

JAMES ORUI

FLASH

THE HIDDEN AGENDA

DRIVE





Constable Kumiko Sato of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is about to have her world turned upside down. When an estranged cousin shows up unannounced, bringing with her danger and deceit, Kumiko must fight to keep both of them alive as they fall into an international conspiracy. In the end, Kumiko is at risk of losing much more than her life. Her immortal soul is on the line.

FLASH DRIVE

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FLASH DRIVE
THE HIDDEN AGENDA

A novel

James Orui

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife and daughters, without whose love and support I would never have been able to complete this work.

PROLOGUE

Twelve years earlier:

I'm going to die here!

The smell of death surrounded him. He'd been knocked out before. He'd suffered concussions and been nearly killed more than once. He knew what it felt like to come to afterwards. But this was different; his senses were telling him something was horribly wrong.

The familiar splitting headache throbbed behind his eyes and back to the crown of his head. But this was somehow different, somehow more intense. *How long have I been unconscious? Am I already dead? Is this all there is?*

His mind was playing tricks on him, foggy and heavy like waking up suddenly from a dream that felt real, only to find that you aren't quite awake and the dream, or rather the nightmare won't end. Like peeling back a layer of onion only to find another layer, he kept trying to wake up but kept feeling he couldn't quite make it all the way back.

With what little consciousness he could muster he tried to focus on what he felt, what he couldn't feel and what he could and couldn't do. He couldn't move, he could barely breathe. Something was pushing heavily on his chest. He sucked hard trying to draw in any precious amount of air he could, willing himself to inhale, willing himself to live. He was becoming more and more aware of his surroundings and more and more frightened.

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With every labored breath he sucked in a rancid, heavy, chalky dust. It filled his nostrils and the back of his throat. It burned its way down his esophagus.

He'd renovated his home last year. He recalled the drywall dust that had filled the air. He hadn't meant to breathe it in, but he had, a few times. This dust felt like that but more intense and with other noxious ingredients mixed in. And something else was there too: Burning, like gas fumes but different. *What was that?*

Toxic air was burning and polluting him with every breath. He began to rummage through his vast data bank of experiences trying to sort it all out. Something told him it was important.

As he sorted through the file cabinet of his mind, exploring the experiences which made him who he was, he focused his conscience mind and took notice of everything he could. He needed to figure out where he was and what was happening to him.

The thought that it was all a lucid dream kept forcing itself into his mind. But no, the pain and the smell, *this is no dream.*

The smell, he'd smelt it before, in the Marines, during Operation Desert Storm. As he focused images started coming to mind. Diesel, dust, burnt electrical wires, and most unmistakably, inners: Copper, ammonia, rot, were the smells he most closely associated with this. People had been ripped open, people physically close to him, *but whom? And why?*

He was still in a fog. He still didn't have a clue what was going on. He kept clutching at strings of thought trying to work it all out.

Consciousness was coming back to him slowly and in waves. He'd think he was finally waking up then it would slip away. He'd feel pain and then nothing, and then pain again. The smell was coming in waves as well. Like the smell was trying to wake him but it wasn't really working.

The next wave of consciousness hit him, he panicked. *Where the hell am I? What the Hell is happening to me?*

He couldn't feel his legs. *Are they pinned?*

He took inventory. His head hurt. *At least I'm alive.*

Arms, *I can move my arms, my fingers. It hurts bad.*

Blood, I can smell blood, I can taste blood. There's something warm and sticky and fluid on my head, blood; my blood.

My chest, breathe, breathe, Oh God that hurts.

Try to yell. Call out. Shout anything. Nothing came out.

Then a whisper, then a thought, *does anyone know I'm here? Where the Hell am I?*

He prayed, said the Our Father, and then started in on the Hail Mary. He gave up and started to think. Think about what had happened. He racked his brain for any glue.

He told himself to start back at the beginning. What had he done from the time he got up in the morning? Work your way forward. Just like you told the people you used to interview. *'It may seem unimportant but there may be something, something that jumps out at you, something that seemed insignificant at the time but now explains everything.'*

His morning had been uneventful. Up at five, an hour on the elliptical trainer then plain yogurt and seeds, *God I hate that breakfast.*

Showered and shaved then dressed for the day. The car arrived at 6:45 and took me to the office. Just like any other morning. I read dispatches in the back seat, what had I read? He couldn't remember.

At the office I remember talking to some people and looking out the window. What did I see out that window? He felt it was important but he just couldn't remember.

His head was getting heavy again and he was passing in and out of consciousness. He fought to stay awake. Then he just gave up.

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* * *

Five years later:

Rolling into the office he glided to a stop in front of the large impersonal but functional desk. Very functional, too functional, made of metal with rounded corners. Not even a simulated wood top. This desk was popular with minimalists, a sleek modern look, but no character; at least he couldn't see any.

The office looked good, better than it looked before that fateful day five years earlier, when he occupied it. He may not like the desk but everything else met with his approval.

The view was as he remembered it. Facing north, no direct light shone into the room but the window was large and enough natural light entered that interior lights weren't needed on most days and were left off. This day was no exception. He breathed in the view, soaking it up before addressing his host. He'd earned that right. Paid for it with his withered legs and torn soul.

He scanned the room looking even more closely at the décor, studying it. He hadn't been here in over five years. Everything was new, everything was rebuilt. Only the view brought back any sort of memory. This wasn't really the same room after all. That room had been completely destroyed and no longer existed. This room was built when the entire wing of the building was replaced. This was a new wing, a new room. Still, a little twinge of emotion spiked somewhere in his chest and his eyes welled up just a little. He took a moment, not wanting to talk and hear his voice crack.

The silence was broken a few moments later when his host addressed him. They were friends going way back, back to the war, that last one, the last properly defined one, the last popular one, the one before the one they were in now.

The war since *his war* had been technically been two wars: Iraq and the war on terrorism. But he saw them as one. *Is it just me or do*

others see it that way? One war with multiple theaters, like WWII, only smaller.

He pulled his attention back to his host. Words needn't always be spoken between them; they knew each other that well. But now it was time to ease into the subject at hand.

"How are you holding up? I guess this is the first time you've been back here in over five years?" The man came around the impersonal desk and watched as his guest soaked up his surroundings.

"It's different, that's for sure."

"There was no sense re-building to the exact specifications it was before the incident. This space may not be as pretty, but it is functional."

"That it is. I like it actually. Except the desk, there's not enough character for me."

His host laughed, "I picked the desk myself. I wanted something functional. We've been on a bit of a budget since the incident."

He grunted his understanding of the situation. "Sorry, I don't mean to disrespect your decorating choices. It's just not my style I guess. But I can see a lot of you in it." This incited another laugh from his old friend. He laughed a little too.

He spun his chair around to face his friend, a man he'd been to war with. A major that he'd commanded back when he'd been a Marine colonel. "I was hesitant to meet here, there's much emotion. Now I find that the only thing I can relate to is the view. I always liked that view." Lush rolling hills, a national forest ran fifty miles to the north. He used to ride horses there sometimes, back when he could ride.

"I've been checking the news sources and I see that the incident remains a secret. How have you managed that after all these years?"

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“With everything else that happening close to that time people weren’t looking for this or anything else. The media was a little preoccupied in other areas. This is a secluded area and the ‘No Fly Zone’ eliminated any possibility that anyone would see the damage from the sky. We just quietly rebuilt.”

“It is nice having out of the way places. Funny how few Americans know of this place yet our enemies were able enough to find it.”

“It’s secluded, fairly private, but it never was a national secret. One just has to be motivated enough to find what they’re looking for. Most people wouldn’t have given a second thought to a second administration building. Of course that was back then we counted a little too much on people lacking the motivation to dig up little gems like this.”

“What about the perpetrators?”

“We were able to link them to a domestic organization, a militia group. We never did have enough evidence to make a criminal case which would stick. So we opted to handle them differently. They won’t be driving any rented cube vans up to government buildings anymore.”

“Sounds like I don’t want to know the details.”

“Well let’s just say that there are certain lines we weren’t willing to cross, but others were a little blurry.”

“Yes, true enough.” Enough reminiscing, time to get down to business; “So, have you considered my proposal?”

“Yes, yes I have. It’s very detailed and ambitious,” he paused; “and dangerous.”

“But what do you think?”

“I’ve gone over your figures and compared them to our internal audit numbers. You’re right; the domestic security budget numbers are way down from a few years ago. Our analysts feel that the war is

making a difference and that the threat level is lower than it has been since 9-11. In the past few years we've been cut back domestically and told to focus our attention on external threats. The FBI has resumed full primary responsibility for domestic matters of national security. Of course they always thought they were the only real player in town."

"How do you feel about that?"

"A little scared to tell you the truth, we're slowly returning to funding levels pre 9-11. Clearly that wasn't sufficient or 9-11 wouldn't have happened."

Picking up the written submission the host said, "This type of proposal isn't unheard of. Throughout history, in this country and abroad, people have had similar plans to swing the tide of popular opinion, and in this case, significant cash flow. But we'd have to be careful.

"We'd have to limit this operation to a few select people. And I like your idea of recruiting civilian help. Not that they'd have to know how patriotic they really were. As you suggest, we'll let greed be their motivator.

"There is a risk that other operational service lines will detect this project and attempt to disrupt it. That could be dangerous. Especially since we can't let anyone know what's really happening, and who's really behind it. We may inadvertently be pitting personnel from various agencies against each other."

"That can't be helped."

"I know."

"Do you support the plan then?"

The man hesitated looking long and hard at his guest. He'd weighed the risk. If they lost and got caught they'd have to reveal all or risk being prosecuted for treason. If they got away with it they'd be heroes who no one would ever know about.

James Orui

“The funding is a little sketchy.”

“I thought I’d made that clear in my proposal, this project would be free market funded. A sin tax if you will. Just like Iran Contra, we use the profits from the drug trade to fund the project. Those profits are untraceable.”

“Yeah, about that, I’m a little hesitant there. I don’t like the idea of getting into the bed with organized crime. And the prospect of being even a little bit responsible for the proliferation the illicit drug trade doesn’t thrill me either.”

“Don’t fool yourself Director. We’re already in bed with organized crime and have been for a very long time. The rules of engagement are well established. In this case they won’t know who is calling the shots. They’ll be expendable resources.

“As far as the drug issue, I believe that many of the terrorist threats we face both internationally and domestically are also drug dealers. It’s their source of income and it comes with the added benefit of weakening our society. We can’t continue to fight them within the confines of our justice system or our individual morals. To win means everything; if we lose we lose it all. We can’t afford to lose. I see this as an opportunity to really clean things up, do some good. In the short term there may be some collateral damage in various forms, but in the long run we will do a lot of good. Think of it as bitter tasting medicine.”

More hesitation, then, “I’ve already started the process. This operation should be up and running in a few months. I’ve placed one of my best men on the job. But it’s come at a price. He keeps all the profit he can and retires wealthy after the operation is complete. To make this work he has to give up everything, he has to risk everything, even more than you or I.”

“Agreed.”

“This will end up being an extremely long term project, years in the making as a matter of fact. Then who knows how long we will

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need to keep it going. And the exit strategy, that could get complicated. It's not too late to call it off. Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"Positive."

"It's a go then."

PART I

ONE

The present day:

KUMIKO: *'The victim was found in the corner of the living room. Pieces of his skull had ricocheted off walls and one piece was located down the hall. The body was badly decomposed...'*

OK, maybe it's not Pulitzer Prize quality but what do you expect? It's a police report. I'm Kumiko, Constable Kumiko Sato of the RCMP, Royal Canadian Mounted Police. My friends call me Kumi.

I figured I should start my account of these events at the beginning. Or at least on the day I got involved.

I wasn't having the best day of my career to tell you the truth. I was tired and just a little ornery. That report I was writing had to do with my second call of the day. I was still one call behind and I was having difficulty concentrating to say the least.

I was at one of my favorite little hide-a-ways. Places I like to go off the beaten track when I need to get some paperwork done. This was at the end of a gravel road, just a little turn around really. On night-shifts I patrol here to roust the kids who come up here to drink or get high or make-out.

It's on a bluff overlooking the Fraser River. You get to it by driving down a path through some trees that cut through an old abandoned farm. I think that only reason it hasn't been developed is the road access would be difficult. So the location is a little secluded and that makes it a favorite with the teenagers.

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OK, so you might think it's mean to ruin some guys night when he's getting friendly with his girl, but I gotta make sure everyone's here of their own free will, right?

Anyway, no one much comes up here during the day so I come here to get away from the hustle and bustle of downtown Surrey. British Columbia that is, not the one in England. I work in the Whalley area. It's kind of a rough neighborhood. I once heard a local emergency room doctor who'd also worked in some big US cities say that Whalley was worse. I couldn't say one way or the other, Whalley's all I know. I've been here since I became a police officer.

I can usually concentrate when I come up here but that day it was rough. I'd been up most of the night getting rid of an arrogant lawyer I'd been dating. Only three weeks and he was acting like it was the end of the world. I should have walked away but I guess I'm a bit of a sap. So I was dog tired by the time I had to get up for work. To top it off the three calls I'd taken so far that shift were brutal. Not that they were difficult to investigate or anything, they just got under my skin, all over my boots, and into my clothes. I'll explain.

I started with the early shift, 6 am. I hadn't even been able to attend morning briefing when I caught my first call. Night-shift constables were guarding a marijuana grow-op. They were waiting for the affiant to complete an Information to Obtain a Search Warrant and present it to a Justice of the Peace. Their shift was over and they needed to be relieved. My corporal looked up from his desk and there I was, so guess who got picked. Note to self: *Make yourself scarce before morning coffee.*

I didn't figure I'd be there long as the affiant had been working on the Information for a few hours at that point. Once he was done he'd hunt down a Justice of the Peace and have the warrant signed. Then I'd just have to wait for the 'Green Team' to come and tear it down. The main investigator, who also happened to be the affiant, would handle the exhibits and hopefully gather enough evidence to charge the homeowner. All I needed to do was provide scene security for a couple of hours.

I got to the house at about 6:15 and strolled straight inside, usually not a problem. Night-shift had been inside already. I hadn't donned a respirator or anything because I was going to be upstairs and usually the grow-ops were downstairs and apart from the smell they were tolerable, for a while. Not today. I was immediately overwhelmed by heavy humid dust and mold filled air.

As I said, usually these houses were tolerable. Most were newer homes where the owner felt that he could pay some bills by harvesting a crop or two of marijuana in the basement. Then they'd clean up the house the best they could and sell it to some unsuspecting chump and buy their next house outright with their profits. The explosive housing market in the Vancouver area over the past several years had made this a common occurrence.

Unless you entered the basement you were probably going to be fine. Today though, it felt as if I'd walked into a swirling dust cloud. The ventilation was horrible. Mold and other allergians hung heavy in the air. My chest tightened, my eyes watered, I could feel dust and God knows what else enter my nostrils as I breathed. I had to fight the urge to scratch my exposed skin and rub my eyes. My flesh irritated instantly from the unnatural air.

I immediately bolted from the house. I went to my car and retrieve a small respirator from the trunk. I pulled on gloves and a ball cap and some coveralls big enough to fit over my uniform. Still I had some exposed skin around my neck and ears. Even my scalp under my cap and the skin under my clothes were screaming for a scratch within minutes. I was there for two hours.

After leaving it took me a half an hour to type up my part of the file. All the time I was cringing at the stench of the house that lingering on my clothes. My skin was irritated and I was dying for a shower.

I'd just finished typing up my part of the electronic file and had barely hit send when I caught my next call, a suicide.

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As you can probably guess some suicides are worse than others. This one wasn't pretty at all.

A male loner had decided that life was too tough to endure any longer. He'd put a hunting rifle in his mouth and splattered his brains over the south living room wall of his two bedroom 900 square foot rental. That would have been bad enough, but he had done it fourteen days earlier when the temperature had dipped to near freezing for a day before shooting up again. The heat in his house was cranked up high. It seems he liked his environment particularly toasty.

The landlord arrived at the house minutes before calling the police. He'd been looking for his tenant who was overdue on his rent and was nowhere to be found. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Vomiting just clear of the back step within moments of opening the door as the overpowering stench of decaying flesh hit him, he didn't dare venture inside. Instead he returned to his car and called the police. Unlike the landlord, I didn't have the option of retreat.

I spent another two hours at that scene until the coroner attended, ruled it a suicide, and given permission for the body removal service to haul the corpse to the morgue. In the meantime I'd been able to enlist some help from a junior constable to canvas the neighbors and take statements from the last people known to have seen the victim. But I was stuck inside examining the scene, taking photographs, and bagging evidence like the suicide note and the victim's many, many prescriptions. Afterwards my clothes smelt of decaying flesh, mold, and raw weed. Lovely!

When the body was finally lifted it came apart as the removal service was placing it on their gurney. I'd finally lucked out, the coroner had told the service to bring two people and this time they'd listened. I was in the bedroom; the corpse was in the living room. I heard the 'Ah F___!' and visualized the inners spilling out through the victims back. I'd seen it before. Yuk!

The carpets and drapes would have to be replaced. For that matter I was seriously thinking about burning my uniform.

I had saved the initial draft of that report in the work queue to review later. You don't want to leave anything out of a death report and my head wasn't fully in the game having been up so late the night before.

OK, so maybe I was being a bit of a girly girl, but I could swear the odor was in my clothes and I really wanted to change my uniform. My corporal must have felt sorry for me because he let me go home to get a fresh one. I live in Surrey, but not in Whalley, so I was back before too long. I had just gotten back into my district when I caught my third call, a school reporting bruising on a kindergartener. The thought alone made me cringe. I hate child abuse cases.

First stop was the school where I met the social worker from the Ministry of Child and Family Development. I gotta say I wasn't impressed. He could best be described as well-seasoned and very rough around the edges: Extremely gruff from years dealing with the worst of the worst dysfunctional families. To match his lovely disposition he was in his mid-forties, quite out of shape and a sweater. Not that I usually judge people by their outward appearances but all things considered I'd be happy when we parted ways.

So Mr. Grouchy Pants social worker proceeds to take this little girl into custody of the Ministry. Fair enough, that's his job and it had to be done. But the girl is five years old and terrified, and he's all business; doesn't even talk to her. So it's down to me to try and comfort her. As a cop that's part of the job so I guess I can't complain. But in my opinion this social worker needs to sharpen his social skills a little. I mean really, this little girl's life was about to be turned upside down. Before the day was over she would be examined by a strange doctor and placed in foster care, quite possibly never seeing her real family again. All I could do is pray she'd get a good caring home; that she wouldn't be uprooted every so many months and bounced around from home to home until she was old enough for the system to put her out on her own without the support structure a

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stable family offered. But at least she'd have a better chance than she would have in an abusive household. She may even be one of the lucky ones and land in a stable long term home right away.

But that was someone else's worry. I can't save the world. My next stop was the family home to interview the mother along with Mr. Personality.

It was a nasty place: Not just a home but a place of business where contradictory signs hung from a broken down fence. "Open for Business - Welcome to BUZAN Nursery" on one sign "Keep out - No Trespassing" on another.

A muddy driveway with deep ruts snaked its way between an opening in a dilapidated chain link fence. Dwarf palm trees were scattered around the front yard, many with hand written price tags tied to them.

After dodging several car swallowing mud holes we reached a bungalow about as run-down as the rest of the yard. Tinted glass chips embedded in rough stucco was the siding covering the top portion of the house, while faded brown stain on old wood covered the lower third. How that look could have ever been in style God only knows!

We parked on the hard packed grass in front of the house and climbed the five cement steps leading to the front door. There wasn't enough room to stand to either side of the door so we were forced to knock and take a few steps down to at least try and maintain officer safety in the event some crazed fool came out at us with a knife or a gun.

No one answered. We could hear a TV. Through the front window behind a thin sheer drape we could see a couch and a head. It was moving. But there was no acknowledgment of the knock.

I knocked again and yelled, "RCMP, open up!" still no response.

I waited a half a minute and decided that we'd have to go in, "This is the RCMP we're coming in!"

I turned the knob and pushed the door open with my left hand and instinctively moved my right hand down towards my gun and rested it on the butt. I had just stepped inside when one hundred and ten pounds of muscle and snarling teeth came running into the living room heading straight towards me. I drew down on a mother Rottweiler protecting her pups.

I couldn't retreat; Mr. Unsociable Social Worker was blocking the entrance. Somehow I could sense that she wasn't going to attack, but just in case I kept my 9 mm leveled at the beast's head while I spoke softly and moved into the room. Then I stepped on something sticky.

The odor hit me.

I glanced down.

The living room floor was a solid mat of dog excrement. Just great!

A barefooted 14 year old boy sat playing video games on the couch, completely oblivious to the filth and the stench and totally unconcerned with the presence of a social worker and police officer who had just appeared in his house, the latter with her gun drawn.

"Tie your dog up, now!" I ordered. The boy didn't move.

His mother appeared from a back room apologized profusely and hauled the dog off to a bedroom before returning, also barefooted, to the living room.

"She's just had pups and things have been a little hectic around here. But she'd never really hurt anyone. So, what can I do for you today officer?" The politeness seemed a little out of place. Most people would be a tad more freaked out coming into their living room and seeing a police constable with her gun pointed at their dog. But I'd take politeness.

Looking at the mother I heard banjos start playing in my head; it changed to Black Sabbath when I saw the video game the 14 year old was playing. The filth and accompanying stench had caused Mr.

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Personality to retreat to the fresh air of the stoop. I couldn't hear because of noise of the video game but I suspected he'd vomited.

I explained to the mother that I was there only to assist the Ministry and when the social worker returned I allowed him to take over. It didn't go well. Did I mention he didn't have much tact?

Things got messy. The mother went hysterical upon learning that her daughter was in Ministry custody. When the social worker proceeded to apprehend the 14 year old she went beyond hysterics. I had to intervene and physically restrain her when she tried to rush out of the room, bad idea.

Many police officers have been killed by not adequately controlling their 'clients' in volatile situations. Visions of two dead Mounties, pictures from a very real incident that was used at the academy to teach officer safety, rushed to the forefront my mind. They'd let their 'client' leave the room, probably just to get a jacket or something that seemed benign at the time, he or she had returned with a rifle. And poof, two dead Mounties, two families left without fathers and husbands, sons and brothers. Nothing similar was going to happen here today.

The boy, as it turned out, was a little challenged and no stranger to the system. The mother, highly challenged in my opinion, couldn't figure out what she'd done wrong. According to her the bruises on her youngest child, already in custody, had come from the dog. In her mind that somehow made it OK.

I was glad to get outta there. After resolving that mess I went to the office and hosed the doggy-do off my shoes. My pants weren't so easily remedied. Soiled where the pant meets the shoe, I'd have to go for my third pair of the day. I was just about to head home when I remembered my dry-cleaning that had probably been returned to the detachment.

Finding a fresh pair of pants I changed, logged myself busy writing files with dispatch, and heading out to my favorite writing spot. Normally those files wouldn't have been such a big deal. I've

been to worse. But three crappy files in a row after almost zero sleep the night before and now going on seven hours without food makes Kumiko a grumpy girl: Just saying.

By now concentration was getting difficult to come by. I rolled the window down for fresh air; the car heater wasn't even running. Although it was the middle of winter it had been a warm one. No snow at all and not much rain to speak of. Currently the temperature was a pleasant 15 degrees Celsius under sunny skies. I closed my eyes for just a moment and breathed in the cool fresh air.

Gravel crunched, I was no longer alone. My eyes popped open. Glancing in my side view mirror I saw the source of the noise. *L'Shaunda, crap! I don't need this right now.* I thought.

Now I love L'Shaunda Rideout, she's one of my best friends and has been since training. We're close. We see each other all the time on and off duty. Off duty we train usually twice a week with Frank, L'Shaunda husband, who's a 5th Dan black belt in Hapkido. Although we have never been officially tested Frank believes we're at the same level he is. I don't know about that, but I can hold my own in a fight.

L'Shaunda's originally from Jamaica but she grew up in Vancouver. She's one of the neatest people I know. But she loves playing match-maker, always trying to fix me up with someone. The last experiment hadn't gone well: A lawyer from Cloverdale. Way too pushy and arrogant for my liking, the same one I'd stayed up half the night dumping. After the day I'd had thus far facing another match-making attempt was just too much to take.

L'Shanda circled around in front of my car and drove up to my open window. "Hey sweetie," she said with a big smile. "I got you a double double, just like you like it." She handed a medium coffee through the open window.

"Thanks." Big smile, "You didn't have to ya know." I couldn't help myself. L'Shaunda's smile always softened my mood.

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“I figured I owed you one. Not that I’m sucking up or anything. But I heard about you and Dean. I didn’t realize he was such a jerk.”

“I don’t know what you heard but...”

“I heard enough.”

I decided to play it down. “To be completely honest it was more me. It’s a lot of work having someone in your life and I’m just not ready for it.”

“Kumi honey look, I know that no one will ever replace Mike. But he’s gone. You’ve got to move on.”

I’d heard this a thousand times before, but still the mention of my deceased husband sent a flush of emotion surging through me. With the day I was having I wanted to get mad, yell, swear, scream hysterically or just drive away. But L’Shaunda meant well and I couldn’t be rude to her. I forced a smile but felt it fading as I thought about Mike, and the years we’d had spent together.

Mike had also been a Mountie. No matter how long it was I don’t think I’ll ever be fully over him. We’d met in college, joined the RCMP together and went through police training at the same time. We were married soon after graduation. No kids, but that had been planned.

Mike had been shot and killed the line of duty five years ago. It happened during a raid on a gang-banger’s house. He’d been on ERT (the Emergency Response Team), the RCMP’s answer to SWAT.

I took a deep breath, renewed my efforts to smile, and lied. “It’s not that. I’m just used to being on my own. Please don’t keep setting me up with guys. I like my life. I have my career, my sports, my side business, my sister and brother and their families and of course you and Frank and the kids. I don’t need anyone, really. I like my alone time too much.”

“So you’ve said. But I know this guy. Now don’t go rolling your eyes. He’s really nice. A doctor...”

FLASH DRIVE THE HIDDEN AGENDA

I let my head roll back: Oh God please. This week can't get any worse.

TWO

He sensed something, but didn't know what. He'd had moments like this from time to time: Rare, unsettling moments of heightened perceptual clarity when he was hypersensitive to his surroundings without knowing why. He couldn't say if he subconsciously picking up on something in his environment, or he was just on edge for some unexplained reason. In the past when he'd had these moments they'd often come to nothing, other times all Hell would break loose.

Walking along the dirty uneven sidewalk towards his destination he had a sudden feeling of being completely alone and vulnerable. It sent a chill through his bones.

Evaporating as it struck the hot metal of a Seattle City Light electrical transformer box which clearly wasn't functioning properly; the light rain which was falling turned to mist and rose like a fog. Pushed by a light breeze it drifted across the sidewalk as it rose to meet and diffuse light from street lamps which were just coming on in the twilight, giving them a haloed look and the evening an eerie feel. The fog played games with his mind. *That was it. I'm just a little spooked. Nothing more,* he told himself.

It had been an isolated shower and was almost over, a singular cloud moving through, sprinkling the ground before moving on. He could see breaks in the clouds, pink streaks mixed with darker clouds and an ever darkening sky further to the east.

As he approached the crack shack his uneasiness piqued, something was definitely wrong. His mind flashed to thoughts of his wife and son. Regrets and hopes and plans grabbed his attention and stole his focus. He hadn't seen his family in months.

What started out as a six week venture was now into its second year and Allison Shepherd was not impressed with the sporadic short

visits she had with her husband. Little Andy was growing bigger every day and next year would be starting grade school. Matt knew he had to get out, he had finally found his ticket. This was all going to end soon. He just had to survive the weekend.

Had Matt Shepherd known what awaited him behind that door he surely would not have entered, but he did.

He opened the door and looked at the faces of the people looking back at him. His stomach tightened.

* * *

The night was warm for early February. The jet stream, a fast flowing river of suspended air which typically separates warm and cold air masses was just north of the Queen Charlotte Islands off the British Columbian Coast at the southern edge of the Alaskan Panhandle. Seattle, Washington was experiencing a run of good weather which had lasted for some time. It was a pleasant 60 degrees.

The evening news had reported that a few isolated showers should be expected as scattered clouds drifted through, but outside the Homeland Security Offices the sky was clear. It would be a perfect night for star gazing, if one could get far enough away from the city lights.

Supervisory Special Agent Robert Baynes the third, LLB, son of Senator Baynes, sat at his desk on the third floor of the Homeland Security Building sipping coffee. In addition to their regular offices in downtown Seattle, the Federal Bureau of Investigation shared space in this building.

His office was spacious and comfortable. He had lucked out when this project came up. The recently renovated corner office had been vacated by its former occupant who had accepted a promotion and transfer to Washington just days before Baynes had been scheduled to move in. Up until then they hadn't been able to settle on a spot to stick the project commander. He had feared he'd be shuffled into the corner of a room with twenty other cubicles, or maybe into

some renovated storage closet with no windows. But now he had one of the best digs in the building, one of the few with an outer and an inner office, more space than he was used to and more than he really needed, but he wasn't complaining. The only thing old in the office was the solid wood desk. But it had character and it was in good shape and he liked the style and the feel of it.

Normally Baynes would have left the office hours ago but this assignment was keeping him at his desk late into the evening. He wasn't the only one. On the same floor in different offices an army of FBI, DEA and ATF agents, along with about fifty civilian employees, were monitoring cell phone communications from across the Northern Border.

The beauty of it was they didn't even need a warrant. Canada was foreign soil and Canadians don't have the same protection under US law as citizens do. So long as the communications didn't originate or terminate in the United States they were fair game. If a call to the over two dozen numbers they were monitoring were to involve cross border telecommunications, Baynes' team would get an emergency warrant under provisions of various Homeland Security Acts passed since 9-11 and they could still use the information they gathered while awaiting the warrant.

This assignment was the biggest of Baynes' twenty year career. From their offices in the Homeland Security Building south of Seattle proper, they were monitoring drug traffickers who they believed were also involved in the illegal weapons trade and were connected to various groups who were on watch lists for suspected terrorist activities or sympathies.

The DEA and ATF had been working their respective mandates separately for years. Both agencies had developed intelligence that gangs from Canada were trafficking into the United States. They'd often take down traffickers with the assistance of the Washington State Troopers but until recently they hadn't joined forces. The turning point came when Troopers independently intercepted a drug runner from Canada and discovered a multitude of weapons secreted

within the vehicle. His interrogation led to intelligence that pointed at a single source providing not only drugs, but weapons to subversive groups within the United States. Subsequent traffic stops resulted in further arrests, more interrogations, corroborating information, and additional intelligence. Eventually the authorities decided that a joint forces task force was the way to go.

Law enforcement had known for years that organized crime syndicates and gangs from British Columbia supplied most of the high grade cannabis marijuana, cocaine, crack-cocaine, methamphetamine and other dangerous drugs to the Pacific North West and well into California. Gangs from British Columbia were also known to be connected in some fashion to traditional organized crime and international arms dealers. But this investigation had now shown a definite connection to out-law motorcycle clubs north and south of the border. The FBI now had a solid link to what they had known for years.

But as always in law enforcement, it's not what you know, it's what you can prove that counts. This knowledge had allowed the FBI's Joint Forces Operation (JFO) to expand its wiretaps and cell phone intercepts to many of the Night Raiders Motorcycle Club's Vancouver and Seattle chapter members, members who were very active on both sides of the Boarder.

This project was now in its third month. Although they had produced a lot of useful criminal intelligence, they had as yet failed to produce a solid link to any planned terrorist acts on US soil.

The three independent informants, all drug traffickers busted in separate operations over the past year had all been from Canada and had been members of two crime syndicates previously thought to have been reviles. Each informant had passed on information that people, who may have been peripheral players in various plots of domestic terrorism in both in Canada and the United States spanning back over forty years were meeting with new more extreme groups with international ties. The common belief was that these extremist

James Orui

groups were becoming more active and were planning attacks within the US.

As usual Baynes would pass along any information he deemed useful to Canadian police and intelligence communities via his contact at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police divisional headquarters in Vancouver. That part of his job seemed to be a daily occurrence. The RCMP couldn't use the information without making their own inquiries. After all, it was gathered as a result of 'illegal' wiretaps by a foreign nation.

Since the early 1980's US law enforcement and intelligence agencies have been obligated to turn over information useful to the Canadian police after the CIA was *caught* using a satellite to spy on Canadians.

Initially the government of the day in Canada feigned shocked indignation at such a violation of trust between nations considered to be the closest of friends. But the Canadians knew that their security as a nation was not compromised in the least from US spying efforts in Canada. So, in a bizarre secret deal struck with the US Federal government, and the CIA specifically, the Canadian government agreed not to blow the whistle on US spying efforts in Canada to the media, or take any diplomatic or trade action, in exchange for a few concessions.

One concession was that none of the information gained would be used to benefit US private sector companies. Another concession was that the US would share all the information they gathered which could be helpful to the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service or to Canadian police. The final concession was that the US would not engage in spying on any Canadian government agency or seek to obtain any official Canadian Government secret.

The only concession that really mattered was the concession to share information. The other two had been nothing more than window dressing, smoke and mirrors, and both governments knew it.

CIA and other US intelligence agencies' spying efforts in Canada have always focused on subversive groups and foreign countries such as the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, who were considered to be dangerous to both Canada and the US. As such, the US was never a threat to Canadian national security because they never considered Canada as a nation, or as a political entity, to be a threat to the US. Helping Canadian agencies maintain national security actually benefited the United States, after all, the two countries shared almost identical cultures north and south of the border. Despite this agreement and the willingness to share information the United States had no plans to stop spying on the Canadian government; they just planned not to get caught again.

This agreement resulted in a vast amount of information which was now available to Canadian police and the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) at virtually zero cost to the Canadian Government. Canadians got to keep the illusion that the United States was their best friend and the United States got to keep spying on whomever they wished.

The truth is the United States benefited greatly from this agreement. Keeping Canada secure and happy and onside with US policy meant keeping the United States secure as well: A win, win situation if ever there was one. The strategist who dreamed up leaking the satellite spying scheme to the Canadians was a genius. Without it they never would have had received approval to share the breadth of information they were now sharing.



Constable Kumiko Sato of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is about to have her world turned upside down. When an estranged cousin shows up unannounced, bringing with her danger and deceit, Kumiko must fight to keep both of them alive as they fall into an international conspiracy. In the end, Kumiko is at risk of losing much more than her life. Her immortal soul is on the line.

FLASH DRIVE

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