Okay, at least the formalities are taken care of."

Marshall opened the refrigerator and took out a small container of orange juice. He took a sip and leaned against the counter.

“I was hoping that you could help me,” August said. “I’m looking for a girl you may have known.”

“Who?”

“Mia Matthews.”

Marshall scrunched his brow as if his mind was retracing a roster of acquaintances.

“Name doesn’t sound familiar. Why do you think I know her?”

“So the name Mia Matthews doesn’t ring a bell?”

“Honestly, Detective, the past decade of my life was either spent locked up or high. I’ve probably met plenty of people who I wouldn’t recognize if I passed them on the street. I’m glad that part of my life is behind me. So, if you’re saying that I should know this Mia person, I may have, but I just don’t remember her.” He took another sip of the orange juice. “Why are you asking about her, anyways?”

“I was at your old home this morning.”

Marshall rubbed his hand over his five o’clock shadow.

“The home I grew up in?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. Feels like I haven’t been there in years. As I’m sure you already know, my parents and I weren’t on the best speaking terms. My mother died when I was locked away. They allowed me to go to her funeral, but then I was taken right back. Last I heard, the house was sold.”

“It was, and the new homeowners started digging up the backyard when they found something.”

“What?”

“Mia Matthews.”

Marshall became quiet for a moment. His eyes had the same searching look again, and then, when it became apparent why August was there, he spoke. “Wait, what? They found her? What are you saying?”

“They found her remains when they started digging up the earth.”

“And you’re here because...”

“I’m trying to figure out how she got there.”

Marshall’s eyes widened and his tone became defensive.

“I don’t know! I didn’t put her there.”

“She went missing seven years ago. Last time she was seen was at Wheaton Mall. Ever been to Wheaton Mall?”

“I don’t know. Probably. Wheaton’s not close, but I’ve been there a couple of times.”

Marshall placed his drink on the counter, and when he did, he glanced to a knife set on his right. August caught the glance.

“If you don’t mind, Marshall, maybe we should talk a little more at the station.”

“Station? Why? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

He looked at the knives again, and this time he slid his body a little to the right. August immediately stood up and placed her hand on the top of her weapon.

“Marshall, that wouldn’t be a good move for you. Your PO said you’re a changed man. Don’t prove her wrong.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.”

“Are you crazy?” His voice rose a little. “A dead body was found in my parent’s backyard. I’m an ex-con and former drug user, and now you’re here with your hand on your gun!”

August wasn’t sure if he was going to go for the knives. She wrapped her hand around the handle of her gun, ready to engage if he made a sudden move.

“Be smart, Marshall. You did your time, and your PO said you’re drug free. All I want to do is talk. If you do anything that’ll make me use my weapon, your changed life will be for nothing.”

Marshall sagged, seeming to accept the situation for what it was. He lowered his head and nodded.

“For both of our safeties, I’m going to need to place you in cuffs.”

Marshall nodded again. He turned around and placed his hands behind his back. Minutes later, they were in August’s car, driving to the police station.

# Chapter 7

The next few hours were spent in the interrogation room. Marshall answered every question in full. He talked about his past drug use and how drugs had influenced his bad decisions. He talked about how his last time in jail had been a real eye opener, and how he'd known that, if he didn't change his life, he would end up committing another crime that would send him back. August asked him a few different times and a few different ways how he knew Mia Matthews, and every time he said he didn't.

August wasn't sure if Marshall was being genuine or if he was just a really good liar. He was a life-long drug user who was used to lying to people, but her instincts told her that Marshall might not be the guy. Regardless, she asked if he'd consent to a DNA sample. She wasn't sure what, if any, DNA could be retrieved from the remains, but the fact that Marshall agreed spoke volumes to his possible innocence. She swabbed his mouth and packaged the sample away for

analysis. She had nothing else to hold him on, and since she hadn't arrested him, she allowed him to return home.

August spent the remainder of the day reading over other cases, doing paperwork and taking calls. When it was time to clock out, she was hungry, but she didn't want to eat a lot. In fact, the only thing she had a taste for was donuts. She believed in health and fitness, so eating healthy was a big part of her diet, but she had a sweet tooth that, from time to time, won the battle of good versus gluttony. When she was younger, August had loved getting donuts from a place called Montgomery Donuts. Sometimes, she'd bought half-a-dozen and eaten three before she'd made it home. Now, at thirty-seven, she couldn't do that anymore, but from time to time, she'd go to the local grocery store and get half-a-dozen donuts from their bakery. They weren't Montgomery Donuts, but they did the trick.

She arrived home with half-a-dozen glazed and chocolate-glazed donuts. After sitting on her couch for a couple of minutes, and coming to the realization that the donuts would be her dinner, she opened her workbag and pulled out Mia's diary. August took a bite of her first donut and proceeded to read page one.



## Chapter 8

August read, imagining what Mia's seventeen-year old voice might have sounded like. Would it have been high or soft? Had she spoken with a lisp, or did she enunciate each syllable? Since August didn't know, she let her mental voice be the narrator.

The first few entries spanned a couple of months, during which Mia wrote about how much she loved her friends and family. Her mother meant everything in the world to her, and most of her entries were positive. Her words were at times poetic, and August wondered if Mia had wanted to be a writer when she grew up. Some of the entries named friends, and August made notes on what she'd want to follow-up. Thus far, the entries were typical, even stereotypical, of what a seventeen-year-old girl would write about. It wasn't until August came to an entry dated, 'April 13, 2009', and entitled, 'Heaven Has Opened Its Gates', that things changed.

*He swooped me off my feet as if he was Prince Charming and I was Cinderella. His eyes were the most beautiful I've ever seen. The way he said my name nearly made me want to jump into his arms. I so hope that I get to see him again.*

That was it, the end of the entry. August scrunched her brow and wondered who Mia was talking about. Was it someone she knew? Three entries later, 'April 28, 2009', Mia titled her entry, 'It's Him Again'.

*Today was one of the best days of my life. I saw my Prince Charming again. He looked so mature in his suede blazer. Goosebumps ran across my body when he recognized me. We talked a bit, and he told me to call him if I ever needed anything. Today was the best day ever!*

Another short entry, August noted. The entries where she talked about her friends or family went on for a few paragraphs, but the entries about this mystery man were only a few sentences. Does it mean anything? August picked up another donut and bit into it. Who was this guy who had Mia so excited? Was it just a high school crush or something more? August read for another hour, hoping to learn more about the mystery guy. There was no shortage of entries about him. The passages became more intense as the weeks progressed, and August found it odd that Mia still never mentioned the guy's name. When August had asked her mom about boyfriends, he hadn't come up. It seemed likely Mia was hiding him, but why?

August turned to another entry dated, 'July 12, 2009', entitled, 'We Became One'.

*I wish that I could share this great news with my mother, but I know she won't understand. It'd be hard for her to understand how deeply in love we are. She'd say that I'm too young to be in love, and that there's no way we can be together. But shouldn't love conquer all? I know that everyone has flaws, but he's perfect for me, no matter what. Today, I showed him how perfect we were together. Today, I gave myself to him. It was the best experience I've ever had. My friends told me that the first time always hurts, but it didn't for me. He was perfect. I can't wait to do it again.*

“Wow,” August said.

She read on for another forty-five minutes, folding pages for later reference, until she came to the final entry. She looked at the date above the last entry and saw that it was, ‘September 7, 2009’, two days before Mia had gone missing.

“Hmm,” she said to herself. “Interesting.”

The title of the last entry was, ‘He Loves Me’.

*Today was a beautiful day. We made love for over an hour, and he assured me that I was the only one he's ever loved. My heart is filled with so much joy, but at the same time, I feel bad for keeping my mom in the dark. But we plan on telling everyone of our love very soon. He's truly a blessing, and I'm not sure where I'd be without him. I told him that he was my Prince Charming and I was his Cinderella, but he told me that I was his Superwoman and he was my Superman. I can't wait for everyone to know.*

August closed the diary. She inhaled, trying to soak in the past two hours. Mia had been having a secret relationship for a few months, right before she went missing.

How could no one have figured out who this guy was? How could no one have known about him? He took her virginity, for God's sake. August began furiously scribbling notes, but a sudden jolt of realization caused her to drop her pen.

“Holy shit.” She went back to the last entry. “Can’t be.” She found the final entry and re-read it as if she were reading an ancient scroll. “Can’t be,” she said again.

## Chapter 9

The next morning, August drove back to the Clarks' home. It was a little after 8:30 in the morning when she got there, and she noted that there were no work trucks in the driveway or along the street. She rang the doorbell, and Briley Clark answered with a warm smile.

“Detective Miller?”

“Hi, Mrs. Clark. I was wondering if I could speak with you and your husband for a minute?”

“Oh, Justin's at work, but you're more than welcome to come in.” Briley led her into the living room and told her to have a seat. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, I'm fine, thanks.”

“You caught me right on time; I just got back from dropping our girls off at school.”

“How old are they, again?”

“Nine and seven.”

“That's a fun age.”

Briley leaned in, saying, "I've gotta tell you, I had the hardest time sleeping last night. I mean, nobody buys a house expecting to find a body in the backyard. Creeps me out just thinking about it."

"That's actually why I'm here."

Briley smiled, "Okay."

"I found out who the remains belong to."

"Oh, really?"

"She was a seventeen-year-old girl who went missing seven years ago."

"Missing? Seven years ago? Jesus."

"Does the name, 'Mia Matthews' mean anything to you?"

"Was that her name?"

August nodded.

Briley shook her head, saying, "Can't say that it does."

August studied her reaction and determined that Briley appeared genuine.

"What about your husband? What time will he be home?"

"Justin? Early afternoon; he only teaches two classes today."

"Teaches?"

"He's an adjunct professor at Montgomery College."

Hearing Briley say the word 'professor' triggered an idea in August's head.

"How long has he been teaching?"

"Well, he's only been at Montgomery College for about four years. He's currently working on his PhD."

"And before that?"

“He was a high school substitute teacher for a few years, while he was working on his master’s.”

“Did he ever sub at Montgomery Blair High School?”

“Possibly. Wherever the county needed him, he’d go.”

August looked off momentarily and began thinking about the diary entries. A few in particular now stood out to her. He looked so mature in his suede blazer, and, The way he said my name nearly made me want to jump into his arms. I so hope that I get to see him again. August hadn’t been able to figure out why Mia never mentioned the guy’s name, but maybe now she knew.

“Detective Miller?” Briley’s voice brought her out of thought. “Why are you asking so much about Justin?”

“Just doing my job, that’s all. I’m gathering background information, since the body was discovered in your yard.”

Briley nodded.

“I understand. Kind of like how one spouse is initially the suspect, if the other ends up dead.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, I can assure you that we’d never been to this house until the realtor showed it to us.”

“I figured as much, but I still need to cross you guys off my list.” August stood up and thanked Briley for her hospitality. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to come back this evening and speak with Justin.”

“Not at all.”

Briley led August to the door. As she walked to her car, August already knew that she had no plans on waiting until the evening.





## Chapter 10

On her first visit to the Clarks', they had given August their realtor's name. Pulling away from the house, August dialed Sunshine Realty Group and asked to speak to Diane Fable. Diane's assistant placed August on hold, and a minute later, a soft voice with a southern accent came on the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ms. Fable, this is Detective Miller. I understand you were the realtor who sold Justin and Briley Clark their home?"

"Yes, I am. I saw the news yesterday, and I was in complete shock. I called and left Justin and Briley a message telling them to call me if they needed anything. Such a tragedy."

"Did you know much about the home, or the family who used to own it?"

"Very little. They were an older couple who had a son. The son couldn't afford the home after the parents passed, from what I understood."

August nodded as if she were face-to-face with Diane.  
“Who handled the estate sale?”

“The brother of one of the owners. He was an attorney who lived out of state.”

August sighed; she hadn't expected to learn much from the realtor, but she'd had a glimmer of hope that maybe something would fall into her lap.

“Okay,” August said. “Thanks for taking my call. Briley said that you worked hard at finding them this home. If you happen to think of anything, please give me a call.”

Diane hesitated before responding.

“Actually, Detective Miller, I didn't find them the home. Justin Clark was the one who told me about it.”

If August had been drinking anything, she would have spit it out.

“Sorry, what'd you say?”

“We'd been searching for a while with no luck. Sometimes, it's like that. Home after home, Justin found something wrong with each one. Then, one day, he called and said that he'd received a tip about that property. He didn't want Briley to know that the tip came from him, so he asked to keep it between us. We agreed that I'd take the credit for finding the house.”

“Why? Did he say how he knew?”

“No, just that the estate was about to put it up for sale.”

August's thoughts trailed off, so much so that she had to slam on her brakes to avoid running through a red light.

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Fable. You've been a lot of help.”

“Give my best to them, will you?”

August nonchalantly agreed, but her mind had drifted to Justin Clark as she hung up. The light changed to green and she slowly pressed on the accelerator. Thought after thought ran through her mind. How did Justin know the house was an estate sale? How did he know the Rubensteins? Did he know Marshall? Could they have done this together? August dialed Montgomery College and found out that Justin worked at the Rockville campus. Montgomery College was a two-year college with three campuses in Montgomery County. The Rockville campus was the largest of the three.

Her trip through Rockville took longer than she wanted, as the congestion along the roadway was at a constant high. It took her nearly thirty minutes to reach the campus, which the locals called ‘Harvard of the pike’. August wasn’t sure where the nickname came from, as Montgomery College wasn’t anything near Harvard. Once out of her car and on campus, it seemed as crowded as the roadway. She weaved through crowds of students, accepting the constant ‘sorry’s whenever someone bumped into her as they headed from one class to the next.

She found the humanities building and took the elevator to the second floor. Down the hallway and to the right, she found Justin Clark’s room. There was a window in the top half of the door, and she stood for a moment and watched as Justin gave a lecture. She couldn’t make out what he was saying, but he paced the room back and forth. When he turned towards her, he glanced at the door, and the two made instant eye contact. His eyes momentarily widened, and he stopped short in what he was saying. His

reaction wasn't enough to convict him in a court of law, but it convinced August that her suspicions were right.

The pause prompted the class to look towards the door, and August felt every eye on her. Justin attempted to continue his lecture, but every other word he would look back at August. Finally, she reached for the doorknob, slowly turned and pushed open the door. An eerie silence fell over the room, and goosebumps crawled up August's arms.

"Detective Miller?" Justin said.

"Hello, Mr. Clark."

August heard one of the students gulp.

"Mind if we have a chat outside?" she asked.

Justin looked at his watch. His hand shook slightly, and he adjusted his glasses. He cleared his throat and then fumbled his first word.

"I've got about fifteen minutes left. Can it wait?"

"I have to insist it be now."

August glanced at the young eyes that looked at her. This wasn't how she'd planned it, but since all attention was on her, this was how it had to be.

"Okay," Justin said. "Let me just grab my things."

He looked towards the class before turning for his belongings and giving them a half-smile, half-nod. He then turned towards his desk and fiddled with his work bag. August stepped back towards the door and was about to open it when Justin spoke up.

"I'm sorry, Detective, but I can't go."

"Sorry?" August said, not sure she'd heard him right.

Justin reached into his bag and pulled out a black .22 caliber handgun. Some of the students screamed, while

others gasped. August's eyes widened, and she felt adrenaline surge through her body. She quickly reached for her weapon and had it aimed at her suspect within seconds. Justin raised the gun to his temple.

"Mr. Clark," August demanded, "put down the gun."

Whimpers came from the kids in the room. Justin closed his eyes, tears streaming down his face.

"I didn't mean to kill her."

"Mr. Clark, please, for the sake of your students, put down your gun," she said, low and calm.

She glanced at the students. They couldn't hide their fear; most ducked down next to their chairs, while others placed their hands over their faces.

"She wouldn't listen," he said. "I tried to break it off."

"Mr. Clark, whatever happened, we can work it out, but I need you to calm down. I need you to drop your weapon." He didn't respond. "Mr. Clark, please open your eyes and look at your students. You're scaring them. You're scaring me."

August wasn't sure what he was going to do, but she was afraid that these kids would see a horror that would haunt them for the rest of their lives. Justin Clark slowly opened his eyes. They shifted from the students to August and then back to the students. For a moment, August thought that seeing them in their frightened state might cause him to lower his gun. His face softened and his grip on the gun shifted.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "Tell my wife that I adore her."

A loud bang shook the classroom, and the kids began to scream.

# Chapter 11

August fired first, striking Justin Clark in the right shoulder and rocking him back. He dropped the gun, and August charged him, tackling him over his desk. She wrestled his arms behind his back and wrapped his hands in cuffs before he had a chance to try and overpower her.

“Call an ambulance,” she yelled to the students.

She leapt up and found his weapon, securing it. Only then did she gather her breath.

“Everyone all right?” she asked.

A few faintly confirmed they were, but most of the students were stunned. August looked down at Justin, who was lying in a pool of blood. She took off her jacket, knelt down and applied pressure to the wound.

Lying there, he kept whispering, “I’m sorry.”

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Within a few days of the shooting, Justin Clark agreed to tell August what had happened. He didn’t want a lawyer present, saying that the murder had been eating him up for

the past seven years. It had all started when he was assigned to fill in for a history teacher who taught twelfth-grade American history at Montgomery Blair High School. Mia Matthews had instantly caught his attention. She was beautiful and personable; he and Briley had only been married a couple of years, but something about Mia kept his attention.

A few weeks had gone by, and he had again been asked to sub for the same teacher. He remembered her, and she remembered him. Against his better judgment, he'd given her his cell number and said to call if she ever needed anything. Looking back, he admitted that was the worst mistake he'd ever made. Mia called him a few days later, and he'd known what he had done was wrong, but his attraction to her had stifled any comprehensible sanity.

The first time they'd met up had been at a small coffee shop, where they talked for hours. He'd told her that it wouldn't look good if she said anything about their meeting; she was underage, and he was married, and she'd agreed to keep their rendezvous a secret. The more they'd secretly met, the closer they'd become, until their casual meetings became sexual. They'd enjoyed each other for months, until Justin received news from his wife that he was going to be a father again.

Justin had told Mia that they couldn't see each other anymore; that their relationship had to stop. It had been hard for Mia, Justin said, but at first she understood. Days had gone by, and he hadn't heard from her. Then she'd called and said that she couldn't let him go. She'd restated everything that he'd said to her; all of the times he'd said he



loved her, and all of the times that he'd said they'd be together, one day. Finally, she'd threatened to tell Briley about the affair, and that's when Justin caved in. He'd agreed to meet at a secluded location, and he'd killed her.

He'd buried her body where it would never be found; where it had laid for six years. From time to time, he'd visited the burial site, always feeling guilty about what he'd done. He'd wanted her to be found, to be put to rest, but he hadn't known how to do it without implicating himself. Then, one day, a year before the house went to the estate, a co-worker had mentioned that a friend of his parents had passed away and that the house was probably going to be an estate sale. The house had sat empty for several months, and Justin had devised a plan to move Mia's body to the backyard, purchase the house and then dig up the yard, in hopes that her body would be found. There was, he had decided, no way that the police would suspect him of any wrongdoing, especially when the son of the former homeowners was a convict.

August concluded the interview thinking that Justin would have gotten away with murder if it wasn't for the Endearment Diary. When Mia wrote, He told me that I was his Superwoman and he was my Superman, August remembered the t-shirt that Briley had worn on the day the body was discovered. August had heard myths of the dead speaking from the grave, but in this instance, Mia's words, written seven years earlier, had brought her justice.

The End

# Between the Trees

A Short Story

Part of the Detective August Miller Series

By Charles Prandy

# Chapter 1

As he walked down the narrow hallway, Carter Wyatt whistled a tune. He ignored the first two doors he passed, making his way right to the end, where he wrapped his hand around the final knob and jiggled it slightly. The door opened, and a flood of light from the hallway disturbed the darkness of the room, causing the young woman in the bed to squint. Carter walked to the bed softly.

“Thought I heard you,” he said, as the young woman rubbed her eyes. “Bad dream, again?”

She nodded, and Carter sat on the edge of the bed and gently ran his fingers through her hair, like a loving father.

“It’s okay, I’m here. You’re safe.” He noticed that her eyes were moist and slightly red. “What was the dream about?”

“My mother,” she murmured.

“Miss her, don’t you?”

“Yes, very much.”

“I know the feeling,” Carter said. “I miss my mother, too. Hard to believe it’s been ten years since her passing.”

The girl whimpered and her eyes moistened.

“Shhh, shhh... it’s okay.” He gently rubbed the back of his hand over her cheek and felt the wetness of her tears against his skin. “If there’s anything I can do, please let me know.”

He leaned in and kissed her on her forehead. When he pulled away, she was looking at him as though she wanted to ask for something.

“It’s okay,” he said again. “Please, let me know what you want.”

She hesitated, but eventually said, “Can I sleep without the handcuffs?”

He looked at her wrists and then followed the chain to the metal bedframe.

“Are they too tight? They look fine.”

“No, they’re not too tight. I was just hoping that I didn’t have to wear them tonight.”

Carter studied her for a moment and didn’t see any deception in her eyes.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I’ve got to skip out for a few minutes. When I get back, if you’ve been a good girl, I’ll take them off. But you’ve got to promise to be a good girl.”

She nodded, saying, “I promise. I’ll be good.”

A smile crawled across his face.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

He stood from the bed and reached for the light switch. The bedroom immediately lit up. He looked at the bed, inspecting it for the slightest change, and then walked

to the window on the far wall. He looked at the window and its casing, rubbing his finger around the window's edge and then fiddling with the lock. Nothing appeared disturbed.

"You see," she insisted, "I've been good. There's no place on earth I'd rather be."

"What about your mother?" he asked, turning.

"It was just a dream."

"But you miss her?"

She hesitated.

"I'd miss it more if I wasn't here with you."

Carter glanced at the window again before walking back to the bed.

"Okay, when I get back, I'll let you sleep without the handcuffs." He raised his hand and pointed his index finger. "You've earned my trust. And I'm sure you won't revert back to the time before that was true, will you?" She shook her head. "Okay, I'll be back after a while."

Carter turned the bedroom light off and closed the door as he left the room. He whistled again as he walked along the hall, keeping up the tune as he crossed through the kitchen and into the garage. In the garage were two white, upright freezers placed beside each other. Carter opened the first freezer, in which the body of a frozen young woman was curled in the fetal position. On the floor in front of the freezer was a large plastic tarp. Carter pulled the body from the freezer, laid it on the tarp and began to wrap it up, all the while whistling the same tune.

# Chapter 2

Three Days Later

The rhythmic chimes from my cell phone woke me from a deep sleep. I'd only been asleep for about two hours, but I must have settled into REM, because my eyes burned and I felt exhausted as I lifted my head from the soft pillow. My shift wasn't longer than any other, but I'd been on my feet most of the day, canvassing the streets for leads in the disappearances of three women. I was spent, maybe more emotionally than physically, knowing that three young women had been kidnapped, and I felt like I could have slept for two days. My bed had been a welcome sight, and I wanted to lay in it for as long as I could.

"Hello," I said, my voice heavy with exhaustion.

"Hello," a woman's voice replied. "Is this Detective Miller?"

I sensed hesitation and nervousness in her voice, which woke me up a little quicker.

"Yes, this is Detective Miller. Can I help you with something?"

“I’m at Motel 6 in Gaithersburg. A guy recently checked in. He was kind of creepy looking. I watched him go into his room. The girl he was with, she... I don’t know. She looked scared. I think she’s in trouble.”

“What guy? Who is this?”

“He’s in room three-sixteen. You’re the detective investigating the disappearances of those girls, right?”

I was about to respond, but the caller abruptly hung up. I looked at the phone a moment, making sure that I wasn’t dreaming. What the hell? I quickly pulled up the notes app on my phone and wrote down the name of the motel and the room number. I’d given out my card to countless people over the past few days, so there was a possibility that this could be a legitimate lead. I dialed the hotel, having Googled the number, hoping that I’d hear the same woman’s voice on the other end, but a man answered. I told the man who I was and asked if a man and woman had recently checked in. He hesitated a moment, and I sensed that he didn’t want to give me the information.

“Sir,” I said, with more authority. “Did a man and young woman recently check in?”

“Yeah, not too long ago.”

“What’s the guy’s name?”

“Carter Wyatt.”

The name didn’t sound familiar.

“Okay, I’m sending over a patrol car. Don’t disturb that room, understand?”

“Yeah, I understand.”

I dialed dispatch and gave them the information that had been relayed to me, telling them to have the officer call

me when they got there. I was still tired, but definitely more awake than before. My eyes still burned though, and I yawned and stood from my bed. I quickly went to my bathroom, turned on the shower and tore off my clothes. I didn't turn the knob to hot, hopping into the shower and yelling as the cold water beat against my warm skin. I climbed out shivering, but it had done the trick; I was awake.

As I dried off and began dressing, my phone rang again.

"Detective Miller."

"Hey, August, it's Mason."

Mason Brady was a patrol cop who'd attended the academy with me.

"Hey, Mason. You got the call?"

"Yeah, we're here at the motel. I double-checked with the guy at the front desk and confirmed that a Carter Wyatt recently checked in with a girl. He said this Carter guy looks like he's mid-thirties, and the girl looked underage."

"Okay."

"What do you want us to do?"

I thought about the missing girls and wondered if this could be a solid lead. There are only so many reasons a thirty-something man would take an underage girl to a motel at this time of night.

"I'm on my way. Call in another car and hang back until I get there."

Twenty-five minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot. Motel 6 was three stories tall and shared a parking lot with a Chevrolet dealership. Walking over to the two squad



cars, I greeted everyone, but gave most of my attention to Mason.

“Any movement?”

“None,” Mason said, pointing to a room on the third floor. “Light’s been on, but other than that, nothing.”

“Okay. How about we introduce ourselves and see how this thing goes?” I said.

Mason and I walked to the room and knocked on the door. A tall, lean man opened the door. He was shirtless and had a salt-and-pepper goatee, with dark brown hair that hung a little past his ears. Beyond him, a girl was sitting on the edge of the bed. She had her head down, but glanced up at us. I took out my badge.

“I’m Detective Miller.” I was about to say something else, but the man cut me off.

“Greetings, Detective,” he muttered, smiling slightly.

“Are you Carter Wyatt?”

“Yes, I am.”

I looked at the girl.

“What’s your name?”

She didn’t respond.

“She’s shy,” Wyatt said. “Her name is ‘Claire.’”

“Is your name ‘Claire?’” I asked, looking at the girl. She didn’t look at me, but shook her head. “What’s your name?”

“Camille,” the girl said softly.

I looked at Wyatt; he still had the slight grin on his face.

“How old are you, Camille?”

“Seventeen.”

“Are you with this man willingly?”

“No,” she gasped, and tears began to fall from her eyes.

“Mason,” I said.

“Sir,” Mason said, “please turn around and place your hands on top of your head.”

Wyatt did so without a fight. I stepped into the room and stood next to the girl as Mason wrapped his cuffs around Wyatt’s wrists.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said to Camille.

She leaned her head against my waist and cried harder.

## Chapter 3

In the interrogation room, Carter Wyatt kept his eyes on me the entire time. He wasn't overly emotional, or aggressive, or stoic; he stared at me as if he was looking into my soul. His grin hadn't changed since he opened the door, and it made me uneasy, almost like he knew something I didn't. I've found, over the years, that some men feel they can intimidate me because I'm a woman. They've tried tactics like aggression or threats to get me off my game, but it's never worked. The way Wyatt stared, though, it didn't feel like he was trying to intimidate me. Instead, I felt like he was studying me, and it creeped me out.

The girl's full name had turned out to be 'Camille Hayes'. She had been kidnapped a week earlier on her way home from school, but she said that Wyatt had never touched her sexually. She also told us that he'd taken her to the motel as a treat for being obedient.

"Why did you kidnap Camille?" I asked him.

"Because I wanted to."

“Had you seen her before?”

“Nope. She was walking. I asked her if she needed a ride. I was surprised that she said yes. I guess the whole ‘stranger danger’ thing doesn’t get through to teens, these days.”

His grin grew wider, and I sensed that he thought he was funny, but I didn’t. For a man in his mid-thirties, Wyatt looked young, and the car he had at the motel was a totally refurbished 1967 Ford Mustang. Even knowing the dangers better than most, I could see how a seventeen-year-old might accept a ride from a good-looking guy in a fixed-up hotrod.

“Why’d you take her to the motel?”

“Wanted a change of scenery,” he replied, shrugging.

“Did you touch her?”

“Nah, not my style.” With each answer, his eyes stayed trained on me. “I’m not a sexual deviant.”

“What were you planning on doing with her?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure. She’d been a good girl. Maybe I might have let her go.”

I felt his candor was sincere, which wasn’t necessarily a good thing; he just wasn’t afraid of the truth. My mind had been turning ever since the anonymous call. Could Wyatt be behind the other disappearances, too? If he was, I got the feeling that he wouldn’t hide it.

“Do the names ‘Faith Tremble’, ‘Ashley Calloway’ and ‘Isabella Montoya’ mean anything to you?”

“Do you expect them to?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.”

“Who are they to you?” Wyatt asked.

I hesitated, caught off guard by the question.

“Let’s stick with me asking and you answering.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “For now.”

“Do you know those names?”

“I do.”

“How?”

“I killed them.”

Once again, I was caught off guard.

“They’re dead?”

“You seem surprised.”

“Why’d you kill them?”

“Why do human beings do anything? Because we can.”

“So you killed them just because?”

“I’m sorry that I don’t have a more elaborate explanation. But yes, just because.”

“Where are their bodies?”

For the first time, he hesitated before answering. He sat back in his chair and briefly looked away from me.

“Aren’t you curious as to why I’ve been staring at you?” he asked.

“I told you, I’m the one asking questions.”

“You were a victim once, weren’t you?”

A chill ran through my body, goosebumps crawling up my arms. It felt like time momentarily stood still, as memories flashed through my mind.

“What’d you say?”

“It’s in your eyes. I’ve seen it before. It’s understandable if you don’t want to answer,”

I looked up towards the camera at the top corner of the room, knowing that other detectives were watching. I kept my cool and checked my emotions.

“Where are the bodies?” I asked.

Wyatt smiled, but he didn’t push his question again. He told me where they were and how he’d killed them. We talked for another forty minutes, until I felt like I had enough information to conclude the interrogation and charge him with murder and kidnapping. I told him that I was done and then stood up from the table. As I was about to leave the room, Wyatt said something that made my blood run cold.

“Don’t you want to know about the fourth?”

I took a deep breath, startled by the question.

“There’s another one?” I asked. Wyatt smiled, and I looked towards the camera again. “Who was the fourth?”

“You mean, ‘who is the fourth?’”

“She’s still alive?”

“Well, I think so. You caught me before I had time to check on her.”

“Where is she?”

Wyatt’s eyes narrowed and he tilted his head forward. The smile was now a devilish grin.

“You seem like a pretty smart woman,” he said. “So now it’s time for me to ask a question.”

“I’m not doing this,” I barked. “Where’s the fourth victim?”

“But you see, if you want to know where she is, you are going to ‘do this’.” He cleared his throat. “Were you once a victim?”

I looked towards the camera for a third time.

“This is bullshit.”

“Yes, it is,” Wyatt laughed.

“Tell me where she is.”

“Were you ever a victim?”

I nearly threw my notepad at him, but managed to keep it in my hands.

“Where is she?”

Wyatt leaned back in his seat and studied me for a moment.

“I can tell that you’re going to need a little warming up, so I’ll start with a clue. But if you want to find her before it’s too late, you’ve got to give something up.”

“Where. Is. She?”

“Between the trees.”

“What?”

“That’s your clue. You might have time to find her, you might not, but if you answer my question, I’ll tell you right now where she is.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“I am, but I’m not in the saving lives business, though.”

I stormed out of the interrogation room, nearly pulling the door off its hinges as I left.

## Chapter 4

I drove to Carter Wyatt's home. He lived in a ranch-style house on a three-acre lot in Damascus, Maryland, about fifteen miles from my station. Wyatt's house sat on a slight hill, surrounded by trees, and the driveway was long, about fifty feet into his property. The area was rural, with a lot of woodland, and I kept thinking about him saying, "Look between the trees." His yard was covered with trees, and I wondered if it was already too late for his latest victim. Worse, it was still dark, but the morning sun was on its way, offering a funny sort of backup.

It wouldn't be enough on its own, though, and I was glad I'd primed the station to await my call for assistance. Pulling to a stop, I got in contact and told them I'd need a search team and forensics at Wyatt's house, right away. Given the size of his property and the amount of trees that covered it, finding victim number four would need as many people as possible, but I felt optimistic that she was still alive. Wyatt had said he planned to check on her after the



motel, and we'd interrupted his evening before he'd been planning to leave.

A search team of a dozen officers arrived within twenty minutes, and the sun came with them. The air was crisp, and I could see my breath with each exhale. Being that it was late fall, the ground was covered with burnt orange and light-brown leaves, which was going to make it that much more difficult to see if there had been any recent disturbances in the ground.

The larger team began to search the property, while I took a few officers into Wyatt's home. The interior was like a flashback to the eighties; yellow linoleum counters and dark brown cabinets filled the kitchen. The floors were hardwood, which looked original to the house. At one time, the paint had probably been white, but the walls were now a faded grey. The bedrooms were all off the same narrow hall, with all of the doors closed. Given Wyatt's admissions, I wasn't sure what I'd find behind the doors.

My heart fluttered a little faster with each door that I opened. They were all empty, but two of them had metal bedframes with handcuffs and chains attached to them. We moved on, but there was no sign of the fourth victim, and I left a couple of officers behind while the rest of us spread out to search outside. When forensics arrived, they took pictures of all the rooms and gathered as much evidence as possible. The bedrooms with metal beds had women's clothes hung neatly in the closets, and one of the techs told me that there were two freezers in the garage that had possible human blood in them. I cringed at the thought of what Wyatt had done to those women.

Once forensics had done their work, I re-entered the home and investigated more fully, taking an hour to assemble some notes. I then left to head back to the station, but stopped at Starbucks for my morning coffee. I usually get a venti with two shots of espresso, but this morning I asked for three shots. I knew that I was going to be in for a long day, and with little sleep, I needed as much kick as possible. A few sips into the coffee, I started to feel a surge of energy kick in. At my desk, I logged into our database to see if there was anything on Carter Wyatt, but I was disappointed. The last time we'd dealt with him was a traffic ticket six years prior for going eight miles per hour over the speed limit. Criminals like Carter Wyatt were the scariest kind, because they blended into society and walked among everyone else without being noticed. If he had been pulled over a week ago for speeding, his name would have been run and nothing would have come up. He would have been given a warning or a ticket, and the officer would never have known Wyatt had killed three people and kidnapped at least two more.

My desk phone rang, and I saw that it was Jessica Roles from the forensics department.

“Hey, Jess,” I said.

“Hey, August. I've got Carter Wyatt's laptop opened up, and I found something that you may find interesting.”

“Interesting enough for me to walk down?”

“I think so. One of the other techs said you mentioned something about ‘between the trees?’”

That definitely perked my interest.

“Okay, be there in a second.”

I walked down to the forensics department and found Jessica at her desk with an open laptop. Her brown hair was pulled into a ponytail, and she was reading something on the screen.

“Whatcha got?” I asked.

“So, look at this...” she said, and I leaned forward and looked at the screen. “This is Wyatt’s Yahoo account. I sifted through his emails over the past few months and found this.”

She pulled up an email and then opened the attachment.

“Is this a poem?” I asked.

“They’re lyrics.” Jessica minimized the attachment and showed me the email again, pointing to the recipient’s name and then the subject line. “‘Between the Trees’ is the name of a rock band.”

“What? No. Seriously?”

Jessica pulled up the attachment again to print it. I grabbed it from the printer and read the first few lines.

“Jesus,” I said. “These are lyrics.”

“Yeah, Between the Trees is based out of Orlando, Florida. There’s five other emails with lyrics to different songs.”

“So the guy’s a songwriter? What the hell does any of this have to do with victim four?”

“Not sure,” Jessica replied.

She printed the five other songs and gave them to me. I thanked her for the help and headed back to my desk, where I read through the songs. Wyatt had known I’d think the victim was buried somewhere on his property, so while

his clue might still apply, his intention clearly wasn't for me to find her. But a rock band?

I read through the songs once, and then again a second time. On the third reading, things began to stick out. I noticed that the word 'secret' appeared in three of the five songs, always followed by 'urn' within three words.

Where is Wyatt's twisted mind trying to lead me?

## Chapter 5

I toyed with the words ‘secret’ and ‘urn’, trying to see if any wordplay or deeper pattern jumped out at me. I wrote down ‘secret urn’, wondering if the idea even made sense, then I turned the words around and wrote down ‘urn secret’. I toyed with ‘secrets of the urn’, but it sounded like it belonged in a sci-fi movie. Over and over again, I reviewed the lyrics. Maybe I was focusing on the wrong words; maybe there wasn’t anything to ‘secret’ and ‘urn’, but something was there. I picked up the receiver of my desk phone and called for Carter Wyatt to be brought back to the interrogation room. Five minutes later, I sat in front of him again. He wore the same devilish grin, which I now found both annoying and unnerving.

I pushed the songs across the table and wrapped my arms together, leaning on my elbows.

“‘Between the trees’ isn’t a reference to physical trees,” I said, and Wyatt nodded, his grin widening.

“I must say that I’m impressed, Detective Miller.”

“Where’s the fourth victim?”

“You know,” Wyatt said, “it strikes me that you never asked her name.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“What’s her name?” I snarled.

“Sophia Page.”

“Where’s Sophia Page?”

Wyatt raised his pointer finger and waved it back and forth.

“Not so fast, Detective Miller. I just gave you a gift, and you haven’t given me anything.”

I ignored him and looked down at the songs. My eyes immediately fell on the words ‘secret’ and ‘urn’ again, and I knew that they meant something to Wyatt.

“What’s the secret with the urn?” I asked.

Wyatt’s eyes widened, and he sat back in his seat. He momentarily looked away from me, opening his mouth as if he was going to say something. He sat back for a few seconds, but then seemed to regroup.

“Detective Miller, you really do impress me,” he said, the grin returning. “And I’m not easily impressed.”

“Thanks,” I said, shaking off the compliment. “So where’s Sophia Page?”

“Again, you haven’t given me anything.”

“Okay,” I said, “how about this? Your best shot at trial is going to be an insanity plea, except juries really hate when that happens. They see it as escaping justice. So what I’ll give you is the chance to sell the story that you were some poor, deranged man who didn’t want to hurt anyone and helped us save his victims as soon as we caught him. The

kind of guy who really does need help. Or, you can keep being stubborn, and I will personally give my account of a deranged sicko who deliberately and knowingly let a girl die.”

“That’s a fine offer,” he replied, “but it’s not what I want.”

“You can’t have what you want.”

We stared at each other for what felt like minutes, though only a few seconds passed. He cleared his throat and shifted slightly in his seat.

“Were you a victim, Detective Miller?”

I held his stare and firmly said, “No.”

He didn’t immediately respond, but continued looking at me.

“But someone close to you was. Your mother?”

“No.”

Wyatt smiled.

“A sister, then?”

“I gave you your answer. Where’s Sophia Page?”

He didn’t respond.

“What’s the secret with the urn?”

He stayed quiet.

“Whose ashes are in the urn?”

He didn’t respond again, and I was getting ready to ask another question when he said, “My princesses.”

“Princesses? Your daughters?”

“I never had kids, Detective.”

“Wife?”

“Strike two. Never been married.”

I curled my lips, wondering if I was on the right path. What did an urn and a secret have to do with Sophia Page? His reaction had told me there was something there, and I was sure it related to Sophia. A sinking feeling filled my gut. Sometimes, serial killers think of their victims as their property; it was possible the ashes were Sophia's.

“Sophia Page?” I asked.

“Strike three, Detective. Now, it's definitely someone close to you; tell me who's the victim.”

I stood from my chair and left the room, frustrated again.



## Chapter 6

My blood felt like it was about to boil over. I paced back and forth in front of the interrogation room, trying to keep from going back inside and slamming the butt of my gun into Wyatt's eye. Who does he think he is? I knew that I shouldn't have shown my frustration; now he had ammo that he could use against me.

I went back to my desk and saw an email from Jessica Roles. The email had an attachment, with Jessica's message saying that pictures of Carter Wyatt's house were included. I opened the attachment and started sifting through the pictures. There were images of Wyatt's living room, kitchen, hallway, bedrooms, garage and outside property. I clicked on the images one by one, and after I'd looked at all of them, I looked at them again. When I clicked on one of the living room pictures, my hand hovered over the mouse, and I stared at the screen for a few seconds, surprised by what I'd missed the first time. Sitting right there, atop a vast entertainment center, was what looked like an urn. I zoomed in on the object

to make it more visible. It was silver and black and looked to be about a foot in height.

I immediately turned off the computer, grabbed the songs and darted out of the precinct. When I arrived at Carter Wyatt's home, I headed for the living room. As I stood at its edge, I felt like I was looking through the photograph at the urn. It was in the exact spot, but looked a little bigger than the picture. I hurried to it, picked it up and looked at it as if I'd found the lost Ark. If Wyatt hadn't reacted as he had when I mentioned the urn, I'd have been a fool to be so awestruck, but deep down, I knew it could be the key to saving Sophia.

I shook the urn slightly, not sure what to expect, as I'd never held one before. It was heavy, but still lighter than I'd imagined. Is it disrespectful to shake an urn? As it shook, I heard something rattle inside. I opened the lid and was surprised that I didn't see ashes, but a key. I turned over the urn and allowed the key to fall into my hand. Why does he have an urn with no ashes? I quickly sat at the kitchen table and pulled out the songs. I read through each one again and could have kicked myself for not paying attention to the word "key" that was used in each song. But does it mean anything? Perhaps. I took out a pen from my jacket and wrote down 'urn, secret, key'. Three random words from songs written to a group called Between the Trees. Wyatt had given me the first clue, but he hadn't thought I'd find the rest. Was the key meant to be the urn's secret? No, it didn't feel right. The words were woven into the songs, and I couldn't imagine Wyatt setting himself the extra task without good reason. Somehow, the urn held a secret that the key could open.

I phoned the station, asking that Carter Wyatt be brought back to the interrogation room. When I saw him again, I knew that he was going to try and test me. On the drive back, I calmed my nerves and temper.

“Three times is a bit much for me, Detective.” His devilish grin cracked through his thin lips. “I didn’t realize that you were that kind of a woman.”

“I found the key in the urn,” I said, ignoring the comment, and was glad to see his eyes widen. “Where’s Sophia Page?”

He clapped his hands, his cuffs jangling along with the gesture.

“Wow... All I can say is ‘wow’. I’m really impressed. Never in a million years would I have thought that you would find my secret. Maybe I shouldn’t have given you the nugget.”

“No more bullshit. Where’s Sophia?”

“Okay, okay, I admit that even I’m tired of the back and forth.” He paused for a moment and stared into my eyes. “Someone close to you was a victim. Who was it?”

“Stop it!”

“You can stop it any time you want.”

“Look, goddammit, do the right thing. Tell me where she is.”

“I want to, I truly do, but I’ve given you a lot, and you haven’t given me anything.”

In my head, I heard a ticking that sounded like the countdown to an explosion.

“Tell me where she is.”

“You first.”

“Where is she?”

“Who was—”

“My sister, goddammit!” I stood from my seat with my right fist cocked and clenched. “Does that satisfy your perverted mind?”

Wyatt flinched but then gathered himself and sat back in his seat.

“Yes, it does.”

I lowered my fist and leaned closer.

“Where is she?”

He cleared his throat. “Sophia and the key were in the same place.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means exactly what I said.”

My mind flashed to the urn and the key, and I thought about the words that I’d pulled from the songs.

“Are you telling me that Sophia’s dead? Is that the secret? Does the urn represent death?”

“Okaaaayyy, you have a vivid imagination. Even I couldn’t have made that kind of a connection.”

“Is she dead?”

For the first time in three interrogations, Wyatt became serious.

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Are you going to tell me where she is?”

“I already did.”

We stared into each other’s eyes, and in that moment I knew that he wasn’t going to give me any more information. I turned from the table and left the interrogation room for the third and final time that day.



# Chapter 7

An epiphany came over me as I stood outside the interrogation room: the key inside the urn was a spare. A backup. What better place to hide something than inside an urn that even the police wouldn't think to check? So, I thought, if the key is a spare, it's probably kept near whatever it opens. We must have missed something in the house.

When Wyatt had been arrested, we'd taken his belongings. It was easy to find them filed away, and I drew his keyring from the plastic bag. There were five keys; if my epiphany was correct and the key inside the urn was a spare, then there was a good chance he'd have the same key on his keyring. I checked the urn key against the keys on the ring and found an exact match.

“Bingo.”

I jumped in my car and headed for Wyatt's home. During my drive, I thought about how the search team had searched the property thoroughly but come up empty. They

were professionals, they'd have looked in every obvious place, and even been creative with possibilities, so there had to be something special about the space I was looking for. When I arrived at Wyatt's home, I took a moment to rule out everything that seemed possible. It was hard, but I kept reminding myself to trust my colleagues. Wyatt's cleverness had worked so far, but now I knew that he'd set a trap for our assumptions, and I could turn it back on him. Everywhere that seemed feasible, I dismissed, until I had a shortlist of impossibilities. Methodically, I began pushing walls to see if there were any secret doors. I found the attic and carefully touched every surface possible for any hidden entrances. I walked into every closet, probed every cupboard that wasn't quite big enough for a body, but there weren't any secret hiding spots.

Then I went back to the living room and pulled every book and object from the entertainment center, looking for a secret switch or lever. Nothing happened. I stepped back and looked around the house. I'd touched every surface imaginable but wasn't able to find where the urn key could go. Did I fool myself? Wyatt had said that the urn and Sophia were in the same place. Is this another of his games?

Exasperated, I exhaled and looked up at the ceiling, which caused a light to turn on in my head. I immediately looked down to the floor. The floors throughout the house were covered with hardwood, but in the living room I stood on a large, beige area rug. My eyes widened and my heartbeat accelerated. I pushed aside a wooden coffee table and then pulled back the area rug. There, built into the middle of the floor, was a wooden door. I couldn't believe it.

I pulled out the key and looked at it for a moment, and then knelt down and put it in the lock. I took in a breath, turned the key and immediately heard a click. Given that the house didn't have a basement, I wouldn't have thought that there was any kind of underground space below.

I pulled on the iron handle, and the door opened with surprising ease. The space below was dark, so I pulled out my phone and tapped on the flashlight app, shining the resultant light into the darkness. The space was about five feet deep, and the ground was covered with dirt. I lowered myself down and shined the flashlight around the circumference of the space. My heart nearly stopped when I saw a large dirt mound about six feet away from me.

"Sophia," I whispered.

I rushed to the mound and started digging with my hands. I was desperate, like a dog trying to unearth a bone, until I finally felt the flesh of a human being. I paused and gasped; I think, unconsciously, I was surprised that a body was actually there. I quickly shook off the shock and continued digging until I was able to feel Sophia's face. I brought up my phone and shined it on her skin; her lips were nearly blue, and her skin was pale white.

"Sophia?"

I shined the light across the mound and started digging again. Sweat fell from my face and onto Sophia's. Once I cleared the dirt from her shoulders, I found her arms and tried pulling her from the mound. I'd never had to lift a lifeless body, but it was harder than I'd imagined. My muscles ached and my legs were instantly tired from being used as leverage. I couldn't stand to my full height due to the



low ceiling, so I hunched over, grunted and pulled until Sophia's body was free from the dirt.

I immediately checked her pulse, feeling nothing. Her skin was cold to the touch, but she wasn't stiff. I started CPR, pumping her chest and placing my mouth over hers.

"Come on, Sophia, breath!"

I pumped and breathed into her mouth some more. I wasn't finding a pulse, and she wasn't breathing. I grabbed my phone and frantically called for an ambulance. I continued with the CPR until my arms were tired of pumping, but eventually I had to stop, long after the point where I knew that Sophia Page was gone, and must have passed shortly before I found her. I sat with her body until I heard the paramedics enter the house.

# Chapter 8

## One Month Later

I sat at the beginning of the aisle in the middle row of Carter Wyatt's arraignment hearing at the Montgomery County courthouse. He'd been formally charged with four counts of first-degree murder and five counts of kidnapping. It was the first time that I'd seen him since finding Sophia Page's body. He walked into the room wearing an orange prison suit, his wrists handcuffed in front of him. His hair was trimmed and his face was neatly shaven. As he walked to the defendant's table, he looked around the room, and when he spotted me, he dipped his head and gave me a smile like we were old friends. I didn't smile back.

The arraignment lasted only a few minutes. The judge went through the charges and asked Wyatt for his plea. He said that he was guilty. I wasn't surprised, given that he'd confessed to me so easily. After the arraignment, I left the courthouse and walked a block and a half along Maryland Avenue to the Starbucks on the corner. I got my usual venti with two shots of espresso. The temperature had dipped over

the last few days, as the first day of winter had arrived. The cold is coming, I thought as I walked back to my car. ‘Winter is coming.’ One of my favorite lines from Game of Thrones.

As I neared my car, my phone rang, and I saw that it was the station. I was told that a body had been found out at Lake Needwood and that I needed to go check it out. I suddenly stopped walking and hesitated before answering. My arms and legs stiffened, and I felt a cold shiver run through me.

“A body?” I asked.

“Yes,” I was told. “A young woman.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I’ll be there in a few.”

My mind immediately started unlocking vaults of memories, and when I looked at the hand holding the cup of coffee, I saw that it was trembling. Lake Needwood. I walked back to my car in a slight daze and sat in the front seat for a moment. Memories that I’d locked away started flashing across my mind. Scene after scene, each more graphic than the one before. Can it be happening again?

I tried to turn the key to start the ignition, but every time, my hand stiffened. So I sat there for a moment to gather myself, but the longer I was still, the more time my brain had to unlock the vaults. Finally, the memories became too much, and for the first time in nearly twenty years, I cried her name.

“Corinne!”

The End

## Message from the Author

I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Detective August Miller through these three short stories. I've had a blast creating her character. Stay tuned, because her debut novel, *A Cold Day for August*, will be here soon!

Thanks,  
Charles

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