

## **Wade**

### Prologue

I woke up late that morning. The sun's rays filled my tiny apartment. I was bathed in a warm glow, but I felt like I didn't deserve it. Maybe it was because I felt like a poor excuse of a man. What was the point? I had sunk so low and now I was lying in the bed I had made. There was no going back. I lost everyone in my life that meant anything to me. All I had left was my job. My one redeeming factor in this otherwise decrepit life. "Pull yourself together, Jack." I said to myself. I thought I would listen. Why would I?

My cell phone lit up and wailed at me to get out of bed. My mind agreed, but my body had other ideas. The phone was beside my bed, lying as naked as I was on an end table. With every ounce of my strength I could muster I sat up and picked up my cell phone.

"Hello," I barely could speak, "this is Jack."

"Where the hell are ya Jack?" The voice boomed. "I've got a crime scene here and I don't have any other detectives available."

"Lieutenant, I thought that was you." I managed.

"I've been calling you for the past hour." The lieutenant said. "Get down to city hall immediately! We've got a DOA and it ain't pretty."

The phone call was short. I couldn't remember a damn thing from the night before. In fact, the last thing I did remember was hanging out with a mysterious red-head. I could picture her simple yet intriguing face. She looked like the nice girl next door. But, now as I looked around my dump of an apartment, I felt like a woman hadn't set foot in here. Maybe she was here and maybe not. It didn't matter. It was time to sober up from whatever had me knocked out last night. I didn't drink. Never liked the smell of beer and I'd never been drunk before. I wasn't sure what I was recovering from. I wanted to find out, but that would have to wait. I had a date with a crime scene and I wasn't in the mood.

## **Chapter 1**

### My Rude Awakening

The big city never seemed to completely agree with me. I always felt out of place. You're typical small country boy forced to move to the city when he was young. I suppose you could think "a fish out of water" story. Whatever floats your boat I guess.

City Hall was a mess with men and women in suits and formal ware. News reporters were covering the front steps like a bunch of cats desperate for some fancy feast. There were cops cars parked a long the main street, blocking traffic and news vans. Police tape was stretched across the the steps connected by two stone lions, the typical animal of choice for public municipal buildings in the city.

I stepped out of my unmarked car, still feeling the sickness in my head. My body was still half asleep despite my hot shower an hour ago. My thin short blond hair was waving in the breeze. Not enough wind to knock a man down, but enough to feel a push. I was still young, made detective at twenty nine. I was considered a genius by my peers and envied by my superiors, other then by the lieutenant that is. What a douche. He saw me approach from the opposite side of where the reporters were standing. I was hoping to avoid them but it seems like the lieutenant had other ideas.

"Wade!" He shouted. "I'm glad you've arrived. Please come over here."

He was trying to sound as polite as he could for the cameras. I wasn't buying it.

"I'm here Lieutenant Cross." I proclaimed. "How may I serve the city today?"

He wasn't buying my act either. The lieutenant pulled me over to the cameras. He wanted everyone to see me, the young good looking genius. I was going to be the unwilling face of local law enforcement. Surely I would be able to singlehandedly bring a sense of safety and calm to the good people. "Don't be afraid!" I thought, "I'm going to stop this fiend! Rest assured, there is no reason to fear."

"Everyone," Cross began, "this is my best and brightest detective. Jack Wade is his name and he will be in charge of this investigation."

The news reporters already chimed in with their questions without letting Cross continue his speech.

"Are you concerned about this man's experience?" A male reporter asked. "He looks quite young."

"He is our youngest detective," Cross stammered, "but he also happens to be the best in his class. He graduated with top honors from our most prestigious university. He has the best education our city can provide and he has put it to good use. He has solved thirty three cases since joining the department last year. And if I might add, he works alone, no partner. Jack is certainly capable of handling this case himself."

"What about the rumors that Jack was related to a suspect involved in two murders?" A newspaper reporter asked.

"That is speculation and nothing more." Cross answered. "Those rumors were started by former police officers who were bitter about their suspensions. They are disgraced cops and have no longer have ties to the department."

"I have a question for Wade..." A T.V. reporter spoke up.

Lieutenant Cross turned to me. "Jack why don't you head up to the crime scene and get started. You've got your work cut out for ya."

I nodded. Turning around, I headed up the steps. I could just make out Cross explain that he was willing to answer any more questions. I could hear the disappointment in their voices as they watched me enter the building.

I was in the main lobby of the city hall. There were three dead bodies lying on the floor all with chalk outlines around them. The bodies were also covered up. I was met by the chief medical examiner, Michale Dunn, probably the only one in this town I dared call my friend. He was middle aged with long brown hair that reached his shoulders, just barely. He had a brown mustache and a faint smile as we approached.

"Welcome to city hall." He said.

"What are we looking at Michale?" I asked.

"Three DOAs." He said bluntly. "All of them completely unrelated. One, a court judge, another a housewife, and the last a lobbyist for a local environmental group, Rouche."

"Rouche?" I asked.

"The leader of the group's last name." Michale said.

"He named an environmental group after himself?" I asked.

"Wouldn't have been my first choice." He commented. "Anyway, it seems that each victim died the same way, one gunshot wound to the forehead. I'd say the shooter is an excellent marksman."

"Like military?" I asked.

"Could be." Michale commented. He looked around.

"Who's the judge?" I asked.

"Gregory Lupino." Michale answered.

"So you think it could have been a cop?" I said.

"What makes you say that?" Michale asked.

"Because he's the judge," I began, "who was involved with the corruption case. He sentenced

two former cops to life terms in prison. Not to mention people link him to the suspensions of a few other officers.”

“Just cleaning up the department, right?” Michale said.

“Sure.” I said. “What about the other two victims, what were their names?”

“Stan Decarto was the lobbyist.” Michale said. “He was here meeting with the District Attorney. Seems he was involved with some case about illegal dumping or something.”

“That's all you know about him?” I said.

“Am I supposed to do your job too?” He asked.

“Point taken.” I said. “What about the woman?”

“Kate Smith.” He said. “As I said before, housewife. She was watching the trial of her ex-husband, Darren Smith. He's accused of murder. I'm not sure of the details.”

“Time of death?”

“Died within minutes of each other. Early this morning shortly after 9:00am.”

“That's an hour after the start of business.”

“Yeah.”

“How much longer till you take the bodies away?”

“However long you need. The press outside assures that.”

“And no point of an autopsy?”

“We still do it, just doesn't matter too much.”

“Right, seems obvious what happened, I suppose.”

“It's your call.”

“The DOAs are all yours. Take 'em to the morgue.”

“You sure? Don't you want to take a look at them yourself?”

“Hell know, why would I?”

“Because most detectives tend to want a look at the victims.”

“I'm not most detectives.”

“Alright then, I'll take them.”

I wasn't used to dealing with the dead. Fact is, this was the first case I had involving murder. I was given mostly small criminal cases. Theft, domestic abuse, assaults, and one or two attempted murder cases, but never homicide.

Homicide was the worst of the worst, maybe only second to sex crimes. Homicide was the effect of some asshole who decided that taking someones life was acceptable. I never claim to be philosophical, but I've always considered killing to be murder. I don't care what the reasons are, taking life shouldn't be easy. And if you are going to do it, be prepared to live with it for the rest of your life. Michale was right, I probably should have gotten a good look at the victims. “That's what most detectives would do.”

After interviewing the few witnesses that were there, I didn't have much to work with. I was able to determine that the housewife and the lobbyist were sitting in the waiting area. They had sat on opposite sides of each other. So it would appear that they didn't know one another. The judge was late that day. Apparently it was unusual for a judge to be late. Not just this judge, but any judge. As soon as the good judge entered the lobby, the housewife and the lobbyist stood up almost at the same time. They walked into the lobby and that is when the shots were fired. Three shots only. No bullet casing were found in the lobby or other bullet holes. There were screams of terror to be sure, but no one saw the shooter, however unlikely. There was a panic, so perhaps people were too busy running to notice a man or woman with a gun leaving the scene.

From the placement of the body, the judge was likely shot first. Then the housewife second and the lobbyist last. It seemed obvious that the judge was the primary target, but why shot the other two victims? That made no sense, but then again there was a reason for it. This looked to me like cold blooded murder. So, there had to be a connection even though it seemed unlikely there was one. Why

else kill the other two victims? There could be a hidden connection or perhaps only in the mind of the killer.

All of this thinking made my head hurt. So, I decided to take a breather. I walked out the front doors to see the news conference was breaking up. The lieutenant saw me leaving and approached me.

“Where the hell do you think you're going Wade?” He asked.

“I need some coffee.” I answered.

## Chapter 2

### Desperate Questions

I was in a small diner around the corner from my apartment. It was packed at this time of day. There was a TV with a local news reporter spiritedly describing the events of the morning. Almost every channel was talking about it. The dead judge was the main subject. It seemed that the news shows already had their own theories of the crime. It almost made me laugh, not because of arrogance, but because this case wasn't going to be easy. There wasn't going to be an easy answer.

My coffee was just about finished until the lieutenant walked into the diner. He saw me and immediately approached my booth.

“There you are Jack.” He said.

“Oh good, you found me.” I said sarcastically. “I should thank you for allowing me to skip the Q&A session. I'm not good with reporters.”

“I didn't want you to embarrass yourself.” He said.

“I suppose I should thank you.” I said.

“Yes, you should.” He said. “You're a lucky man, Jack.”

“How's that exactly?”

“You've got the case of a life time and you don't deserve it.”

“You really got a problem with me don't you?”

“Yeah, you're under qualified and out matched. But, we need you, Jack. You're the only one I have available for the job. I don't have to remind you of all the other crap I have to deal with. It's like it's murder season or something.”

“I get it, you don't need to give me the speech.”

“What ever, just get this case solved. Who knows, if you can do it, I just might respect you afterwards.”

Steven Cross stood up and looked at me.

“Just get it done.” He said walking away.

I decided to start with the judge. Gregory Lupino was the likely intended target of the suspect or suspects. He was the obvious choice and was the face of cleaning up the department. There was a long time suspicion that the local PD was ripe with corruption. The scandal couldn't have broke at a worse time.

Lupino resided over many court cases of bad cops and the people of the city were on his side. It was a shame for such a man to die, but then again it wasn't easy to tell who the good guys were anymore. A lot of officers were crying foul over the many charges being hurled at their friends. The million dollar question was there, who were the good guys? Was the department really so corrupt or was the corruption misplaced?

You couldn't ask me. I had no idea. Sure, I heard the rumors, heard the accusations. To be honest, I hadn't seen the evidence, I didn't know the whole story. There was no judgment in my heart,

at least not yet. All I wanted to do was solve the case. It was the only thing that mattered anymore. I didn't have anything else to do. It would be the only thing to keep me sane.

The judge's house looked like any ordinary suburban home. The white picket fence, tree in the yard, flowers all over the place. I knocked at the door. Mrs. Lupino wasn't too happy to see me, even after I introduced myself.

"I suppose you're here to tell me you're going to find my husband's killer." Mrs. Lupino said.

"Yes I am." I said.

"I also suppose you know I don't trust you." She said.

"I assure you I am dedicated to finding the murder." I said. She wasn't convinced.

"How do I know you aren't going to sabotage this case?"

"You don't."

"At least your honest."

"I'm not going to pretend here. I know you probably don't trust the police. But, I got a job to do, and I'm going to do it with or without your help. I don't care if you trust me or not."

"Kind of rough around the edges aren't you?"

"Let's just say I've got somethin' to prove. Look, I'm on the side of justice here. I don't care about police corruption. There are three families that want answers here. We're looking at a possible serial killer and I want him off the streets."

I could see the doubt in her eyes. I didn't blame her. I'd probably feel the same if I were in her shoes. Still, I must have been convincing enough. She let me inside.

I walked through a hall of photographs and into the living room. The furniture was sparse and inexpensive. I was sure the rest of the house was the same. The wall paper looked old and worn out. It didn't look like the judge's salary helped at all. It was strange. I thought they got paid pretty well.

Mrs. Lupino sat down on her small two seated couch. I took an adjacent chair.

"So what do you need to know." Mrs. Lupino asked.

"His work." I said. "Do you know of anyone in particular who would have a grudge against your husband?"

"How about the Police Department?" She asked.

"I suppose a cop could have done this." I said. "But, anyone in particular that you know about?"

"James Litman." She said. "He left a threatening phone call the other day. I made a copy of it if you want it."

"Yes, that would be helpful." I said.

"I hope so." She said. "What else do you need to know?"

"Do you know if your husband knew a woman, Kate Smith?" I asked. "Or a lobbyist by the name of Stan Decarto?"

"I've never heard of those names before." She said. "Who are they?"

"The other two murdered victims."

"I see"

"Was your husband concerned about any other possible threats?"

"If he was, he didn't tell me, he never wanted me to worry."

Mrs. Lupino was having difficulty with the interview. She was tearing up. I felt she was about to cry, then she stood up and left the room. After a few minutes she returned with an audio tape.

"Here." She said. "That's what you want. Now, if you'd please leave I'd appreciate it."

I took the tape and nodded to her. I left the house with something, it was better than nothing. At least, the next step was obvious. I wasn't about to question James Litman yet. I wasn't looking forward to it. It was too easy to continue to talk to the friends and families of the other victims. I thought I'd pay a visit to Rouche. The environment is a big issue these days and maybe it would play a part in this case.

## Chapter 3

### Saving the Environment

The environmental group was a non-profit organization located in the downtown area. They had their own small office building next to a grocery store. It seemed like an odd place to have it. There were protesters preparing signs and other supplies.

I parked my car near the exit of the parking lot. I got out of my car. The crowd saw me as I approached.

“Something I can help you with?” A man asked. He seemed to be the leader of the group. I could tell because he had a megaphone in his hand.

“I need to talk to your leader.” I said.

“You mean of our organization?” He asked.

“Yeah,” I began, “where can I find him or her?”

“Top floor of the office.” The man answered.

The lobby of the building was simple. Various indoor plants adorned the walls and from the low ceiling above. There were also flower bouquets on the receptionist's desk. For a moment, the pleasant aroma made me forget my troubles. I felt like something was wrong, it was an uncomfortable feeling.

I walked past the receptionist's desk and to the elevator. I took it to the top floor. There was a short hallway that led to a large office. A secretary was sitting behind a desk. She looked at me.

“Detective?” She asked.

“How could you tell?” I asked.

“We figured someone would come by.” She said. “We are all mourning the loss of Stan. He had worked hard in Washington on our behalf. He was a champion for the environment.”

“Is your boss in?” I asked.

“Yes he is.” She said. “I'll let Mr. Rouche know you wish to see him.”

The secretary took the phone at her desk in hand and told her boss I was here. It was only a few moments until she let me inside. The office was decorated with all kinds of plants. Some of which I had never seen before. It almost looked like a jungle had grown inside the room.

“Peter Rouche” was the name on a placard on the desk. The man himself stood up. His expression was solemn. He knew why I was here. He was a short man and very thin. His brown suit looked like it had been worn for many years.

“Detective.” Peter said. “I'm sorry to have to meet you like this. Stan was a good man and he certainly didn't deserve this.”

“Did he work for your group for a long time?” I asked.

“Ever since I started this non-profit.” Peter said. “He was one of the most passionate lobbyists I have had the pleasure to work with.”

“What was he doing at the court house today?”

“To be honest, I do not know. Whatever reason he was there it wasn't official Rouche business.”

“Can you make a guess?”

“He wasn't going to be in today. The last thing I talked to him about was the conference he attended a few days ago.”

“Did he have any problems there?”

“Considering that it was an energy conference? Stan was a major activist against offshore drilling or any more drilling period. Not a lot of people at the conference liked that. I doubt anyone would want to kill him over it, though.”

“Did Mr. Decarto have any enemies?”

“Enemies? Besides politics? No, again, I can't think of anyone who would go so far as to hurt Stan. It doesn't make any sense to me.”

“Any family I could talk to?”

“Stan was divorced. You could try talking to his ex-wife, Denice Colman. His parents are dead, but he did have a sister who married last year. That's about all I know about his past. I can't get you in touch with his sister, but I can give you his ex-wife's address.”

“That would be helpful.”

Peter sat back down at his desk and looked on his computer. After a few minutes, he grabbed a pen and wrote down an address and phone number on a pad of paper. He tore off the written sheet and handed it to me.

“Did he have a good relation ship with the ex after the divorce?” I asked.

“Does anyone?” Peter asked. “I had the impression that he didn't talk to her much afterwards. The break up was, toxic to say the least, but they didn't have any children. I suppose that was a good thing.”

“What about personal items?” I asked. “I'd like to look in his office.”

“That isn't a problem.” Peter said. “We have nothing to hide to the police. Though Stan didn't keep much there. His personal computer is probably at his house, the one thing he managed to keep after the divorce. He did keep his work papers in a brief case in his office. That he never took home. I'll show you.”

Stan's office was neat and clean. It looked like he had been meticulous in keeping organized. His whole life must have been in his office. There were file cabinets lined up on one side of the room. Inside were various files of the many projects he had. Most were unfinished. He had records dating back decades. Newspapers, press releases, and old photographs depicted important environmental achievements. It seemed Stan was quite helpful in bringing global warming into the spot light as well. There was a photo of Stan shaking hands with former Vice President Al Gore at a press conference.

I didn't find anything that looked useful until I began to search his desk. The bottom drawer was locked. There were few occasions when I was able to use my strength to force open a lock. The desk was old and the bottom drawer easily gave way. Inside it was barren, save for a small key. It looked like a safety deposit key. I wondered what it would lead to. I had to find what the key would unlock. I made sure to ask Peter.

“A key?” Peter asked. “Hmm, well after a close observation I can tell it's a special key.”

“Yeah, I gathered that.” I said.

“You don't understand.” Peter said. “It's a very rare key given only to important environmentalists.”

“Why do I get the feeling you're going to start talking like a conspiracy theorist?” I asked.

“If I let you in on this secret,” he began, “you can't tell anyone about it.”

“Why?” I asked. “Will some secret society come running after me?”

“No.” Peter said. “The government will.”

“Ok, now you got me spooked.” I said, sarcastically.

“There's a secret government agency that was formed about thirty years ago. I can't remember who started it, but it's been in charge of guarding a secret for the past three decades.”

“Please don't use the word, 'aliens.'”

“I don't really know what they guard. However, it has something to do with nature and the environment.”

“I'm really not a fan of the supernatural.”

“I assure you its perfectly natural or so I have been told.”

“Great, so you think Stan might have been killed because he knew too much?”

“I don't know.”

“Why didn't you tell me about this before?”

“Because I didn't believe it before.”

“But now that you see this key you suddenly believe? Seems suspicious to me.”

“The keys were rumors. I had seen pictures, but I never thought Stan was able to get one. Look this doesn't really make much sense to me either.”

I wasn't buying it. I knew there was something he wasn't telling me, but I thought I'd leave it alone for now. The secret, it seemed too “spooky.” I wasn't really interesting in chasing ghosts or aliens. I lived in the real world and not The X-Files. Still, it was one piece of the puzzle. Then there was the briefcase.

It wasn't ordinary. It was sealed shut with a combination lock and made out of steel. I was going to have to figure out the combination if I wanted to see what was inside. It was bad luck for me, I hated puzzles.

## Chapter 4

### Murder for Murder

Denice Coleman, the ex wife. It's an unflattering label regardless of who divorced who. It's an unintended result of what was supposed to be a blessed union. I knew the pain personally, though I've never been married, it was my childhood.

Another suburban home, the one Stan was actually able to keep, where I met Denice for the first time. She was outside the door of the house with the white picket fence. The rose garden, maple tree in the front yard, and the tire swing. Funny, it almost felt like I was going home again, until I remembered why I was there. The house itself was locked, but I had the key. Apparently Denice did not.

I parked my car across the street and sat for a moment. I waited till Denice was finished crying. Sometimes you just need to be alone. Stepping out of the car was a fateful decision, thankfully it wouldn't cost me much.

“Ms. Coleman.” I said.

“Yes, that is me.” She said. Her accent was thick, but I couldn't place it.

“I'm detective Jack Wade.” I said. “I'm here investigating your husband's murder.”

She was still very upset. It was an odd moment, because I thought she hated the guys guts. Maybe it was just a facade to tell herself he deserved the divorce. Maybe her true colors were showing, she still loved him.

“I suppose that means you'll be wanting to ask me some questions.” She said.

“Goes with the territory.” I said. “I'll give you another moment if you want.”

“Yes, thanks.” She said. I didn't really care what the ex-wife had to say. Did she kill him? No way, why would she? All Stan got out of the divorce was the house. Besides, she would have had to kill a judge and a housewife too. All that just to hide a vengeful spirit? It would take a real cold blooded character to do that and Denice didn't seem the type. She was above suspicion.

I entered the house and left the door unlocked. I'd figure I'd have a look around and if the ex wife wanted a peak what was the harm? I was weak for a pretty face. The living room had your typical suburban look. Couch, TV, fireplace, the whole nine yards. I wasn't impressed. The American Dream was over-rated. I did notice an interesting looking urn on the mantle of the fireplace. There was a design of a strange looking tree. It twisted and turned all around the urn.

Looking in the kitchen, it was clean as a whistle. There wasn't anything out of place. The kitchen was spotless. There was still food in the refrigerator and the pantry. A small dining table was

in the kitchen with just one chair next to it. I guess he didn't get many visitors for dinner.

The front door opened. Denice walked into the living room. She looked around and then she saw me at the foot of the stairs.

"Is it ok that I come in?" She asked.

"As long as you don't touch anything." I said.

She nodded and walked to the couch to sit down. I headed up the stairs. There were three bedrooms. I tried opening one and there was a brick wall in the door way. I couldn't believe it at first. I pushed hard on the wall, but it didn't move. Stan didn't want me or anyone else to get in there. The other two rooms were Stan's master bedroom where he slept and his office. I was more interested in the office.

He had a macbook lying on his desk. Perfect, I didn't know how to use it, but how bad could it be? I sat down at the desk and opened the lid. I turned on the computer and watched it boot up. There was a password screen. I heard a noise coming from downstairs. I closed the lid to the computer and grabbed it. I walked to the stairway and heard gun fire. I pulled my gun and looked down the hallway. Denice was lying on the floor with a pool of blood forming around her. There were two men walking out of the kitchen. One came into clear view at the foot of the stairs. He saw me and fired a round in my direction. I ran across to the other side of the hall and into the master bedroom. I closed the door and looked around the room. There was a chair up against a wall near Stan's dresser. I took the chair and placed it under the door nob. The macbook was still in hand as I ran to the window. I put my gun back in its holster and opened the window. I kicked out the screen covering the window and jumped out. I was on the roof over the garage. I got to the edge and sat down on the roof. I slid down, tumbled once, and got to me feet. I could hear the bedroom door smash open. I bolted to my car, unlocked it and got in. Thank fully I had parked across the street.

I turned on the engine and I heard more gun fire coming from the upstairs window. I put the macbook on the passengers seat and hit the gas. Calling for backup, I turned the car around, parking far away from the house. I hid the macbook in the trunk of the car. I took the shotgun from the trunk of the car, then locked up. Made sure my badge was in clear view hanging around my neck. I cocked the shot gun and made my way back to the house. By the time I got there, all was quite. I looked up towards the window. I didn't see anything.

The front door was open, so I carefully walked in and quickly looked around the room. I could see Denice lying on the floor. There had been no way to save her. She was likely killed instantly, a bullet to the brain. I slowly walked to the stairs and took a peak upwards. There was no sound within the house and no one in sight. I looked towards the fireplace and noticed the strange urn was missing. The perpetrators must have taken it.

My backup arrived. There was nothing for them to do. The invaders were gone and they left a mess for us to clean up. There were new questions that needed to be answered now. It was adding to my case load. I was frustrated and not in the mood to do more searching. I had the macbook, maybe that would lead to something. I left the crime scene techs to do their job and I headed back to the police station. I decided to let the computer guys look at the computer, it was useless to me.

I was tired, I needed a good nights sleep. I headed back to my dirty apartment hoping to rest for the night. The night had other ideas.

When I opened the door to my apartment, I saw a blonde woman relaxing on my bed. She looked up at me.

"You're late." She said.

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong apartment." I said.

She smiled.

"No, you have the right place." She said. "I have a key."

"I should tell you, I'm a cop." I said. "Breaking into a police officer's room isn't a good idea."

"I know, I'm a cop too." She said, getting up. I remembered her face all of a sudden.

"I know you." I said.

"Janis Lippmann." She said. "You already forgot about me didn't you?"

"Janis, I'm sorry..." I said.

"No trouble." She interrupted. "I'm hear to give your life some well deserved meaning. Close the door."

I did as I was told.

"Ok, I'm listening." I said.

"Their's something going on around here." She said. "Something secret."

"Funny, this sounds familiar." I said.

"You talked to Peter Rouche today." She said.

"Maybe, how would you know?" I asked.

"I have my sources." She said. "A conspiracy is afoot. I always wanted to say that."

"Great, your just as crazy as Peter." I said.

"It's not what you think." She said. "At least, I think it's not what you think."

"I don't understand." I said. "What's this conspiracy you speak of."

"Someone wants to shut down Rouche." She claimed.

"Peter or his company?" I asked.

"Both." She said.

"Someone has been watching him." She said. "I found a safe house someone was using to watch Peter's every move."

"Are we going to tell Peter?" I asked.

"No, better he doesn't know." She said.

"You want to catch the peeping tom in the act." I stated.

"Correct." She said.

"Think the guy watching Peter is responsible for Stan Decarto's death?" I asked.

"Yeah, and the judge, the housewife, and Stan's ex-wife." She said. Janis walked closer to me. She had a devilish grin.

"So it's true, you are the conspiracy nut." I said.

"Maybe." She said. Now she was a foot away from me.

"If you wanted to get closer to me," I began, "should have just said something."

"I say we should make good use of your bed." She said.

"Why do I have the feeling you don't plan on telling me some bedtime stories." I said.

## Chapter 5

### The Blonde Bombshell

The sun's light was intruding into my apartment. It woke me up. My bed was a mess of covers and blankets. I could hear my shower running. She was still here. I felt strange, as if I wasn't supposed to be here. I was accustom to being used, like an old pair of shoes, and then tossed away. But, Janis was different. The shower stopped and Janis entered the room, drying herself off with my towel.

"I better get going." Janis said. She went for her closes. They were on the floor on my side of the bed. I wasn't sure what to say. She got dressed.

"I didn't think you'd stick around." I finally said. She looked at me for a moment and then gave

me a smile.

"I've had my eye on you for a long time, Jack." She said.

"Have you now?" I asked. I wasn't sure what she meant. Then she hit me with it.

"Now that I'm your girlfriend," she began, "you are going to have to get used to not being alone all the time."

Girlfriend. I couldn't remember the last time I had one of those. Then again, the truth was that I didn't want to remember.

"Are you sure about that?" I asked. "I'm not exactly the perfect guy."

She giggled a little.

"What's the fun in being perfect?" She asked. I thought I was in a dream. It didn't seem real. She was heading for the door.

"Leaving so soon?" I asked.

"I'll be back tonight." She said. She gave me another smile and then she was gone. Why did she care for me the way she did? I couldn't answer the question. She saw something in me that I couldn't see. Was she hoping to pull me out of the darkness I lived in? Every day was a reminder of my old life, my childhood. The loss of love. I couldn't let it go. Not even Janis had such power to take away my pain. There was a killer out there who owed me. Thinking about the person he took away filled me with anger. Thoughts of vengeance filled my brain. I knew the path I was heading down and I knew it was a dangerous one. I didn't care. I wanted to hunt him down, and kill him for what he had done to me. But, I had a moment of clarity. I had a case to solve and a conspiracy to reveal. I had a job to do.

Back at the department, I was going over what little evidence there was. All I had were some dead bodies, a key, and a computer. I decided to pay the tech lab a visit. The lab guys were going crazy over the computer I had found.

"Hello boys." I said. "Tell me you hacked the computer."

"Well, not quite." Mike Dodd said. "We were able to break into the computer, barely."

Mike Dodd, the leader of the pack. Nice guy, had no social life, but nice guy.

"Yeah," a long haired man began, "we almost lost the hard drive. There was software in place to format it if you put in the wrong password when it booted up."

"Thankfully our friend Stan used an obvious password." Mike said.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Environment." Mike said.

"It's almost like he wanted someone to hack the computer." I commented.

"Most of the files on here are pretty boring." Mike said. "Environmental files, legal documents, and personal stuff. Seemed he was big into porn too."

"Who isn't?" I asked.

"Does that mean you too, detective?" Mike asked.

I didn't give him an answer. I just smirked at him.

"Just your run of the mill porn." The long haired man said. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

"We did find a large folder with something interesting." Mike said. "It's got a lot of encrypted files on it."

"Encrypted?" I asked.

"Means we can't read them." Mike said.

"Is there a way you can?" I asked.

"Well think of it this way," Mike began, "the files are arranged like a code. If we can figure out the key to that code, we can read the files."

"So, then you guys have a lot of work ahead of you." I said. "You'll earn your paycheck well."

"Well, it's not as if we have other work to do." Mike said sarcastically.

“Yeah, but this case has top priority.” I said. “Just ask the chief.”

The key. It reminded me of the key I found in Stan's desk. I assumed it would be just as challenging finding the lock for the key as cracking the code for those files.

I left the precinct

“Detective Wade.” Cross said. “May I have a moment?”

I turned around. Lieutenant Cross was walking out of the building behind me. Janis was walking next to him.

“Lieutenant, Officer Lippmann.” I said.

“You're not going to like what I have to say.” Cross said. “But I don't care. I'm giving you a partner.”

“Don't think I can handle the case on my own?” I asked.

“No, I don't.” He said.

“Oh, how honest of you.” I said.

Then he said something I wasn't expecting. I had a feeling I'd be getting a new partner for a while now, but I wasn't ready for who it was.

“Janis is your new partner.” Cross said.

“A pleasure to meet you Mr. Wade.” She said.

“What?” I asked.

“I know there isn't going to be a problem here.” Cross said. “You don't want to give me any trouble about this wade.”

“No trouble at all sir.” I muttered. I wasn't looking for trouble, it had found me, but I didn't have a choice. Janis was trying to invade every part of my life. I didn't know how I felt about that. Still, it could be worse, at least she wasn't moving into my apartment.

## Chapter 6

Kate Smith

The poor housewife. Ms. Smith was my last chance to avoid looking into the alleged corruption within my precinct. It was futile putting it off, I knew it, but I wanted to believe I could find a better lead.

Her parents were waiting in an interrogation room. It was an uneasy place to be interviewed, even if you weren't a suspect. There simply wasn't any other place to talk to them. We were booked up.

The parents were in their sixties and were middle class people. The husband was in shock, still unable to accept the truth. The wife was having a difficult time. She was sobbing uncontrollably for quite a few minutes. I was familiar with their pain, it wasn't something I wanted to talk about. They probably felt the same way, except that had little choice but to talk. If not now, then eventually. Justice cried out for satisfaction.

I had gone to get some water for the Smiths. They were talking with my new partner. Mrs. Smith had calmed down.

“I still can't believe it,” Mr. Smith said.

“We're sorry for your loss,” Janis said.

“She was always a good girl,” Mrs. Smith said. “But, she never knew how to pick her men.”

“Do you think her husband is responsible?” I asked.

“He works for the Mob,” Mr. Smith said. “You tell me.”

“Why did you're daughter choose to keep her maiden name?” Janis asked.

“She liked it better,” Mrs. Smith said, “and she didn't like the sound of 'Kate Marine.’”

"I can understand," I said. There was a knock at the door. I stood up and walked over to the door. It was the lieutenant.

"Jack, I got something for you," he said. I stepped outside and closed the door.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The nerds downstairs cracked the hard drive you picked up earlier," he said. "They have some files decoded. Go check it out, let Janis talk to the Smiths."

"I'd rather stay here, if that's ok," I said.

"It's not," Cross said. "Go down to the tech lab, now. That's an order."

"Fine," I said. "Whatever you say Lieutenant."

I wasn't happy with the Lieutenant. I knew he didn't like me, but I always thought he respected me. I guess I was wrong. I'm sure he was under a lot of pressure to get the job done. The tech boys were pretty excited when I arrived.

"We were able to crack more of the hard drive," Mike said.

"Great, what did you find?" I asked.

"Lots of documents referring to some kind of cover up," Mike said.

"Involving the government?" I asked.

"No, money laundering," he said.

"Now the mob's in on this?" I said.

"Well, no, we don't think so," Mike said.

"Yeah, it looks like a secret group of investors," a technician said. "I'll pull up this document so you can read it."

The technician had the macbook booted up. He accessed one of the folders that was unlocked. There were a number of files all labeled by their creation date. The one the technician clicked on was dated two weeks ago. "Here you go," the technician said.

"Dear Mr. Decarto,

It has come to my attention by my associates that you wish to join our exclusive club. You have been recommended by Sigmund Prior. I do not know how you managed to get said recommendation, however, we will consider including you in our group.

First, you must wire two thousand dollars to our swiss account. We will provide you that account number in our next communication as well as a formal application. Once the application is finished and the money wired we will review your qualifications. The environment is quite important to us and as such we take very special precautions regarding who we accept as members. Thus our 'special' services for those who protect the environment are allowed to be available thanks to our 'banking system' and because we take such precautions.

That is all that I can tell you for now without endangering our members. Please note that should you become a member of our organization that you are not allowed to discuss even the existence of our group with anyone on the outside. Failure to comply with this rule will result in termination.

We shall contact you again in a few days. Thank you for your interest in us and I look forward to meeting with you soon."

"There's no signature," I commented.

"So, am I right or what?" The technician asked.

"Money laundering could be one of their sins," I commented, "however, I'd be more interested in finding out what their 'special services' are all about."

"Interesting stuff," Mike said.

"The environment seems to be a reoccurring theme here," I said. "Maybe that has to do with something. Maybe Stan was the main target and the judge and the housewife were collateral damage."

The boys went back to work on the computer. There were still more files to be unencrypted and I wasn't interested in speculating. I was heading back to the interrogation room to see if I could get in a few questions. By the time I got up there, the interrogation room was empty. Janis was walking down the hall and spotted me.

"Hey there," she said.

"I guess the party's over," I said.

"Don't worry about it," she said, "we didn't learn much anyway. You would have been bored."

"Nothing useful?" I asked.

"Nothing we couldn't already figure out. Except for one thing, she was a big time environmentalist. I guess activist really."

"Is that so? Well, I think we may have a connection then."

"To Stan Decarto? Why because he worked for an environmental group?"

"We have to find out if Kate knew Stan."

"Kate's parents have never heard of him."

"Doesn't mean Kate didn't know him."

"True. Are you suggesting that Kate got killed because of Stan?"

"It's possible."

"What are you not telling me? Did you learn something from the tech boys?"

I wasn't sure I could trust her. She was too good to be true. There had to be a catch somewhere. Still, all she needed to do was talk to the computer techs downstairs.

"Stan was trying to join some secret environmental group."

"Like a club?"

"Yeah, except they are into some, illegal activities. At least, that's what it looks like."

"Really?"

"I'm thinking maybe Stan learned too much and then tried to squeal."

"And this club decided to have him killed. Kate too?"

"If she knew Stan, maybe."

"Then we need to find out if Kate had any friends."

She was thinking the same thing I was. Janis filled me in on what Kate's parents had said. She was from the south. She moved back east about five years ago and met her now ex-husband. They married about two years ago. Her parents kept in touch with Kate, but she didn't talk too much about her personal life. She seemed very secretive to them.

I was sure we'd find something at Kate's house. Maybe even a clue. Janis seemed to like the idea.