



Falcon's Bend Case Files, Volume I (The Early Cases)

Excerpts

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Bugs

"Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat but ye have not enough... and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put into a bag with holes."

~from Haggai 1:6, *Holy Bible* (King James Version)

The coffee station in the center of the Falcon's Bend Police Department was surrounded by cops when Pete Shasta left his office reluctantly at nearly five p.m. He'd come in early today—his day off. Anything to avoid having to face his wife the morning after. His back was stiff from another night on the couch. Hiding

out in his office all day hadn't done it any good. He'd tried calling Donna in the early afternoon—not even sure himself why, exactly—but he'd been almost relieved when there'd been no answer. What could he say that he hadn't already said a million times and she hadn't already twisted into something else entirely, just as many times?

"What the hell you doin' here on a Saturday, boss man?" Patrol Sergeant Jeff Chopp demanded while the group parted to allow Pete access to the coffeepot.

"Overachiever," Dennis Lambert teased.

Pete had been hired as an investigator—the only one at the moment—only six months earlier. In that time, he'd spent more hours in his cramped little office at the station than in his own home. Another one of Donna's frequent complaints.

Pete's father, a life-time patrol officer, was looking at him, and Pete didn't have to face him to know he was worried. He understood Pete's personal situation only too well. Amazing how a person could be scarred by something so deeply in childhood only to make the same damn mistakes. His parents' marriage had been a nightmare Pete had wanted to escape any way he could. He couldn't say his own marriage was any different.

From the room off to the left, dispatch center, a phone rang. Most of them turned that way.

"How long you been holed up in that office?" Chopp continued in on Pete a second later. They'd know what the call was about soon enough.

Pete grimaced at the thick, burnt-smelling coffee he sipped. "I had some cases," was all he said. The sludge-for-coffee—and Pete's reason for holing up—just made his hollow, acidic stomach feel worse. He wondered if he had an ulcer. Twenty-two years old and already he was stressed to the point of an ulcer.

Tammy Allan came out of Dispatch. "We've got a dead body," she said, and everyone immediately forgot Pete's personal problems.

Falcon's Bend was a small town in west-central Wisconsin. Most deaths were by natural causes, and that was everyone's assumption for this one.

"Tom Kreager called it in. He's the manager of the wastewater treatment plant. One of his workers fell in an oxidation ditch. He's dead."

"He say who it was?" Lambert demanded, his expression agitated. "My cousin Shawn works there."

"It's Bill Lexmark. You better get out there right away."

"Did Tom seem to think it was an accident?"

Tammy nodded. "Yeah, he seemed to think so."

"Okay. Just in case, I want you to call DCI in Madison and put 'em on the alert, Chopp. We might need 'em." While Bill's death probably was an accident, the Department of Criminal Investigations was three hours away. If they had a murder on their hands, Pete wanted a unit ready to dispatch here on the double. "And call Cora. Tell her to meet us out there."

Cora Kingsley was the county corner.

"Dad, Lambert, you'll come out with me and Chopp."

* * * *

The Falcon's Bend Wastewater Treatment Plant was situated toward the far north side of town on a large lot with a long, dusty, snake-like road leading up to it. The plant was completely surrounded by a chain-link fence with barbed wire topping it.

They had quite a few calls about kids trying to break into the gate, vandalizing, and littering the area throughout any given year, but especially in the summer. Because of the area, cloistered away from the general population the way it was, the plant was an ideal place for kids to come out, drink, and raise hell.

The gate stood open. In front of the closest building, there were two trucks parked. One of them had the plant logo on the door. The other was a beat-up old Ford.

A short, stocky older guy was leaning against the company truck. He wore a three-piece suit and shiny black shoes, which were marred with brown splatters. He straightened as they approached.

"Tom Kreager, manager of the plant," Chopp told him from the passenger's side of the unmarked investigative car Pete had

been given when he was hired. "Can't say I've ever seen him dressed up, so I could be wrong."

Pete grinned. He'd met the guy around town, though he didn't know him well.

Tom explained that he'd been at a wedding reception and had planned to do a quick run-through here before heading back to the party. Pete re-introduced himself and the rest of his men while Tom nodded. Hands were shaken all around.

"Where is he?" Pete asked.

"Back ditch. I don't know anything about procedure, but if I could've gotten him out myself, I would've. Tried but I couldn't do it myself, damn it. Seein' him in there...hell, it ain't right. Well, you'll understand when you see." Pete figured Tom's attempts to get his employee out had resulted in the brown splatters on his suit and shoes.

The little Pete knew about wastewater treatment plants had mostly come from the times he'd been out here on teenage trouble-makers. He couldn't help noticing the place seemed to have fallen into disrepair this time. The other times he'd been here, the extensive lawn that covered five acres had been mowed at least. Now the grass was overgrown.

As he followed Tom, he noted the half-dozen pole sheds and round white domes, and near the back of the property, a silo-like tank and an open pole shed with concrete walls four feet high. Inside it were piles of what looked like manure.

"You usually work weekends?" Pete asked as they passed a particularly smelly area.

Tom turned back to him. "Me and my three employees alternate weekends. Not much to do on the weekends unless something's wrong, as you can imagine. But on our weekend to work, we're on call from Friday night to Monday morning. Then we work about an hour or two on Saturday and Sunday when it's our turn."

"So it was your weekend to work."

"Yeah, exactly," Tom said. "I'm in later today than I usually would be. My wife's nephew got married today. I couldn't believe it when I drove up to the plant and found the gate unlocked,

standing wide open. Saw Bill's truck and wondered if he forgot it was my weekend to work. I went into the control building—"

"Control building?"

Tom stopped to point back the way they'd come. "When you came in. Building you parked in front of. That's the office and the lab. Control building."

"Okay. Go on."

"My office was a mess. Somebody went through my desk drawers. Pulled everything out. Even broke into the locked drawer where I keep the petty cash box."

"Was the cash taken?"

Tom nodded. "Yeah. All of it. I like to keep a hundred or two in cash on hand, but luckily I just got a bunch of office supplies Friday morning so there was less than twenty bucks in the box. I planned to replenish it Monday. I knew I better find Bill and figure out what the hell was going on here. I checked the headwork's building, front ditch and clarifier, the UV building, then the back clarifier and ditch."

"And that's where you found him?"

"Yeah, exactly. I still can't believe it. The aerators cut him to ribbons."

They entered one of the enormous pole sheds. On each side of the building was an over-sized door. All four of them were open.

"You usually leave the doors open?" Pete asked.

"In the summer, yeah."

Though the doors were all open and the lights were on in the building, it was dark, and Pete's eyes took a minute to adjust to it. Beneath his feet, the ground was covered with small tan rocks. He could hear motors running from near the center of the building. The smell was strange—musty, but not pungent like before.

The bulk of the center of the building was taken up by what he supposed was the oxidation ditch. It was an oval shape with concrete walls four feet high. In the middle of it on each side were two walkway platforms made of green fiberglass grating, and two huge domes that looked like oversized cans resting on

their sides. Before he had a chance to ask, Tom spoke. "Those are the aerators. They're what did the most damage."

Pete followed Tom up to the walkways. The sound of the motors was louder, and he thought instinctively, *This ain't gonna be pretty.*

Broken Wings

*"Soon as she was gone from me
A traveller came by
Silently invisibly
[He took her with a sigh]"
~William Blake*

*"I touched a broken girl and knew that marble bled."
~"Oak and Olive" by James Elroy Flecker*

Chapter One

"I'm surprised there is a motel in a stupid town this small."

Keith Pierce looked at his daughter. She'd pulled off her jacket and was sitting on the edge of the bed looking around the cheap motel in disgust. As if any of the foster homes she'd been in most of her sixteen-year life had been much better. But Keith knew that look. She wasn't thinking about their accommodations for the night. Something else was worrying her. He'd known her for all of two months, and he surprised himself with this revelation.

Quinn had the face of an angel...and the tongue of a viper. She'd spent many years of her life searching for him when the system hadn't been able to locate him and so had given up. She'd found a listing of Keith Pierces around the country and called every one of them. Keith would never forget that call, nor opening his door in the dead of the night to find her there claiming she was his daughter. If she hadn't said the words she had in explanation, he would have assumed she was insane.

After so many years of being passed from hand to hand, Quinn had become jaded and untrusting—traits that frequently translated into impatience, discontent, and resentment. The glimpses Keith saw of her vulnerability had been the only things that kept him from sending her back to the foster home she'd run away from to find him...at least he told himself that.

"What's up, kid?" he asked quietly, stopping with his boot half off to face her once more.

She'd dyed her long straight hair a strange combination of strawberry and white, but it suited her almost as much as her evasive expression did. Keith watched her lie on her stomach across the other bed nearest the door. "When will we get there tomorrow?"

"Early. It's only an hour from here." They'd stopped for the night when she'd complained his motorcycle was unbearably uncomfortable. He wondered now if she'd wanted to stop for more reason than that. Their decision to come had been spur of the moment earlier this afternoon. He'd called his boss, ready to lose his job if need be, but was surprised when he'd been granted an indefinite leave of absence; and he'd called his cousin Jen to tell her to expect them soon.

"So you grew up in Falcon's Bend?" Quinn asked like she couldn't care less.

Keith shook his head. "Not exactly." He finished removing his boots. When he glanced at her again, she'd pulled a cigarette out of the pack in his leather jacket. He'd smoked since he was twelve years old—what right did he have to forbid her?

"I've got relatives in Falcon's Bend, so I spent a lot of time there. We were close." He leaned forward and plucked the cigarette out of her mouth just before she lit it. She'd gotten used to him doing it, and she didn't waste a glare on him now.

"What relatives?"

"A cousin. Jennifer. And her brother. Scott moved to Seattle though. Jen's quite a bit younger than me. She's only twenty-five. She was born when Scott and I were thirteen. She started tagging along with us when she was just a toddler, and we didn't mind most of the time," he told her, tossing the cigarette on the shabby nightstand. He wasn't even sure why he kept the smokes

in his jacket anymore. He'd all but quit since he'd gotten temporary custody of Quinn.

"And my mom told you she grew up in Falcon's Bend during your one-night stand?"

Keith frowned and she looked away. She'd asked him a million questions the first night she'd arrived and every day since, yet this one area made them both uncomfortable for some reason. He'd told her the truth—a truth he'd never been ashamed of, and wasn't exactly now.

"It was four nights," he corrected. As she well knew. He'd met Kat—Katerina Fulton—his first day at an annual concert event that took place in mid-July in west-central Wisconsin. That night, she'd been in the tent he'd been camped out in. Everything between them had happened fast. Maybe too fast, but he'd never regretted his first and only encounter with something bordering on love. "And, yeah, she told me she grew up in Falcon's Bend."

"And you never met her when you were hanging out with your cousins in Falcon's Bend?"

Keith shook his head. Falcon's Bend was a small town, but it had over 8000 citizens.

"You think she'll be there, Keith?" Quinn asked, and Keith saw the core of her fears in her dark eyes. She had Kat's eyes. For just that reason, Keith couldn't have turned her away when she'd landed unceremoniously on his doorstep claiming he was her father and she was his long-lost daughter.

Keith had never known Kat was pregnant. She'd disappeared the last day of the event, and he hadn't been surprised by her abrupt departure. Based on what was known, Kat had given birth to Quinn eight months later. Despite coming early, Quinn had been strong and healthy. And Kat had abandoned her newborn daughter inside a church in New York City with a short note that told her daughter's name, Keith's full name and paternity, and her own first name. A lock of hair that had proved to belong to Kat had been attached to the note. None of that made sense.

Quinn was worried her mother had abandoned her because she hadn't wanted her, and here the two of them were, determined to find her and figure out exactly what'd happened all those years ago. Before Keith accepted permanent custody of his

daughter, he wanted to talk to Kat. He wanted to know the truth. Almost seventeen years ago, she'd told him she was going home to her brother in Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin, a place Keith well knew. What had happened after that point?

"I don't know, kid. I hope so, but I can't make you any promises."

She didn't move away from him when he mussed up her hair consolingly. He didn't know her well enough to hug her—he wasn't even sure she'd let him. But he knew something had shifted in her when he'd gone out of his way to straighten out the situation with her foster parents. He'd established beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was his daughter. His efforts had meant something to him.

She'd changed him, too, in ways he could never have imagined before her appearance. He'd spent a selfish life, living for the moment and for his own gratification. He'd lived without regrets. Going on as the careless rogue had suddenly seemed wrong to him. He had a daughter. He had a responsibility to more than his own hide.

Quinn smiled at him, that playful grin that made him think of Kat until his heart felt enchained by it. "I still can't believe you let me cut your hair."

Keith chuckled. "I can't believe I did either."

His long hair had been his pride and joy most of his life. Quinn had insisted long hair on men was long gone. Her lecturing and begging had finally prevailed. He'd let her cut his hair last night. His whole head felt different.

"Now all we have to do is get rid of that scruffy beard."

"Scruffy? I'll have you know women have swooned over this face."

"Imagine what they'd do if they could actually see it," Quinn said, her voice like silk. "Do you have a razor?"

"Never touch the evil things."

"We'll get some tomorrow. I'll give you a proper shave."

"Let you put a razor to my neck?"

Quinn rolled her eyes. "If I wanted you dead, I would have bumped you off the night you let me in."

He thought about asking her why she hadn't but instead pulled his shirt over his head. She aimed the remote at the TV, quickly found a music channel, and punched the volume up. A minute later, though, she asked, "So what's your cousin Jennifer like? Is she married?"

"Yeah. She married Warren Jensen—they started dating when they were fourteen. We knew they'd get married right out of high school, and they did. They—and Scott—were my best friends. I went to Falcon's Bend every chance I got." He'd grown up less than ten miles from Falcon's Bend in another dinky town in west-central Wisconsin.

"What do they do?"

"She owns a garage. She's a hell of a mechanic. I bet she'd give you a job for the summer. Keep you out of trouble." Keith had warned his boss he might be gone most of the summer. He had a good feeling it'd take at least that long to find out what'd happened to Katerina seventeen years ago.

"I guess it'll be something to do in a boring town. What about her husband?"

"Warren's a cop for the local police department."

"Geez, Keith, you're gonna have me in a detention center in no time!" She groaned.

Her life of crime had already been well established. Part of the reason she'd been passed around so often was her penchant for finding trouble and following it home.

"Keep outta trouble, kid, and maybe we can find a way to stay together."

She glanced at him, a sober look on her face before she turned back to the fuzzy television screen. He'd been just as wild as she was as a teenager. She'd have to learn her lessons the hard way, the way he always had. Ironically, she was the one who'd taught him that lesson. What goes around comes around, one way or another. And once accountability showed up at your door, there was no way to duck out the back way. It was there to stay.

Chapter Two

She trusted her instincts. Her entire life had been based on following what felt right to her. Tonight was no exception. When she'd seen the motorcycle parked in front of the rundown motel, her gut had told her it was a good place to stop for the night. She'd been on the road since four a.m. She was beat.

After setting her black helmet on the nightstand, she threw her duffel bag containing everything she owned on the bed. She stopped long enough to count her money. Her gut instinct didn't agree now about stopping there—she was down to less than five bucks, which would be just enough to put some gas in her motorcycle to get to Falcon's Bend in the morning. Breakfast would be whatever she could scrounge. If nothing, she'd go hungry. But that was the story of her life. A person who trusted the call of the wind either lived like a peasant or a king—never anything in between.

From next door, she could hear the TV and wondered to herself if the occupants were deaf or the walls were paper-thin. After kicking off her boots, she stripped down to a short tank top and panties before collapsing on the bed. Impossibly, the bed smelled worse than she did, but she was too tired to care. The music next door was too loud for her to feel any peace that might allow her to drop off to sleep. She tried covering her head with the pillow, willing the noise to disappear, but it didn't. If she didn't ask them to turn it down, she'd never get any sleep.

Dragging herself from the bed, she didn't bother detouring for anything. She banged on the door on the left side of hers. She'd be lucky if she could be heard over the blaring music.

She was about to bang again two seconds later when the door opened a crack, then wider. An extremely tall guy about her age stood in only not-tight, not-loose jeans that rode his slender hips like they'd been designed especially for him.

He didn't bother hiding his gaze, which moved over her face, down every inch of her nearly nude body, and then back up to her face. He had the nerve to grin when he'd finished his

thorough inventory. Much as she would have liked to deny it herself, she liked not only the looks of him, but the way he looked at her.

She glared at him. "I'd be willin' to bet you're disturbin' the peace, honey. Mind turnin' it down, or preferably *off*? The walls are paper-thin. I could hear you breathin' if the music wasn't so loud."

Her words were as futile as a whisper. His deep blue eyes were all over her again, lingering on the swell of her breasts, her tight stomach, and her legs. Yet he managed in a drawl, "Anything you say, sugar." His gaze returned to hers just before he turned and told the kid on the bed nearest the door to turn it down. The girl glanced back at them. She had the same face shape and mouth as this guy. They had to be related. The girl's gaze made the same trip her old man's did over her, then she did as she was told with a mumbled apology. The world was thankfully plunged into blissful silence.

The guy turned back to her, and his grin was in place. "What can I say? I'd love to hear you breathe," he said, as though he'd obeyed her request for just this reason.

If she wasn't so tired, she'd give him points for originality. She stepped closer to him, taking several huge breaths and letting them out with a flourish. "What can I say?" she murmured when she backed off. "I'd hate to keep you from sleep tonight, honey."

She started back to her room without further ado, but his voice called her back. He'd stepped out of his room. "Hey, you didn't tell me your name, sugar. I won't be able to sleep if I don't know."

For a minute, she looked him over the way he'd looked her over. There was nothing not to like. "My friends call me Cyn," she told him softly. "And I'll sleep just fine not knowin' your name."

She heard his soft chuckle before she slipped inside her room and closed the door.

Obsessions

"What have I to do on this earth! I have the choice to suffer or to enjoy.

Where will suffering lead me? To nothing. But I shall have suffered.

Where will enjoyment lead me? To nothing. But I shall have enjoyed.

My choice is made... Beyond the tomb are only equal nothings."
~from *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo

"...for what is not connected with her to me? and what does not recall her?

I cannot look down at this floor but her features are shaped on the flags!

In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses

in every object, by day I am surrounded by her image!"
~from *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë

Chapter One

December 1, 11:31 p.m.

"What'd you think New York would be, Van Gogh?" Pete Shasta asked his best friend long distance.

Danny Vincent grunted. "Thought I'd be a famous artist by now, actually."

Danny had set off for the Big Apple when he was only eighteen with the intention of becoming an artist. Within four months, he'd realized he didn't have the ambition to starve and had instead followed the career path the two of them had envisioned as kids. Seven years had gone by since the art dream faded in the face of reality and Danny had been made a detective on the NYPD. Pete was the only detective in the dot-on-the-map town, Falcon's Bend, Wisconsin, where he'd been born and planned to die.

"So come home," Pete encouraged, trying to not influence his friend with what he'd like to see happen. "City board's talking about gettin' me a partner."

"Yeah? Falcon's Bend turning into a cesspool of crime now?"

Pete laughed. Fortunately things hadn't gotten that bad, but he'd often thought a partner would lighten his load. And Danny'd be his first choice.

Leaning back on the sofa, his head tilted against the cushions with the cordless phone loose at his ear, Pete rubbed his eyes. He'd gotten off work a few hours ago, come home, eaten, and taken a shower. But he wasn't much for sleep lately. He just didn't want to admit to himself why he'd been having trouble sleeping.

"You seein' anybody, Van Gogh?"

"Three, actually. Nothing serious."

That was Danny. Why limit himself to one woman when he could have three times as many?

"What about you?"

Pete's wife had walked out on him four years ago. He hadn't had a date since. Most days he didn't mind. No way was he interested in ripping open the scars Donna'd given him. He could live with the loneliness. Most days.

"Workin' too much."

"You say that too much. She isn't worth this. And not all women are like her. Never knew what you saw in her in the first place."

Pete seriously didn't want to talk about it, and Danny let him off the hook easily at his excuse that he needed to get some shut-eye. After disconnecting and pushing to his feet, Pete went into the bathroom and looked at himself critically in the mirror: twenty-six years old, already divorced, and his life was his work.

He needed a haircut, he decided. When he neglected that, the thick strands tended to turn to frizzy, tight curls. He'd do it tomorrow, before the horror happened. Not that he'd meet anybody before then anyway.

The phone rang, and Pete's head swung toward the sound. He didn't have to wonder who it was. Other than Jeff Chopp, who'd

been the patrol officer on the FBPD pretty much forever, Pete worked more over-time than anyone else in the department.

Striding through his small apartment, he picked the cordless up from the coffee table. "Shasta."

"Boss man," Chopp greeted him. "We got a kidnapping. Newborn baby's missin' from the maternity ward. I've already got the search goin', full steam."

Baby missing. In Pete's four years of being a detective, he hadn't had a case of a newborn being taken from the hospital. It was a countdown case with no time to lose.

"I'll be there in ten."

Chapter Two

December 1, 11:46 p.m.

Snow came down in fat, wet flakes that messed up his windshield something awful, not to mention the roads. Plows wouldn't be out until at least four a.m. either.

The hospital parking lot was filled with cop cars and lights. Pete located Chopp's patrol car and parked close to it. Donning large-frame square glasses covered with snowflakes, Chopp appeared as soon as Pete emerged from his car. "Hospital's being searched. We've put teams at all exits out of the city. APB's are out to every law enforcement agency, airport, and other means of travel in the state. So far, no sign of the baby."

Pete nodded. "Good. We're gonna need witnesses."

"Already on it, boss. Another thing: The mother planned to adopt the missing baby, so we're doin' a background on the couple that planned to adopt while we pay 'em a visit. We'll check them out right away. Night supervisor in the maternity ward's waitin' to talk to you."

Navigating his way through the maze of corridors, Pete finally found the maternity ward. He deliberately avoided the front desk and took a walk around the entire ward, familiarizing himself with the layout of the delivery rooms across from surgery and the new mother rooms on a separate end. A woman was screaming in a

birth room while a nurse and doctor spoke calmly to her. A huge circular desk stood at the center of the ward, enclosing two separate rooms almost completely inside it. The room nearest the new mother section had a huge window of glass, and he recognized it as the nursery. He didn't see any babies in it at the moment, but figured they must be with the mothers.

An older woman behind the receptionist desk stood at his approach. She was tall, grandmotherly, and very upset. Her hands were shaking when she removed her glasses to dab at her eyes.

"I'm Lieutenant Pete Shasta. Are you the supervisor of this ward?"

"Meg Harris, Lieutenant. Nothing like this has ever happened here before," she moaned.

Pete nodded acceptingly. "Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

Nodding, she moved around the dusty pink receptionist desk covered with baskets of flowers, balloons, and bears. She led him down the hall to a staff break room. After they both sat down, Pete pulled out a pen and small pad of paper. "Who's on duty tonight?"

"I am, of course. Andrea Millicent and Shandi Singh are the nurses on duty tonight with me. Dr. Etheridge is the doctor on call."

"What about a janitor?"

"Herb Bacon. He was in at eight."

"Is everyone on duty still here?"

Meg shook her gray head. Her tight curls didn't move even a fraction. "Herb's shift ends at eleven."

"Did you see him leave?"

Meg removed her glasses to wipe her still streaming eyes again. "No. It's been a very busy night. But you can look at his time card to see when he punched out. Andrea, Shandi, and I have been here since seven."

"I'm gonna need personnel files for all staff who've been on duty today, as well as their schedules for the day, as soon as we've finished here."

"I'll get them right away."

"Tell me about the baby."

Smiling sadly, Meg said in a gushy, grandmotherly way, "He was born this morning at 9:30—healthy boy at seven pounds. Julie Hammond is the mother. She's nineteen, unmarried. She'd planned to give the baby up for adoption. The prospective parents were actually the ones who brought her in, and the adoption case worker was here early, too. Julie changed her mind about giving her baby up at the last minute though. It happens sometimes, as you might expect. She named him Tyler Franklin."

"What adoption agency was handling the adoption?"

"Liace, out of Eau Claire. You can get the address and phone number from the phone book over there. Lisa Mercer is the name of the case worker. Lovely young woman."

Pete wrote it all down, nodding. "How many babies were in the nursery with Tyler?"

"None, actually. I had five women come in in labor after I came on shift, in addition to the two who were here earlier. Julie had Tyler very quickly, especially for a first birth. The other woman who came in this morning is delivering right now. The five that came in later are all in various stages of labor, but Tyler has been the only baby in the nursery today."

"Is there a nurse in the nursery at all times?"

Meg crushed her sopping tissue between her hands, shaking her head in emotional agony. "No. But we always know if something happens. We check them often, of course. We're required to check them once per hour, but we always do it much more than that. As I said, it's been extremely busy tonight with all these back-to-back labors. Shandi went to check the baby at 10:30—I saw her notation on Tyler's chart. Besides, all babies and mothers born here have matching security bracelets. The babies can't be taken out of the ward without having one of us verify that the baby's bracelet matches the mother's. We looked for the bracelet in case someone snipped it off the baby, but we haven't been able to find it. Your men are looking for it, too."

"But anybody could've taken the baby, whether or not they removed the security bracelet, when no one else was around?"
Pete confirmed.

Meg nodded, looking tormented about the fact. "But most people wouldn't do that."

"When did you notice the baby was missing?"

"I didn't. Andrea did. She noticed at around 11:30. We searched the ward, then we called the police right away. This has never happened here before, especially not on my shift."

Pete ignored her repeated appeal for a pardon. The baby had been missing almost an hour before anyone noticed. As Shandi was the last one who saw the baby, he'd interview her next.

"Did any of the nurses go off-duty tonight—for a break or any other reasons?"

"I honestly don't think any of us had time for a break. I know I didn't. You'll have to ask the girls. I saw them often, but I have no reason to keep track of them. They both do their jobs efficiently, without needing someone to keep tabs on them."

Pete nodded. "I think that's all for now. I'd appreciate if you'd call down for the personnel files immediately. I'll need those for the current nurses on duty and the doctor on duty first, so try to get those to me right away, if you can."

He watched Meg leave the room, wondering about the bracelets. He'd never had children and had never heard of the security bracelet. It sounded like an excellent policy...but it clearly hadn't been enough. As Meg had said, a lot of people outside of hospital staff could have easily sneaked into the nursery when no one was behind the reception desk and taken the baby. Even if they snipped the bracelet off within the hospital, it didn't mean they'd find it. The kidnapper could have put it in a purse or pocket to hide it until they could dispose of it safely.

Pete got up and went to the phone book, searching and quickly finding the contact information he needed for the Liace Adoption Agency in Eau Claire. Then, walking over to the window that overlooked another side of the hospital, he called down to Chopp with his cell phone to get a progress report. Chopp's answer that they were still working told him they hadn't gotten any leads yet. Pete asked him about the security bracelet thing, and Chopp said he already had the men on the lookout for it. They might get some clues from it if the kidnapper ditched it.

This was a hell of a night to kidnap a baby. The snow still fell. But he had to hope the bad weather slowed the snatcher down.

Blind Revenge

*"All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream."
~from "A Dream within a Dream" by Edgar Allan Poe*

*"Shall I believe that unsubstantial Death is amorous,
and that the lean abhorred monster keeps thee here in dark to be
his paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with these,
and never from this palace of dim night depart again:
here, here will I remain with worms that are thy chambermaids;
O! here will I set up my everlasting rest, and shake the yoke of
inauspicious stars from this world-wearied flesh.—Eyes, look your
last!"
~from Romeo and Juliet by Shakespeare*

Prologue

"Lindsay," her father called after her as she flew out his office door.

She didn't want to hear his explanations. Nothing could justify what he'd done. But even believing the thought, she knew her father always did what was best for those around him. He didn't consider his own needs first. He couldn't know what she did. Lindsay had never told him, *would* never tell him. She loved him too much to let him suffer along with her.

She was a grown woman, now, on her own. It'd been nineteen years. Yet she still felt the fear of closing her eyes, drifting helplessly into that darkness where the tangle of evil would draw her to... *Oh no*. Lindsay wanted desperately to close her eyes. If her father did what he said he was going to, it would all come back. She couldn't escape it this time.

Passing the stage in Java & Jazz, her father's coffee and book shop in Falcon's Bend, she tried to take a deep breath. She tried to calm her wildly thumping heart. *Focus on something else, she told herself, or you'll fall apart right here, right now.* She had to keep the fear at bay somehow, even knowing it couldn't save her.

Her gaze met that of a customer at the front counter buying a pack of cigarettes. While Falcon's Bend was a small town, she didn't recognize him. He was tall, his hair copper-blond, around her age or slightly older. His handlebar moustache ended in a soft curve at his stubborn-looking chin. Though he didn't smile and her mind wasn't clear enough to respond in any way, she saw the interest in his crystal gray eyes before she walked past him. She felt his gaze all the way to the door. The cowbell jangled as she pushed it open, and the need to turn back overwhelmed her.

Her only thoughts before doing so were, *Something, someone, to hold onto before she comes for me.*

Just as she knew he would be, the customer was looking after her steadily, not bothering to hide his attraction. Lindsay stopped breathing for an instant under the focused intensity of his gaze. She forced herself to turn away, walk to her beat-up convertible, and slide in. It was too cold in the fall weather to have the top down, but she did it anyway. She did it despite the fact that she was trembling. Tears were burning her eyes like insistent fires, searching for a spark to grow into a conflagration.

I can't leave him like this, she thought suddenly and pulled out her cell phone. She dialed her father's office inside his shop. He answered, his tone heavy from their confrontation moments ago.

"Daddy."

"Lindsay," he said on a sigh of relief.

"Daddy, I love you. I've always loved you best, more than anyone. More than you could ever know."

"Lindsay, my girl—" he started desperately, but she disconnected.

She sat staring straight ahead, not moving, not realizing until the passenger door opened that she was wishing. Her wish eased into the passenger's seat and shut the door behind him. She turned to him.

Unconsciously, she realized she'd been waiting for this moment for nineteen years. She'd known it would come. She'd known because the witch had told her she'd never have the love of any man except her father...until it was too late.

"I'm Chad—" he began, and Lindsay couldn't bear it another moment. All the emotions inside her were roiling like a hurricane.

She reached for him. His beautiful, gentle eyes widened just before she kissed him, and there was a moment's surprise in his lips—rigid beneath hers. The moment passed quickly, and his strong arms surrounded her, enclosing her in the fragrant worn leather of his jacket and then into the wild sweetness of his powerful kiss.

I haven't lived my life, she thought, tears filling her eyes as she gave this stranger everything she'd been holding back. *I've been too afraid to live. Too afraid of death. But death is coming. This beautiful stranger is all the life I have left. My last chance to live. My last chance to see...*

Chapter One

Pete warned me about this, Danny Vincent thought viscerally as he groped in the darkness for his ringing phone. He'd been an investigator on the Falcon's Bend police force for a little over a year. He'd returned to his hometown after eight years away. His partner, Pete Shasta—a lifelong friend—was honeymooning with his new bride in Hawaii. Pete had warned him that if you got time off, to leave town—far enough away that they couldn't easily call you back in. Pete had also taught him that all the spit fell down when you were least able to handle it on your own. Danny was on his own for the first time, but he wasn't worried about being able to handle this himself. He'd been a beat cop and then a detective in New York City; Falcon's Bend was a cakewalk after that.

"Yeah. Vincent," he muttered into the receiver, closing his eyes again. If it wasn't important, maybe he could go back to sleep again when he hung up. Wishful thinking, he soon realized, recognizing Dispatch on the other end.

"We've got a possible murder, Lieutenant. Just called in. Chopp went with a team. Wants you to meet him there."

Jeff Chopp was the patrol sergeant on the FBPD, and had been as long as Danny could remember. Squinting, Danny located his clock. It was almost one thirty in the morning.

"Victim?"

"Lindsay Bronwyn. Lonnie Bronwyn's daughter."

Danny knew Lonnie. He was the owner of one of the oldest businesses in town—Java & Jazz, a popular coffee and book shop on Main Street. Danny had never met Lonnie's daughter though.

"You got a suspect?" he asked Dispatch.

"Chopp should have him in custody soon. Guy's saying it was a murder. Says he didn't do it. Found the girl like that."

Danny was sitting up, now, switching on the lamp next to his bed. "Like what?"

"Stabbed in the side of the neck. I don't know more than that. The guy was all but incoherent when he called it in."

After taking down the address, Danny hung up, then stood and dressed quickly. He noticed it was still pouring outside as he pulled on boots, followed by a long rain jacket. The thunderstorm had started yesterday, late afternoon, and it continued to come down in torrents.

He didn't bother with an umbrella, something he didn't even own, though he knew what his mother would say about that. *Always be prepared. You won't get caught in the rain if you're prepared.*

Slightly uncomfortable in his damp coat and clothing, Danny thought about the victim as he drove to the scene of the crime. He didn't know Lonnie Bronwyn well. Truthfully, he hadn't even known Lonnie had a daughter. About all he did know was that Lonnie owned Java & Jazz, made a mean cup of joe, and played the blues on the stage in the shop for anybody who cared to hear. Danny had thought a couple times that the shop should have been called Books & Blues, but he didn't know Lonnie well enough to suggest it.

A daughter. Lonnie was easily in his late forties, so chances were his daughter was—had been—a grown woman living on her

own, possibly married. Where was the mother? Danny didn't know anything about that either. But he'd find out soon enough.

The small ranch-style house was surrounded with police cars. Danny parked across the street, noting a car in the garageless driveway—a convertible with the top up. He also saw a couple of officers leading a guy in handcuffs out of the house. The guy who'd called it in, no doubt.

Danny jumped out of his car and hurried across the street. In the darkness, he didn't recognize the suspect, who walked with his head down as they led him toward a police car. Danny saw blood on the man's hands. When Officer Lambert carefully guided him into the back of the black-and-white, the suspect didn't put up any fight at all.

Lambert glanced at Danny, shouting over the thunder "Chopp's inside waiting for you" before he ducked in the car out of the rain.

As soon as he entered the house, he saw Chopp in the blinding light of the kitchen. DCI was already there, which surprised Danny because they generally had to wait several hours before the Department of Criminal Investigation arrived from Madison. "They were in Sparta on another call," Chopp told Danny shortly, glancing at his rain-soaked head. "Should-a brought an umbrella."

"Thanks, Mom," Danny muttered, moving around the burly patrol sergeant. "What do we got?"

Cora Kingsley, county coroner, stood when DCI zipped the body into a bag. She turned to Danny. "There's no blood anywhere in the area except right here by this side of her neck, which is what killed her. See where it gushed out in a jet-like stream here." She indicated the spray of blood on the left side. "This is where she was killed—lying just like this. You can tell because of the direction of the blood jet stream. If she'd been standing or sitting while being stabbed, there would be blood all down her clothes."

Cora pointed a finger at the tape on the floor, which was in the shape of a body lying stretched out from head to foot, arms right next to the body. The outline of the body was directly next to a free-standing butcher block in the center of the small kitchen.

"It's a very odd thing—I've never seen anything like this before. I've never seen a victim lying so prone. I can only speculate at this point that at the time of her murder she gave no struggle at all to her killer. The scene is far too clean for that. There isn't any blood underneath her either, as you can see."

"So it was murder?" Danny verified, since DCI had taken the body already. He'd see it soon enough.

"Most definitely. She couldn't have done this to herself. The markings on her face were done after she was dead. They didn't bleed. She was killed recently. Very recently—less than an hour ago." Looking disturbed in a way Danny had never seen her, Cora murmured she'd have an initial report for him in the morning before she got her bag and left.

"Her throat was stabbed and her face marked up," Chopp told Danny. "Stabbed with a pocket knife. Martin fessed up to it bein' his, but he doesn't know how it got in the kitchen. Says it was in the pocket of his jacket, which we found just inside the hall. DCI's already bagged the knife. They're takin' the body to the funeral home for Lonnie to ID. She was messed up pretty bad. Damn shame. Damn shame."

It was clear to Danny that Chopp knew Lonnie better than he did. When he asked if that was the case, Chopp nodded, adjusting his glasses which were wet enough at the moment to make it hard to tell if the gruff man had been choked up or rained on.

"Went to school with Lon. I was there when his little girl was born. Lindsay was beautiful. Can't imagine anybody'd hurt someone as sweet as her. But, I gotta tell you, Danny, I knew her as well as anybody, and I didn't recognize her tonight. Whoever did this messed her up bad."

"What about the guy they took to the station? Was he her husband? A boyfriend?"

Chopp shrugged. "She's not married. Never has been. Don't know about a boyfriend, but I doubt it. Lon's talked about how she doesn't date or have relationships. This here guy's name is Chad Martin. He wasn't a lot of help. He called it in and he's broken up about it, so you gotta wonder about that."

Chad Martin. The name was familiar to Danny. He'd had a classmate named Chad Martin when he'd gone to Falcon's Bend High. Was it the same? He hadn't recognized the suspect outside a few minutes ago, but it was dark and it'd been quite a few years since they'd seen each other.

"What does he say happened?"

"Says he went to take a piss. Didn't hear anything, but when he came out he found her dead."

"So no struggle is his story?"

"Nope. But he was covered in blood up to his elbows."

Still, was a murderer likely to call the cops after doing the deed? Very few of the criminals Danny had encountered experienced such rapid remorse after killing. If they called, it was usually part of a calculated plan to throw suspicion off themselves.

Staying clear of the tape lines, Danny walked around looking at the scene. Near the hall were discarded clothes—a woman's jacket and tank top. A barrette and bobby pins littered the floor.

Bread, lunch meat, cheese, and olives sat on the butcher block in the kitchen; half made sandwiches neatly prepared; a clean kitchen towel—apples on a white background—sat next to the food. No sign of a struggle there. As Cora had said, the murderer hadn't caused a lot of ruckus when he or she entered the kitchen, which implied the victim had known her murderer and hadn't expected the attack.

Danny kneeled down to inspect the floor where the victim had died. The blood had gushed out of the wound at the side of the neck, but there wasn't blood everywhere—again, implying little struggle from the victim. It was almost as if the victim had lain down on the floor where she'd been killed. The position of the body was also odd. If the victim had passed out just prior to the crime, why was she arranged so neatly on the floor? The position of the tape resembled the posture of an old-fashioned tin soldier. If someone she'd known had come in, there would have been signs of a struggle as the murderer stabbed her in the side of the neck, either by coming up in back of her—which wasn't what the scene indicated at all—or right at her face-on. There would be

blood in more places than just here, by the left side of the neck but not under it or any other part of her body.

Shaking his head, Danny glanced at the tape lines that marked where the body had been, seeing muddy water on the outside of the tape on the left side near the middle of the body. He knew Cora well enough to know she'd dried her feet thoroughly when she'd come in. The forensics team would have been careful about that, too.

Danny asked one from DCI's team for gloves, then touched the pool of water next to the body. Yeah, it was just mud and water, he verified by the sight and smell. Danny stood up and followed other small, disconnected pools of muddy water moving out of the kitchen, down the hall, and into a bedroom. There, one of the windows was open and the pool of water under the window was much larger. The rain had come in and soaked everything in reach. If there'd been muddy footprints from the murderer's entrance and exit, they were long gone. Based on how the pools didn't follow the trail from window to kitchen, Danny guessed the murderer had tried to clean the mess quickly. In an effort to get out, or some other reason, the killer hadn't finished the job.

"Murderer entered and exited through here," a member of the forensics team said, and Danny nodded at his own conclusions voiced.

He glanced across the hall from the bedroom. There was a bathroom there, and he confirmed it was the only bathroom in the house. If Chad had been in the bathroom when the murderer slipped in the bedroom window, why hadn't he heard anything?

"Did Martin say he heard the murderer leave?" Danny asked Chopp who was following him around at a discreet distance.

"No. He says he didn't hear anything, but he knew something was wrong as soon as he came out. The window was open, rain was pouring in, and he rushed into the kitchen where he found Lindsay already dead."

Danny turned to the DCI technicians. "Are you done with this window?"

One of them nodded, saying they'd finished with the room. Danny unhooked the latch on the window—something that could be easily forgotten and left open, making the window an

accessible entrance from the outside. When he pushed the window open, it squeaked loudly. Closing the window produced another aggravated squeak.

Danny left the window unlatched. "Team done outside?" he asked, and Chopp said they would be soon. But a sudden discovery in the small backyard caused a commotion that sent Danny out to where a couple of technicians had discovered a long length of nylon rope in the bushes near the end of the property. The rope was wet with rain and mud. No one knew why it was there, but it was bagged anyway.

When the team confirmed that they were done on the exterior of the house, Danny went out and tried to open the bedroom window. It opened fairly easily with the same squeak as from inside. He entered and exited without obstruction on either side of the window.

Moments later, Danny was sure he'd seen all he needed to see there, though none of it made any sense at the moment. When he told Chopp he was heading out to the funeral home, Chopp said he'd just had a call from Officer Rosch. Lonnie Bronwyn was on his way to the funeral home to identify the body.

Danny swore. He didn't like the idea of a father seeing his child dead in a situation like this without first trying to soften the blow.

Fixated

"The longing was with him day and night, an incessant undefinable craving, like the sudden whim of a sick man for food and drink once tasted and long forgotten. He could not see beyond the craving, or picture what it might lead to... He simply felt that if he could carry away the vision of the spot of earth she walked on...the rest of the world might seem less empty."

~from *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton

She was being followed. The only difference today was that the guy had gone beyond lurking in the shadows far enough behind her that she might not have noticed anyone was there. This time, he appeared to be trying to follow Risa inside her security access apartment building. He hadn't caught the door after her, but he also hadn't walked away and disappeared the way he had for the past five nights.

Victor Brooks sat very still on the balcony of his apartment across the street from Risa's building. He knew this stalker well. Victor had noticed him last Saturday, when he'd appeared in front of Risa's building and had stood scanning the call button directory off to the side of the door for several days.

The guy was noticeable, despite his obvious intention to be otherwise. Because of Victor's repeated occasions of measuring the stalker up, he knew the guy to be a gangly 5'7, give or take, with short, greasy dark hair that looked like someone had put a bowl over his head and cut raggedly around it. Tonight a baseball cap covered his hair. With oversize, black bug eyes, too-large nose and ears, a mouth set in a perpetual, ghastly smile, and the remnants of a severe case of acne, few people wouldn't notice this guy. Few would look twice though.

Victor had only because of the guy's attention, which seemed to be on Risa for God only knew the reason. He'd quickly come to despise the very sight of the bug who couldn't possibly have good intentions toward Risa. It'd been all Victor could do to keep himself from approaching—and throttling—the weird little creep.

Sunday morning, Risa had come down early for her morning walk to the Baptist church she attended regularly not far away. Knowing her ritual by heart, Victor had been on his balcony, morning coffee in hand, to silently see her off. Unfortunately, she hadn't been alone. A minute after she'd reached the end of the block, her tail of the day before had appeared suddenly and silently.

Victor had decided then to see what was going on. He'd dropped his mug on the kitchen table in his apartment, grabbed beach sandals, and ran down to the ground floor. In less than a minute, he'd caught up and spent the next hour and a half lurking in the doorway of a shop that was thankfully closed for the

weekend. The bug had stayed close to the church, ducking into the bushes when Risa came out at the end of the service.

It was now Thursday, and Risa's stalker had only grown bolder each and every day—following her to work, home from work, gawking in the windows of her pet grooming shop for hours on end. Up until tonight, he'd made no effort to connect with her. He seemed to be following her for the sole purpose of seeing her. Not a concept Victor himself was above, considering his own fixation with the woman he'd never even said hello to.

Victor lifted his gaze to the third floor across the street. As usual, Risa's curtains were open. In the months since Risa had moved into her apartment, she'd only had her curtains closed the first few days, and then only after dark. Now she didn't close them even at night.

He saw her now, removing her jacket and glasses, setting down her purse and mail, reaching down to pick up her two cats and kiss them hello. Cats he'd named. The little one he called "Minnie"; the bigger, pure white one he called "Pearl."

When she put Minnie on her shoulder, she held Pearl up and rubbed her cheek against the feline's face. Victor swallowed at the movement as Risa's cascade of black silk hair tumbled down past the small of her back at the movement. She was a woman of ritual behavior. He knew exactly what she would do and when she would do it, and his entire body tensed in anticipation.

After setting down Pearl, Risa kissed Minnie then slipped out of her shoes and walked to her patio door. She slid the heavy glass aside to let the summer air in through the screen, allowing herself only one surreptitious look around her—to him for a brief moment. Unfortunately she didn't glance down this night or she might have seen that Victor wasn't the only one watching her breathlessly.

A minute later, soft jazz music floated out into the street from her apartment, but he wasn't paying attention to anything except the woman unbuttoning her dress, opening it, and slipping it down her shoulders and off.

Her skin was the color and texture of warm, light caramels. Though he'd never stood next to her, Victor knew she had to be close to 5'11—any creature with legs that impossibly long had to

be tall. All the curves of her body were subtle and graceful and utterly breathtaking.

Ah Risa, you've captivated me. How can I paint? How can I get anything done when I know you're near? When I know you're not, and I want you to be. All I want to do is watch you.

She knew how often he watched her. She had to know. He'd even thought maybe she liked knowing he watched her. Yet he knew she wasn't the type of woman who played with men as if they were toys. She was far too gentle and sweet for that. Yes, because he knew she was a church-going girl, but also because he'd watched her in her shop, too. She treated each animal that came in like royalty. The way she smiled at them, at her customers, and at the children who came in with their pets...certainly everyone loved her. *I love her, foolish and impossible as it is. And I feel so protective of her—of a woman I've never even met—that I can't let anything happen to her.* Victor's loathing of her stalker grew worse each time he saw Risa. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone wanting to hurt her.

Outside of her beguiling penchant for floating around her apartment in nothing but her underwear, Risa wasn't the type of person who had enemies. She wasn't the type of person who inspired others to evil deeds or harm. So why was this guy following her? What did he want? Victor couldn't get himself to believe the bug had innocent intentions. The few times Risa's stalker had sensed he had a tail, he'd ducked into a private place and stayed there until Victor had gotten paranoid, given up, and gone home to make sure Risa was all right.

The bug was looking around nervously, pacing in front of the building now that Risa had disappeared back into her apartment. For one minute there, Victor had thought the creep might be considering climbing up the second floor balcony to hers. If he had, he'd since decided it was too risky.

Victor glanced again at Risa. She fed her cats, her fish, and birds before lying in front of her balcony on the floor with her mail. Before this past week, when the bug had appeared, Victor would have tried to convince himself to get some work done—put some paint on a canvas and work up some inspiration for finishing. Generally, he ended up sketching Risa instead of doing

what he needed to do. This whole summer had been a wash for his painting, thus far. He'd done nothing that could be used in his new collection—set for early autumn release. He had pads full of Risa in every position. He had a strong feeling his clients would be scandalized if he launched a collection of near-nudes of one of their own, albeit probably new and therefore little known, citizens.

No, tonight work didn't matter either. There was no way he would leave Risa alone when this guy was lurking around her front door.