

# SECRETS

**A HIGH-IMPACT SUSPENSE CRIME THRILLER**



G. Paul Grondin



*A genetically engineered monster kills three people in the tourist town of Bentley Harbor. The town fathers hire Jack Tanner to help hunt down and destroy it. But how many half-human, half-animal beasts are there? As Jack's investigation unfolds, the town's well-kept secrets are revealed. The lives of the power elite will never be the same in Bentley Harbor where there's not enough moral fiber to sew a quilt for a flea.*

# SECRETS

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# **SECRETS**

**G. Paul Grondin**

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# 1

## EARLY SUMMER 1989

The phone's uninvited sound pierced the stillness of the night. It was unusual for Jack Tanner to sleep through the second ring let alone the third and fourth. Finally, his body stirred.

Jack dreamt of Lauren Smith, a friend of eight years and at one time, a live-in girlfriend. They were in a nondescript room with sparse furniture, no windows and bleak walls. The vivid expression of terror on Lauren's face left an indelible impression on his mind—something he would later recall in a flash of *déjà vu*.

He turned to Lauren recognizing the fear on her face and knew it was out of character, for in reality, few things had ever scared the intelligent Lauren Smith. When his mind returned to the conscious world the memory of the dream lingered for a few brief seconds in flashes of black and white.

"I hope this is important," said Jack into the phone. His words were barely audible, but each word held a certain degree of consternation. His eyes registered the time—3:05 AM.

Ben McKinley of the FBI, a specialist in criminal profiling, offered no excuse or apology. "Jack, you have to get over here."

Jack's mind snapped alert. "Is there a break in the Doc Serial Killer Case?"

"It's something else, Jack. It's impossible to go over the details on the phone." A sea of confusion, slowly becoming a nightmare, engulfed McKinley.

Jack pushed the covers away from his body as his feet found the blue-carpeted floor. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the Old Mill, off Mill Creek Road." Jack heard the audible mixture of voices and noises in the background mingled

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with the raspy quality of the cellular. "It's like we just discovered the missing link."

"The what?"

"It's too complicated, Jack. Just get here, ASAP."

"OK, I'll be there in twenty." Jack forced his body out of bed heading to the master bathroom.

Jack drove a sleek, green Jaguar XK8 convertible. He stopped at an all-night Starbucks and picked up two 'venti' coffees and tipped the pretty young lady who considered Jack to be her favorite late-night customer.

At the age of thirty-nine, although he appeared younger, Jack Tanner was an unassuming 5'11", with broad shoulders, agile body and slightly longer than normal arms. His black hair was short and neatly brushed off his high forehead. His light hazel eyes were intelligent, alert and if nothing else, inquisitive.

Jack's three hobbies were collecting vintage wines, classic movies and cars ranging from a 1947 Mercury Woody to a 1968 Ford Shelby GT 350 convertible.

He didn't regard himself as being good looking, although he was. Instead, he thought of himself as a simple man with simple needs, but he was the only person who held this point of view. Lauren Smith once teased him saying if he ever looked up the word 'complex' in the dictionary, he would see an eight by eleven glossy of himself.

Jack survived his own stupidity during his days of youthful exuberance and the Vietnam War, as well as, a divorce and another gun-shy escape from the altar. There were no children, something his mother never understood or accepted. Jack decided to leave Talbot Wakefield University, named after his grandfather, before his last year of premed in a quest to find himself, which shocked his parents. It wasn't the identity crisis that shocked them, but Jack no longer planned to become a heart surgeon like his father.

When his wife realized he was serious about leaving school she abandoned him since all the benefits of being a

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heart surgeon's wife had dissolved into obscurity. At least, that's what she told all her friends who did not know Jack had caught her in bed with his best friend. Jack told no one of his wife's extramarital affair. In the late fall, Jack joined the Army in search of himself, which even baffled his closest friends. His parents were in a state of bewilderment.

He turned onto Mill Creek Road and accelerated to 65 mph.

Jack viewed himself as a link in the chain of the justice system. He never pondered how important his role was, but knowing he had positively contributed to a number of lives over the years was enough of a reward to carry him into places where angels feared to tread. Jack was about to place himself in harm's way, although it was the furthest thought from his mind.

Cresting the hill at the approach to Mill Creek the Jaguar almost levitated off the asphalt. His foot hit the brake slowing the convertible to a crawl as he turned into the gravel parking area.

High-powered lights, fed by portable generators, blazed across the rear of the Old Mill and at the far edge of the clearing. In the distance, light flickered off the yellow crime scene tape. Uniformed men and women idled around a sea of police cruisers, unmarked cars and pickup trucks.

Holding the two large cups of coffee Jack emerged from the Jag into the humid pine scented air.

A State Trooper, who should have been playing on the defensive line for the Green Bay Packers, confronted him. "Sorry sir, this is a restricted area."

"And why would it be restricted?" asked Jack casually.

"Just following orders, sir. And my orders are no civilians beyond this point."

"Jack, do you know what the hell's going on?"

Jack turned to greet the frustrated expression of Pat Benny, a friend and senior reporter for *The Bentley Harbor Examiner*.

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Pat Benny's eyes looked like he had been at an all-night poker game with the boys. Pat's sandy brown hair looked as if it had been assembled using a comb with half its teeth missing. In his mid thirties, his stomach left no doubt how much he enjoyed Estelle's cooking. Both Pat and Estelle had gained weight over the years, and they thought it was sexy—beauty was in the eye of the beholder. At 5' 9" with broad shoulders, a sports jacket buttoned in the front usually hid his stomach that gracefully spilled over his belt.

Turning his eyes away from the sea of police vehicles Jack said, "I'm just as clueless, Pat. Been here long?"

"Almost thirty minutes. Decided to drive through the country on the way home from a poker game at Matt's. Saw the lights and stopped. Funny thing though."

"What's that?" Jack knew an important piece of the puzzle was about to drop into place.

"Had the radio on the police band out of habit." The piece of the jigsaw moved slowly. "Didn't hear a word. This army you see before you arrived under radio silence."

"Anybody taken out?"

"Not in the time I've been here," offered Pat. "One of those coffee's mine?"

"Sorry, didn't see your name on the invite list." Jack turned to the rookie trooper whose expressionless demeanor was enough to threaten anyone from challenging his authority. "I'm only a delivery boy," smiled Jack. "I suggest you get on your radio and tell Special Agent Benjamin McKinley of the FBI his coffee's getting cold."

"It's OK, Trooper." Ben McKinley's voice came out of the darkness before his body appeared in full view. The rookie trooper nodded and remained silent at his no-one-goes-beyond-me position. Jack extended the coffee. "Thanks, Jack."

McKinley was a fifty-five year old African-American with a trim and muscular body. His dark brown eyes were extremely intelligent and only friendly when he liked you. He had climbed the ladder in the Bureau by hard work, studying criminology



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and psychology at night school when time allowed, eventually achieving a Master's degree.

"Agent McKinley, what's going on?"

"Sorry Pat, but it's too early to comment. You'll have to talk to Chief Amsted in the morning."

"Where's the Chief now?" asked Pat looking beyond the Special Agent.

"Somewhere back there."

The word of the FBI should have been enough to cause a reporter to retreat with temporary satisfaction, but Pat was a familiar face with political connections and a reputation for fairness and accuracy. "Just tell me what's behind the FBI's involvement here. It's got to be serious or the Chief wouldn't have called you in, and I mean you personally."

*What's going on?* thought Jack. *State Troopers, FBI, Sheriff's Department and Town Cops?*

The Mill Creek area sat on the edge of Conaco Pharmaceutical Inc. property at the northern tip of the town limits. Normally, two rank and file agents would have responded to a police request, gathered information and then reported to their supervisor. However, this never happened in the early hours of the investigation under the jurisdiction of Chief Amsted, due to the shocking complexity of the crime.

Ben McKinley was not only a specialist in high-profile crimes, but also highly regarded by the Bureau when it came to the analysis of criminal investigations involving what the public would consider to be bizarre circumstances. He had been sent to Bentley Harbor, Wisconsin, just north of Green Bay and over the line into Door County by the FBI's Washington office to talk with Jack Tanner concerning the Doc Serial Killer Case.

When the first two cops responded to a call from Harmon Kendal, a local citizen, they expected to meet him at the scene. However, after arriving they couldn't understand what exactly had taken place. Their initial reaction was shock and disbelief. One of the officers vomited on his shoes, cursed, backed up and fell backward. He had tripped over a body part.

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Harmon Kendal was now a victim—a very dead victim. His injuries appeared minor in comparison to the other two bodies. Harmon had a badly broken shoulder and arm, lacerations to the face and chest, a mutilated hand, as if it had been squeezed in a vice and a broken neck. His body lay in a twisted heap on the wet grass; his head turned two hundred and seventy degrees.

Two other officers arrived as backup, and their reaction was much the same. The fifth police officer to arrive was five years from retirement. Similar to Jack, he had seen action in the Vietnam War. He had witnessed the gruesome effects of bodies being blown apart, faces made unrecognizable and napalm bombs incinerating men, women and children, but this crime scene possessed a bizarre and unfathomable twist. This veteran cop summoned Police Chief Victor Amsted, who attended his brother-in-law's birthday party.

Initially, Chief Amsted thought his rank-and-file troops were either drunk, playing a joke, crazy or all three. The Chief gave orders to seal off the area before he left the party. When he arrived at the crime scene he looked at the three victims, cursed violently and made one phone call creating a chain reaction. Now, a dragnet of silence covered the scene of this unbelievable and gruesome crime. Anyone who talked to the public would have to answer to Chief Amsted personally—a threat even the Sheriff's Department and State Police respected.

## 2

Harmon Kendal, an electrician by trade, enjoyed a simple life. There were the Green Bay Packers and hunting season in the fall, baseball games in the summer—the local semiprofessional team, not the major leagues—active membership in the National Rifle Association and membership at the Bentley Harbor Sportsmen Club, but nothing compared to his one and only pride and joy—Casey.

Casey first met Mark Bowman at the public tennis courts at the end of her high school junior year, only six weeks ago. Many of the town's folk knew about Mark's past. He was 'no-good' from the word go. However, after Mark's return to Bentley Harbor from serving a six-month jail term he had changed due to a new found relationship with Jesus Christ. Now he appeared to be a fun loving intelligent young man whose smile had caused Casey to give him the benefit of the doubt when it came to his dubious past.

Being a member of the X-Generation, Casey's philosophy was 'live and let live.' Nevertheless, Casey never deluded herself when it came to her father. He was tough, but she understood tough-love. Harmon's toughness did not come from his physical size of 5' 8", 165 lbs. His dark eyes could bore a hole into the roughest man instilling a sense of fear no one wanted to challenge.

Casey never admitted she could manipulate her father. It was more a consideration of how the game of life was played. Brought up as a tomboy she knew wild animals were always handled, while wearing gloves. Therefore, Casey didn't inform her father she was seeing Mark.

Casey laid the foundation of her plan very carefully. Four weeks ago, Mark, accompanied by two close friends of Casey's, arrived to take her to an early movie. This was not a date, but rather friends going to a movie. Harmon recognized Mark and all hell broke loose. Casey was forbidden to see

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Mark, and if she did, she would never see the outside of her home until the fall.

However, Casey had developed her father's stubbornness, and young love was not to be denied. On this night of enigmatic recompense, she waited ten long minutes after her father had fallen asleep in his favorite lounging chair. He would sleep soundly until six the next morning when he would arise from the silent alarm of his internal clock. She exited the back door without making a sound.

The Old Mill was a favorite spot for teenagers to party and make out. Fortunately, when Casey and Mark arrived at the gravel parking area the place was deserted. It had been Casey's last minute idea to go there.

"Why haven't you ever wanted to neck with me?" asked Casey. She flipped her long ash-blonde hair out of her eyes as she placed her arm on top of the front seat edging closer to Mark.

"What are you talking about?" asked Mark finding amusement with the mischievous twinkle in her baby-blue eyes.

"I'm talking about making out."

"I have enough problems with your old man." Mark was terrified of Harmon.

"I'm not asking you to neck with my dad."

"Very funny."

"Cute, aren't I?" Casey smiled enjoying the moment.

"Yeah, you're hilarious."

Casey's eyes turned serious. "I hope you're not scared of my dad because every guy I've ever dated has been afraid of him."

"It's not a matter of being scared," lied Mark, who had his image to maintain. "It's a matter of having respect for people. And I don't want to complicate things."

Casey didn't know if she was buying this, but it sounded good. "You're not a virgin, are you?" asked Casey with a forced expression of innocence.

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"No," lied Mark.

"I am."

Mark wasn't ready for this conversation, but he was interested.

Forty-five minutes earlier, Harmon Kendal woke from a nightmare he couldn't remember as soon as his mind oriented itself to the familiar surroundings. Now that he was awake, he decided to check the lock on the front door and go upstairs to bed. As he turned from the front hallway he thought he had heard a sound, so he called out Casey's name, but it was greeted by the stillness of the empty house. From the pit of his stomach, he could sense danger—imminent danger. He made his way to Casey's bedroom.

The bed was undisturbed. Casey wasn't anywhere to be found. Normally, he would have waited for Casey to show up with whatever explanation she planned to give him before he grounded her for a month. However, there was nothing normal about what his instincts told him. He located her address book in the top drawer of her study desk and began telephoning her friends.

The fourth call proved fruitful. Jenny, one of Casey's best friends, hesitated to give any information. Nonetheless, her father and mother were in complete sympathy with Harmon. They threatened to take away her use of the car until Labor Day, an infinite number of days from the present.

Jenny confessed to Casey's secret rendezvous with Mark Bowman. Jenny thought Casey and Mark were at an all-night diner on the edge of town, so she suggested the Old Mill as a way to send Mr. Kendal on a wild goose chase. In her friendship and loyalty to Casey, the one thing she didn't want was Mr. Kendal getting his hands on Mark, who was now accepted by all of Casey's friends.

Harmon unlocked the gun cabinet, grabbed the Moss 12-gauge shotgun and loaded it with No. 2 buckshot. He jammed a handful of shells into his jacket pocket. By the time he arrived

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at the bottom of the hill that blocked the Old Mill from view, Harmon had come to his senses. Nevertheless, nothing prevented him from instilling the fear of death and hell into Mark Bowman.

He stopped the black Dodge Ram truck, pumped out the No. 2 shells from the shotgun, placed the pickup in gear, turned off the lights and proceeded slowly toward the Old Mill.

Fifteen minutes before Harmon's arrival, Mark's fingers fumbled with the last button on Casey's blouse, while her delicate hand played with the dark hair at the back of his neck.

It sounded like a giant lead ball dropping out of the sky and hitting the trunk of the Chevy! During Casey's initial scream the car shook violently and then everything fell into a deathly still silence.

"What was that?" whispered Casey forcefully. Her heart pounded in her throat as she desperately tried to listen, while she quickly fastened the buttons on her blouse.

With great relief, Mark realized it wasn't Casey's father. He pondered leaving the car to investigate, but an internal mechanism signaled caution. Casey turned in all directions trying to look through the steam-covered windows. Neither one possessed the courage to wipe off any of the window for fear of what they'd see.

"I'm not sure what it was," said Mark pausing. "But whatever it was it stopped."

"Maybe someone's playing a joke. Me and Jenny did it once to Karen when she made out with Tim."

Cautiously, Mark rolled down the window an inch. "Listen."

"I don't hear anything," whispered Casey, who felt a chilling sensation run through her body as goose bumps appeared on her arms. The absence of the sound of crickets should have served as a warning, but it didn't.

"Neither do I." Mark's voice was just above a whisper, his mouth dry. He swallowed hard ignoring the hair standing up on

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the back of his neck. He began to summon the courage to get out of the car and investigate.

Mark heard the sound of a foot kicking loose stones on the gravel of the parking lot. His hand started to wipe the moisture off the window when he heard a deep guttural sound as the driver side door flung open. A swift and powerful arm grabbed Mark by the face and in one quick jerking motion yanked him from the Chevy. His body, face-first, slammed onto the gravel.

Initially, Casey knew Mark was there one second and gone the next. She heard an agonizing scream followed by a scuffling and then the silence of death.

Absolute shock struck her as terror instantly consumed her fear. She didn't know if what she saw was real. She released a bloodcurdling scream!

In panic, she cringed against the passenger door holding onto the armrest. Adrenaline shot through her like a bolt of lightning! She grabbed the handle and pushed against the door. Simultaneously, the giant hairy hand reached into the Chevy, over the steering wheel and across the seat grazing her shoulder as she escaped its perilous grip.

Casey bolted so fast her untied running shoes remained on the floor of the car. She was unaware of running barefoot as she charged across the gravel parking lot and onto the grass toward the Old Mill. The bloodcurdling sound of a growling howl prevented her from looking over her shoulder.

It had been a long time since she had explored the mill's interior that served as an unofficial clubhouse for underage drinking and the smoking of marijuana. If her mind had been free from terror, she would have remembered that instead of it being a sanctuary, it was a blind alley of entrapment—death.

Ten minutes later, Harmon Kendal parked thirty yards from the lone car. He grabbed the unloaded shotgun and stepped quietly to where the piece of trash waited. Mark Bowman was about to meet judge, jury and hangman embodied in Casey's father.

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Harmon's plan was simple. He would open the door, rip Mark from the car and threaten him, but not necessarily at gunpoint. He smiled over the thought that the kid would probably crap in his pants. Then the idea of Mark having his way with his daughter entered Harmon's mind. The smile faded as quickly as it had appeared.

Harmon only focused on the car as he approached thinking they better not be having sex. He didn't see what he stumbled over almost losing his balance. In the light of the full moon peeping from behind the clouds, it appeared to be a small log. Then he recognized the features of a body part.

"What the hell is this?" demanded Harmon's sense of reality. His alert eyes searched the immediate area and recognized what appeared to be the rest of the body.

What was left to the face made it unrecognizable. After realizing the obstacle was human, definitely male, Harmon had to swallow hard to force the bile from rising beyond the back of his throat. The twisted and distorted mass of what was once a living person caused him to doubt it was the Bowman kid, but he knew Mark's Chevy.

Two large dark and menacing eyes stealthily watched from the cover of darkness.



### 3

The moisture of the heavy night air caused everyone's clothing to stick to their skin. Walking next to Ben, Jack removed his Christian Dior sports jacket and took a drink of his lukewarm coffee. After viewing Mark's body Jack knew he would soon witness more of the gruesome crime, but he wasn't prepared for the connecting multiple twists of events.

"Jack, you've been cleared by Bureau Headquarters in Washington," said Special Agent McKinley. "Chief Amsted doesn't know it yet, but I'll be taking over the investigation. Keep that between us for now."

Jack thought, *How could these decisions be made in such a short time?*

No response was expected from Jack, so he remained silent as they continued to walk away from Mark's mangled body and down the grass incline leading to the Old Mill. Jack was soon to witness more blood, guts and gore. That was a given. He looked up to see the tail end of a lone cloud revealing a full moon. Crime, especially violent offenses, increased sharply on the days of the full moon. Every cop, prison guard and ER medic knew this to be an undisputed fact that baffled logic and only made sense in terms of superstition.

The rustic wooden door creaked eerily as a portent of ill intent.

Jack followed Ben stepping cautiously into the Old Mill. Its musty smell was immediately recognized and quickly forgotten. What he witnessed drove the scent of diesel fuel and the sound of the portable generator powering high-intensity spotlights from his mind.

"My God..."

Unlike Mark Bowman, her young face appeared undisturbed with the exception of its expression of complete terror. More specifically, she had a recognizable face.

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Victim Number Two: Casey Kendal, Caucasian, age 17, height 5' 6", weight 113 lb., blonde hair, blue eyes, no distinguishing marks, no record—a victim who simply appeared to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jack Tanner was grateful he had not known the victim other than to see her and say hello, but Jack knew her father since Jack was a teenager.

He wanted to believe Casey had lost consciousness in the early seconds of the attack. However, Casey had consciously lived through most of the terrifying moments of her incomprehensible death. Casey was like her father, a fighter—a survivor. She should have passed out during her final minutes of life considering the horror confronting her, but her mind focused on the hope for escape.

Her last conscious thought: 'Oh daddy, please help me.' Then her tears stopped.

Casey had been on the second floor of the Old Mill. Her attacker had blocked the escape route down the stairs. The two glassless windows had been boarded up. The only possibility for escape had been to jump from the second floor landing, and she didn't hesitate. Down she went ash-blonde hair rising above her head.

She landed awkwardly with a loud thud, an excruciating painful scream and a broken ankle. Now her only defense was a victim's cry for help no one would ever hear as she desperately tried to crawl to the exit with tear-filled eyes and terror raping her mind. Death arrived five minutes later, but the attacker continued to mutilate her body.

Casey Kendal had been very pretty, and this was the final and only evaluation Jack Tanner made of her face.

A detective placed her left arm, which had been ripped from its shoulder, into a large plastic bag. Her legs were mutilated, and bone protruded from the skin of the arm still attached to her body. Her shirt was missing with the exception of a small fragment of material around one wrist. Even the most

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hardened of those present in the Old Mill were not exempt from the numbing effect of pretty Casey's last minutes of life.

Jack's emotions were now relegated to a distant corner of his awareness. His analytical mind froze all thoughts not belonging to the examination of the scene.

"Could I see the arm before you put it in that body bag?"

Jack's words shattered the silent concentration of the five working men and women who stopped to look in his direction—some with a questioning glance, others with detached professionalism.

Ben McKinley nodded to the forensic specialist who handed it to Jack.

After a quick glance Jack had his question answered. "Thanks," was all he said in a weak voice handing the evidence back. Jack looked around for blood, which should have been sprayed on the floor, but its absence confirmed an earlier conclusion—a conclusion beyond human reasoning.

"Anything else?" asked Ben.

Jack didn't hear the question. His professional mind lingered elsewhere. He had witnessed body separation in Nam, but this was totally different. A memory came to mind. An incoming rocket had hit a soldier in Jack's platoon, but when the arm was found after the battle was over most of the torso was gone. Here was an arm that had been severed from the body without the use of a cutting instrument or explosive impact. A shivering shudder slithered silently through Jack's soul.

Before Ben could say another word, a Special Agent approached and handed Ben a clamp used to pick up small pieces of evidence. It had a three-inch long hair attached to it. Ben examined it saying nothing until he handed it to Jack. "Human?"

Jack examined its thickness and dark brownish-black color. "It seems thick and coarse... It could be animal hair. The lab will know soon enough."

"C'mon, there's more."

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After returning the evidence Jack followed Ben through a rear exit to the far side of the Old Mill. He no longer noticed the fresh scent of pine. External senses had been shutdown.

The crime-investigating personnel worked in silence similar to those inside the Old Mill. Usually, jokes helped depersonalize the insanity of such a crime, but nothing helped in this situation.

Ten feet from the door, Harmon Kendal's body sprawled across the grass in a continuing sea of surrealism. The 12-gauge shotgun rested five feet from the body and had been fired three times. No fingerprints on the gun except Harmon's. Due to the lack of bruises on his neck, they knew it had been broken after his heart stopped beating.

Reluctantly, Jack followed Ben to the gravel area at the rear of the Old Mill. The gentle trickling of the stream went unnoticed. Jacked slapped his face killing an annoying mosquito. Chief Victor Amsted of the Bentley Harbor Police Department and Captain Steward of the Wisconsin State Police joined Ben McKinley and Jack.

"Good to see you, Jack," said Chief Amsted.

Jack returned his thoughts to the present. He had searched every recess in his mind and found nothing compared to the MO of the killer. Butcher, madman, psychopathic killer were inadequate terms to describe the person who had done this.

Although the Chief was overweight, he was a big man at six-two. His hands were powerful. Known as a scrapper in his earlier days, the Chief had practiced the police philosophy of the old guard. Unrepentant hoodlums had been taken out back and given a proper beating. 'That was the way to teach 'em,' and it left a lot of jail space open. Kids straightened up faster in those days, or at least thought twice before doing a petty crime a second time. People who knew about this where more than willing to trade-in a few civil liberties for a crimeless town, but those were the old days.

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Officially, Jack was a Criminologist Consultant. His job was to analyze, offer plausible conclusions, answer questions and render useful advice.

"It doesn't make sense you would bring me in on something like this so soon." His statement was more of a question—a question concealing a multitude of unspoken questions.

"Decisions had to be made, Jack. Quick decisions." Chief Amsted glanced at Captain Steward before looking at another bank of high-intensity lights at the far side of the clearing.

Three men worked under the cover of the shadows inside the line of pine trees. A small orange cone sat on top of a pile of gravel. The third officer to arrive had seen the moon's reflection off the white bloodstained cloth on top of the pile of gravel, which led to a crucial and disturbing piece of evidence—the footprint.

The Chief continued, "Let's take a walk, Jack...Captain Steward, Ben."

Jack nodded stepping between McKinley and the Chief. Jack mentally filed his last observation for later recall. The powers-that-be gathered their evidence as quickly as possible.

"We want to get everything out of here as soon as possible," began Chief Amsted. "The reason will soon be obvious." Jack held his curiosity in check. The Chief paused for a few seconds, and when Jack didn't speak he continued, "The girl is Casey Kendal. She and her boyfriend were here. No one else, thank God... They were most likely necking. That sort of thing."

The Chief paused again glancing at the full moon descending silently to the horizon. It was as if he offered a silent prayer since his granddaughter who knew Casey could have been at the Old Mill just as easily as any number of teenagers.

"Harmon Kendal, Casey's father, who was most likely acting like an over concerned parent, arrived on the scene. Hell

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Jack, we both know Harmon from the gun club. He's been a hard-ass ever since his wife died fourteen years ago."

The Chief paused before continuing off Jack's nod.

"Anyway, he sees Mark Bowman's car, puts two and two together, approaches and stumbles over the kid's body. That's what we think. We'll match the blood on Harmon's boots, later.

"Then he goes looking for his daughter. When he doesn't find her in the Chevy he calls 911. He reports Mark's body and his missing daughter, and we're to get our asses here as quick as possible. While he's waiting for my boys to show, he loads his shotgun with slugs and does his own investigation. He had the box of shells in his glove box. Why slugs and not buckshot? Beats the hell out of me... Could be a moot point."

Chief Amsted paused, turned and pointed to the Old Mill.

"We don't know if he saw his daughter or not. But, he fired three shots before he had his neck broken. As to the details? The confrontation and firing of the three shots are clouded in mystery right now."

Chief Amsted shook his head in silent disbelief and turned his back to the Old Mill. The four walked toward the portable bank of lights.

They stepped around the small pile of gravel. Jack recognized the blood-stained shirt, or what was left of it, next to the orange cone as belonging to Casey. One step inside the tree line, the three men greeted the four. No one noticed the camera flash under the high-intensity portable bank of lights.

Chief Amsted continued, "Fortunately, with the downpour yesterday afternoon and with the natural incline of this area, the ground is extremely soft here."

A forensic specialist lifted the plaster imprint from the earth, brushed off a clump of mud and handed it to Chief Amsted, as if on cue. The Chief examined it for a few brief seconds before giving it to Jack, who was surprised by its size.

The imprint, in the shape of a human foot, possessed an abnormal width that appeared to be eight inches—abnormal in

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terms of proportion. It was an imprint of a bare foot measuring just over sixteen inches in length, which was very unsettling.

"The guy would have to be at least seven feet tall," said Jack.

"There's no other footprints than those in this immediate area," said the forensic expert. "They all belong to the same person."

Jack acknowledged Kevin Davitz, the forensic expert who had worked with Jack on the Doc Serial Killer Case. Jack had ingeniously put the case together, but it was now bogged down in obscurity.

"How're you doing, Kevin?" Jack's voice was low, almost cautionary.

"As good as can be expected considering the circumstances," said Kevin lowering his clipboard.

"OK," said Jack. "If we've got clues let's put them together instead of just placing them on the board in random order."

"Fair enough, Jack." Kevin Davitz went to a storage-filing box, removed a twelve-inch square transparent plastic bag and handed it to Jack.

Blood marred one side of the bag. Jack turned it over. It contained a finger. After careful examination it looked as much as belonging to an animal as it did a human. Jack calculated the size of the hand that would possess such a finger. A chill ran up his spine. He handed it back to Kevin feeling as if its possession gave the nightmare a greater degree of reality. The hair on the claw-like-finger was similar in color to the hair he had examined back in the Old Mill.

"OK Kevin, human or animal?" asked Jack.

"I won't know for sure until we run a few tests."

"What about belonging to an ape or something like that? A gorilla?"

"Thought of that," said Kevin Davitz pushing his dark rimmed eye glasses snugly against the bridge of his nose. "The skin is human. The only skin that comes remotely close to

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ours is a pig's and that's because of its color. But this is not George Orwell's *Animal Farm*."

Jack Tanner drove through the sleepy small city of Bentley Harbor as first light crept over the undetected secrets hidden in the Wisconsin landscape. Oddly, he recalled parts of the Three Witches' dialogue from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Double, double toil and trouble:  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble...  
Cool it with a baboon's blood:  
Then the charm is firm and good...  
By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes.



## 4

The late June sun shone high in the cloudless azure sky casting its light equally on the just and unjust. Local businesses thrived in the busy tourist town of Bentley Harbor. Families and teenagers crowded the beaches on the bay. The playgrounds, tennis courts, golf courses and hiking trails were busy. Loyal and fanatic spectators cheered the local baseball team after the ball was knocked over the fence bringing in the winning run. Everyone was unaware of last night's horror.

It was 2:35 PM.

Captain Adam Steward, Ben McKinley of the FBI, Kevin Davitz and Chief Victor Amsted, smoking a Cuban Churchill cigar, represented the crime fighting membership of the meeting held in the mayor's office. Jack entered.

"Have a seat, Jack," said the mayor sitting behind the cherry wood desk.

Mayor Edmund Foxworthy was in his mid fifties with his immaculately kept sartorial appearance and tailor-made suit. His pale-blue eyes reflected a politician's friendliness that was often mistaken for intelligence. He was the long-standing political leader of Bentley Harbor. Last election, he received eighty percent of the vote.

Smoking a pipe Samuel Geary, owner and publisher of *The Bentley Harbor Examiner*, was considered the leading intellectual of the community, which included those who taught at the local Talbot Wakefield University. He sat to the right of Mayor Foxworthy. Also, Dr. Ignatius Randolph Walker attended the meeting.

Foxworthy and Walker came from similar backgrounds, old money, which was not to be confused with mere wealth. However, as social levels went no one was on the same plane as Dr. Ignatius Randolph Walker. In the mid 1800's, the original family name was Simon. When great grandfather Simon discovered his father had been hanged as a horse thief near

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Milwaukee he changed the name to Walker and moved to what is now Bentley Harbor. He started the mill and later constructed the mercantile store at the only crossroads in the area. Everything that was considered politically and economically important to the community of Bentley Harbor was always communicated to the Walker family. Chief Amsted's first choice of phone calls was obvious.

Dr. Walker was not a medical doctor. After earning a doctorate in biochemistry from Yale the title of doctor seemed to stick. He was stately in appearance carrying his 6' 2" frame with regal elegance. His presence commanded the attention of any assembly—social or business. At sixty-two years, he appeared to be younger even with his pure gray-white hair. His features were angular, continental. His dark eyes were intelligent, overbearing, but animated when he thought something to be humorous. He was one of those rare men whom you never forgot. His suit was Savile Row cut from virgin wool in a dark navy-blue with a hint of a pinstripe. His nails were manicured, and no one remembered a hair on his head being out of place even during a game of tennis.

"Jack, I'm sure you know everyone here," said Mayor Foxworthy.

"Yes. Good afternoon, gentlemen," said Jack formally.

"Good," continued Mayor Foxworthy. His pale-blue eyes appeared gray unconsciously darting about the room. "I want to thank you personally, Jack, for accepting this assignment. No one can say what would happen if news of this madness ever got out." He paused as his nervous eyes rested on the plaster foot imprint sealed in a large plastic bag near the front edge of his desk.

Jack thought, *Good luck keeping this quiet even if it never happens again.*

"I know we're all concerned about whether we can prevent a leak," Jack heard Chief Amsted say, "but everything has been taken care of. We crashed Mark Bowman's car into a tree, put the three bodies in it and set it on fire."

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Jack swallowed hard to keep from speaking. *Are you crazy!*

"My people will keep quiet," said Captain Steward. "They understand the ramifications of word getting out. Gilmore has ensured us the Sheriff's Department will be taken care of."

"Let's not kid ourselves," said Jack. Chief Amsted flashed a questioning glare. Jack decided to back up a few paces and use some diplomacy. He knew Chief Amsted was not a man who took kindly to challenges of his well-thought-out plans. "I know everyone has been debriefed, threatened, so to speak, with the riot act if they leak anything, but there are too many people involved."

"There's only four outside this room who know about the footprint," said Chief Amsted adamantly, as if he were speaking on cue and turning to Dr. Walker. "Everyone's a professional. This can and will be contained." The Chief bit down on his cigar.

"I wasn't referring to the integrity of the men, Chief, with all due respect," said Jack diplomatically.

"If you're referring to Pat, that's been taken care of," said Samuel Geary.

*So it's true,* thought Jack. *Pat's being groomed for your little club.*

Pat Benny's father-in-law, Samuel Geary, continued, "Pat has always cooperated in the past. He knows tourism is the bread and butter of this town. There's nothing Pat would do to jeopardize the well-being of the community."

Geary glanced at Dr. Walker, who gave a just noticeable nod. Although tourism was the major concern for the town fathers, Dr. Walker's concern focused on another reason. He did not want anyone associating the beast with Conaco Pharmaceutical and its massive genetic research department.

Initially, Jack was surprised Ben McKinley accepted the crash-and-fire story. On second thought, he remembered Dr. Walker's political influence in Washington, DC.

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"We must all work together," said Mayor Foxworthy redirecting the meeting. "State Police, Sheriff's Department and our local boys under the leadership of Special Agent McKinley, here, and being assisted by our Chief will select people who know how to handle this situation. They'll accept the responsibility of keeping it confidential. That's why we're grateful to have you on board as a consultant, Jack. If anyone is capable of solving this and putting it to rest quietly, it's you."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence," said Jack, who got up and walked over to the window. The town center, seen from the mayor's office, reflected an aura of normalcy. He noticed Lauren Smith stop and talk with two middle-aged women carrying shopping bags from an upscale clothing store. Jack's mind flashed back to when Ben had called him waking him from a dream with Lauren, but he couldn't remember any of the details.

Everyone waited for Jack to continue, but when he didn't Dr. Walker filled in the gap of silence. "Are you sure of your findings, Mr. Davitz? Maybe there's a freak of nature out there that's turned into a psychopathic killer."

Jack turned from the window, leaned back resting against the sill and looked at Kevin Davitz knowing the answer before it was spoken.

"I'd give that explanation a small chance, very small," said Kevin. "We generated a computer profile before I came here. All of the probabilities point to something unnatural. I hate using the term, but we're dealing with a character that can only be described as Bigfoot. It's around eight feet tall, three hundred and fifty pounds with the strength of ten men. Samples taken from the earth, estimating density and weight that would be required to leave the depth of the imprint, the size of the foot, characteristics of the sample from the finger—all—make our conclusions very plausible."

"The FBI lab will do a genetic signature," added Ben McKinley. "It's been given top priority by Director Foley. We should have the results in ten to twelve days."

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Dr. Walker was impressed. In 1989, genetic profiling usually took thirty days.

"Not being an expert in genetics, what do you hope to find?" said Jack, who wasn't saying what he believed to be true until he had final proof. The beast-thing is both human and animal.

"Confirmation of what we have pieced together," said Kevin Davitz.

It was obvious to Ben that Jack knew something everyone else in the room had missed—something important.

Mentally, Jack struggled with everyone in the room except Ben, the only one he trusted. Those who were present would do only what they thought best for themselves and not the community, although what was good for them was also good for the community and undeniably so, according to their way of thinking.

Fear resided in everyone's eyes including Ben. Nevertheless, Jack Tanner played a masterful game. He was an enigma among those who believed their motives were cloaked in secrecy. He was unwilling to lay his cards on the table for reasons that were obvious only to him.

After Jack turned to look upon the town square for a second time he left his place at the window moving toward the burgundy leather chair. As he walked he began to talk. "What can rip an arm from a person's body? Rhetorical question, gentlemen. It's eight feet tall, over three hundred pounds with the strength of ten men. Let's reexamine our initial concern. Secrecy. Besides those in this room, there are more than four people who know what's happened. Every person knows who was involved in gathering evidence."

"Jack, are you suggesting—"

Jack held up his hand with its palm facing the Chief. "Let me finish before you jump to any conclusions. Mayor Foxworthy called this a nightmare, and surely, this is what we're dealing with. Nightmares. That's the key word."

"I'm not sure I'm following," interjected Mayor Foxworthy.

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A slight smile broke over Dr. Walker's thin lips before disappearing as quickly as it appeared. Jack thought he was the only one who had noticed it.

"If you have a nightmare and you're sleeping with your wife, it's hard to conceal it from her," said Jack now stating the obvious. "I've never been to such a gruesome crime scene. Outside of Nam, I never thought I'd ever witness something like this."

"I've thought of the same thing," said Chief Amsted. "But, psychologists will treat anyone suffering from shock, nightmares or whatever."

*That's a good way of keeping this quiet,* thought Jack sarcastically.

"Any other concerns?" asked Mayor Foxworthy moving forward with the prearranged agenda.

"I, for one, want to know what's on Jack's mind," said Special Agent McKinley.

"From what angle should I express my concern," replied Jack pausing to rethink what he had wanted to happen since having breakfast. "Ok, let's examine something else. Who in this room wants to believe we have a Bigfoot-type monster on our hands? I know the evidence. We all do. But forget the evidence. Who really wants to believe this?"

Everyone exchanged a puzzled expression in an aura of silence.

"Ok...what happens when our monster strikes again? What happens if a witness gets away and goes screaming through town at the top of his lungs? Disbelief followed by mockery? Maybe...initially that is...then hysteria. It'll take three hours to wake up the entire population before the national press comes screaming down our backs. And if tourism is your major concern here, you can say goodbye to this season and every other season, if the national press discovers the cover-up."

Jack's eyes caught Dr. Walker's before turning to the mayor.

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"Until it's hunted down, killed and disposed of quietly," said Foxworthy adamantly trying to recover the initiative. Foolishly, the mayor considered how something like a Bigfoot character could be turned into a tourist attraction—political ingenuity turning morbidity into viable economics.

"I wish I had your faith," said Jack. "Kevin, you gave us height, weight and probable strength, but you didn't talk about age."

"Unknown," said Kevin Davitz, "until we get the genetic profile."

"What's your point, Jack?" asked Dr. Walker.

McKinley knew Jack's point but remained silent, at least, for now.

"Doesn't anyone here think it's odd that all of a sudden and seemingly out of nowhere, we now have a beast on the loose, and it has a tendency to rip the limbs off its victims for no apparent reason, other than it can be categorized as a monster?" Jack noticed the genuine alarm in the dark brown eyes of Dr. Walker.

"This so-called beast has to be found," said Dr. Walker. "At all cost."

"Exactly," said Jack.

"And it must be done discreetly," added Mayor Foxworthy.

"Fifty agents should be enough to get the job done," said Ben McKinley bringing a detailed focus to the meeting.

"If it's possible, they should be men and women whose hobby is hunting," said Jack, who silently acknowledged that Ben never pulled rank when they were together. "They should stay in different motels in the area. Two to a motel. A show of force must be avoided. That's my suggestion. You know best, Ben."

Ben's eyes acknowledged Jack's deference to his position. "How long do you want them for?"

"Ten days," said Jack. "Then the powers that be will review our activities. But there's something else we should do."

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"What do you have in mind, Jack?" asked Dr. Walker, who approved of the meeting's direction.

"We'll recruit those who were there including the County Sheriff's Office to assist the FBI in their search. Tell those who volunteer exactly who the enemy is and swear them to secrecy. This will help them deal with the trauma of last night. The more active they are, the greater the chance they'll keep their mouth shut. And that's your main concern, isn't it?"

"Good point," said McKinley.

"Good," interjected Dr. Walker. "We'll leave the details to the professionals, here." His eyes moved away from the mayor, the Chief and Samuel Geary, who offered a silent nod of approval. "We are counting on you to resolve this situation as quickly and quietly as possible. Thank you for coming, gentlemen."

With that abrupt statement, the meeting was adjourned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Under the late afternoon sun and cloudless sky, Ben McKinley and Jack stood at the crime scene reviewing the facts and trying to recreate what had really happened. Two State Troopers guarded the area. Only authorized personnel were allowed beyond the yellow crime scene tape, and the list of authorized personnel was very limited.

A tow truck from Gill's Garage, rented by the police department and driven by an officer who had been there last night, removed Harmon's pickup truck.

Inside the Old Mill, the three cops who had been the first to arrive last night used a high-power hose to wash away Casey's blood from the crime scene.

"Jack, let's back up. Where do you think it came from?"

"I don't believe in Bigfoot. This thing just didn't drop out of the sky. I think it came from an experiment. Someone has been messing with the gene pool. I think it was created, and it escaped from its creator. And it's curious how Dr. Walker,



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who's a leading expert in genome research, didn't mention this."

"How would you explain the three shots fired by Harmon Kendal?"

"There could have been two of them."

"Do you really think there's two?" asked Ben. "Tell me more, Jack."

"If you piece everything together, it's the only possibility that's hitting the mark. I knew Harmon. He was a seasoned hunter, a former sergeant in the Marines. How did the beast get its finger shot off and later, break Harmon's neck? There was no blood belonging to the beast on Harmon."

Jack paused before continuing, "There were two. It's the only explanation. And they were capable of moving with stealth. Otherwise, Harmon would be alive today. Let me tell you a true story. Harmon was fishing up in Alaska with three buddies. They were walking down this path when a brown bear came at them. Mad as hell according to the story. Three ran to get out of the way, while Harmon pulled out a Colt .45. That bear charged, and Harmon stood there emptying six shots into that bear's skull before it dropped dead at his feet. Four seasoned hunters and only Harmon had the guts to pull it off."

"Then it makes sense," confirmed McKinley.

"In Nam, I saw a village get wiped out in the madness of war," recalled Jack. "When it was over no one remembered how everyone started firing at once. Then the memory came back. My buddy stood next to me giving a chocolate bar to a kid. All we were doing was walking through. We'd done it three times before. This little old grandmother sat next to an entrance of a hut. She took out an AK-47 from under her dress and blew my buddy away leaving me and Dan Baskin standing only inches away. My face was smeared with blood. Baskin opened up. All hell broke loose. The Gooks, including children, came at us from all directions. I joined in the battle. We lost three men and our lieutenant. The village lost everything. After I gave my report they sealed the records. No one wants to hear about the

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killing of women and children, but women and children tried to kill us—were killing us. Everything about it is insane. If you weren't there during the madness, it's impossible to understand."

"What made you think of that story?" asked McKinley.

"This thing. This beast. It reminds me of Nam. When you're in the middle of things you don't want to think about it. While you're waiting for your next assignment or the next skirmish there's drugs, alcohol, poker games, prostitutes, letters from back home and no one talks about it for fear of losing their sanity. That's how scared you are. But you never talk about the fear. Can you understand that?"

"I can say I understand it intellectually, but I wasn't there."

"That's my point," continued Jack. "We're trying to understand something that's unnatural—too bizarre to qualify as part of our reality. This beast or beasts has intelligence beyond the animal kingdom, but what exactly are we dealing with? We can understand a serial killer. He's chosen to kill for reasons we now know and understand. The FBI created profiling. It gives us the why behind his bizarre actions. In the pursuit of a serial killer, we wait for a mistake to be made. This thing?"

Jack stared into Ben's eyes that reflected understanding with a hint of compassion.

"I can understand what you're saying," said McKinley.

"But what happens if they're being controlled by a criminal mastermind?"

Jack's question slammed into the pit of Ben's stomach like a thunderbolt.

Jack stepped toward the Old Mill and silently cursed at the memory of that village trying to shatter the lingering images of women, children and his buddies being killed in the insanity of war.

## 5

Jack Tanner arrived at The Continental, a busy restaurant in downtown Bentley Harbor. The Asian-American owner, Lauren Smith, occupied a rear booth in the far corner. She appeared to be working on a set of books. Jack took a seat at the bar. If Lauren noticed him, she would have the option of coming over and saying hello. Jack didn't like to disturb her, while she attended to business.

The two external corner walls facing the busy intersection were solid glass. The triple rows of booths were decorated in dark red leather with wood-grained tables. Fine linen covered the tables filling the expansive center of the room. A three-tiered fountain stood in the center of the room. An ornate dark-stained oak bar occupied the back wall adjacent to a waiting lounge, which served to occupy the overflow. The lounge was usually filled to capacity on most summer nights. The bar was hand-carved requiring a close inspection to appreciate the intricacy of the workmanship.

The food was considerably beyond the mundane with daily specials rarely repeated in the same month. Lauren's reputation was established by bringing fine cuisine to the masses, and at the same time, not forgetting the meat and potato customer. When customers offered compliments Lauren always redirected credit to the staff.

Jack asked the bartender if the paper near the cash register was today's. When it was silently placed before him he said, "Thanks," and ordered a coffee. The car crash and subsequent fire killing three dominated *The Bentley Harbor Examiner's* front page.

Lauren gazed across the room and saw Jack. With the dinner crowd arriving she would have to pack up her papers. She spent most evenings floating among the guests insuring everything was to their satisfaction and occasionally turning

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down dates from the more confident men, which included the young and old.

Lauren, who was named after Lauren Bacall, wife of Bogie, was the child of an American father who had served as a colonel in Vietnam and a mother who was Vietnamese and who had barely escaped the aftermath of war since she was a well-known American sympathizer. Lauren's features were a perfect blend of the Oriental and Occidental cultures.

During her trek across the room Lauren stopped at a few tables, offering a smile or a word, making the customers feel she was honored to have them in her establishment. Johann Pachelbel's Cannon softly flowed from the speakers in the ceiling with its tranquil and sweet melody.

At 5' 10" Lauren was seductively graceful in three-inch high heels. It appeared as if she had been poured into the high-split Ao dai (Vietnamese dress) of dark red silk. Her legs were shapely with long thighs and smooth round calves. Her black hair cascaded over her shoulders like a gentle flowing stream of jet crystal.

Lauren sat on a barstool next to Jack. The two slits in the silk Ao dai revealed much of her shapely legs. She tossed her long jet-black hair to one side as she gently turned her head.

"Anything interesting in *The Examiner*?" asked Lauren.

"Just reading about that accident last night," replied Jack not wanting to think about what really had happened. The stress of what could arrive on Bentley Harbor's doorstep caused his mind not to focus his full attention on Lauren.

Instantly, she knew something bothered him, and she wanted to keep the conversation light. "I don't want to talk about anything that's morbid. Thrill me with one of your stories when you were young and foolish."

The harmonious sound of her voice would have normally captivated Jack, but not today. "You should forget what I said about my days of youthful exuberance."

"If I recall correctly, you once referred to them as 'hell-raising and I'm lucky to be alive.'"

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"I'll be forty next May. I'm getting wiser in my old age."  
Jack's eyes returned to the newspaper. *Did I say May? Dammit.*

"Jack, when did you change your month of birth?"

Jack gazed into her eyes with a familiar yet curious smile, which reminded Lauren of the Cheshire cat. "What?"

"You were born in January. You just said you'll be forty next May." In the following pause, Jack hid his nervousness. "You're not on the planet, are you?" Lauren's hazel eyes maintained their curiosity.

"Would you like anything, Boss?" asked John the bartender.

Jack felt grateful for the interruption as his eyes returned to the newspaper. The first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata flowed over the room gently caressing the restaurant's ambiance.

"Coffee please and give our preferred customer here a warmer." She flashed a smile that made John smile. "Thanks, John." She preferred a cup of herbal tea, but it would be a long night, and her body and mind were in need of a jolt of caffeine.

*The way everyone around here calls her, Boss, it sounds like a movie set in Chinatown, thought Jack. You almost feel Jack Nicholson will walk in at anytime. Not the Boss, just Boss. But it doesn't sound tough when they say it.*

Jack continued his thoughts along a deferent tangent trying to dispel the image of Casey Kendal's mangled and mutilated body, a body once full of life and adventure.

*How long has it been since we were together? Six years this summer. What an incredible first date we had. That picnic... Lauren sure is beautiful. Actually, she's incredible. She's got everything. Even great parents. In the last couple of years we've turned out to be best friends. Maybe I should ask her to go away with me for a week. Maybe I'm asking too much. She won't want to leave her restaurants. No, she's happy with just being friends. I should ask her if she's been*

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*dating lately. If I only paid more attention to her when we lived together.*

After John placed the black coffee in front of her and warmed up Jack's she took the paper, stacked the three sections together and neatly folded them before John took the paper from her.

"Why did you do that?" asked Jack.

"Not when I've come to visit."

"I wanted to finish that article."

"You were daydreaming," challenged Lauren.

"No, I wasn't. I was reading the paper."

"Jack, how many times have we had this discussion? You were daydreaming. I can hear you think. You're the most intense person when you slip inside yourself."

"OK, I was daydreaming. I'm sorry." Jack flashed a winning smile that was reserved for special people. The list of who qualified as 'special' was very short. Now he was determined to focus on Lauren and their conversation. "By the way, you're looking incredible tonight. Don't go off visiting customers just when I start to enjoy your company."

"Do you know what you did?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"You went from being a very sweet man any lady would love to be with to placing the blame on me for your habit of slipping into yourself."

"No, I didn't."

"Yeah, you did." Lauren nodded her head with a comic expression dancing across her face. Then it turned serious when she realized he had refused to yield to her point. "If I have to leave you to attend to a customer or go to the kitchen, then it's OK for you to daydream when we're talking. That's what you implied."

Jack quickly thought about what she had said and couldn't deny the truth of her logic. He turned to look into her eyes. He raised his eye brows quickly and then let them drop. "I did, didn't I?"

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"You're guilty. Now for your punishment. Say dinner for two, candles, linen on the table. I'll promise to dedicate and selflessly devote at least seventy-five percent of my attention to you." She smiled enjoying the moment.

"How would you like to have a simple dinner at my folks?"

"Jean Claude's cooking is not what I would call meat and potatoes Americana," smiled Lauren. "If he didn't work for your parents, I'd steal 'im for here."

"How does tonight sound?" Jack glanced at his watch. His facial expression appeared as if his question held a foregone conclusion.

"A curious thought just entered my mind," began Lauren. "There's been times when I had accepted that same invitation. I was there. Your parents were there. But you weren't. As a matter of record it happened more than once. You're the son they never had. Oh my God, Jack, I'm so sorry. Total slip of the tongue and brain." She touched his arm to reinforce her sincerity.

Jack had been adopted when he was eight years old, and there had been a lot of controversy over the sanity of his birth mother. His real father was unknown.

"No offense taken," said Jack in a reassuring voice. For some reason Jack had an urge to hold her, but he dropped the thought from his mind. "Did I say you look incredible tonight?"

"You've already covered that base. What's bothering you, Jack?"

"Nothing." After she gave him a disbelieving look he added, "Really...nothing. I'm just a little distracted."

"Well, when you want to talk about it let me know." There was a note of resignation in her tone. "So your mother's on one of her 'why-aren't-you-married kicks,' and I'm about to be the one night sacrificial lamb, which is more commonly known as Jack's potential rent-a-wife. I swear your last three girlfriends were exactly that."

*Could she be right? My God, there's a better chance than not that she is.*

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"Jack, you're daydreaming on a barstool, again." *Why doesn't he ever fall off?*

"It's either you, or I'll have to find a streetwalker within the hour and introduce her to all my good habits."

"That comparison will cost you a bottle of very expensive wine," smiled Lauren adding, "from your wine cellar, Mr. Jack. I have a very good memory, remember?"

Jack glanced at his watch for the second time. "Deal. When can we leave?"

"Do I need to change?"

"When have you not looked gorgeous?" *Maybe there is hope for me.* "I swear you were born just as you look today."

"I'll take the first half of what you said as a compliment. The jury is still out on the second half. What are you driving?"

"The Jag."

"We'll take my Porsche. Give me your keys."

"What?"

"It'll stop you from deserting me, if you get an emergency call in the middle of dinner and leave me at the mercy of your mother. Besides, I can pretend I'm in temporary control of our interesting lives. Give me your keys."

Out of curiosity and because the game they played was the best distraction a ministering angel of mercy could have prescribed, he reached into his Dockers and produced the keys to the Jaguar. Lauren tuned to the bartender.

"John, these are Jack's keys to his Jag convertible. Jack lives at three twenty-seven Hillcrest up in Huron Park. As long as you have it at Jack's by six in the morning, this car will make you a very lucky man, so to speak."

"Thanks, Boss, but I'm working the saloon 'til three in the morning."

"In that case..." Lauren tossed the keys to the back of the bar where they ricocheted off a bottle of Jack Daniel's before coming to rest in a dish of lemon slices. *Is that symbolic of our future?* she thought in a moment of uncertainty. "Keep them for me. I'm going to drive it for the next few days."



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"This is getting to be an expensive date," said Jack.

"The Jag's a token of how much you still love me and always will," teased Lauren. "Besides, you sitting with me while I'm driving the Porsche will make me feel in control. The bottle of very expensive wine comes after we leave your folks' place. Don't forget, I come with a bonus. I don't need to be introduced to your good habits. I know you don't have any... John?"

"Yeah, Boss."

"If Jack sneaks back, don't giv'em to him for fear of your life."

"John, she's only kidding," said Jack holding out his hand.

"Sorry, but she signs my check," smiled John.

"Sorry is the prelude to my autobiography," replied Jack.

"C'mon, Jack, it's two against one," teased Lauren. "We better leave before you get into trouble."

Lauren gave him a quick kiss on the lips, slipped off the barstool, looped her arm in his and turned back to John. "Don't wait up, I'm having expensive wine tonight."

*My God, did I really kiss him on the lips? Thank God, he didn't say anything. Do I really want to sleep with him after all these years? Yes, but I'm not going to. No way.*



*A genetically engineered monster kills three people in the tourist town of Bentley Harbor. The town fathers hire Jack Tanner to help hunt down and destroy it. But how many half-human, half-animal beasts are there? As Jack's investigation unfolds, the town's well-kept secrets are revealed. The lives of the power elite will never be the same in Bentley Harbor where there's not enough moral fiber to sew a quilt for a flea.*

# SECRETS

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