

THE REPLACEMENT

A Novel



JASON PELLEGRINI

PART I

CHAPTER 1

It was an average New York City day.

The usual congestion of traffic swamped the streets, and the sounds of horn blasts dominated the afternoon air. The sidewalks swelled with people of every race, color, and religion. Each coming and going; minding their own business, not talking to one another. Just trying to get where they need to be with minimal hassle. Still, the streets boomed with the deafening sounds of activity. From below, sounds and vibrations of the constant running subway systems (along with the not-so-faint odor of urine) drifted up through the sewer grates as they pounded along from one stop to the next. There were street performers of all kinds, here and there. Hot dog vendors and McDonalds almost everywhere. Nothing—maybe except the traffic, which could only be described as sluggish, at best—moved slowly. Everything and everyone moved at a million miles an hour.

All in all, it was an average New York City day.

Patrick Sullivan sat in his police cruiser, enjoying the few precious moments of his ass-busting day where he could sit back, drown out the rest of the world, and enjoy a single cup of coffee.

Patrick had been a member of the New York City Police Department for six years. Every day, since his first day out of the academy, when he was placed in the dingiest and poorest parts of the five boroughs—where he often wondered if he was even going to make it through the day alive—he managed to find those few important minutes where he could, in peace, drink his coffee.

He took his daily Cup of Joe the same way every day; black as the devil's soul. He never added a single drop of milk or sugar, and he certainly never added any of that flavored creamer crap people were always pouring into their coffees these days. He simply drank it black.

As if the grimace look etched upon his face each time he took a sip wasn't enough, Patrick often admitted the taste of black coffee was vile.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the taste of this crap," he often said.

He joked with friends and colleagues that it put hair on his chest and kept him more alert than that coffee diluted with milk, sugars and creamers. The truth was, Patrick had no idea why he drank his coffee that way. It had simply become habitual, and he was in too deep to break it now.

The familiar Manhattan sounds and smells (mostly unpleasant) filled his cruiser, but Patrick was completely oblivious to them all. At that moment, he and his black mistress were the only two things that existed in the universe.

He brought the cup to his lips, blew down on the steaming surface, and took a long sip. He cringed at the familiar detestable taste, and just like every sip that came before it, it was perfection.

Patrick Sullivan had only made it to his third sip before some moron on a bike crashed onto the hood of his cruiser.

Patrick was viciously ripped from his safe haven; dragged back to harsh reality, like an angel being expelled from heaven and thrown back to the plain of humanity,

where it would be forced to walk among such ugliness after knowing such divine beauty.

To say he was not pleased by this sudden inconvenience would have been an understatement. This, like his distaste for black coffee, was obvious by the look on his face. With a stony stare, Patrick bore a hole through the young man. The bicyclist looked utterly petrified, and who could blame him? Not only did he crash his bike into a police cruiser, but the officer inside was obviously not very pleased about it.

“S-S-Sorry, sir,” the young man managed to say in a broken, nervous voice. The actual words were drowned out by the loud city sounds—not to mention the screaming rage inside Patrick’s head—but Patrick was able to read his lips just fine.

“It’s fine,” Patrick shouted through his cracked window. “Just move along.”

Relieved that he hadn’t gotten into any trouble, the bicyclist thanked Patrick with a wave and a smile, then rode away. Patrick watched him through the rearview mirror as he disappeared; sinking into the monstrous sea of Manhattan life.

Patrick tried to return to his cup of coffee and a few more moments of peace, but it was too late.

The moment had passed, and now he was really annoyed. He had told the poor young man, who obviously lost control of his bike trying to weave in and out of traffic (like every other bicyclist in the city) that his accident was fine, but it certainly, most definitely, without a shadow of a doubt, was *not* fine.

Not even a little bit.

That punk ass on his stupid bike had to crash into Patrick’s car. Of all the cars in the city, it had to be Patrick’s, and it had to be during the few minutes in the day where he was escaping the chaos that was reality. Accident or not, Patrick was pissed off.

Really pissed the fuck off.

What Patrick really wanted to do while that guy was leaning over the hood of the cruiser, his bike tangled between his legs, was get out of the car, get in the idiot's face, and tell him to watch where the fuck he was going. He wanted to tell the cretin that if he ever crashed into his car again—or into any car in the entire city of New York, for that matter—he was going to take out his gun, and bash his skull into pieces with the butt of it.

He wouldn't though. He needed to stay composed. Patrick could not allow his emotions to get the best of him.

Knowing it would be a lost cause, but still hanging onto that last shred of false hope, Patrick brought the cup back to his lips for one last effort to sink back into that familiar peace. Like he had expected, all the heavenly feelings that swig of coffee usually brought him were gone. It was nothing more than a cup of disgusting black mud.

The sudden sound of a long, drawn out horn blast from the car behind him caused Patrick to jump in his seat. This resulted in the remaining contents of his cup to spill all over his lap; staining his uniform and, more importantly, burning his legs.

That is it! Patrick screamed in his head. *Somebody is definitely getting pistol whipped.*

He unbuckled his seatbelt, and grabbed hold of the door handle.

“Temper, Temper, Patrick. You have to control that temper.”

Patrick looked over to the passenger side of his car, and sitting there comfortably was Wallace Freewaters, better known to the community, as Baby Tooth.

Baby Tooth was the ringleader of a circus of drug dealers throughout all five boroughs. He was a tower of a man. His hair was tied back in cornrows, and he was wearing a suit that easily cost two thousand dollars. He frequently lived by the motto ‘Just because a nigga lives

amongst the poor, doesn't mean that he can't dress with a 'lil class'.

The truth was, Wallace Freewaters didn't need to live in one of the worst neighborhoods in New York City. It was common knowledge that Baby Tooth had made quite the fortune for himself thanks to his not-so-legal business. The choice to live in the same rundown neighborhood he had grown up in, was his own. He always said with pride that it was a constant reminder of where he came from, and what he overcame.

That didn't mean that Baby Tooth didn't live like a man of class.

He spent most of his nights in some of New York City's finest clubs. He was there usually on business, supplying a celebrity in town with a weekend fix, or some hot shot business man with a sea of cocaine. However, sometimes he would go for entertainment purposes; never indulging in his own product, though. Baby Tooth may have been dumb enough to sell that shit, but he certainly wasn't dumb enough to snort it up his nose and rot the brains his dear 'ol mamma gave him, was another frequently cited line of his.

When he was home, which was mostly during the day to sleep, shower and get ready for a night of business, Baby Tooth's life was certainly not anything to complain about, despite the location in which he lived.

In addition to his closet full of suits that cost a minimum of two grand a pop, Wallace's what-should-have-been-a rat hole two room apartment was completely decked out with the most expensive, state-of-the-art home accessories; ranging from his flat screen LED HD television—complete with Blu-ray DVD player and angelic surround sound system—to his six hundred dollar blender that he had never once used.

Owning such elegant and expensive stuff didn't worry him, either. His belongings were as safe as a baby in its

mother's warm embrace. No matter how desperate people in his neighborhood were for food or money, no one was stupid enough to steal from Baby Tooth.

"We all know what happens when you let your temper get the best of you, Patty Boy," Baby Tooth said, looking out the windshield at the bustling city life.

"No," Patrick argued. "*You* know what happens when I let my temper get the best of me."

"Very true," Baby Tooth's lips parted into a small smile. Patrick could see Wallace's baby tooth as his grin expanded.

After everything that happened to him that god damn baby tooth still didn't fall out. Patrick thought.

When Wallace Freewaters was a child, his upper lateral incisor on the left side of his mouth was impacted into his gums. As a result, it never descended, therefore his baby tooth never got pushed out. His parents, who were not blessed with the same fortune their son would one day have, did not have any dental coverage, nor could they afford (or cared enough) to have the problem fixed. He would go on into his teens and then his twenties with his incisor stuck up in his gums.

Over the years the tooth slowly loosened, but never fell out. When he had become wealthy enough to finally see a dentist, Wallace politely declined surgery to remove it, and have his adult tooth pulled down to take its rightful place amongst the rest of his teeth.

In truth, his baby tooth was Wallace Freewaters' trade mark.

In his teens, when he was just getting started in the business of drug dealing, serving as a mule, Wallace Freewaters had adopted the nickname 'Baby Tooth' from his higher-ups. When he reached his twenties, and started to make his way up the ranks, it became more than a simple nickname. It would become his modus operandi.

When a client of Baby Tooth had the misfortune of being short or late in payments, Wallace had a unique and torturous way of making sure this client never forgot his mistake.

After being beaten down, bloodied, and bruised for not being able to pay, Baby Tooth would then proceed to take a pair of pliers, and shove them into his clients' mouth. He would then proceed to latch onto the upper lateral incisor of the left side of their mouth, and rip it right out with one hard, fierce pull. From that point on, whenever they looked into the mirror and saw the empty space where a tooth once resided, they would always remember to pay Baby Tooth in full, and always remember to pay him on time.

In Patrick's head, the second horn blast sounded more like a nuclear explosion, and he once again gripped the handle to his car door; ready to get out and give this horn honking asshole a piece of his mind (maybe even a piece of the butt of his gun). He quickly regained his composure. He did not want Baby Tooth to see his temper get the best of him. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

It, however, was a little too obvious that Patrick was ready to unleash his fury at any moment. Even though he sat there, staring out the car window (he hadn't made any eye contact with Patrick since their little chat began), Baby Tooth knew that Patrick was moments away from flying off the hinge. Anger seemed to be seeping from his pores. Or maybe it was because Baby Tooth knew Patrick so well.

"Why you letting this dumb-ass nigga get to you so much?" Baby Tooth asked.

As he asked this considerably reasonable question, Wallace Freewaters continued to stare out into the street ahead. Patrick was glad they weren't making any eye contact. What he was even more grateful for was that Baby Tooth hadn't turned towards him. He knew what the other side of that face looked like. He had seen it plenty of times

before; in pictures, in the paper, and in his head whenever he closed his eyes. He did not need to see it again.

“You act like this is the first dumb-ass mother fucker who ever got horn happy in Manhattan,” Baby Tooth continued. “People act like this every God damn day. Shit, nigga, there’s no reason to get yourself all worked up.”

Despite his attempts to just ignore it, when the third horn blast came, Patrick could feel his grip on the car door handle tightening; digging in and making impressions in his palm.

“It just pisses me off that people think they can get away with being assholes, that’s all,” Patrick finally managed to say. He really wanted to tell Baby Tooth to fuck off and mind his business, but he was attempting (poorly, but still attempting) to practice control to the best of his abilities. “He can go around me, but he chooses to sit there and blast his horn.”

To this, Baby Tooth responded with another toothy grin, and once again Patrick saw that baby tooth hanging there, long overstaying its welcome, between the central incisor and canine tooth.

“Very true,” he eventually said. Patrick knew he had waited a few seconds before responding just so he could smile, and taunt Patrick with that freaking baby tooth. “But you can’t go letting your temper get the best of you anymore. Like I said, we both know what happens when that temper of yours gets out of control. You got too many people relying on you now to let it happen again. You wouldn’t want to let anyone down... not again.”

Unfortunately, Baby Tooth was right. It was the last thing Patrick ever wanted to admit, but it was the simple truth of the matter. Patrick couldn’t let history repeat itself. Not with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

With the fourth ear shattering horn blast, however, everything Baby Tooth had said was erased and forgotten. Patrick pulled the handle, and gave the door a push. As his

one foot hit the pavement outside, he felt Baby Tooth's hand grip his leg. It was ice cold.

So this is what death's cold touch feels like. Patrick thought, as the door sat ajar; resting on his leg.

"Don't do it, Patty Boy."

Patrick turned back towards Baby Tooth. He was still facing forward, but his eyes were now locked on Patrick. He really wished that Baby Tooth wouldn't look at him. As he made eye contact with NYC's biggest drug lord, he felt a mixture of emotions; ranging from anger, to sadness, to guilt. He tried (wished) to look away, but couldn't. Baby Tooth had Patrick paralyzed; trapped in his stare.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

Before Patrick could react, Baby Tooth tightened his grip, and Patrick felt a shiver rocket up his spinal cord; penetrating the depths his brain.

"You don't want to do this, Patrick. You know the consequences. Do you really think you can live with them again?"

"I did after that first time!" Patrick fired back. "I can do it again!"

"Do you really believe that? Shit, nigga, you're barely dealing with the first time. I mean, that's why I'm here, isn't it?"

"I don't know why you're here! I don't fucking want you here. So why don't you leave, God Dammit!"

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

"Do I need to show you?" Baby Tooth asked. "Do you need to see it again, so you remember why you shouldn't to lose your temper?"

"I don't need to see anything!" Patrick shot back without a moment's hesitation. Of all the things in life he had become uncertain of, the one thing he knew for sure was that he did not want to see what Baby Tooth was about to show him.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

“I think you do.”

“I see it every fucking day when I close my eyes. It haunts me when I sleep! Fuck, it haunts me when I’m awake. I can’t escape it! So don’t act like I’ve forgotten.”

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

“I am going to shoot this motherfucker in the face!” Patrick screamed.

“See what I mean, Patrick. Clearly you’ve left me with no choice.”

“NO! DO NOT LOOK AT ME, WALLACE!”

It was too late, though. Baby Tooth, for the first time during their little chat, turned his head. Patrick tried to look away—he tried with every fiber of his very being—but he was locked into that stare.

The right side of Wallace ‘Baby Tooth’ Freewaters’ face barely resembled that of a human being’s. His temple was caved into his head, and his eye was swollen to the size of a golf ball—which was nothing compared to his broken cheek bone, which had blown up to the size of a baseball. The bridge of his nose was badly fractured, and a dark trickle of blood ran down from his right nostril. His jaw hung slacked on one side after being dislocated (not broken, but did it really matter at this point?). His bottom lip had ballooned up to about ten times its normal size, and his upper lip was split completely up the middle to his nose. When he smiled, most of the teeth on the right side of his mouth—excluding his lateral incisor and first molar—were knocked out or broken. There was a noticeable indentation at the top of his head where his skull had been crushed in, and blood stained and matted his cornrows.

The sight of what was now Wallace ‘Baby Tooth’ Freewaters’ face made Patrick sick. He felt his stomach contract, and he thought he was going to heave right there. Looking at Baby Tooth made him want to run away and

hide. Like a dog hiding from a thunderstorm, Patrick wanted to curl up in a corner and whimper.

Unfortunately, the sight of Baby Tooth's face wasn't enough to keep Patrick's anger at bay. Obviously, Baby Tooth thought it would—even Patrick thought the sight of that mangled face would be enough to get him to gain control of himself—but with another blast of the horn from the car behind him, Patrick went ballistic.

He kicked the door open, and grabbed his gun from its holster.

“Patrick,” Baby Tooth gripped Patrick's shoulder in attempt to restrain him.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

“Shut up, Baby Tooth.”

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

“Don't do it, Patrick. Let this mother fucker go. Just let it be.”

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

“You can't handle another one on your conscious. Isn't it bad enough you always have to sit in this car with me? Imagine what it would be like with someone else along for the ride.”

“I told you to shut up”

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

“FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE!!!!!!!!!!”

Patrick freed himself from Baby Tooth's chilling grasp, and shot out of his seat. He drew his gun, and pointed it at the skull of the person sitting in the car behind him.

There, sitting behind the wheel, a huge grin painted on his face, was Wallace 'Baby Tooth' Freewaters. His face was completely fine; exactly the way God had created it. The light of the afternoon sun seemed to be bouncing off his pearly white baby tooth. It was taunting Patrick. With an obnoxious grin painted on his face, Baby Tooth waved, and then, with both hands, slammed down on the horn.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!!!!!!

Patrick released a deafening scream filled with rage, and he pulled the trigger.

The explosive sound of the bullet leaving the chamber was the last thing Patrick heard before shooting up out of bed; sweating profusely and breathing frantically. At first, he had no idea where he was. He then slowly became aware of his surroundings, and realized that he was home; in the comfort of his own bed.

The sounds of a car horn had transformed into the buzzing of an alarm clock. He reached over and grabbed the clock, which was sitting atop his nightstand. He fumbled blindly in the dark for the 'off' button. When he finally found it, the buzzing sound instantly ceased. Now, with the exception of his breathing, which was tapering towards calm and controlled, there were no other sounds in the room. He reminded himself that he was in his bed, which was in his room, which was located in his home. He was not sitting in an NYPD squad car with Wallace 'Baby Tooth' Freewaters. For that fact, Patrick couldn't be more grateful. It was all only a dream. He kept repeating that line over in his head. As if he dared to stop, it would become a reality.

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was time for Patrick to wake up.

CHAPTER 2

Patrick Sullivan sat up in his bed; cold beads of sweat pooling on his forehead and dripping down his back. He was as still as the dead; staring down into his lap.

To the average bystander, Patrick would seem as if his stare was one of complete emptiness; as if he was trapped within the depths of boundless reverie. His face was void of all emotion. He resembled a person who was in a state of shock. An explosion could have occurred in the same room—in the same bed—and he wouldn't have flinched or even heard it. It was as if the lights were on but nobody was home. This, however, was not the case.

In fact, it was the complete opposite.

The reason for Patrick's blank stare was that he was trying to expel, from his brain, the events of the dream he just awoken from. He wanted so badly for it to turn out like most other dreams; the ones you have already forgotten by the time you've climbed out of bed. This dream, however, remained stubbornly stagnant. Patrick had been sitting in his bed for five long minutes, which seemed equivalent to a single eternity, and he still remembered every detail. Turns out, only the superb dreams where he was having

sex with Jennifer Lawrence were the ones he ended up forgetting completely.

This hadn't been the first time he dreamt about Baby Tooth, but it had been the first dream in quite a while—four months; maybe more.

Patrick finally gave up, and unwillingly welcomed defeat. The dream wasn't going to bury itself in his unconscious, and he wondered why he even had tried. Baby Tooth dreams had always had an unsavory knack for sticking around for weeks, even months. He let out a sigh—his first movement since sitting up—flicked on the lamp, and threw the blanket off of him.

That's when Patrick noticed the beautiful woman lying on the opposing side of the bed; peacefully sleeping next to him. How he could have possibly forgotten about her presence, he had no clue. His nightmare must have really irked him if he was able to forget that there was a woman so perfect, she could only exist in the words of a love song, sleeping next to him.

He stared down at her for a few moments before getting out of bed. He was infatuated with her beauty. Even as she lay there, asleep on her side, Patrick couldn't recall anything more exquisite. She wore a tiny pair of red boy shorts that exposed the bottom of her shapely back side, and a tight white tank top that clung to her flat stomach and perfect breasts. Her brunette hair rested on her cheek; hiding most of her face, but it did not mask its sublimity. He couldn't remember, not once in his entire life, seeing something so incredible. He brushed the hair away from her face, and kissed her softly on the cheek. She gave a faint smile at the feel of his lips upon her gentle skin, but did not wake. He covered her with the blanket over her, and got out of bed.

He stood at the foot of his bed, taking in the suburban sounds that flowed in from outside his window. Four-thirty in the morning here was, on all counts, completely

different from where he had lived in the city. Instead of the sounds of young teenagers staying out much too late; causing havoc, getting high, or something equally distasteful, he heard birds chirping in the bushes below his window. They were singing their songs; welcoming the impending sun. Patrick could hear the sounds of a train traveling through the silent morning air as it pulled into the Wantagh station a few miles away. It replaced the unwelcoming sounds of cars backfiring and horns blasting. When he would wake up in his old apartment, Patrick knew there were already thousands of people in the city who were already up and living their busy lives. Now, as he stood in the master bedroom of his new house, he felt like he was the only person in the world.

He had gone from living in a one bedroom apartment in a horrifically poor neighborhood to living the American dream. His life was good now, but it hadn't always been. For the longest time, it seemed like he was trapped in a deep hole (more like a bottomless pit) that there was no escape from. Everything in his life had spiraled out of control all at once. He had believed that he truly wrecked everything beyond reconstruction, and would never be happy again. Sometimes miracles happen, though, and things changed. That part of his life was over, and buried in the past.

At least, he had hoped.

As Patrick donned a pair of basketball shorts and a white t-shirt, and left the room, the dream of Baby Tooth lingered in the back of his mind; tainting the pleasant thoughts of his new life.

He grabbed his iPod from the kitchen counter, where it had been charging, and made his way down to the basement. There, he would pop in his earbuds and press play. He would stretch thoroughly before putting on his running shoes and heading out for his morning run. Working out was something Patrick tried very hard to keep

up with on a daily basis. Every morning, he would get up before the sun did, drown out the rest of the world through his music (mostly 90s alternative and grunge), and do a solid hour of cardio. In the evenings, he would do a plethora of weight training.

As Patrick was stretching the muscles in his legs to physically prepare himself for his morning jog, he was also mentally preparing himself for the day ahead of him. He had once considered that part of his life—law enforcement—to be over, but as it turned out, fate had other plans for Patrick Sullivan. He had gone through the academy once before—with New York City—so he knew what to expect, and it had been smooth sailing, so far. Yet, he still found himself getting nervous each morning.

Once he felt that all his muscles had all been sufficiently stretched, Patrick headed back upstairs, where he would set out for his morning jog.

It was still dark when Patrick stepped outside, but there was a strong sense of the oncoming morning in the air. He jogged along the streets, listening to bands he had grown up on (Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Bush and Pearl Jam), admiring the beautiful suburban houses of Levittown. At one point in time, each house looking exactly alike; all sitting on small plots of land right next to one another. Now, they all looked uniquely different from each other with all the renovations done since the town was first established after the Second World War. There were now only a few original Levitt houses left, which he would spontaneously spot while driving or jogging around town. His own home wasn't an original Levitt house. Patrick didn't think he could live without a basement, which was something all Levittown houses lacked. His house had originally been a farm house from back when this suburban town was nothing but potato fields.

He kept a steady pace; controlling his breath, as he ran down the winding streets. Still, after a month and a half,

he found himself getting lost in the crazy, curving Levittown roads. He would turn down one street, thinking it would lead him one place, and find himself somewhere completely different. He sometimes wondered if the people who built the town were drunk when they plotted the streets. He knew that even after living there for twenty years, he would *not* surprisingly find himself on streets he didn't even know existed.

When he had finished running the route he had mapped out for himself so not to get lost in the morning hours, he stood at the foot of his walkway; staring in awe at his beautiful new home. It really was a dream come true. Patrick Sullivan never thought he'd be where he was at that exact moment in his life.

He allowed himself a few minutes to soak it all up. Not just his new home, but the simple things he had never appreciated before; the dew on his front lawn that should have been frozen over if not for the abnormally warm weather they were having, the fall breeze that hit his sweaty skin; sending goose bumps up and down his arms. It was hardly believable that the man standing in front of his home now was the same man who woke up terrified only two hours prior.

It was not long after six in the morning when Patrick walked back inside his house. The sky over Long Island began to lighten, and over the course of the next half hour, a brand new day would dawn. Soon, the sun would be completely up, and daylight would stake its claim over the Eastern Coast. Parents all over would be attempting—likely failing miserably—to wake up their adolescent teenagers; making sure they were up and getting ready for school. Uneager sons and daughters would try their hardest to ignore their parents pestering demands in order to catch a few more moments of precious sleep. Some would fake sick, some would swear before almighty God that they were awake, only to face-plant their pillows moments

later. Some people would be getting ready for work, while others would already be there. Morning traffic on the Long Island parkways would start to become more congested as the minutes crept towards nine o'clock.

Patrick sat in his kitchen eating a carb filled bowl of oatmeal with flax seed. As he ate, his thoughts couldn't help from traveling back to his good pal, Baby Tooth. He thought he was done beating himself up over the infamous New York City drug lord and all that had gone down almost one year ago.

Apparently Patrick was wrong, because, here he was, having dreams about him again, and thinking about him over his morning cereal.

Would Baby Tooth ever truly let him be? He had promised Patrick a few months back that he would, but that turned out to be a lie.

Regardless, Patrick wanted him gone. He didn't want to go the rest of his life seeing that disfigured face whenever he slept.

He couldn't sit there anymore; fixating on the subconscious that he couldn't control. He had to wash the sweat and stink off of him, and get his day going. He slid his chair out from under the table, walked over to the sink, and washed his bowl before heading towards the bathroom.

He plugged his iPod into the little radio he had in his bathroom, and turned up the volume. Patrick hoped the sounds of nineties grunge and metal would drive away the thoughts of his least favorite person.

As shuffle switched from Soundgarden to Metallica's rendition of Bob Seger's *Turn the Page*, Patrick reached through the shower door, and turned the volume to its max. By the time the drums and bass had joined the guitars at the top of the second verse, Patrick was singing along with James Hetfield as he shampooed his hair. He was

completely unaware to the bathroom door slowly easing open.

Circumstances couldn't have been more perfect. The sound of running water over Patrick's ears combined with the blaring music completely drowned out the sound of his shower door carefully being slid open. With his eyes squeezed shut as he rinsed the suds from his hair, he was completely blind to the hand creeping into the steamy shower; reaching for his shoulder.

As he ran his fingers through his hair for one final rinse, Patrick felt smooth fingertips on his skin.

He jumped at the completely unexpected touch of another person's fingertips on his shoulder. For a fraction of a second his fears took hold of him, and Patrick thought it was Baby Tooth grabbing at him. Basic rationalization quickly ruled that out though. This was reality; not a dream, and Baby Tooth could not get to him here in the real world.

Except that wasn't entirely true.

Even though he could not physically take hold of him, Baby Tooth certainly had quite the grip on Patrick's mind.

Knowing he wouldn't see the pummeled face of Wallace Freewaters, Patrick opened his eyes to the pleasant sight of his wife, Claire.

The brown hair that had covered her face as she slept was now resting on her shoulders. She was no longer wearing a pair of shorts or the tight tank she had been sleeping in. Claire was wearing absolutely nothing.

Patrick stood there, staring in awe at his naked wife—her perfectly sized breasts, her soft skin, and her flat stomach, which he loved to kiss before they made love. The very sight of her expelled all negative thoughts he had been having that morning. He now only had one thought racing through his mind as he felt his penis hardening.

“See something you like, Mr. Sullivan?” Claire asked as she, flirtily, ran her hands down her side. She had a

seductive smile on her face that made him want to jump out of the shower, and have her right there on the bathroom floor. However, before Patrick could act on his primal instincts, Claire climbed into the shower to join him. “You’re looking a little stressed, baby. Is there anything I can do to help out with that?”

“Uh-huh,” was all Patrick could articulate as a response. He was finding it very hard to find words at the moment.

“Well,” Claire said; kissing her husband’s neck; knowing full well it drove him crazy. “Let’s see if I can guess how.”

She moved away from his neck, and kissed her way past his chest and down to his stomach. She looked up at him with those beautiful eyes before slowly making her way down to her knees.

Patrick had frequently heard, from one source or the other, once you got married, the sex becomes mundane. Even on the night of his bachelor party, friends of his who had been married for years joked that after his and Claire’s honeymoon, the blowjobs were over, and there was nothing left for him but the missionary position until the day his dick decided to just give up.

He and Claire, however, proved this theory to be very wrong. They were married now for three years, and the sex had become anything but boring. On the contrary, as their relationship evolved, the sex intensified and only got better.

For one thing, the blowjobs never stopped, and neither did Patrick’s reciprocation of the favor. They were constantly finding new, exciting places to have at each other, whether on their new couch, the kitchen counters and table, and both, washer and dryer. They had even done it in the backyard in broad daylight; not even considering (or caring) that someone could possibly see them. The sex was always sporadic, and always mind-blowing.

Now, as Claire so excellently disproved the theory that blowjobs ended after marriage, Patrick felt his penis begin to throb as orgasm grew nearer. He gripped the bar on the shower door, and let out a pleasurable moan as he reached climax.

“Stress free now, baby?” Claire asked as she got to her feet.

“I definitely am,” Patrick assured his wife.

“Good. I’m glad.” She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Now get out of here, stud. I need to shower.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Patrick rebutted. “No cuddle time afterwards. You must be the all business type?”

“You bet your butt. Just leave the money on the kitchen counter before you leave, or I’ll have to send my pimp after you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Patrick stepped out of the shower, and dried himself off. He headed back to the bedroom to get dressed.

He now stood in a room with walls painted powder blue. Large fluffy clouds crowded the ceiling; mimicking the sky of a gentle spring day. Scattered along the four walls were tall trees with luscious red apples dangling from their thick branches; creating the scene of an enchanted forest. Birds flew over the green blades of grass where a deer had stopped to nibble upon an apple that had fallen from one of the grand trees. Above a tiny bed placed in the far corner of the room that Patrick now stood over, were the letters A, B, and C. They were made from a blue and white gingham patterned fabric, and stuffed with white cotton. Claire had made them as one of her projects when she was so pregnant that she refused to move unless it was absolutely necessary. It was indeed a very nice room for a toddler, and he was proud of himself and Claire for putting it together.

At this particular moment, the world ceased to exist. There were no such things as disfigured drug lords with

silly nicknames. No such thing as new job jitters. There was only him and his two year old son, Connor.

Patrick stared at his son; completely content. Connor lay on his stomach; his legs sprawled out. His thumb rested on his bottom lip from when it had fallen out of his mouth while he slept. He had the softest skin and finest blonde hair, which he had inherited from Patrick's mother. Under those closed lids were big blue eyes, which he got from Claire. Like his mother's eyes, they were the kind you couldn't resist falling in love with once they had you locked into a stare. When he was awake, he had a personality that matched his physical beauty. Again, he took after his mother in that perspective. Once Connor warmed up to someone, which didn't take long, he was the most lively and entertaining child to be around. Everyone loved him within minutes of knowing him. Just like Claire.

He heard Claire enter the room, but did not turn to acknowledge her presence. He didn't want to stop looking at his son. Just like he was on the day Connor had been born, Patrick was hypnotized by his perfection. He had held this brand new human being, who was completely void of flaw and knew nothing of wickedness, and was overcome by a feeling of intense adulation. Connor was made up of nothing but pure innocence, and as Patrick held his newborn son for the first time, he knew right then that nothing else mattered. His sole purpose on this Earth was to keep his family safe.

Claire slipped her arms around Patrick's waist. He felt her warm cheek pressed against his back as she hugged him. He locked his fingers with hers, and squeezed gently. The moment was perfect. It was the kind of moment you never wanted to end.

"He's beautiful," Claire said.

"He sure is."

He took one last long look at his son; letting the love that seemed to be resonating off his little body seep in, and

turned to Claire. She was wearing her robe and a towel around her head. Even then, she was the most attractive woman in the world. It was no contest. He leaned in, and gave her a long kiss on the lips.

Now, four years after their first kiss, Patrick still got the feeling of butterflies in his stomach when their lips met. Some people went their whole lives without ever knowing that feeling (true love), but he was fortunate enough to experience it every day.

“I love you, Claire Sullivan,” he said once their lips parted.

“I love you, too, Patrick Sullivan,” she said; smiling. “Or should I say Officer Sullivan? Oops! I mean Detective Sullivan!”

“Not just yet. I’ll be detective in a few months—once I go through the academy again—but I have to admit; it definitely has a nice ring to it.”

And it did.

As much as Patrick had wanted to bury his career in law enforcement in the past, his pending new job title gave him a sense of honor and prestige. He could do some real good with this job, and make an amends for the mistakes of his past.

Claire took two steps back, and looked her husband up and down.

“You’re definitely one handsome man,” she said; adding a nod of approval.

“Why, thank you, ma’am. You’re not too bad yourself.”

He leaned over Connor’s bed, and kissed his little forehead. He put his arm around Claire, gave her one to match. Arm in arm; the happy couple walked out of the room.

The two ate breakfast in their newly renovated kitchen. They had moved into a house that probably hadn’t had any major upgrades since Reagan was shot. The carpets were old and worn down. The whole house needed a good paint

job. Both, kitchen and bathroom looked incredibly tacky, and that was just the inside. On the outside, the house needed to be sided, and the gutters should have been replaced at least a decade ago.

The couple had moved into a fixer-upper. With the help of some old cop friends, Patrick had taken it upon himself to do all the necessary repairs. The end result was nothing short of gratifying.

Patrick leaned against the counter, eating a piece of dry toast with his usual morning cup of [black] coffee. He was reading the sports section, enjoying the recent streak the New York Jets had been on. Claire was sitting at the kitchen table. She was eating the same breakfast that she ate every morning; a grapefruit, followed by a yogurt (today it was blueberry). She was skimming the penny saver for some deals and coupons.

“So, seriously; Patrick, are you nervous at all?” she asked.

“You know... I was, but not so much anymore,” he replied before taking a sip from his mug.

This statement was the truth. Maybe it was their moment in the nursery, maybe it was the blowjob in the shower—probably a little bit of both—but the fear and worries that had been weighing down on him ever since he decided to return to his former career seemed to have drifted away.

“Good, because I know you are going to be an excellent detective.”

“Yeah... because I made such an excellent police officer.” His sarcasm was apparent.

Claire stopped looking through the paper. She got up from her seat, walked over to Patrick, and looked him dead in the eyes, which he knew meant to pay attention.

“Patrick, you were an excellent police officer. Don’t you dare think, otherwise!”

“Sometimes I can’t help it. Things didn’t exactly end well the last time”

“You can’t let isolated incidents, like Wallace Freewaters,”—Claire never referred to him as Baby Tooth—“define you as a whole. Not as a police officer, and certainly not as a human being.”

“It’s a pretty big isolated incident, Claire.”

She placed her palm on the apple of his cheeks. “You are a good person, Patrick. The greatest person I have ever known—that goes without question—and you are going to be a great cop, and an even better homicide detective. I know you are going to do a lot of good.”

She leaned in and kissed him. He loved her so much in that moment. Truth was, he loved her in every moment; each one a different reason than the last. He knew she would never just say something simply because she felt obligated to as his wife. Claire spoke what she believed. She always had. Even on the day they met. If she told Patrick she thought he was going to be a great detective, it was because she truly believed it.

“Thank you, babe. That really means a lot.”

He glimpsed over at the clock. He needed to finish getting ready, and Claire needed to leave to drop Connor off at daycare before heading to work, herself.

As he was dumping what remained of his coffee down the drain, the house phone rang. Claire walked over, and answered. After greeting the person on the other end and asking who was calling, she covered the mouth piece, and told Patrick, in a low voice, an Officer Summers from the 8th precinct was on the phone.

“Gimme,” he mouthed; taking the phone from her. “Hello, this is Patrick Sullivan.”

“Hello, Detective Sullivan, this is Officer Summers calling from the 8th precinct. How are you this morning?”

Patrick told her he was good, and asked how she was; exchanging all the appropriate pleasantries. What he really wanted was to get past those as quickly as possible, and get down to real meaning of this sudden phone call.

“I know you’ve been going through the academy; preparing for your new position with us here,” she said; finally getting down to business. “but there’s been a sudden change in plans, and you are unofficially being pushed through the academy. You are to report directly to the field; starting today.”

Change in plans? Pushed through the academy?
Reporting directly to the field?

Patrick had so many questions, he didn’t know which one he should ask first. This was absolutely unheard of.

“I’m sorry,” Patrick said; finally able to somewhat gather his thoughts. “I’m just a bit confused to what exactly is going on. I’m to report to the field? I haven’t even made it half way through the academy.”

“I know it’s a lot all at once, and I apologize for that. We don’t usually do this, but there’s been a murder, and you’ve been requested by the onsite detectives. It’s been approved by the captain, and you’re to report directly to the scene.”

This whole thing was just bizarre. In his six years on the force, Patrick had never heard of anything remotely like it. That was because it simply was not allowed. People just don’t skip the academy. It didn’t matter if he had police background, and had already gone through it before with New York City. It was just something that did not happen.

He knew what he had heard, though. He wondered what type of murder could merit this strange occurrence. As exciting as getting out of repeating the academy sounded, Patrick found himself suddenly petrified of being thrown right into action.

“What address am I to report to?” he asked; pushing aside the other hundred things now racing through his mind. He signaled to Claire for a pen and pad.

“96 Merry Way Drive in Seaford. Do you know where that is, detective?”

“I have a GPS. I’ll have no problem finding it,” he assured Officer Summers; jotting down the address.

“Okay, when you get there identify yourself to an officer, and request to see Detective Murphy. He will have your gun and credentials with him, and he will brief you on the situation so far.”

“Okay, thank you, officer.”

“You are welcome. When you return from the field, you are to report to me immediately. There’s some paperwork I’m going to need you to fill out.

When he hung up, Claire inquired about the nature of the phone call. Her reaction was the same as Patrick’s; confusion.

“Well, be careful, Patrick.”

“I will,” he promised Claire.

He kissed her goodbye—she and Connor would already be gone by the time he was ready to leave the house—and ran up the stairs to get dressed.

He dressed quickly in clothes he didn’t think he’d be wearing for at least another few months, and left the house. In his car, he typed the address Officer Summers had given him into the GPS, and backed out of his driveway.

The chain of events that would change the life of Patrick Sullivan forever were about to begin.

CHAPTER 3

“Make your next left, and destination will be on the left,” the voice on Patrick’s GPS told him.

On the car ride over to 96 Merry Way Drive, nervousness continued to creep up on Patrick. As his destination drew nearer, he began to think that perhaps he was about to get himself in too deep with something he wasn’t fully prepared for. He had been pulled from the academy months before he was supposed to, and now he was about to become part of an active murder investigation. He found himself feeling underprepared and a bit overwhelmed, and it hadn’t even started.

But maybe he was just being too hard on himself.

After all, Claire believed in him. She had told him so. She thought Patrick would be a great detective, and here was his chance to prove her right. Claire was always right. She always was; ever since the first day they met on the roof top of her Brooklyn apartment building.

Once he put his mind to ease on the matter of law enforcement competency, Patrick’s thoughts drifted to memories of the past year of his life. In the few minutes that remained of his drive, he recalled the intense rollercoaster ride he and his family had endured.

Nine months ago (almost to the day) Patrick Sullivan decided to resign from the New York City Police Department to pursue his interest in architecture. That was at least what he and Claire had told everybody.

Truth was, Patrick had no interest in designing buildings, but there was no way people could know the truth behind his leaving the NYPD. Only he, Claire and his father—who if hadn't been informed by Patrick, would have found out from his department connections, anyway—were the only people who knew the truth.

It was hard leaving the force. True, the only reason he had become a cop was because his father had expected it of him, but Patrick had grown to love the job, and like all things in this world we fall in love with, it hurts when we are forced to let them go. Patrick didn't have a choice, though. He couldn't stay on. Not after what had happened.

Breaking the news to his father was no walk in the park, but telling Claire broke his heart. She was having a hard enough time as it was finding a teaching job, but now Patrick, who was their only source of income, was also without a job.

She had been upset about Patrick having to leave the force, but what really devastated her were the circumstances surrounding his departure. Still, despite the shock that her husband was capable of doing such things, Claire vowed to stick it out, and stand by her husband.

“For richer or for poorer,” she said; quoting the infamous line often uttered during wedding vows.

Once they both decided that nothing could tear their loving family unit apart, the terrifying reality that they were both unemployed and had little in the form of savings quickly sank in. They desperately needed money to get by.

As if admitting the truth to his father wasn't hard enough, Patrick now had to swallow his pride, and ask his parents for a loan to keep his family afloat until he found employment. That was something he did not want to do,

but there was no choice in the matter. He and Claire had an eighteen month old to provide for, and turning to Claire's parents for financial aid was not an option. He wouldn't allow it. On that matter, he remained stern. Claire's father was never fond of Patrick—hate would be a more suitable adjective to describe his feelings towards his son-in-law—and Patrick refused to admit to his father-in-law that he was in any sort of financial peril. He would not take a single cent from the hand of that miserable man, and risk having to listen to a long drawn out speech on how Patrick had failed his wife and son.

So Patrick would suck it up, and ask his father for the money he needed. Not for himself, but for Claire and Connor. He would throw himself at the mercy of Edward Sullivan for them.

Patrick received the money he requested—enough to hold them over for a year—and vowed to pay back every last cent borrowed.

Despite promising himself he would be back on his feet and have the remainder of the loan returned to his father by the six month mark, Patrick found himself four months later still without a job. He had applied for every position he could possibly think of, and couldn't land one. He couldn't even land himself a gig doing security, and they were always looking to employ former cops. It seemed as if there was absolutely nothing out there for Patrick Sullivan.

As if his terrible luck finding employment wasn't enough to quell his spirits, Patrick's nightmares had begun. Every night he would see the brutalized face of Wallace 'Baby Tooth' Freewaters. Like a small child, Patrick would wake up petrified; afraid that Baby Tooth would jump out of his closet or spring through his window like some creature of the night; seeking his revenge for what Patrick had done.

The dreams had gotten so bad that Patrick had found himself panic-stricken in the middle of the day. Every time he passed a dark alleyway, he braced himself, expecting Baby Tooth to jump out, and snatch him up into the darkness.

In late June of that year, their financial situation took an upward turn when Claire secured a job with the Bellmore school district (a few towns over from where the Sullivan's currently resided) as a kindergarten teacher, and would be starting that September. It was only half a solution, but it unquestionably lifted a significant weight off both of their shoulders.

While attending a Fourth of July barbeque with his family, Patrick was approached by his friend and former colleague, Joey Vanzetti. He and Joey had grown up together, had joined the force, and gone through the academy together, and when Joey learned that his lifelong friend had fallen on hard times, he decided he needed to do what he could to help.

He came to Patrick with some inside information on a job offer that was immediately deemed too good to be true.

Over on Long Island, an opening in the Nassau County Police Department's homicide unit had recently become available. One of their finest, most respected detectives was retiring at the end of the year, and they were interviewing for his replacement.

Joey told Patrick he could have his father, who was a captain with the NYPD, place a phone call to Nassau County, and make sure Patrick got in for an interview.

Despite his less than slim chances of actually getting the job, Patrick couldn't pass up this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He told his friend to place the call to his father, and Joey did just that. The very next morning, Patrick received a phone call from the Nassau County Police Department to schedule a meeting between him and their captain.

The night before his big interview, Patrick dreamt of Baby Tooth yet again. It would be the last time Baby Tooth visited him. That was, until the morning Patrick would become Detective Sullivan.

In the dream, they were sitting on a bench in Central Park. It was a clear summer day. Kids were playing with one another on the playground. Couples were having afternoon picnics, and enjoying quaint carriage rides together. Dogs chased Frisbees; catching them, and bringing them back to their impressed masters.

The two watched, in silence, this picture perfect scene unfold before them. When Baby Tooth finally decided to speak, he reminded Patrick of how important this meeting was to the survival of his family. He let Patrick know how proud he would be if he got the job. Patrick responded by informing Baby Tooth, quite bluntly, he didn't give two shits if he made Baby Tooth proud or not. The only person he wanted to make proud was Claire. He wanted his wife to swell with pride; knowing her husband had done right by his family, despite what he had done to let them down.

He then did something he had never been able to do in life or any of his dreams. He put his anger and all-encompassing hatred for Baby Tooth aside, and confided in him about how scared he was that he would fail his family. He didn't mean to, but it came pouring out, like flesh torn open by a carving knife.

That was when Baby Tooth struck a deal with Patrick.

If Patrick went into that interview and walked out the other end with a new job, Baby Tooth would leave him alone. He would never again be visited by that mangled drug lord. He would never be forced to stare at that God forsaken baby tooth, and have an unnamable enmity boil up inside of him. Patrick Sullivan would be ridden of Wallace Freewaters once and for all, and that was a deal too good to pass up.

The next day, he walked into that interview a man with a mission. One where he would be the husband and father that he was destined to be, and just as importantly, it was a mission to rid himself of the man who had ruined his entire life up until that point.

When the meeting had concluded, Patrick's adrenaline was pumping so hard, he couldn't recall a single word exchanged in the entire hour he was there. Still, he left feeling confident. More confident than he had felt in months.

Not even two weeks later, Patrick received a phone call informing him he would be the new homicide detective for the Nassau County Police Department. His training would begin that September.

That night he told Claire the good news over a surprise candlelit dinner that had taken him all afternoon and two attempts to prepare.

The reality that their dire financial peril was now ending brought tears of joy and relief to both their eyes.

Later on, while lying in bed together after making love, the happily married couple decided it would be best to move out of their crappy Burroughs apartment, and into a suburban house on Long Island. After all, they now had steady jobs out there. They fell in love with the very first house they saw, and with his blessing; they used what remained of Patrick's father's loan for the down payment on their brand new home.

Patrick turned onto Merry Way Drive, and parked across the street from the house Officer Summers had given him the address to.

It was a quaint little white house with green shutters, a peaceful lawn, and a cute picket fence. From where Patrick was sitting, it looked like a typical suburban home; picture perfect. Then he took notice of the small group of people that had gathered on the sidewalk. They stood on one side of yellow police tape that read: **'CRIME SCENE: DO**

NOT CROSS’. On the opposite side of the tape, stood a handful of uniformed Nassau County police officers. Parked at the curb were two patrol vehicles, and an unmarked black Lincoln Townscar. An ambulance was parked in the driveway.

The sense of pleasant suburbia had now withered away. Patrick was looking at a crime scene.

“Here we go,” he told himself before opening the car door.

He was nervous. No question there. His heart was pumping hard against his chest, and he could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck. Even though he had seen numerous crime scenes while with the NYPD, Patrick was about to enter his first as a Homicide Detective. There was a monumental difference between the two. He had spent months attempting to mentally prepare himself for this job, but now he found himself completely unprepared to enter the unknown.

Regardless, he took a deep breath, opened the car door, and crossed the street.

“I’m Detective Sullivan,” Patrick told the officer standing opposite him, once he made his way through the small crowd. “I was told to ask for Detective Murphy.”

“May I see some identification, sir?”

“I wasn’t issued any credentials. I was told I would receive them when I arrived.”

For a moment, Patrick feared no one had informed the officers standing the perimeter that he would be coming, and that he wouldn’t have the proper identification. This officer probably thought he was some crazy person; dumb enough to try and impersonate a detective to sneak a peek at a murder scene.

“Your license will do just fine.”

Patrick produced his driver’s license, and handed it to the officer. He examined the license then looked at Patrick.

He proceeded to repeat the process until he felt certain Patrick was who he claimed to be.

“My apologies, detective,” the officer finally said; handing Patrick back his I.D. “I’m sure you understand. If you could hold on for just a moment, I will get Detective Murphy.”

“No problem” Patrick said; stepping under the yellow tape to the opposite side. There, he stood; patiently waiting. A few minutes later, the officer returned; followed by who Patrick could only assume was Detective Murphy.

Detective Murphy was a man nearing the age of retirement, and it showed. He was short in height, and greater in weight; putting on those unwanted pounds that comes with the crashing of one’s metabolism as they age. He was balding, and what was left of his hair had gone almost completely grey. He had little neck, and it looked to Patrick as if his head was merely resting upon his shoulders.

“Detective Sullivan,” he greeted Patrick; extending his hand. “I’m Detective Murphy.”

When he was younger, Patrick’s late grandfather had always said you could size up any man’s confidence based only on his handshake. By Detective Murphy’s shake, he was a confident man.

“It’s nice to meet you, Detective Murphy,” Patrick said. “I just wish they could be under better circumstances.”

“You and me, both,” Detective Murphy said; breaking their handshake. “You ready to get right down to business?”

“I hope so,” Patrick answered. The tone he used may had been one of half joking, but the words that passed his lips were dead serious.

“You better be. Here are your credentials, and service pistol.” Detective Murphy handed Patrick his badge and gun (a police issue Glock .19). “This way, please, detective.”

Patrick walked side-by-side with Detective Murphy towards the house. As they walked, he noticed the garden in the front yard; running along the foundation of the house. Most of it had withered away due to the time of year, but he could tell that it was well tended and cared for in the spring and summer months. Sticking out of the dirt was a little white sign that had a pink and yellow flowers painted along the border. It read, in cursive *Estelle's Garden*.

Patrick knew that murder victims were supposed to remain just that; murder victims. It was a big no-no for an investigating officer to get emotionally attached to their victims or case, but, already, he could see how hard that would be when you looked around a person's home, and saw the many things—like a garden that would never be tended to again—that made them more than just a lifeless body, or a nameless face.

“Our victims are an elderly couple,” Murphy told Patrick; briefing him as they walked to the house. “Their names are Arthur and Estelle Ramsey. They were discovered this morning by seventeen year old Samantha Melina. She's in the ambulance right now being looked at by paramedics.” He pointed to the ambulance parked in the driveway. The doors were closed but Patrick could see people inside. “The onsite therapist is in there with her. The girl seems pretty shook up, and, quite frankly, I don't blame her after what she saw. We couldn't get much out of her except for her name, and the names of the victims. She's said a few things here and there, but nothing very coherent. She might as well have been speaking gibberish.”

“What was she doing here?” Patrick asked.

“We're assuming she was dropping off some groceries. She hasn't been able to tell us that much, but there was a bag on the kitchen table filled with fresh milk, eggs, a

canister filled with coffee grains, and three days' worth of Newsday's."

"And what about the victims?"

To this question, Detective Murphy raised his eyebrows, as if saying 'You aren't going to believe this...'

"I think you better come in and see for yourself, Detective Sullivan. But I warn you... it is like nothing you could possibly begin to imagine."

Detective Murphy said no more. He pulled open the door; allowing Patrick to enter the house.

The kitchen, where they stood upon entering the home, was dimly lit. The shades were drawn, and the only sunlight that entered was whatever had managed to sneak around the edges. The bag of groceries Murphy had mentioned was on the kitchen table; its contents emptied out onto the table. There was a distinct odor in the air. It was an odor that Patrick had never been able to mistake for anything else since the first time it hit his nose. It was the smell of death and decay.

In his first year out of the academy, Patrick was dispatched to an abandoned building. There had been numerous phone calls from neighbors about the unbearable smell coming from the boarded up building. What he found when he arrived were two bodies deep within the stages of decomposition. The smell of muscle and skin deterioration mixed with the release of bodily gases and fluids was so putrid that Patrick had to fight the continuous urge to throw up with everything he could muster. From that day on that smell stayed with him. If he had lived to see a hundred and twenty years on this planet, and had gone completely senile; he still would remember that fetid stink of death.

"The victims are in the den," Murphy said. "If you would follow me, please, detective."

Patrick followed Detective Murphy down a small hallway into a living/dining room. The same dismal

lighting that lit the kitchen lit this room, as well. The furniture was very old. It looked as if someone in this household liked to buy antique furniture, and restore it. This sight only brought the victims even more to life. If what he had already seen wasn't enough to make him feel terrible about the abrupt ending to the lives of the two victims, what he saw next sealed that deal.

The far wall of the room was covered with portraits. They descended by generation; forming a family tree of photos. At the top, closest to the ceiling, was a black and white photograph. The couple in the picture was a very young, very happy couple on their wedding day. Patrick assumed this picture to be the two victims; Arthur and Estelle, Detective Murphy had said their names were. Below the wedding picture were high school graduation photographs of the victims' three children—all daughters. Next to those were photos of each daughter dressed in white wedding gowns alongside their husbands on the day of their respective weddings. Below the children were many photographs of the grandchildren. They were all smiling in their school pictures; ranging from kindergarten to high school seniors (possibly in college now).

The photos ate away at Patrick. Like the garden outside and the restored furniture, the photos told a story, and brought the house to life. A happy couple had lived here. They had raised a family here. They had grandchildren who came to visit, and ran through the house; possibly playing in their grandma and grandpa's garden.

Now they were dead. He hadn't even seen the victims yet, and, already, Patrick was carrying the weight of their deaths on his shoulders.

The smell of death grew stronger as they made their way through the living room. When they made their way into another hallway that came off the living room, the smell

hit Patrick full on, and he found himself glad he hadn't eaten a big breakfast that morning.

The doorway to the room at the end of the hall was blocked off with more yellow tape. He could see the forensic team inside; photographing the scene, dusting for print, and looking for fibers or anything else that could aid them in their upcoming investigation.

The bodies are in there, Patrick thought. It's go time. Get over whatever fears you may have left inside of you. Let go of them, so that you can catch the bastard sick enough to murder an innocent elderly couple who had grandchildren. Grandchildren, who probably loved their grandma and grandpa more than anything in the world.

"Ah, Carl," a voice called from inside the room. "I was beginning to think you may have gotten lost."

A man stepped from the room; ducking under the police tape. Patrick guess that he was about Detective Murphy's age; only he was six inches taller, and in far better shape.

"Just bringing the new guy up to date," Murphy answered. "Patrick Sullivan; meet Detective Jonathan Hawkins."

Detective Hawkins was a dominating presence, even at first glance. He still had a full head of hair that had only begun to grey on the sides. The skin on his face was rugged, yet showed minimal signs of aging. He would have made an excellent television drill sergeant, Patrick noted to himself. He wore a pair of slacks and a button up shirt, just like Patrick and Detective Murphy, but unlike the two, who more than likely shopped at the same Kohl's for the best bargains on work acceptable clothing, Hawkins' clothes looked quite expensive. This man refused to look like anything but a top of the line Nassau County Police Detective.

"So... this is the replacement, huh?" Hawkins said; looking Patrick up and down, as if checking if he was adequate enough to even be breathing near a murder scene.

“Excuse me, sir?” Patrick asked.

“Detective Hawkins is only kidding around,” Murphy cut in. “He will be retiring at the end of the year. You were hired to relieve him.”

“Replace me,” Hawkins corrected.

Right as Patrick was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable (not mention unwelcomed), Hawkins emotionless face turned into a friendly smile.

“I’m just playing hard-ass, kid,” he said.

Kid? Did he really just call me ‘kid’? Patrick asked himself.

He was thirty years old and had been a hard working member of the police department for six long years, and he was being referred to as *kid*. He definitely didn’t like that, but he would hold his tongue. Hawkins meant no harm by it, Patrick didn’t want to leave the impression of being ‘too sensitive’ on his first day.

Like Detective Murphy minutes before, Hawkins extended his hand in welcome, and Patrick shook it.

If there was any truth to what Patrick’s grandfather had told him, Detective Jonathan Hawkins was the most confident son-of-a-bitch in all existence. He never thought he would say this about a handshake, but it was flawless. Patrick could feel the pride and confidence radiating off of Hawkins’ warm palm.

In that single moment that they shared shaking hands, Patrick was able to size up Jonathan Hawkins perfectly. He was a man who was defined by his job. A man who gave his livelihood to it. No words needed to be exchanged on the matter. In one handshake, Patrick understood the man opposite of him completely.

“Sorry to hear that you are leaving the force,” Patrick said as they broke their shake.

“Me, too,” Hawkins responded. “I have to though. Doctor says it’s my damn ticker.” He banged his fist

against his chest twice. “Apparently, it’s not what it used to be.”

This news shocked Patrick. He had known the man for less than a minute, but he already believed that nothing could be wrong with him, despite his age. He had an aura of invincibility to him. Still, Patrick guessed, no matter how hard you tried to outrun it; time is going to catch up with you, eventually.

“Truth is,” Hawkins continued. “I’d stick around for another twenty years if they’d let me, but if the old blood pump is having problems, then they can’t risk keeping me on board.”

“It’s a damn shame, too,” Detective Murphy added. “Detective Hawkins here is the best homicide detective in not only the department, but in the whole damn state of New York.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, Carl. I’m no better than anyone else doing right by the law.”

“Whatever, Hawkins; you’re just being modest. You know, they don’t call you *Ace* for nothing.”

Ace? Patrick wondered. It was an interesting nickname. It sounded like a nickname that a cop in a good mystery novel or detective movie would have.

“Why do they call you *Ace*?” Patrick asked.

Before Detective Murphy could answer for his partner, Detective Hawkins cut him off.

“That is a story for a different time and place, kid. Right now, we have a double homicide to investigate.”

“Of course,” Patrick said; feeling a bit embarrassed that he had been shooting the shit with his new coworkers, instead of giving his undivided attention to the recently deceased. “My apologies.”

“No apology needed. It’s perfectly acceptable, and under normal circumstances, you’d be able to hear all about my fascinating nickname, but, unfortunately, these aren’t normal circumstances, and here, when you’re

working alongside me, we steer the course. Those two people in there are our number one priority.” He pointed to the room behind him “When we nail the son-of-a-bitch who took them away from their family and friends; that’s when we’ll all sit down to a nice cold beer, and bullshit with each other.”

Patrick respected Jonathan Hawkins’ words, because everything he had just said was exactly how he felt, himself. It was probably how any police officer standing near Detective Hawkins felt after hearing him speak. This veteran officer of the law was a natural leader. People looked to him for guidance and for confidence, and when they looked, they found.

“You ready to make sure that the dead don’t go unheard?” Hawkins asked Patrick.

“Yes, I am, detective.”

“Okay, then let’s go in there, and take a look at the bodies.”

Hawkins headed back into the den. Detective Murphy followed suit, and then Patrick. When his eyes locked on to the two bodies on the couch, Patrick couldn’t believe what he saw. He had been expecting a lot of things walking in to a murder scene, but nothing like what he was looking at now.

CHAPTER 4

It is like nothing you could possibly begin to imagine.

That is what Detective Murphy had said. Now, after seeing the victims for the first time, Patrick realized that had been the understatement of the past millennia.

The bodies of Arthur and Estelle Ramsey were propped up on a blood saturated couch like two mannequins in some grotesque window display. The elderly couple, who probably spent many nights over the course of their long marriage sitting on that very couch; watching television, enjoying conversation, or, perhaps, simply sitting in silence; relishing each other's company, were skinned.

That's right; at first, the voice inside his head was Baby Tooth's, but he would only haunt Patrick momentarily. The voice quickly shifted back to the one Patrick was accustomed to hearing inside his head on a daily basis. *Skinned!*

The two bodies on the couch barely looked like human beings. They faintly resembled pictures that one would see in a biology textbook of the human muscular system. Only difference being that this was a whole lot bloodier, and a hell of a lot scarier.

“Holy shit,” Patrick said aloud; staring wide eyed at the two bodies that used to be the Ramsey’s. He had meant to say it to himself, but the words just fell out of his mouth as they ran through his head.

“You can say that again,” Hawkins said. He was standing on one side of Patrick while Detective Murphy stood on the other; all three staring at what remained of Arthur and Estelle Ramsey.

“I told you,” Detective Murphy reminded Patrick. “Like nothing you could even begin to imagine.”

The more he fixated on that statement, the more Patrick realized how true it was. Heading into his first murder scene, he had prepared himself to see a lot of disturbing things—some of which he had already been exposed to in his previous years on the job—but none of those things even came close to what he was looking down on now. Every inch of skin that had once covered the bodies of Arthur and Estelle Ramsey was now completely stripped away from their bodies.

Patrick then noticed something that struck him as odd.

Along with being propped up in the sitting position, the Ramsey’s hands were conjoined. Not in the simple right hand in left hand sort of way, though. Arthurs’ skinned hand was stretched across his gory lap, and was joined with Estelle’s left hand. The symbolism of this gesture wasn’t lost on Patrick. The handholding represented unity, just like marriage. Arthur and Estelle Ramsey had lived most of their life together, and now they had died together. To their killer, it would only be fitting if they were found linked together by their hands. Whoever did this had a mind for the theatrics.

He stared; fixated on those hands. Patrick knew there was something else. He just had to concentrate, and find it. Then he saw what he was looking for. It was the frosting on this extremely unappetizing cake.

He wasn't positive if he was looking at what he thought he was. He couldn't see them clearly, because they were covered in blood. Maybe his mind was just playing tricks on him, and he was seeing what he wanted to be seeing. Those two bodies were such a mess that what he was looking at could have been almost anything. Patrick would need to get a closer look to confirm.

"Have the bodies been photographed, Detectives?"

"They have," Hawkins answered. He could see the wheels turning in Patrick's head. He had probably already seen what Patrick saw, because he was that good. What he wanted was to see if Patrick could figure it out.

Hawkins was feeling his replacement out.

"May I approach the bodies?"

"You may..."

Patrick donned a pair of latex gloves, and knelt in front of Arthur and Estelle Ramsey. With his thumb, he wiped away the blood from both Ramsey's wedding rings.

"What the hell...?" Detective Murphy asked. He and Hawkins were now beside Patrick; examining his find.

"He put their wedding bands back on them after he killed and skinned them," Patrick answered.

"This just keeps getting more disturbing by the minute." Detective Murphy shook his head in disbelief.

"Wow," Hawkins was all said. The tone of his voice was neutral. He wasn't going to let any of this phase him. No matter how out of the ordinary it was. "Good find, kid. I'm impressed."

"Thank you," Patrick said; trying to absorb the compliment, and ignore being called *kid*.

However, Patrick wasn't sure how impressed Hawkins really was. He had noticed the hands, and he likely noticed the wedding rings, even while they were covered in blood. So finding something that he had already known wasn't going to impress a guy like Hawkins. He, undoubtedly, expected no less from the man who was to replace him in

a month's time. Patrick was going to have to make a discovery in this case that no one else was able to pick up on. Then he would truly impress Jonathan Hawkins.

A man then knocked on the den door. He turned out to be the onsite psychologist, and informed the detectives that Samantha Melina—the young girl who had found the Ramsey's bodies earlier that morning—had been checked out by both medics and himself, and was ready to be questioned.

Hawkins thanked the psychologist. He told the forensics team to make sure they photographed the hands, as if they were inept at the job they were trained to do. The three detectives then left the room to go handle another fragile part of their investigation.

"Okay, here's the game plan," Hawkins said once they were halfway down the driveway; taking his natural role as leader. "The replacement over here will talk to the girl. Carl, you and I will talk to neighbors.

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Detective Murphy agreed. Patrick doubted Detective Murphy ever questioned his partner's decisions. He didn't think there were many who did.

"You going to be okay doing this on your own, kid?"

"Yeah, I should be okay."

Patrick hoped that was at least half true. He had never questioned someone before, nor had he ever observed an interrogation, unless what he saw on *Law & Order* and *Bones* counted towards anything, but he doubted that.

"I have a feeling that you'll do fine," Hawkins said. He gave Patrick one last look up and down; making sure he was adequate enough to handle such a task. He seemed confident in his decision. "Most newbies are barely competent at questioning—they're all nervous and shit—but I'm willing to give you a try to see what you've got."

"Thank you, detective."

"Well, good luck."

With that being said, Hawkins and Murphy took off down the driveway.

Patrick gave himself a few moments to prepare. He took a deep breath, and let it out. It helped calm his nerves a little. He then headed down the driveway towards the ambulance.

Samantha Melina sat at the rear of the ambulance. On one side of her stood a medic, the other a police officer. They both seemed pretty bored, being that all the action was going on inside, and *their* job was to babysit a teenage girl. Samantha, herself, was staring down at the cracks in the Ramsey's driveway. Her face was void of emotion; a lot like Patrick's face had looked like minutes after he had awoken from his nightmare earlier that morning. Only difference was that Samantha actually was in a state of shock.

The freshly turned seventeen year old now looked twice her age. Patrick guessed that she hadn't looked so aged before seeing two human beings propped up in the sitting position on a couch drenched through with blood; their skin no longer attached to their bodies. She wore glasses and her mess of frizzy hair was pulled back with a hair tie. Sitting there, not weighing an ounce over a hundred and five pounds, she looked so fragile; as if made of porcelain.

If this girl wasn't already delicate enough..., Patrick thought as he approached to introduce himself.

"Samantha," he said in the most comforting, not intimidating voice he could muster. "My name is Detective Sullivan. I just need to ask you a few questions. Is that okay?"

Samantha gave no answer. She hadn't even flinched. She gave zero indication that she was even aware there was a stranger standing in front of her; attempting to talk with her. She simply continued to stare down at the cement driveway. He slowly took two steps towards her and

repeated her name; only this time, he put his hand on her shoulder to get her attention.

And get her attention, he did.

At the exact moment of contact, Samantha jumped like a skittish cat.

“I’m sorry,” Patrick said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I was just trying to get your attention, Samantha. I’m Detective Sullivan. I’m a police officer... with the homicide department.”

She just stared at him, like she was questioning whether or not she should believe the man standing in front of her. Her eyes were red and wet. She was on the verge of tears. Patrick was shocked that the little start he had given her hadn’t sent her right over the edge.

“Would it be okay if I asked you a few questions?”

After some more silence, he began to believe that getting this poor girl to talk right then would be impossible. She was in such shock and so fragile, Patrick was almost certain she might never speak again. Still, he would try once more, because he had no other choice. He needed the details of that traumatizing morning while they were still fresh in her mind. He had to grab hold of them before Samantha Melina could bury them deep in her subconscious, because one of those details—even the smallest, seemingly insignificant—might be the key to finding the murderous beast who did all this. So he would push one more time. Not for himself, and not to prove his competency to Detectives Hawkins or Murphy. He would push this girl, who didn’t deserve to be after all she had seen, because he needed to find justice for the Ramsey’s, who now sat on a couch in the house behind him; lifeless.

“Samantha, I know it’s hard to talk about this right now, but it is very important that you at least try. I really need you to be strong, and do this for—“

“You shouldn’t worry yourself so much over boys, Samantha,” she finally said in what was barely a whisper.

“Excuse me?”

The one line might be the only thing he’d get out of her, and it was about as useful as her saying nothing at all.

“That was the last thing he ever said to me—Mr. Ramsey,” she explained. “He told me not to worry so much about boys. That I was too young and too pretty to let myself fret over such silly things.” She then paused; recollecting her last moments with Arthur Ramsey while he was alive. “Mr. Ramsey was always really nice like that... Positive, you know? He was always calling me pretty—not in a creepy old guy kind of way, but the way that made you feel good about yourself. He was so genuine and honest. Everyone liked him so much.”

“Samantha, I know talking about this morning is going to be really hard, but you have to try. The longer we wait, the more prone you are to forget things... things that might be important to finding the person who did this.”

“I understand. I’m okay to talk... I think.”

“Thank you, Samantha. Just take your time, okay? I don’t want to make this any harder for you than it has to be. If you feel like you can’t talk anymore, and you have to stop, you just tell me and we will take a break. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Now that he had finally gotten her to a point where she was willing to try and talk about what she saw, Patrick realized that he had not the slightest idea of what to ask young Samantha Melina first. Yes, he had about two dozen questions running through his head, but he just had no idea which ones to deem important enough to cover first.

And not to mention safe enough.

Questioning Samantha Melina was as delicate as disarming a bomb. You snip one wrong wire, and it detonates. He was lucky enough to have been able to get her to this point, and at any moment she could revert right back to step one. This was all foreign territory to Patrick, and he was in it alone. Still, Hawkins deemed him

competent enough to get through this on his own. Not to mention there was the Ramsey's to think about. One by one, he ciphered through the different questions he had; seeing which ones he could hold off on asking. After a quick deliberation, he decided to go with the simplest, yet one of the most important questions.

“Samantha, what were you doing here at the Ramsey's residence this morning?”

Arthur Ramsey was a usual at the deli Samantha Melina worked at, she explained in a voice desperately trying to remain calm. She had worked there since she was fifteen, and every day, just after six in the morning, Arthur Ramsey would come in, and buy himself a large coffee and an issue of Newsday.

“I would always ask him why he didn't just make his coffee at home, or get the paper delivered,” she reminisced with a small smile on her face. “He would always say something along the lines of he enjoyed the little human contact he got each day, or that a walk down the block probably did someone his age some good.”

The weak dam that held back the waterworks almost burst as Samantha remembered the kind old man that she saw every day. Miraculously, she managed to regain some resemblance of composure instead of breaking down.

“When was the last time Mr. Ramsey had come into your job, Samantha?” Patrick was aware that his first question had yet to be answered, but he followed his gut and asked another; knowing they'd be able to come full circle back to his original inquiry.

“Friday morning.” She explained that she had been distraught about boyfriend issues that entire week, and the last day she had seen Arthur Ramsey alive was the day he told her that she was too pretty to be worrying so much. “I acted like my stupid fight with my boyfriend was the worst thing in the world. Meanwhile, it doesn't even compare to

what happened to Mr. Ramsey and his poor wife. I feel like such a childish idiot.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over that, Samantha. We all have our own problems.”

“I guess.”

“You say he was there every morning, every day, yet the last time you saw him was on Friday. That was two days ago.”

“Yeah, he didn’t come in either yesterday or Saturday.”

“Did anyone point out that he hadn’t been in? He was a regular customer, so his absence must have stuck out.”

Everyone working at the deli had taken notice to Arthur Ramsey’s absence that weekend. This wasn’t the first time this had happened though, Samantha explained to Patrick.

“Mrs. Ramsey has—had—a heart condition, and times when she felt weak, he stayed home with her to watch over her, instead of coming in. He really loved her. He carried a picture of her in his wallet. He loved to show it off. Anyways, when he didn’t show up Saturday or Sunday, we figured that was likely why. That’s the reason I came here this morning.”

Samantha’s boss had called her that morning, and asked if she could come in for a couple of minutes to bring a bag he had put together for the Ramsey’s over to their house. It was his little way of showing his appreciation for their continuous business over the years. With the promise of a few extra bucks for a few minutes of work, Samantha said okay. This explained the bag of groceries on the kitchen table.

The question Patrick had to ask next was one he didn’t want to. He could piece together the sequence of events that followed Samantha Melina’s arrival at the Ramsey’s house that morning, but he still had to ask her to relive it. He had no doubt that this would be the hardest part for the frail girl, and there was a chance he might lose her after she had come along so far.

Still he asked, and Samantha explained.

When she arrived at the Ramsey's home, she knocked on the back door, and got no answer. After a few tries with no response, she opened the door and went inside; calling Arthur Ramsey's name.

She nearly broke down a few times as she spoke, and had to take small breaks to regain herself. She spoke of the smell, and how it made her want to throw up. Patrick wondered if the smell of death would follow Samantha around for the rest of her life, like it did his. She placed the bag on the kitchen table, and made her way through the house. Hysterics hadn't yet come, but tears began to stream down her face as she began to remember what she had seen when she pushed that den door open.

"The smell was so strong that I wanted to turn around and leave, but I opened the door, anyway. When I did, I saw them there; looking the way they did, I couldn't take it. I ran as fast as I could from the house." She had remained calm as long as she could, but now she was full blown crying; forcing her words out. "I collapsed in the grass in the backyard, and vomited. I waited there... I couldn't move. I just stared at the puddle I had made. Then I forced myself to call the police."

"Thank you, Samantha." Right now, that was all Patrick needed to know, and he had zero intentions of making this poor girl go through more than she had to. "You've been a tremendous help."

"Really?"

"Absolutely, Samantha. You were great."

Patrick saw Detectives Hawkins and Murphy coming back up the driveway. He thanked Samantha for all her help, and excused himself.

"It's not fair," she said as Patrick was walking away.

"Excuse me?" he asked; turning back to the girl.

“It’s not fair that they had to die. I mean, like the way they did. Everybody dies, but no one should ever have to die like that.”

“I know, Samantha.”

He turned his attention to Hawkins and Murphy, who were now standing next to him, and got them up to speed with everything Samantha Melina had told him.

“Poor kid,” Hawkins said in a low voice when Patrick had finished. “No girl should have to see that. I hope she’s able to get over it.”

“Me, too,” Patrick said; although he doubted she would. He knew from firsthand experience that it was the bad things in your life that had a tendency to not go away.

“How’d you make out, Carl?” Hawkins asked Murphy.

“Not so good.”

Detective Murphy told his two partners that the house next door was rented out by a few college students. Three out five were home when he went over, and none of them had much to say. The relationship they had with the victims was a simple one. It consisted of seeing them in passing, and exchanged pleasantries. None of them had noticed the victims missing, nor did they hear anything over the weekend coming from the Ramsey house that would merit them calling the police.

“Okay, that’s good, I guess. Doesn’t really help us much, but who knows,” Hawkins said at the conclusion of the update.

“How’d you make out, Ace?” Murphy asked.

“Not much better.” Hawkins told them. “No one was home.”

“That’s because Mr. and Mrs. McKensy live there...”

All three detectives turned towards Samantha Melina, who was staring at them.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” Hawkins asked.

“Mister and Misses McKensy live next door. Mr. McKensy always comes in to the deli with Mr. Ramsey.

They're all like best friends. They've probably lived next door to each other longer than I have even been alive."

"Mr. McKensy didn't mention anything to you, or anyone you work with, about why Mister Ramsey wasn't around?" Hawkins asked. "Or, if the two always go to the deli together, then how come this McKensy didn't find the bodies?"

The latter question was likely meant to be directed at Patrick and Murphy, but Hawkins' gazed stayed remained on Samantha.

"Because the McKensy's always fly to Georgia to visit their children this time each year. They haven't been home."

That response hit Patrick like a ton of bricks. Actually, it felt more like an entire building collapsing on top of him. This new information changed everything. As if the crime itself wasn't bad enough, this made it worse.

He looked to Hawkins, who bore an expression on his face that told him, like two people who answer a question in unison, they were thinking the exact same thought.

It was Patrick who spoke, and said exactly what they were all thinking

"He knew..."

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