

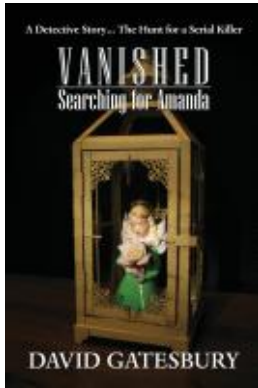
A Detective Story... The Hunt for a Serial Killer

VANISHED

Searching for Amanda



DAVID GATESBURY



Hardnosed Detective Leonard Harris gets caught up in a missing persons' case that's possibly linked to a serial killer. Harris was once romantically involved with Amanda Kramer, the woman who's vanished. She was Anthony Tokar's private secretary, a casino owner with a nefarious reputation. While probing Tokar's connections to organized crime, Harris's no-nonsense methods get him into hot water with authorities and, as suspects are eliminated, a trail of murder and bloodshed is left behind...

VANISHED: Searching for Amanda

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a Serial Killer**

Vanished

Searching for Amanda

David Gatesbury

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First Edition

To Julie and Eric

Contents

PREFACE	7
Chapter 1 - Raiding a Drug Pusher’s House.....	11
Chapter 2 - Getting Together with Some of the Guys	17
Chapter 3 - The Study of Criminal Behavior Involving Murder	25
Chapter 4 - Gathering Information on Missing Persons and the Activity of a Serial Killer.....	36
Chapter 5 - Meeting Amanda’s Sister Rhonda at Tokar’s Casino.....	46
Chapter 6 - A Visit to the Hospital Raises New Concerns	57
Chapter 7 - Consulting with Supervisory Special Agent Johnson of the FBI	65
Chapter 8 - An Interlude with Rhonda and Learning Someone is Shadowing Him	72
Chapter 9 - The Bureau Locates the Home of a Serial Killer.....	81
Chapter 10 - Entering the House on Navarro Terrace	88
Chapter 11 - Taking a Ride Out to Lake Laraine	97
Chapter 12 - Poking Around the Lake after Nightfall	107
Chapter 13 - Another Late Night Return to the Lake	116
Chapter 14 - Rendezvous with a Hitman-Contract Killer	123
Chapter 15 - Butting Heads with Georgie ‘The Bull’ Sypka.....	133
Chapter 16 - A Flirtatious Night at the Races	141
Chapter 17 - An Unexpected Interruption at Dinner	151
Chapter 18 - Facing a Hired Gunman and Shooting it out	161
Chapter 19 - A Witness to Murder	170
Chapter 20 - Meeting with a Nervous Informant	183
Chapter 21 - Learning about the Secret Place	192

Chapter 22 - Entering the Doctor's Lair	200
Chapter 23 - Fitting Together Remaining Puzzle Pieces for Tying Up Loose Ends	209

PREFACE

This is a gripping, suspenseful, and fast-moving detective story that has components of a mystery. While it delves into the darkest side of human behavior, abductions and the heartless, gruesome actions of serial killers are not the main focus. The terrible stories we hear about these killers and the fate of the people who've fallen into their clutches, one is left to ponder about the deterioration of our society.

It would be wise to keep in mind that the character in the role of Buffalo Bill in the motion picture *Silence of the Lambs*, who oversaw the girl kept in the pit, was based upon a real person. To meet the standard FBI definition of a serial murderer requires three or more victims to fall into this classification. How many serial killers have been born who didn't make the grade simply because they were caught and locked up after their first or second murder?

What astonishes a good many people is the little prison time criminals get for kidnappings and abductions in this country. The next time you read or see on television a story about a murderer getting caught, make note of his criminal record and you'll see what I mean. They've already been arrested and convicted of committing serious crimes and it's remarkable how little time they've served. Some of America's most infamous murderers have been incarcerated, only to be released early to prey on the public once again. Having gained their release from jail and determinedly looking for their next target, they now understand the importance of not leaving behind survivors from their crimes. They often start a house of horrors, with their criminal tendencies including kidnapping, torture, and sometimes even cannibalism. As time goes by and their list of victims grows, eventually they gain notable fame for their brutal and horrific escapades. Scars on their victims' lifeless bodies by way of forensics tell of the nightmarish persecution these people have endured.

The world is becoming more and more a dangerous place and for many of us, especially the families of their victims, we cannot grasp why this person was let out on the street. All you have to do is watch the news and it doesn't take long to understand our streets are not safe, and it's even worse after dark. If I see young children playing on the street after nightfall I have to wonder about their parents. . . . Don't they care, and who's to blame when one of them disappears.

I remember President Obama saying, "There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars." Hasn't he ever told his children to be cautious of strangers?

It's highly advisable that if a stranger approaches your car, no matter what race or color they are, you'd better lock that car door and fast! I don't know about you, but I'm uncomfortable when somebody approaches me at a gas station and I'm outside the vehicle filling the tank.

I hope you're not naïve enough to think that every crazed murderer is behind bars, so nowadays how safe can a person feel when walking the streets alone.

John Douglas, a former chief of the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit and author of "Mind Hunter," was quoted as saying, "A very conservative estimate is that there are between 35 and 50 *active serial killers* in the United States".

Kidnapping laws vary from state to state, and can include just a couple of years in prison for the perpetrator of this crime. If a criminal is caught, tried and convicted for kidnapping, assault, and unlawful restraint in connection with a woman he didn't previously know, do you think after spending just two years in jail that he's cured of the habit? If the woman he'd abducted was lucky enough to escape or law enforcement was able to somehow intervene on her behalf before she suffered malicious acts, what would have otherwise been this woman's

fate? What is this guy's routine for getting women to submit to his wishes?

After the two years are over and he's let out, what do you think is going to be on his mind after doing without female companionship for a two-year stretch in the clink? There are not only criminal minds to consider, but there are also people with schizoid personality disorders. The mentally unbalanced have legal rights the same as the rest of us. The institutions are full, and the numbers of them on our streets are on the rise. You'd be shocked and amazed at how many people have been pushed off subway walkways in front of moving trains the world over.

So whatever you do, don't take President Obama's advice. Be vigilant and well aware of your surroundings when you step out on the street. If a stranger is standing by your car when you're coming to it, don't go to the car, but seek a parking lot attendant or a policeman for help.

Long after the fulfillment of a serial killer's death sentence, questions still linger, as psychiatrists sift through court records and interviews trying to figure out what was in this person's mind. Was this individual insane or simply an evildoer who exulted over the sadistic torture of women?

One of the most frightening aspects about serial killers is the legacy they leave behind and the culture society has developed in their names, for their deeds are sure to inspire and breed patrons. Some who admire them may come to follow in their footsteps and try to emulate their ways, bringing misery and death on the innocent and unsuspecting that cross their paths. The sad thing is that they're out there now in growing numbers crisscrossing the country in search of their victims.

How are your survival instincts?

Chapter 1

Raiding a Drug Pusher's House

The country was experiencing the worst economic downturn in years, and crime was on the upswing. The city of St. Louis was in the midst of a war on drug-trafficking and distribution, and in an effort to stem the tide of drug smuggling, law enforcement officials planned a citywide crackdown on drug dealers. They intended to raid the locations of four known drug lords simultaneously: two on the north side, one on the west side, and another on the south side of the city. Police squads were aiding narcotics officers, and Chief of Detectives Steven Hastings asked for volunteers from his department to bolster these raiding parties.

Detective Lieutenant Leonard Harris, a tough, no-nonsense, veteran law officer, had nothing pressing on his desk, so he hooked up with a group of officers targeting one of the drug pushers on the list. Subject Booker Jennings lived in a north side three-story brick apartment building on Kossuth Avenue, west of Grand Boulevard. Jennings had a reputation for carrying handguns and a long rap sheet for violent behavior. Authorities had tried convicting him in the past for killing a prostitute, and later, a criminal informant, but were unable to provide strong enough evidence to win over a jury.

Harris attended an early morning meeting on the day of the raid and narcotics officers Derrick Griffin and his partner Julian Ortiz, who'd be leading officers on the Kossuth operation, spoke at the briefing. They told officers participating in the sting that they had been to Jennings's posh third-floor apartment on several occasions to purchase crack cocaine and marijuana to build a case against him. They also announced they had made previous arrangements to purchase twenty pounds of marijuana from Jennings at ten a.m., the time scheduled for the raid. Lastly, Griffin mentioned they had never seen anyone else in the building on their previous dealings with the suspect and they didn't expect any trouble.

Police arrived in force at the designated address at ten minutes before ten that morning and approached the apartment building in

orderly fashion. There were two entrances at the building's front, one for first floor apartments, and another leading to second and third floor flats. Griffin and Ortiz wore casual street clothes and entered the building first, moving quickly up a steep flight of stairs while holding their pistols at their sides. Officers wearing black sweat shirts marked with the word POLICE in bold print over bulletproof vests followed them, carrying assault weapons.

Having been involved in this sort of operation many times in the past, veteran Lt. Harris wanted to look out for youthful, inexperienced officers participating in the raid. Tensions ran high, and when the line of policemen stalled, Harris moved forward, taking long strides, charging up the staircase on the balls of his feet to pass some of the officers. Hesitation on the part of the others allowed him to close the gap between him and Ortiz, who followed Griffin, and he fell in line behind Ortiz.

Now third in line at the crest of the stairs, the lead officers took caution at a second floor corridor that took a sharp turn to the left. Harris drew his .45 Smith & Wesson semi-automatic, engaged the slide for chambering a fresh round, and bent his right elbow to keep his weapon pointed upwards. These sorts of raids were always dangerous and there was no way of knowing how they would play out, but as long as they had surprise on their side, the odds were favorable for a successful mission.

The handrail joined with an upright support column before leveling off with the hallway to run horizontally, capping off a row of spindles. They quietly proceeded past an entrance door to a second floor apartment. At the hall's far end was another apartment door set on a forty-five degree angle, and another turn came with the next handrail ascending with another flight of stairs leading up to the third floor.

Griffin and Ortiz started up the stairs to the third floor, but Harris stopped, holding his position as he glimpsed their approach to a closed door at the top of the staircase. Not wanting to be seen when the door opened, he backed up to the angled apartment door in the corner of the corridor, now to his left, his back to the wall. Holding his revolver firmly with both hands and his finger resting against the trigger guard,

he leaned to view Griffin knocking on the door before stepping out of view again. Sergeant Harold Kerns, a tall African-American officer, came to stand at the top of the stairs coming up from the ground floor, holding his weapon much the same way as Harris held his. Squad members bolstering the raid remained on the first staircase with their riot guns ready, and there were some taking turns looking over the rim of the second floor to glimpse the corridor.

Harris hoped no one residing in the building would show themselves for the next few minutes, and resisted the urge to look up at Ortiz and Griffin as they knocked on the third floor door again. After Griffin finished knocking, there was quiet stillness, and Harris heard a phone ringing faintly in one of the second floor apartments.

As soon as the phone stopped ringing, Griffin began knocking again, a little harder than the last time, and Harris heard a door in the middle of the second floor hallway begin to open. Officers clustered on the stairs below the handrail spindles, some eyelevel with the second floor corridor's floorboards, ducked to conceal their presence, while Kerns stepped into a corner as a way to avoid being seen.

Harris moved to his right to get a better view of who was opening the door and spotted a large black man holding a sawed-off shotgun. He took aim and shot at the gunman, his bullet hitting the doorjamb at the same time as the shotgun fired. Diving for the stairs leading up to the third floor while pellets hit his left knee, he returned fire through banister spindles. The assailant returned another shotgun blast, missing Harris, and chips of wood from the handrail went flying.

Kerns was unable to see the gun toting individual and remained out of the line of fire, but kept his weapon pointed in the direction of the second-floor door.

The gunman closed the apartment door, but before it latched officers coming up from the first set of stairs took aim between spindles and cut loose with a barrage of gunfire.

Hearing a loud thud of deadweight hitting the floor inside that same apartment suggested they had killed the gunman. Kerns raced across the hallway, leading others to join Harris, a few stopping to force open the door to the second-story apartment to see a dead man lying on the floor, a shotgun lying beside him.

Suddenly, bullets from a chattering machine gun breached the third floor door with shells hitting Griffin and Ortiz, and a pack of officers joining Harris at the bottom of that flight of stairs backed off. The two narcotics officers fell down the stairs onto Harris, and expecting that door to open with a hail of gunfire, Harris stretched to get a clean shot, firing four times at the door with his pistol.

Kerns leaned over the men lying at the bottom of the stairs to fire repeatedly at the third floor door, stopping when two officers carrying pump action shotguns charged up the stairs, firing as they went. The officer in the lead kicked open the door before leaning back and freezing, and then more gunfire was exchanged with whoever occupied the third floor.

The suspect, Jennings, had barricaded himself inside a bedroom, but police quickly overtook the third-floor apartment to occupy it in numbers, taking secure positions for trading lead. The onslaught of police increased quickly, the sound of gunfire deafening; it was only a matter of time before the authorities took him out. Jennings had done time in the past, and wanting to avoid years of jail time, he took his own life with a headshot beneath the chin, which ended it.

Griffin and Ortiz were both wearing bulletproof vests, but had still suffered critical wounds. Griffin had received two wounds in his left leg and Ortiz had a bullet lodged in his right forearm. An ambulance crew hustled onto the scene to take the wounded policemen to the nearest trauma center, while another ambulance transported the two deceased criminals to the morgue to be pronounced D.O.A.

A regular patrolman took Harris to a nearby hospital to have a surgeon dig the shotgun pellets out of his left leg. Given a room where a doctor could examine his leg, Harris immediately removed his trousers for concern they would cut off his pants and then he'd have nothing to wear. He covered his boxer shorts with a hospital gown that closed in the back, provided by a nurse, and then he waited for a doctor to treat the wound.

The doctor entering the room knew Harris from previous injuries for which he had treated him, and he peered down at the holes in his knee and leg.

“Lieutenant Harris, isn’t this the same knee I operated on less than a year ago?”

“I guess so. Why?”

The doctor shook his head and proceeded to give him two injections of painkiller in the knee, commenting, “I thought you were going to consider taking a desk job.”

“I’m not one who likes to sit around.”

After the painkiller took effect, a nurse assisted as the doctor maneuvered a large pair of tweezers to penetrate holes in the tissue to dig out the pellets. He dropped them in a pan one by one.

“This knee is going to swell up and be stiff for at least a week, and until it gets better you may walk with a limp. I’m going to again suggest that you either take a desk job or think about taking a line of work in the private sector that’s less hazardous. How many more times are you going to come in here before you receive an injury that’s not medically treatable?”

“I’ll take it under advisement, but there’s not much of a job market out there.”

“You’ll be lucky if I don’t have to operate on that knee again, but before it comes to that you can be retrained for a far less dangerous occupation.”

When the doctor finished, the nurse cleaned the wounds before bandaging the knee, and Harris grimaced while adjusting the knee, putting his pants back on.

The doctor said, “I’m prescribing pain medication and I recommend that you do nothing strenuous for the next few days. In the morning, you may find soaking in hot bath water beneficial for loosening that knee up to give you mobility.”

By the time Harris left the medical facility his knee was already stiffening up with pain increasing considerably. He knew the doctor was right, as he wasn’t getting around like he used to, and there may one day come a time when he wouldn’t be as lucky as he was today. Still, there was a question of how he was going to make a living if he got out of law enforcement, as he didn’t see many prospects for someone with his training and experience.

Hoping to learn of the condition of Griffin and Ortiz soon, he and the officer providing him transportation headed back to the station.

Chapter 2

Getting Together with Some of the Guys

Harris returned to St. Louis Police Headquarters, and another detective named Jorgensen saw him in the hallway.

“Hey Len, I heard you were wounded, so how’s the leg?”

“It’s nothing serious.”

“Hastings wants to see you in his office right away.”

Harris went to an office door marked ‘Chief of Detectives’ and after entering he approached the secretary’s desk. “I understand Hastings wants to see me.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Harris, he’s expecting you. Go right in.”

Entering Hastings’ office, the two men went back a long way together as old friends, and greeted each other with a smile and a handshake.

Hastings asked, “How’s the leg, Len?”

Getting a whiff of the smoldering, citrus-based cologne Hastings wore, he replied, “It’s really not bad; just a few pellets caught me.”

“You took a shotgun blast to the knee and all you can say is that it’s not bad.”

Then Harris asked, “How are Griffin and Ortiz?”

“They’re in a critical care unit, but are expected to pull through. What do you say to going out and having a bite to eat?”

Harris nodded, “Yeah, sure.”

They left the station and went to Reilly’s, a restaurant and bar located nearby that was regularly browsed by police detectives as a watering hole. The two friends had drifted apart in recent years as Hastings moved up the ladder in the department, but it seemed like old times as the two sat down at a table together. Hastings ordered a Rueben on a croissant and Harris had a roast beef sandwich on French bread.

Steve Hastings held concern for a drinking problem Harris developed after his wife Valerie was killed in an automobile accident, and listened as his friend ordered a Seven-and-Seven, while he had a beer.

After the waiter walked away, Hastings asked, “You okay with drinking alcohol?”

“One isn’t going to be a problem, and I can use a drink after the day I’ve had.”

Hastings nodded, knowing his friend’s drinking problem had nearly cost him his badge. “Are you still going to those Alcoholics Anonymous meetings?”

“I went to two meetings, and never once acknowledged I’m an alcoholic, but I’ve been able to get a grip on managing my problems.”

Looking to change the subject, Hastings commented, “I saw you limping. I hope you’re not in much pain.”

Harris shook his head no.

Hastings then said, “I’m going to arrange it so you can get some time off, maybe as much as a month.”

He looked at Hastings, “A month?”

“Look, I know for a fact that you’ve had several injuries connected with that left knee, and that’s the same knee you twisted playing college football. Do you remember the day you learned you were going to lose your scholarship, and we went out and got completely plastered? A few months later, we went in and signed up to join the police academy, a couple of guys who thought they were *hot stuff*.”

Harris recalled the memory, “I saw myself as someone of average intelligence, and didn’t see much chance in continuing my education. You, at least, had the good sense to get a diploma to make something of yourself, and you’ve got it made now.”

Hastings returned the compliment by saying, “You’re a topnotch detective, Len, and if I ever had to go out on a case and needed a partner, you’d still be the guy I’d ask for. I can recall a few times when you and I got caught up in sticky situations and you saved my neck—you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

The waiter delivered their drinks, and Len replied, “Thanks for saying so, Steve. I know we’ve kind of gone our separate ways over the years, but I still feel the same about you.”

Hastings went on to stir up other memories, “There was a time when I was feeling down because I couldn’t get a girl, or a date for that matter, but you always attracted the females. You introduced me

to an old flame of yours, Frances, and you came to be the best man at our wedding. We've had three great kids, and life's never been better, but you know that first night we doubled Fran didn't want anything to do with me. She'd gone out with me just to be close to you, hoping to rekindle the relationship she'd had with you, and it was only after she saw the competition she was up against that she settled for this loser."

"You were never a loser. You were a good catch, and I tried setting the two of you up because I believed you'd make a great couple and things worked out wonderfully for you both."

"Maybe I wasn't a loser, but compared to you I was, and it took a lot of work on my part to get Fran to cozy up to me." Hastings then opened his wallet to let Harris see a recent photograph of his wife Frances. "Get a look at her."

Harris was impressed how Hastings' wife appeared, as she had a slender, shapely build. "Steve, I always thought her to be an exceptionally nice-looking girl, and the years have been good to her—she looks better than ever."

"Most people think she looks ten years younger than me and they're surprised to learn she's given birth to three children, all grown now." Hastings then turned the photo to glimpse at it, adding, "When I first met her, I thought her to be pleasantly plump. I like a full-figured woman with a voluptuous figure, and she had an angelic face. After having the kids she started putting on weight, and after trying every diet in existence, she sought help to get her weight down, and now she's skinny as a rail."

Harris grinned, "You know, old buddy, you can afford to lose a couple of pounds. What do you weigh nowadays?"

Hastings replied, "I'll tell you what, I promise not to talk about your drinking problem if you won't talk about my weight."

Nodding in agreement and tapping their glasses together, Harris downed a few swallows of his drink.

Harris then took notice of a senior detective named Ron Warren walking by their table, an honest, diligent cop he respected.

Warren acknowledged the two men's presence, "Hi, Steve. Say, Len, you were the last guy I was expecting to see here this evening."

After hearing about how that raid went, I thought you'd be in the hospital. So how's the leg?"

"I'm going out ballroom dancing later."

Warren grinned, nodding his head, "Oh yeah, like it's an everyday thing for you to get wounded by a shotgun blast."

"No, but seriously, it's not that bad. I'm going to walk with a limp for a while."

"You were lucky—both those scumbags were hardcore criminals with rap sheets a mile long. Jennings ran that neighborhood with a climate of fear from that apartment building with his mother living on the first floor, and she was the only person shedding tears over her son's death. Everybody else within a six block radius was celebrating when they got the news Jennings died in a gun battle, ending his life with a bullet to the head."

Harris said, "Why don't you sit down with us, Ron, and have a drink?"

"Okay, but I've got Jack Gallagher with me."

Hastings nodded, "Tell him to come over and join us."

After the other two detectives joined them at their table, Hastings remarked, "Len and I were going down memory lane, talking about the old days. You wouldn't believe how the girls used to flock after this guy." Hastings reached over to gently pinch Harris on the cheek, "His features haven't changed all that much, maybe a little more rugged, but he still has that baby face the females like."

Warren and Gallagher chuckled, and then Warren said, "I don't know if you've heard, but Jack is opening up his own detective agency here in town."

Harris said, "Good for you, I hope things work out. But what made you open up your own office?"

Gallagher, dark-haired and the youngest of the four sitting at the table, gripped his glass, "I took up corporate work for a couple of attorneys investigating the theft of industrial secrets at a chemical plant. The work became quite lucrative and with the money I made I was able to make an investment toward starting my own agency."

Warren commented, "In my day, detective work took a whole lot of thought and footwork, but these young guys have the smarts and the

advantage of today's technology to acquire information. They have miniature camera lenses and listening devices to help them, and look how most of the kids today are operating computers at almost the same time they can walk." He gently elbowed Harris, "We were born at the wrong time Len."

Hastings commented, "Yeah, but while they're becoming a computer whiz they're lacking in social skills. Some of these kids can't even make change." He then turned to Harris, "You ought to start your own agency. I can get you all kinds of keyhole work—men checking on their wives and vice versa."

"I haven't the business sense to manage a company. For now, I'm soaking up time cushioning my pension, but today's raid may be the last one I'm volunteering for."

Hastings stated, "You must've been out of your mind taking a spot on that sting operation. What are you trying to prove?"

"These younger guys have much more to lose than I have, and I thought I could give them assistance."

Ron Warren kept rubbing his nose, finally commenting with a disturbed expression, "My nose itches, am I getting a cold or what?" He then squinted, looking at Hastings, "It's that damn cologne you're wearing. I know that's what it is because my nose acts up every time I step into your office. Where'd you get that goofy stuff, and don't say Macy's or Dillard's."

"I got it at a high-class clothing shop in the Plaza Frontenac shopping center some time ago while picking up a blouse for Fran." Hastings looked at Harris, "I told you how Fran has trimmed down and is still losing weight. She'd purchased this blouse for a wingding the city was having in the mayor's honor, but they didn't have her size so it had to be special ordered. When picking up the blouse, it occurred to me that I'd been thinking about purchasing cologne for those celebrity VIP bashes the city holds, and I asked the salesman what male colognes his shop carried."

"The guy sets three fancy bottles on the counter and one at a time he puts a couple drops on his wrist and forearm to let me get a whiff. I don't know anything about colognes, and my smeller isn't the best, so I asked if there's one out of the three he recommends. He draws my

attention to the third bottle and says, “This is the one I wear. It has a very distinctive, risqué scent.

“Now I notice this guy’s looking deep in my eyes, and all of a sudden it hits me that he’s gay and flirting with me. I nearly climbed over the counter to punch his lights out, but this calm voice comes to me from the back of my mind, *Hastings, you’re not above the law. You belt this guy and you’re sure to find yourself arrested for assault and battery and he’ll probably sue you.* What else was there for me to do, but say, “Okay, put it on my wife’s charge account?”

Everybody busted out laughing, and Jack Gallagher asked, “What’s the name of it?”

Hastings replied, “Vintage something. The salesman described the fragrance as a blend of unique but masculine primal scents in wood and musk with citrus and floral notes.”

Harris gazed at Hastings, wondering about what he’d just said. “You can recall all that, but you can’t remember the name of the cologne.”

A few other detectives gathered to listen in on the conversation, and Warren commented, “I think I’m allergic to that stuff. It’s powerful enough to set off the damn sprinkler system in this place, and as long as you go on wearing it, you ought to be carrying a fire extinguisher to guard against spontaneous combustion.”

More laughter broke out, and Warren caught sight of a popular blonde waitress named Angie walking by who had a reputation for holding a straight face while making off-the-cuff remarks. He stopped her, “Hey, Angie, get a whiff of the cologne Hastings is wearing and give us the lowdown on what you think. It’s a blend of unique but masculine primal scents.”

The woman stopped to lean over Hastings to catch the spicy, heavy scent, and then she gave him a look. “Tequila—yeah, that’s what I smell, tequila. I hope you have to be over twenty-one to purchase it because it’s sure to give people a mind-numbing high. I highly recommend that you don’t get behind the wheel of a car when wearing it—the arresting officer won’t need a Breathalyzer to put cuffs on you.”

Everybody was laughing and some were on the verge of falling on the floor when Warren said, “You know something, you’re right. I think I smell tequila too—it must be those citrus notes that are in it.”

While on a roll, Angie remarked, “Citrus notes, like hell, that’s tequila—the fumes from that stuff can melt the chrome off the bumper of a ’57 Chevy.”

Angie grinned, pointing her finger at Warren, “Ron, you’re laughing so hard you’re in tears.”

Still laughing, Warren shook his head no, “I’m in tears because I’m allergic to that damn cologne of his.”

Angie now broke into a giggle, turning to look at Hastings, who was no longer amused by jokes about his cologne. “Instead of wearing it on your body you should dump some in your car’s tank to increase your gas mileage. It would make a good substitute for fuel injection cleaner.”

The place was now in an uproar, and Warren said, “Angie, here comes Gary Heitzel, a detective we all suspect is gay. I’ll ask him what he thinks.”

Warren signaled for Heitzel to join the party, “Heitzel, we’re trying to describe the scent of the cologne Hastings is wearing. Would you like to give us a take on what scent you pick up?”

Thinking his description would differ entirely from everyone else’s, Heitzel appeared glad to give his opinion. “Sure, I’ll give you my best shot.”

Warren gave Angie a wink without Heitzel noticing and began thumbing at the detective as he leaned over Hastings to take a slow, gentle whiff.

Heitzel then voiced, “Citrus based with a confluence of grapefruit and lime, hints of pepper and lavender, and bottom notes of oak and sandalwood. I also believe it contains patchouli, which is a warmly scented oil derived from an Indo-Malayan shrub.”

In the deliberate motion of shaking his head yes, Warren said, “That’s the best description I’ve heard yet.”

Angie nodded, “You can tell this is a guy who knows his colognes.” She leaned back as she gave Warren a look with her eyes

bugging out, “Be careful though. They say it’s known to bring out the primal, animal instinct in you.”

Angie next looked at Hastings, “I’ll tell you one thing though, you need to leave the window open when you uncork the bottle to apply that potent stuff to your skin. The fumes could blow up the whole house, and it may take months for the bomb squad to determine the accelerant was that crazy cologne.”

Their laughter went on at Hastings’s expense, as almost everyone went on running down the cologne he wore.

Chapter 3

The Study of Criminal Behavior Involving Murder

Later, Warren, Gallagher and the others moved on to mingle with other law enforcement patrons at the bar, and Harris and Hastings resumed talk about the old days at their table.

Hastings finished his drink and, after ordering another round, lit up a cigar.

Harris saw an opportunity to give Hastings a hard time about his smoking, remarking, “I thought you’d given up smoking those nasty things. I recall you once telling me that doctor’s orders were for you to stop.”

Hastings took a deep drag, and then expelled smoke as he spoke, “I don’t know if it was doctor’s orders as much as it was Fran’s orders, but I’m down to smoking three a day.” He then had another thought. “Say, do you remember when you were still wearing blue and you hooked up with a young kid named Mark Kramer? You sort of took him under your wing, becoming his partner for a short time until he was killed.”

Harris recalled Kramer, “Yes, he and I had received a radio call about a burglary in progress and when we went to the address we made a search of the grounds. He was shot in the alley by a kid not yet seventeen years of age.”

“That’s him. His sister disappeared.”

“Which one? He had two sisters.”

Hastings commented, “Yeah, I forgot you dated the older sister, the foxy blonde with the sweet smile—she’s the one missing.”

Harris nodded. “Amanda was the one I dated, and Rhonda was the younger one. They’re a nice family, good people. So, what is this about Amanda disappearing?”

“It seems whenever the economy takes a nosedive it brings out the worst in criminal behavior. As you well know, over the past few months the gruesome remains of prostitutes have begun turning up in the metro area. Thus far, three victims found are black, but, of course, Amanda Kramer was no prostitute. Her father called me up voicing

concern about wanting to find his daughter alive and asked if I could connect him with a reliable detective. My answer was that we're doing everything possible to find her, and hiring a detective would not only be expensive, but there's little chance he'd be able to find her before the police could."

Hastings paused to take a drink. "I thought that since I'm giving you some time off you might want to look into the case. I've assigned Ron Warren to lead the investigation into the deaths of the prostitutes, but the FBI has intervened, so I don't know if he'll be able to give you the latest up-to-the-minute progress we're making. However, if you're interested, I'll give you Mr. Kramer's phone number."

Harris said, "Sure, I'll take it, but what was his response when you told him hiring a detective could get expensive?"

"He said, he's lost his son and now one of his daughters is missing, and he's willing to spend his entire life savings to find her. When speaking of his wife passing away about a year ago, he got emotional, sounding terrible over the phone, out of breath and wheezing like he's having serious health problems."

"I remember Amanda's father once telling me how his father escaped Tito's socialist Yugoslavia with his family in a small boat during a thunder storm, crossing the Adriatic Sea to reach the Italian shore. He had undergone torture for denouncing communism, and succeeded at bringing his family to the United States. Wanting to Americanize his family name, which was Kurasovic or something like that, he had it changed to Kramer."

Hastings handed over his business card with Mr. Kramer's phone number written on the back. "I told him someone would contact him, and that was a few days ago, so try to get in touch with him as soon as you can." He then had another thought, "I recall Amanda Kramer well. She was a knockout, and I thought for a time you and she were going to marry. Why did you and Amanda stop seeing each other?"

"Naturally, Mark Kramer's death devastated that family, and the day they laid him to rest Amanda told me she wasn't going to see me anymore."

He clasped his hands around his glass, "When she and I first met, she was a freshman in high school and I was a senior. I was

embarrassed dating someone that young, but she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. Ordinarily, you'd get a hard time from classmates dating a girl that young, but that was overlooked in part because she was nice-looking and had a charming personality. I don't think I ever met a person who didn't like her. At first, I tried avoiding her, but every time I turned around she was standing there, and what she liked most was that I could make her laugh—we had a lot of fun together. After graduating in 1999, I picked her up in front of school on a couple of occasions, and it was a little weird, but she was happy to see me pulling up in my car.

“Anyway, I was a young officer on the force when Mark joined the department, and when he was killed it was over for the two of us. She wasn't going to get involved with a cop and have her heart broken again when he was killed in the line of duty. I never asked because I didn't want to make matters worse, but I believe the family thought I'd let them down by failing to look after Mark, blaming me to some degree for his death. I made it my business to see her once more, telling her I loved her and asking her to marry me, but she said no. I suppose to merely look at me reminded her of what happened to her brother. She had looks and amiable traits, but she was never the same after her brother was killed, acting very cold toward me the last few times we spoke. I took it that was her way of breaking ties with me and giving me a sendoff.”

Harris put the card in the inside pocket of his sport jacket and swished around the ice in his glass while thinking about ordering another drink. “Are you gonna have another?”

“I hope I'm not going to be at fault for you falling off the wagon.”

“No, I just thought I'd have another to help kill the pain in my knee.” Smiling, he added, “You know, for medicinal purposes.”

The two men soon departed and Harris went to his home on the southwest side of the city. He popped two pain pills and poured himself a tall glass of Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whisky to wash them down with. There was no hiding from the truth that he used liquor as a crutch to help him live in what he saw as an empty, lonely existence. Always a heavy drinker, his drinking significantly increased after his wife Valerie's death, but seeing his liquor consumption

running out of control, he managed to cut back on the habit. He had little choice, as to go on the way he was would make it impossible to function in this world as a homicide investigator.

Sitting down in the living room and carefully propping his left leg up on the coffee table, he reached for his wife's picture which he kept on the end table. Staring at it, he thought how much he missed her, as they were a happy couple. If there was anything their marriage lacked it was children, and although doctors hadn't given them much chance for having a child, they hadn't given up hope. They'd spoken a few times about adoption and giving it consideration. They saw years ahead of them for making such a move, and suddenly, she was gone. In that moment, swept away was a future full of expectations, and for a time it was as though he didn't have much to live for.

For months, depressed and grief-stricken, becoming a miserable drunk, one night when feeling downheartedly bereaved and melancholy, he nearly shot himself in the head. What kept him from pulling the trigger was looking at Valerie's picture, as he knew this was something she wouldn't want him to do. From that moment on he began pulling himself back together. Realizing without some sort of routine he was sure to fall back on the bottle again, he concentrated on his work, and for a time this was the only thing that kept him going.

Something that helped Harris climb out of his fit of alcoholism was the study of serial killers, a sobering phase of his education in law enforcement. Reading correctional institution records and coroner's reports, he'd analyzed statistical information with regards to the history of these enigmatic psychopaths. Vicious, soulless, and evil to the core, these prolific murderers are committed to taking the lives of innocent people to feed and gratify a thrill while getting perverse pleasure from these unspeakable acts. It made him wonder what awakens the ravenous appetite of this type of killer to emerge and take hold, whereby for a time they willfully take control over another person's fate. Being in control can bring on an exalting feeling of power, feeding a savage but primitive rationale as the killer gives into perverted thoughts, an overwhelming defilement of the soul that energizes the capacity to kill. Some find fulfillment in the rapture of this magnificent grand illusion, and once they've crossed this line they

become something inhuman, for it's only a matter of time before they do it again.

Harris had previously taken college courses covering Criminal Justice to scrutinize the characteristics of murderers, while focusing on the basic fundamental motives for such acts. He found the main motives for murder to be: love or the absence of it, money and greed, pride and jealousy, revenge, mental illness/obsession, crimes of passion/sex and lust. Other factors inducing the urge to kill are gang initiation and violence often related to drug trafficking, mob contract/murder for hire, thrill killing, hate crime (religious, racial, deteriorating marriage), and robbery.

His studies of human behavior entailed examining the roles of certain emotional risk factors such as personality disorders. Men who kill their wives are almost invariably personality disordered, and he'd learned that physical abuse, domestic violence, and rage often come before the act of murder. Deaths of a spouse or an intimate partner usually come after an escalation of violence, beatings and bludgeoning. Estrangement, separation and abandonment are motivational factors in many cases for creating rage. One clear pattern is that a high degree of domestic homicides occur after a verbal or physical confrontation during a failed reconciliation, or when a wife first announces her intention to leave.

Police report male jealousy as the most frequent motive. After a prolonged period of internal conflict, chronic, and aversive tension, the act is carried out on impulse in a violent episode. "Overcontrolled" murders are common, where paranoia and depression is linked to passive aggressive and dependent personality disorders. Homicide-suicide incidents often involve amorous jealousy on the part of the perpetrator, whether real or delusional, for their partner's infidelity.

Marital or intimate killings often result in greater violence, or "overkill", involving lengthy and excessive violence, inflicting harm far beyond what is necessary to ensure a kill. It is not unusual for these fatal assaults to continue long after the person is dead, as victims in most of these prolonged attacks have multiple stab wounds and dozens of bodily injuries. There may be two or more separate actions of stabbing, cutting, or shooting, but most resulted in stabbing and/or

throat slashing. This act of overkill in most cases doesn't apply with mariticide (husband killing).

Knowledge Harris acquired in case studies helped aid him in his career for solving numerous homicide cases. Murder is seldom simple, and predominantly an unplanned event. Psychoanalysts have diagnosed killers' prevalent pathologies and emotional problems in an effort to pinpoint the root cause for murder. The mindset of some killers ranges from ruminative to obsessional, and often taking on the "Othello Syndrome." Such relationships are more often than not chronically chaotic, fraught with jealous suspicions, and verbal and physical abuse. "Homicidal husbands" commonly escalate to a dangerous level of anger and anxiety prior to the act. In many cases, they threaten to do what they end up doing for responding to the intolerable stimulus in the face of a wife's departure. The worst scenarios lead to "Family homicides," which are often precipitated by separation from the partner.

What he'd learned in the past as a detective helped prepare him for taking up a psychiatric study for delving into the mind of the serial killer. The actions of these people definitely place them in a separate classification. Their 'Modus Operandi,' approximately translated "method of operation," sets them apart from the others, and can sometimes by description make a person's skin crawl. It's a term often used in criminal profiling, and examining the actions and methods employed by these perpetrators offers clues to the offender's psychology. Work in this field can assist in the identification and apprehension of such criminals while determining links between crimes.

Getting into the minds of these psychologically unbalanced killers is difficult, as their ungrounded thinking usually has no logic to it, and it may be that their behavior is linked to a degenerative gene. The environment of their upbringings linked to child abuse can impact their mental development, but it may just as well be that they suffered oxygen deprivation for a lengthy period of time at the moment of birth. Studies have proven that these considerations can lead to a flawed mind-altering mutation, resulting in their having warped ideas about people and in particular, the opposite sex. It's a well-known fact that

many serial killers show a propensity for torturing and killing animals in their youth, which accelerates into a diseased, unstable mind that has crazed, violent impulses. A predisposed fault in a person's personality can cause this killer instinct to take root and prevail while surfacing to give a person an unrestricted drive to kill and mutilate the bodies of their victims.

Few see themselves for what they are and what they've become, but for some an internal struggle begins. They're conscious of their criminal behavior and how it caused them to take a life. They know they've done wrong in the eyes of God and man and want to repent as a way to come to grips with their actions. Overtime they are tormented by feeling the need and strong desire to do it again and again. Judgmental reconciliation leads to excuses and forgiveness, and an innermost urge to kill again pushes aside clear thinking, overriding civilized reasoning. The period of intercession has fallen to the wayside, as the insertion of another victim put through living hell is the only thing that can quell this unremitting and incessant drive to kill. This hostile, aggressive tendency that needs quenching is immured for but a short time before the murderer is compelled to conspire, solicit, and incur upon the unlucky, the unsuspecting, and the sadly unfortunate. What happened once is imminently and ultimately certain to occur again and again until the killer is exposed and put away. Some might say they are sick and can't help themselves, but they get fulfillment, and even enjoyment, out of torturing innocent people to death.

Serial killing took the public's fascination in the late 1880's when a murderer calling himself "Jack the Ripper" began slaughtering prostitutes in London's Whitechapel District. However, many of modern day's serial killers, by comparison, make this individual look like a boy scout.

Harris's study of courtroom records covering American serial killers chronicled in depth some of the most infamous murderers in modern history, starting with the Zodiac Killer. These were killers whose atrocities rocked the nation, as they cruelly etched a place for their names on the list of the worst criminals in the annals of history.

His thoughts for the moment were for the relationship he'd had with Amanda Kramer. It seemed that having this missing person's case may serve to keep him occupied so he wouldn't drink during the time he had off with this injury. However, this also gave him reason to recall the death of Mark Kramer, and he carried a guilt complex for not being able to do anything to save this young man's life. Having collared the teenager who'd fatally shot Mark, he remembered standing over his dying partner and watching life drain from his body. This was an image that had surfaced in his mind more often than he wanted to recall, and he'd sometimes relive it in his dreams for feeling so helpless to save him. What gave Harris additional cause to rehash this terrible incident was that he'd played a role in Mark wanting to become a cop, as he'd looked up to Harris. He'd seen Harris as the kind of law officer he wanted to be and strived to emulate him.

He remembered Amanda well, a woman he wanted to marry, but it wasn't to be, for she had no desire to be married to an officer of the law. He fell asleep in the chair thinking about both Amanda and Mark after drinking almost half of the bottle of bourbon. Awaking in the middle of the night, feeling the urge to use the restroom, as he stood up, the stiffness in his knee caused him to misstep and fall flat on his face. He got up from the floor and after stumbling into the bathroom to relieve himself, he soon made it to bed.

Waking up the next morning, he was looking at foreclosure on his house before finally getting a grip on life to turn around his grim financial situation. Nowadays doing a much better job managing his life and keeping up with invoices, he sat down to write checks to cover the house payment and utility bills. Later, looking in the bathroom mirror, he thought himself a mess, but then he showered, shaved, and prepared to start his day. He stopped and gazed at Valerie's photograph once more as though making a gesture of apology for his drinking, and without a spoken word promised to try harder to stop.

He phoned Mr. Kramer and when he didn't get an answer, he neglected to leave a message, stopping instead at a greasy spoon to have a light breakfast.

Afterwards, he phoned Mr. Kramer again and this time he got an answer, hearing a drowsy voice sounding deep and withdrawn. "Hello."

"Good morning, Mr. Kramer, my name is Harris, and I received your phone number from Chief of Detectives Steven Hastings."

"Yes, I'm sorry I can't speak too clearly. I came to the emergency room of St. Mary's Hospital a few days ago complaining of chest pains, and the next thing I knew they were performing bypass surgery on me."

Thinking this man must've just came home after being hospitalized, Harris said, "Well, perhaps I should call you back in a day or two to give you some recovery time."

"No," the voice said urgently, "I want you to come to my house today so you can start looking for my daughter immediately."

Having a bad time understanding Mr. Kramer, Harris replied, "You want me to see you now?"

"Yes, please, as soon as possible."

"It may take me a half hour or so, but I'll be right there."

Harris drove to the Kramer residence in his tan Chevrolet Impala, and memories of coming to this brick home on the south side returned to him as he walked up to the door. He hadn't seen Amanda's father in years and saw little chance of this man remembering him. Mr. Kramer must've been watching for him to arrive, as he opened the door wearing a robe and slippers, "Are you the detective I spoke to on the phone?"

"Yes, I am."

The frail and seemingly feeble man gently caught hold of Harris's sleeve to pull him inside.

Not knowing what response he would get with his next comment, Harris said, "My name is Leonard Harris. I knew your son Mark well, and for a time I dated Amanda. Do you remember me?"

The aging man's eyes flashed at Harris, as if giving his features a look over, "Yes, yes I do, and it's good you know Amanda. You may know the circle of people she ran with and something about the routine she followed."

“I haven’t seen Amanda in a good many years, Mr. Kramer, but I’m willing to investigate her disappearance, if that’s what you want me to do.”

Mr. Kramer made a strong effort to communicate verbally, “I had this wretched heart attack out of concern for her safety, and I want you to find her.”

“I understand.”

His hand shook as he reached for a piece of paper on the fireplace mantle where there were graduation pictures of Amanda, Mark, and his youngest daughter Rhonda, photos Harris remembered seeing before. He handed the paper to Harris, “This is my youngest daughter’s phone number. Her name is Rhonda and she can write you a check from my savings account to get you started looking for Amanda.”

On the piece of paper was chicken scratched handwriting, but he could make out the name Rhonda and the phone number Kramer had written down.

“I wish I could be more help to you, but in my condition I’m quite helpless. I went in the hospital the next day after last talking to Hastings and he told me he’d be sending someone.”

Harris gave a reassuring nod, “You can rest assured that I’ll do all I can to find Amanda for you and I’ll get in touch with Rhonda today to start my investigation.” Harris handed him his card, “Here’s my card, in case you need to reach me, and I’ll also see to it that Rhonda has my phone number.”

As if out of breath, Kramer strained to add, “Rhonda is sometimes difficult to contact. She’s employed as assistant manager at Tokar’s Casino, but you can catch her there tonight after six in the evening.”

“Where is Amanda employed?”

“She works for Anthony Tokar, owner of the casino, managing his affairs as his personal secretary.”

The old gentleman settled down when telling Harris goodbye, and over the course of the next several hours, Harris had trouble reaching Rhonda by phone. He tried her number at different times throughout the day, leaving no message. Confident he’d soon catch up to her, he went to police headquarters to fill out paperwork to arrange time off

for his knee injury. While there, he intended talking to Ron Warren to see what he knew about Amanda's disappearance since it was currently under investigation by the department. He was also curious to find out if there were any new developments regarding the gruesome murders of those prostitutes.

Chapter 4

Gathering Information on Missing Persons and the Activity of a Serial Killer

After completing the necessary paperwork at police headquarters to arrange time off, Harris went to Steve Hastings' office. In the short time he spoke to his secretary, he learned Hastings wasn't available and he may not be back at the station for hours. He caught the scent of cigar smoke and that peculiar cologne worn by the chief of detectives. His knee beginning to ache, he took a pain pill, and stopping by a water fountain to wash it down, he saw Ron Warren standing behind a counter reading paperwork. Hastings had indicated that Warren was the one to speak to, as he was handling both the missing person's cases and directing the investigation involving black prostitutes.

Harris approached him, "Ron, I understand you're conducting the investigation into those murdered prostitutes. I've taken on a case involving the disappearance of a woman named Amanda Kramer, looking into it as a favor to her family, and I was wondering if you can give me anything helpful."

"You're asking for privileged, confidential information Len, but I don't mind letting you in on a few things because I know you'll keep a tight lip. This is a hot item to say the least—it's beginning to get nationwide attention, and if the media finds out you have anything to do with this case they'll be breathing down your neck. I'm giving you my cooperation strictly because I think you're an OK guy, but unfortunately, I can't say the same for your old buddy Hastings."

Warren appeared a bit steamed and resentful, "He burned me a few times to make himself look good for becoming Chief of Detectives, and getting that promotion has blown-up his ego. I haven't got too long before retirement, so I don't mind if you tell him I said he's a jerk. It's my hard work that's made this department operate efficiently, and just this morning he dumped his problems on me, but I've come to the point where I don't care anymore."

"Whatever you and I talk about stays with me, Ron."

“Moving up in the ranks gave him a big head. I saw a change in him the minute he took that position, and now he acts like he’s some kind of a ladies man.”

“Ron, he’s a family man.”

“Oh, yeah, don’t fool yourself, a guy that wears cologne that potent is on the prowl for female companionship, and if you don’t know that, you’re not the detective I thought you to be.”

Warren took a manila folder from a nearby file cabinet and handed it to Harris, “These are photos of the first three victims. We found the remains of a fourth victim this morning, the body mangled and badly decomposed, and like the first three victims she’s a black prostitute. We got a break making the identification with her being a local living on the streets for only a couple of months. She kept tabs with family and friends on the north side where she turned tricks to make a dollar, and they reported her missing ten days ago. A plaster cast was made of undisturbed tire tread impressions found at the location of where they discovered the body.”

Harris examined photos of the first three victims while listening to Warren and a photo marked #1 in the upper right hand corner indicated the first body found. Her remains were nothing more than a skeletal structure assembled on a table, hair still connected to the skull.

“The killer focused on women living on the fringes of society, leaving no family members reporting the first three victims missing. We received our first lead a month ago by mail here at the station, a typewritten letter with a map, and a red X on the map pinpointing exactly where to find the remains of that first victim. We found what was left of her lying on a stack of debris in an abandoned lot on the north side of town, and as you can see, she wasn’t much more than scattered bones. This is the method by which we’ve found all four victims: correspondence arriving here at the station in the nature of a short letter and a map indicating where to find a body.

“We discovered the second victim in much the same condition as the first. However, with the exception of the first murder victim, the others were located across the river in the metro east. Plastic straps bound the hands and legs of the decomposed bodies, which may have been used to make it easier to transport them, and there are obvious

indications they underwent torture. Each one had limbs and ribs broken, injuries perhaps delivered by a brutal kick. The killer placed the bodies in high weeds or thick woods at secluded outdoor areas, and not one of them had a stitch of clothing or articles of identification, their identities confirmed by various means.

“Whoever this sadist is, it wasn’t enough to murder these women and expecting to get away with it, he wanted credit and attention for his handiwork. He’s entertained himself by sending us letters and maps, correspondence that has drawn a lot of media attention. He’s been careful thus far not to leave fingerprints, but we’ve detected DNA from saliva applied when he carelessly licked one of the envelopes to seal it. No match came up in CODIS and the National DNA Index System of known criminal offenders, but we are still checking with other database systems nationwide, and the FBI has taken over control of the investigation.

“One detail you’ll have to keep to yourself is the typewritten letters and maps come off a computer printer say very little, but the FBI agent leading a specialized team thinks the maps carry significance. Getting his kicks marking the location of victim’s bodies on a map, he’s certain to get a thrill when it’s announced on the news that a fourth victim has turned up. I understand they found scarring on the wrists and ankles of this last female, indicating he’d secured chains or cuffs to hold her in bondage.”

Harris remarked, “Amanda Kramer is not a prostitute, nor is she black, so even though she was reported missing, she may not have been abducted by the same individual who killed these other women.”

Warren acknowledged this with a nod. “That’s true, and she was reported missing just four days ago, but you never know about people’s lifestyles. I’ve done murder investigations to learn a woman can lead the life of a high-priced call girl with practically no one knowing about it until she’s found murdered. Another young Caucasian woman reported missing is a dancer at a topless lounge in East St. Louis, and she’s held several other occupations while residing here in Missouri. Her name is Deborah Kutraba, an immigrant from Albania who may be of Bosnian or Serbian descent. She’s married with three children, and to put it the way her husband told it, she is a

hardworking girl trying to support a family. The husband had a heavy accent that was difficult to understand, also mentioning he was having a bad time finding work. You know how it is, a girl can make a lot of money working as a dancer and the cost for a babysitter can get expensive. So, the way I see it, they're making it the best way they know how, and he's a stay at home dad."

Warren presented to Harris an envelope that held still photos from security cameras where Amanda Kramer worked. The photos were taken at the casino's underground garage and showed the Toyota Camry she had driven as it left her place of work for the last time.

"These surveillance photos are the last taken of the Kramer girl, and the last accounting for her whereabouts. It's difficult to make out with any certainty that it's her behind the wheel from glare reflecting off the glass, and the picture's a little fuzzy anyway. Technicians have tried to computer enhance the imagery to give them clarity, but as you can see, it's done little good."

He also presented additional photos of the two missing Caucasian women, "These are fairly recent photos of Amanda Kramer and Deborah Kutraba."

Harris mainly gave attention to the photo of Amanda Kramer, who still looked very attractive, "What else can you tell me?"

"I can give you this Kutraba girl's address," and Warren wrote information down for him on a piece of notepaper.

Warren added, "I'd like to give you more, but I'm restricted on what I can say about this case. Should information leak out jeopardizing the investigation or subsequent arrest and prosecution of a suspected serial killer, I'd lose my badge. If I had any evidence linking Amanda Kramer's disappearance to these other killings I'd tell you, but except for the fact that she's missing I have nothing clearly indicating that someone abducted her. Two days after receiving the missing person's report on Kramer, a patrolman found her car downtown, not far from the riverfront on Wharf Street, six blocks south of the Arch grounds. That's not an area I'd recommend for somebody to go casually walking after dark. There were no prints or indications of a struggle, but the driver's seat may have been moved back to accommodate a person taller or larger than her. So, while

suspecting foul play, we can't say with any certainty that somebody took her from that location or if someone simply parked her car there and took the keys.

"My gut feeling is that Amanda Kramer was probably abducted elsewhere and whoever took her left her car at that location, but we haven't enough facts or evidence to draw any conclusions. After all, like I said, the Kramer woman was only reported missing four days ago, this Deborah Kutraba was reported missing forty-eight hours ago, and we've yet to find her car."

Harris returned the photos to Warren, "Thanks Ron."

Someone in office personnel dropped a typewritten note on the counter, and while Warren read it, he commented, "There's no end to the hours I've spent on unsolved deaths and disappearances." He then looked at Harris, "I'd say the FBI agent handling the deaths of these prostitutes is a decent enough guy that he might be willing to give up more information. I'll put in a good word for you and should I get anything more I can release to you I'll let you know. He's not at the station now, and I couldn't give a definite time for when to catch him here."

"I'll try to stop by again soon to speak with him. What's his name?"

"Howard Johnson."

Harris continued looking at Warren, who nodded yes, "Really, that's the guy's name."

Warren added, "I don't know if you're aware of it, but the mayor announced this morning that there's to be a meeting at city hall to discuss the murders of the prostitutes at noon today. If you're going to it, you haven't got much time."

Harris thought it best to make that meeting, and when arriving at city hall he had a difficult time finding a place to park. There were television news crews and newspaper people gathered in the building's spacious lobby where he came to listen to the mayor speak on an elevated platform. After telling the crowd that immediate family members have been notified, he detailed the names of four victims before introducing a female criminologist named Juliet Palmer, heading the Behavioral Science Unit for the FBI.

The woman came forward. “I know you have questions, but at this time I can only tell you that we have leads we are pursuing. The FBI was asked to assist local law enforcement in this case, and has taken an interest in it mainly because it involves multiple murders of females that transcend state lines. While the body of one victim was found in the St. Louis area here in Missouri, the other three victims were discovered in Illinois, but they’re all Missouri residents. Our primary role at this time is to ensure the continuity in evidence collected.

“Serial murders comprise less than one percent of all murders in a given year, but it is estimated that serial killers may have done away with as many as ten times their known victims. We have a serial killer in the St. Louis area walking about in our midst, so beware and avoid contact with strangers. Many serial killers rely on charm to seduce their victims, and yet are rage personified, getting excitement and arousal out of terrorizing their victims. These rages satisfy an animal instinct pleasure, controlling pain and suffering as they wield the power of life and death. Strangulation for most of these killers is a component of sexual gratification—the grandeur of having importance by dominating others and controlling their fate.

“Often those targeted are runaways caught in the drug trade or a prostitution circuit, casualties by their way of life. Women living a transient, rocky, wasted lifestyle are weak-minded, unsuspecting and easy prey. Having been molested and abandoned at a young age, enduring harsh treatment and suffering violent episodes at the hands of possibly their parents or guardians, they’re often robbed of their childhood.

“The science of anthropology has made great strides in the past 125 years. Quite often in such cases it’s by the study of bones that we determine the deceased’s age, sex, and race for identification purposes. The first two prostitutes found were badly decomposed, little more than a collection of bones, but an odontologist identified the victims by dental records, and their remains speak to us through forensics.

“Whoever did away with these prostitutes is merciless in how he deals with women, for before he’s finished with them, they are probably praying for their deaths to come. The medical examiner said she believes the first two deceased women died from suffocation as a

result of manual strangulation. She gave special attention to the laryngeal skeleton when performing the autopsy for determining their hyoid bone was broken. Exerting pressure on the neck to suffocate a person often breaks the small U-shaped bone at the base of the tongue.

“As for the third victim, he crushed her entire larynx and thyroid cartilage to collapse her airway, which he may have accomplished by a punch, a Karate chop, or perhaps a kick. For investigators, this says he’s taken self-defense courses or may have had training in the armed forces. He may have just as well had experience in law enforcement, and simply delivered the blow to end the victim’s misery or to silence her screams. The killer may have been emboldened to make this death blow as an exhibition of power to instill fear in others he may have abducted and have little choice but to watch.

“The killer hogtied and strapped up the fourth victim, probably doing it as a form of torture or punishment. Hanging someone that way for an undetermined period delivers hideously cruel pain, and the lungs are expanded so they cannot fully function to exhale, leading to asphyxiation or heart failure. The fact that her shoulders were dislocated gives evidence of this, and ligature marks were found on the victim, indicating he may have used various forms of restraints such as rope, zip-ties, or handcuffs. The killer’s inordinate capacity for homicidal violence is rooted in a dysfunctional family history, as he may have endured beatings from his parents. Psychiatrists say society breeds serial killers who have a twisted hatred for women, compelling the individual to abduct and torture them as payback for the mistreatment they suffered as a child.

“During the act of performing torture on their victim, these people are living a fantasy. In most cases, the perpetrator was a victim of torture and in a certain sense they may be reliving the experience of their own victimization. By delivering torture to their prey they imagine themselves as regaining something they’d lost when experiencing a violent episode directed at them. Often a person of low esteem, the satisfaction of exerting power over their prisoner, for whatever reason, may give them a feeling of exaltation and by this act they’ve returned some of the dignity stolen from them. It’s evident that he may periodically get some uncontrollable, compulsive urge to

attack women as payback for mistreatment he experienced, and he may enjoy these power trips of making the female species suffer.

“While most serial killers are white, the hair follicle of an African-American male was lifted from one of the bodies. Believing this single hair was not transferred by some form of contamination, we have good reason to think our suspect is black. When profiling this individual, we again have concluded that he may have been in the military, and only perhaps recently was discharged. Since getting out of the armed forces he may have had a hard time finding employment or feels he is not suited for the job he now has. He may have undergone a recent divorce, which has increased demeaning feelings of his inability to function in this world on his own. This is an individual who may feel uncomfortable or even inferior when in the company of certain women. In his personal life at home, he may easily fly into a rage, which may have played into the failure of his marriage.

“Once he’s overpowered a female and she’s subject to his will, torturing her in a controlled environment gives him a sense of superiority. His mind may host multiple personalities, as he may usually act like an ordinary person in order to hold a job, but when exercising his authority over his captives, he demonstrates egregiously monstrous behavior. In a strange way, these episodes may feed his ego, giving him weird, gluttonous compensation for other things he’s lacking in.

“Many in my department feel that most of these predators are beyond rehabilitation. Take the pervert who likes to abduct and fondle children. If this individual has a sexual preference for little kids, how are you going to alter his way of thinking? It’s like you’re a heterosexual, and a psychoanalyst is convinced that with treatment he can change you into a gay or lesbian. Taking into consideration he exhibits violent behavior, he may have avoided serious criminal charges up till now. This means he has no criminal record, making it more difficult to identify who he is. If he’s committed violent crimes in the past besides these murders and eluded authorities to go on preying on the public, he may live under the delusion he can do as he pleases without consequences. What makes this individual dangerous

is that he's obviously convinced himself that he's not going to allow witnesses to survive his wrath."

Harris left city hall thinking about the predatory killer who'd murdered these four women, his mind immersed in things serial killers do to their fellow human beings. While Harris's investigative experience told him there was a good chance that Amanda Kramer's abduction had no connection with the deaths of those four black prostitutes, he could not discount that possibility. Surmising that after having secured her in a confined, out-of-the-way space, her abductor could be holding her anywhere in this town. He may have driven her car to the riverfront and from there caught a cab or used a bus route to return home. Seeing those gruesome photographs of dead women Warren provided left him uncomfortable, for this person might have a number of women caged in such a way that they're helpless.

Still having no luck reaching Rhonda Kramer by phone, he intended seeing her that evening where she worked at Tokar's Casino in nearby St. Charles, Missouri. St. Charles is a city in the county seat of St. Charles County, with a population of fewer than 70,000, making it the ninth-largest city in Missouri. A municipality located northwest of St. Louis and a thirty minute drive from the St. Louis city limits, the casino was located on the Missouri River. A fairly large facility, it also offered a private gentleman's club for high rollers who have an itch for amorously attractive young females who like to tease.

Harris wasn't exactly pleased with Amanda and Rhonda Kramer's employment at a gambling casino, and this casino in particular, for their involvement with its owner, Anthony Tokar, complicated the investigation. Tokar had a dark, nefarious reputation with likely connections to organized crime, and if he had anything to do with Amanda's disappearance it would be difficult to prove. The fact that Amanda managed Tokar's affairs as his personal secretary meant she had insight into his private business dealings, giving her access to crucial information that perhaps made a man like Tokar uncomfortable. The casino owner was known to employ unsavory and unscrupulous people recently released from prison who were anxious to acquire large sums of money fast to make up for lost time. Some were rough characters with long criminal records, in which Harris

thought to be capable of making an individual vanish without a trace. They weren't the types of people you'd want to turn your back on or think about crossing if you wanted to sleep peacefully at night.

Chapter 5

Meeting Amanda's Sister Rhonda at Tokar's Casino

Harris arrived at Tokar's Casino at six-thirty that same evening, a huge building with that name in bright lights to draw the eyes of people from afar. Entering the lobby, he passed by hotel accommodations offered by the casino's inn that was part of the complex. He walked through a wide corridor lined with fancy shops carrying high-priced clothing, souvenirs, and two restaurants, one offering Greek cuisine and the other offering Italian dishes.

Two warmly decorated drinking establishments caught his eye. One presented a brightly lit sign showing galloping race horses with the name *The Kentucky Derby*, which played prerecorded horse races on a big screen for people to bet on. A computer controlled the races, having multiple outcomes for it to choose from, with the ability to change the colors of horses and their numbers. The other place was *The Viking Lounge*, and what made it remarkable was the long replica of a Viking fighting ship that made up the bar, a majestic dragon's head protruded from the bow.

Moving along, clusters of exotic plants and palm trees surrounded the casino's broad entrance, which was a spacious sky lighted atrium. He went to a counter to register for receiving a card issued by the casino that gave him access to the gambling establishment and all the trappings it offered. Harris made the card visible to a watchful female guard in a dark blue jacket standing at the casino's entrance who observed him pass through. His eyes were soon drawn to a lovely young female dressed in a sleek black uniform, wearing the same black top and slacks all the female casino employees wore. The cool brunette with big brown eyes gave a bright smile as though recognizing Harris, and coming to greet him, he thought she may be Rhonda Kramer.

"Len Harris," she said, before welcoming him with a hug.

At first having trouble seeing her as the grownup younger sister of the girl he once dated, he expected her hair to have changed to light brown like Amanda's.

He grinned, “What’s it been, about a-hundred years?”

She had that same choked up laugh she’d had as a teenager, “It seems about that long.”

He lowered his voice when saying, “I tried phoning you numerous times today. I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but at the request of your father, I’ve taken up investigating the whereabouts of your sister.”

“I know Dad was trying to get through to Steve Hastings to ask him about hiring a private detective to look for Amanda, and I’m glad you’re the one who took the job.”

“Hastings hooked me up with the case by asking me to speak with your father, and I agreed to do what I can to find her. I’ve got some time off as a result of an injury, and I don’t intend charging your family anything unless some unexpected expenses crop up.”

Rhonda had an anxious expression, “I thought I noticed you limping. Are you okay?”

“My knee is a little stiff is all, but it’s nothing.”

The pair began walking casually about the casino, “The reason Dad wanted to hire a detective is because with each passing day the chances of finding Amanda gets slimmer and I agree. We’re very concerned about her, and it’s a situation that’s fast growing unbearable. It’s bad enough when your sister’s missing, but there’s also those dead prostitutes they’re finding around St. Louis and over in Illinois.”

Moving about in no definite direction, they meandered away from the ringing slot machines and sound of clanging and shifting levers as she continued, “I’m sorry you couldn’t reach me by phone. I may have impulsively switched the ringer to low, a habit I got into doing during the daytime when I know I’m working the night shift. I’ve tried to avoid hitting that switch on the phone for concern Amanda might call, although I never turn off my phone in case she leaves me a message.”

She turned her head to face Harris, her fluffy long hair enveloping her face and plump cheeks. “I can give you my home phone number, but it’s best to catch me by my cell phone, and I check my messages on a regular basis.”

“I didn’t leave a message because I thought it better to talk to you in person, but I do want to get your home number just in case.” He nodded in the direction of the slot machines, “I wonder if the noise of those things can lead to hearing loss.”

She gave a warm smile, “The noise gives a vibration in my ears during the allergy season when my sinuses are acting up, and I use ear plugs.” Her expression changed more serious as she remarked, “Dad and I are going crazy, and we don’t know what to do, but you’re someone I have confidence in. Years ago when that kid shot and killed my brother, he may have just as well shot my mother and father too because it practically destroyed them. I can attest that it took years off my mother’s life. Not a day’s gone by that I haven’t replayed in my mind the time I heard the news of his death.”

Harris momentarily looked down, picturing Mark in his mind while remembering the night he died in that alleyway, recalling apprehending the kid that shot him, “Yeah, it still haunts me too. Mark was in every way like the kid brother I never had, and there have been few people I’ve met with whom I’ve been as fond of.”

He stopped walking to look into this beautiful young girl’s clear eyes. “I fully understand you and your father’s concern for Amanda, and I promise to do everything I can to find her. Something that may prove helpful is that the FBI is looking into the deaths of those prostitutes, and in doing so they’re also taking an interest in Amanda’s case. While it’s highly unlikely your sister’s disappearance is linked to their deaths, they may still come up with some valuable information for helping to find her, so keep your chin up.”

They’d moved far enough away from the noisy slot machines to speak in a normal tone of voice, and poker, blackjack and craps tables surrounded them. Harris then asked, “One thing I’d like to know is, what made Amanda take up working here at the casino for Anthony Tokar, and for that matter, the same question goes for you? On the outside looking in, these places are alluring and exciting, but in my opinion, they draw the lurid, criminal type that I detest. Part of what draws the people is the money and the carnival atmosphere, many of them are addicted to the gambling scene, but you and Amanda don’t fit in this. You’re worthy of a better calling in this life.”

“Like I said before, when my brother died, it was like the end of the world for us, and it changed Amanda in a way that I never could’ve predicted or imagined. She loved you and had aspirations of getting married and having a family, but that all changed the night Mark died. For a short time, I thought you could take the place of my brother toward helping my family heal because my parents thought you’d make the ideal husband for her. My brother’s death changed her though, she turned cold, and my folks and I couldn’t believe it when she broke off from seeing you. It was as though the way she perceived life changed overnight, and while I can’t say she became a selfish person, she no longer wanted things that tie a person down. Most of my mother’s emotional distress came from Mark’s death; she cried for days, but she also took it to heart when Amanda ended her relationship with you, and there was no reasoning with Amanda.

“Anyway, when she took up with Anthony Tokar years later, he wined and dined her. He eventually asked her to marry him, but she wouldn’t say yes for probably the same reason she wouldn’t marry you. You could say she’d taken up with the good life, and even though she saw marriage was out for Tokar, the two had a lasting and meaningful relationship. Unfortunately, it was taking up with Tokar that led to her to falling into drug dependence for a spell, but she was strong-willed enough to overcome that. However, she didn’t break off seeing Tokar afterwards, which is something I couldn’t relate to or understand.

“I guess, over time, I was lured by, as you say, the bright lights and excitement of the casino and the prospect of making good money here as an assistant manager. Amanda got me the job and looked after me as best as a sister can to make certain I didn’t start carousing with the shady characters that hang around here. In some ways, I’ve done better than Amanda by establishing a career here, and at the same time, I’ve tried looking out for her. While she’s stuck to Tokar, I’ve been groomed as a professional for managing this business, and I’m afraid seeing what goes on behind the scenes at this place might have played a part in her disappearance.”

Harris scratched his chin, “Yeah, and how’s that?”

She pointed to a wide black door that had neon lights over it that read *Tokar's Private Gentlemen's Club*. In lights was a female posed like a French floozy as though resembling a playboy bunny with her rump in the air.

“On the far end of the interior of the men’s club is Tokar’s office where Amanda spent almost all of her time. That place is off limits to me, but a few times after Amanda disappeared I pushed my way in, asking questions to those who knew my sister to find out what happened to her.”

She motioned for Harris to look at a large, blown up photo hanging on the wall from the last New Year’s party held at the casino. Girls employed at the casino had grouped together laughing in the photo, and she pointed out a girl closely resembling her who stood next to her in the picture.

“A lot of people thought this girl to be my sister because we look so much alike. Her name is Nadia Popovich, but we all call her Natalie here, as we rarely use our real names at the casino. Incidentally, I’m known as Bianca.”

Another female, dressed the same way in a black outfit came to interrupt Rhonda to ask a question, cutting short their conversation.

“Len, will you excuse me for a minute, there’s something that needs my attention. It’s important that you and I talk, and we’re slow tonight so I’m going to arrange to be free in less than an hour. My car’s in the body shop and I need to make arrangements to pick up a rental my insurance company is paying for.”

“I’d be glad to chauffer you around town.”

She pointed at Harris as she walked away, “I want to stop by the hospital later to see someone, and I’d appreciate you coming with me.”

“Sure, that’s not a problem.” He then used his thumb to draw her eyes to the gentlemen’s club. “I’m going to see your boss for a few minutes before we leave.”

Rhonda gave a bright smile, “Good luck with that,” and she continued on her way to take care of a small problem a dealer was having with a customer.

He went to the entrance of the gentlemen's club where a doorman wearing a dark suit stood watch, and he looked at Harris while holding out his hand, "Your card, please."

Harris presented his badge, "I'm not here to be entertained. I've come to see Mr. Tokar on an important matter if he's available."

The doorman had a miniature walkie-talkie with an earpiece he listened through, and before speaking into it, he asked, "I'll need your name, and the purpose for you wanting to see Mr. Tokar?"

He put away his badge, "I am Lieutenant Leonard Harris, and I'm here on police business investigating the whereabouts of a missing person."

The doorman spoke into the mouthpiece of the communication device, "I have a Detective named Harris here who wants to see Mr. Tokar regarding the investigation of a missing person."

He listened briefly before saying, "Yes, I've seen his detective's badge."

The door opened for him to enter the establishment, which didn't look much different than the casino, but there were no slot machines. Dolled up girls working the floor wore little more than a sparkly, snug fitting red swimsuit, and they hung on the arms of male patrons playing games at the tables.

A hostess dressed much the same way greeted him with a warm smile. "Mr. Harris, please come this way."

The young lady escorted him across the gentlemen's club to Tokar's office and while walking they passed two men of Latin American descent who were leaving. They were well dressed, but Harris highly suspected they were drug smugglers. One had the build of a stout football player, his hair worn in a short, stubbly, skinhead haircut, and he had cold, dead eyes and had a nasty scar across his left cheek. The other had a darker complexion, black wavy hair and a black moustache, appearing more businesslike.

Harris came to a door marked OFFICE and the female leading the way opened the door for him, holding it open until he entered a room with a vacant desk. He thought this would've been the station Amanda Kramer ordinarily occupied. After closing the door behind her, the girl opened the next door which took him to Tokar's office. Harris saw

Tokar as a man with an off-colored complexion, as though he was Hispanic, Caucasian, and possibly oriental, wearing an expensive silk blend suit and strong cologne, his hair wet with mousse.

Tokar got up from his desk and in a gentlemanly manner came to greet Harris with a smile and a handshake, “Hello, Detective Harris, won’t you please have a seat? I understand you’re here investigating a missing person, and am I right to assume its Amanda Kramer you’re trying to find?”

The casino owner’s smooth-talking manner did little to impress Harris. He thought everything about this guy was phony and fake from the word go. Wanting to seem friendly to the successful businessman, he simply replied, “Yes, as a matter of fact it is, and I’m also a friend of the Kramer family.”

Tokar returned to his seat behind the desk, nodding. “Oh, yes, I remember Amanda once mentioning she had an old and dear friend who was a police officer. Well, I’m pleased to meet you, and I hope you’re here to report the police department is having some success locating her?”

“I wish I could say that is true. We’re following up on a number of leads, but so far everything keeps taking us back to this casino. The last persons to see her before she disappeared are her fellow employees, and the main reason for my coming here is to find out if there may be something we missed.”

“I turned over to the department what our security and surveillance cameras filmed that day and they show her leaving in her car, but we have no idea what happened to her after that. Other detectives have interviewed my staff and me, and I don’t know what I can add that I haven’t already told them.”

Harris calmly replied, “Yeah, we keep going over those videos and reports expecting to turn up something. I came out this way on the mere chance that you might’ve remembered something that slipped your mind since that first interview. You know, it’s common for people to recall something later that they forgot to mention before, and those are often the kinds of things that give us an important lead.”

“If I had remembered anything of importance I assure you I would’ve phoned to tell investigators about it. Amanda is one of my

most valued employees, and I'm sure you know Amanda's sister Rhonda works here as well. Both girls are intelligent, hard-working, reliable people and what they contribute does a lot toward keeping this place going."

At that moment, there came a knock on the door, and in entered a man with thinning hair, wearing black rimmed eyeglasses and carrying an assortment of paperwork. Seeing Tokar was busy, he turned around to leave.

Tokar said, "Allen, come on in." He then made introductions, saying, "Lieutenant Harris, this is Allen Schaeffer, the casino's business manager. Allen, this is Lieutenant Harris, who is one of the investigators looking for Amanda."

Schaeffer, who looked brainy, mild-mannered and somewhat shallow in character, shook Harris's hand, and said in a soft-spoken voice, "Pleased to meet you." He then turned to Tokar. "Tony, I need your signature on a few things and then I can return to my office for processing these invoices."

As Tokar gave attention to the paperwork, Harris said, "I've taken up enough of your time Mr. Tokar, and I appreciate you seeing me."

After signing the first document, he looked up at Harris, "I apologize for the interruption Harris, but we're constantly under a logjam of paperwork here. If there's anything I can do, you're welcome to stop by my office anytime to discuss the case. Like I've said, I need Amanda here and it means everything to me to find out what's happened to her."

"It's helpful to know that, and one thing you can count on is that we'll keep on searching for her."

Harris shook hands with Tokar, and then left the room to wait in the adjoining office space for Allen Schaeffer. When Tokar's business manager exited the room occupied by Tokar, he approached Schaeffer as he closed the door.

"Excuse me, Mr. Schaeffer. I was wondering if you could shed any light on the disappearance of Amanda Kramer. You see, all our leads keep taking us back here to the casino and I would imagine there's little that occurs here that you don't know about."

Schaeffer appeared uncomfortable, holding firmly the paperwork Tokar had just signed, and avoiding eye contact with Harris. “My position here is strictly connected with the business aspect of running the casino. I have little to do with how the casino operates out here on the floor.”

“Yes, but you know Amanda Kramer by having seen her on a daily basis. It’s only logical you must be somewhat familiar with her routine and duties here at the casino. We’re counting on someone with the kind of insight you possess to provide information to help us find her. Investigators think it rather odd that her parking space was out of view of surveillance cameras when there are so many set up to cover parking areas around the casino. That’s either a strange coincidence or quite convenient, depending on how you want to look at it.”

Schaeffer commented, “I have nothing to do with security, but I think you may have better luck talking to the casino’s floor manager.”

“Well, like I say, there are few people who would’ve seen Amanda Kramer as often as you have or know her routine here at the casino as well. What’s more is that I spoke to one floor manager and she told me the gentlemen’s club was off limits to her, so she couldn’t tell me anything. What’s important to understand is that we think she is still alive, but her whereabouts is time sensitive in that she may not have long to live. Depending upon how circumstances play out, the law could contend that someone withholding information about Amanda’s disappearance could be partly responsible in the event of her death. Their failure to speak out to prevent Amanda’s murder could result in prosecution for criminal negligence and leave them facing years of imprisonment. At the very least, they could be prosecuted for manslaughter for having done nothing to assist law enforcement at this critical time, and you’d be wise to think about that.”

Schaeffer looked nervous, shaking his head, “I don’t know what I can tell you that I haven’t already told the other investigators.”

Harris stood in Schaeffer’s way, giving him a look of disgust to let him know he didn’t believe him. To get further under his skin, he stated, “I thank you for your time then, but it may become necessary at a later date to bring you in to the station for questioning. If nothing

else, I want to get you on record making a statement on what you know about Tokar's shady business dealings."

Schaeffer wore a worried expression as the two men exited the office space to enter the gentlemen's club and Harris moved on to reenter the casino. Thinking he shook up Schaeffer and that the key to Amanda's disappearance lay here with Tokar and his cronies, he found a restroom and thoroughly washed his hands before going to look for Rhonda.

She came to him, "I was beginning to wonder if you stood me up and left without saying goodbye."

Harris replied, "Maybe you can tell me something that may be of importance. Amanda was and perhaps still is romantically involved with Tokar, but can you tell me whether their relationship was more on or off near the time of her disappearance?"

"Amanda is Tokar's favorite, but he has many favorites he caters to and treats like they're his one and only. They were on the off going side of romance, but he didn't see it that way, and treating people as property he owns, he generally sees life the way it suits him best. Amanda gave me the strong impression she'd had it with him and was ready to move on with her life by finding work elsewhere. A couple of months ago, she met Jim Abernathy and they dated only a few times before two men took him by surprise and beat him up in the lobby of her apartment building.

"I didn't see Jim after the fight, but from what I understand they gave him a rough going over, clobbering him and kicking him until he was nearly out cold. Bruised ribs and a jarred back, he could barely walk for a week. He told Amanda that the one that gave it to him the worst had fists like sledgehammers."

"Did he say what these two men looked like?"

"Amanda said Abernathy described the men as tough-talking thugs wearing trench coats, telling him that if they found him at that address again they would finish the job. Jim was good for Amanda in that he had a lot of patience with her, showing he cared deeply for her. I think the way their relationship was going he was on the verge of asking her to marry him. Jim's work is forming and finishing concrete and he looks like he can take care of himself, but the two that assaulted him

must've made their point because he feared for losing his life. I know he didn't want to break off from seeing Amanda, but for a time he was out of commission, losing almost two weeks of work because of his injuries."

Harris looked down as though dwelling on the incident, "It sounds like they really did a number on him. It's tough taking on two, especially when they have the element of surprise on their side."

Rhonda broke his concentration. "It doesn't take a lot to imagine these two men were enlisted by Tokar. I think he wanted to get rid of Jim to either win back Amanda or to make it easier to abduct her. She knew almost as much about his business dealings as he did, and she hinted more than once that Tokar was into big money in connection with drug smuggling and distribution."

Rhonda then asked, "Do you still have time to make a couple of errands?"

"Sure, you want to pick up a rental car and then you wanted to drop by and visit a friend at the hospital."

She smiled, "It's the girl I pointed out to you in the photo named Nadia who, as I said before, is known at the casino as Natalie. You might find this visit interesting because in an odd way what happened to her may pertain to Amanda's disappearance."

Chapter 6

A Visit to the Hospital Raises New Concerns

Harris and Rhonda picked up the rental car and from there he followed her to Barnes Hospital in midtown St. Louis to visit a friend of hers getting medical care. After parking the cars in the parking garage, they began their walk to the room occupied by this girl.

While strolling through corridors, Rhonda spoke, “I think I’d better let you in on a few things before we see Nadia. I intended to tell you this earlier at the casino before I got pulled away to take care of a problem, but Nadia had borrowed my car when her car was in the garage for repairs. She’d gotten off from work and the plan was that she would return later to pick me up at the casino when I got off, and at that time I’d run her home.”

Rhonda stopped walking to face Harris as she continued, “After she left the casino, a man driving a four-wheel-drive vehicle or SUV sideswiped her and ran her off the road. He accosted her and dragged her out of the car before brutally attacking her, beating her half to death on the side of the interstate highway. Len, he beat her so badly that he broke her jaw and fractured bones in her face, and I believe it happened because she was driving my car.”

Becoming emotionally choked up, she clamped her hands over her nose and mouth, her complexion turning red as she became teary-eyed, and she said something he couldn’t understand. He pulled her out of foot traffic in the hospital corridor, and drew her close before carefully pulling her hands away from her mouth.

“Okay now, tell me again what you just said.”

Sniffing, she went on to say, “It happened after I’d gone into the gentlemen’s club pressing people to tell me what they knew about Amanda’s disappearance, and now Nadia is in terrible shape. Whoever this man was, I’m convinced he must’ve thought Nadia was me, and he beat up the wrong girl.”

Crumpling into his arms as tears flowed, Harris took a deep breath. “I’ve only just begun working this case today and there’s much about

it I don't know. But what happened isn't your fault and there's nothing we can do about it now except to try and find out who brutalized her."

In near hysterics, Rhonda then blurted out, "I'm wondering if this man was one of the men who attacked Jim Abernathy at Amanda's apartment building. Am I going to be the next one who's assaulted or maybe disappears?"

After Rhonda calmed down, they resumed walking to Nadia's room, and she stopped to freshen up in the Ladies public restroom. When she came out, she said, "Nadia comes from a large family, and although Nadia holds no grudge against me, some family members believe I'm at fault for what happened to her."

"I guess I can't blame them for being upset, but you did nothing to hurt this girl and it's not your fault she was attacked."

When finally entering Nadia's room, they saw close family members gathered there for her, and Rhonda and Harris drew what they perceived to be unwelcome looks. There was tension in the room as Rhonda approached Nadia who lay before them with her head wrapped like a mummy, her eyes looking back at them.

"Nadia, this is another detective investigating the assault. His name is Leonard Harris."

Harris spoke in a quiet manner, "Hi Nadia. Did you get a good look at the man who attacked you?"

Nadia nodded yes, and Rhonda pulled from her purse a notepad and pen to hand to her, "Can you write down his description?"

Nadia wrote, and Rhonda read out loud what she was writing, "A man, like a mountain, wearing a suit, with dark hair worn short and choppy, maybe using mousse because it looked wet. He didn't speak a word, but used his fists, knocking me down with one punch, and then hovered over me. I tried blocking the blows and I remember his head and neck appeared abnormally fat or wide, as if he had a form of..."

Rhonda had difficulty making out the last word she'd written, and Nadia's father came forward to peer over her shoulder, speaking very distinctly, "Gigantism." He then added, "She described him as abnormally large in his proportions, perhaps not so much extremely tall, but big and brawny in an odd sort of way."

Nadia nodded yes, raising her arms and hands as if motioning to show he was a large man.

Rhonda then spoke to Nadia's father, "Mr. Popovich, I'm so sorry about what's happened."

Mr. Popovich gave a kindly nod. "I know, and some members of my family flew off the handle when first learning of circumstances surrounding Nadia's injuries, but that's all over now and we apologize."

With that, Mrs. Popovich, a woman with sad eyes and big hips, rose from a chair and walked over to give Rhonda an affectionate hug, patting her on the back. She then spoke sincerely, "We know you are a good friend to our daughter, and we understand this wasn't your fault." She then held her hands out, "I didn't mean to act so angrily when speaking before, but this is one of my babies."

"I understand, Momma Popovich." Then Nadia's mother returned to her chair.

Her father then said, "I told Momma that there are lunatics driving on our highways and it is dangerous out there, but our Nadia is alive, and I have faith she's going to be fine. However, judging by what I've heard, there does seem to be a chance this man was targeting you when this incident occurred."

Harris then asked Nadia, "Did this man who attacked you have any distinguishing features, any marks or scars on his face?"

She paused and then resumed writing, and Rhonda again read what she wrote, "He had a light complexion, and dark eyebrows. He had a flat nose as though it had once been broken and a large mole the size of a dime on the left side of his face."

Harris took an interest in the mole she described, "Can you indicate exactly where this mole was on his face?"

Nadia wiggled her index finger to draw him closer and touched his cheekbone on the left side of his face, just over an inch away from the outside corner of his eye.

Harris then asked, "What can you tell me about the car he drove, I understand it was a four-wheel-drive vehicle?"

Nadia grabbed her father's arm, as though wanting him to speak, and the man moved in closer. "Well, yes, we gave all of that

information to the police, but Nadia said it was much like a Chevrolet *Carry All* I once owned some years ago. Mine was one of the last made because by then they'd begun using the name Suburban, and GMC had a version of it with a very similar body style. They were bulky vehicles, ideal for pulling a boat, and we would pile into it and jam it full of everything you can think of for going on a camping trip. Nadia described this model as dark brown, but the side trimming was light beige, and what makes it unique is that she insists it was an older vehicle like mine, rarely seen on the road anymore. She also thought it similar to the one I'd driven because it was a rust bucket, and the driver had no trouble nudging the car she was driving off the road."

Harris smiled when looking at Nadia, "A man of size with the description you've given will have difficulty hiding from the authorities. We train our police to identify people and makes of automobiles, and you've given important information that may be helpful for bringing this person to justice. Hang in there now, get well, and Rhonda and I will come back to see you again."

He then motioned toward the door and waited while Rhonda took Nadia's hand. "I leaned on the casino to pay you while you're off work. In case someone asks, and I don't think they will, I told them you were running a work-related errand picking up office supplies when this man ran you off the road. My insurance agent told me your injuries are covered, so make copies of the hospital bills and give me the originals so I can send them to him." She then added reassuringly, "You're going to be okay, and I promise to do all I can to help you get through this."

Nadia gripped her wrist tightly, shaking her head yes, and then Harris and Rhonda left the room. They exited the hospital to soon arrive at Rhonda's home, which was located in an upper middleclass neighborhood in the western suburbs.

Harris pulled in behind the rental car Rhonda drove before stopping in the driveway, and when he shut off his Impala's lights and the engine, he noticed the front yard was dark. He stood outside his car leaning on the open door as Rhonda got out of the rental and came to hand him a piece of note paper that had her home phone number and address. He then gave her a business card with his cell phone number.

He stuffed the paper inside his shirt pocket, “Speaking for myself, I don’t like coming home to a dark house. You already have a light above your garage door, and it wouldn’t take much to change it out for a motion detector light that will come on when you pull into the driveway.”

“I know and I generally park in the garage anyway, but driving this rental, I didn’t have my garage door opener. My father suggested the same thing, telling me he’d install a light for me, and as soon as he gets back on his feet again, I’ll ask him to. Once he’s feeling better, I intend keeping him occupied doing a few light chores to keep him active until this blows over and we have Amanda back. . . You do think she’ll be found safely, don’t you?”

“I think the chances are fair to good for a favorable outcome, but it’s important that she be found soon.”

There was quiet before Rhonda said, “I remember when you used to date Amanda and I’d make a nuisance of myself pestering you. I don’t know how many times you tried getting rid of me so the two of you could have time alone together. Once you even offered me a dollar to get lost, and I wouldn’t go, but I’m sure you had plenty of opportunities to trap her in the backseat of an automobile.”

Harris rubbed his chin, “That’s going a long time back, a lot of water under the bridge, so they say.”

“I enjoyed giving you a bad time, and don’t tell me there wasn’t any paybacks, like those times you teased me about my breaking out with acne, and my braces. The worst time of my life was when I wore braces, and I can remember feeling terribly embarrassed to smile when wearing them. I never gave a hint of it, but I had a crush on you, and I was even a little jealous of my older sister.”

She just then had a thought, “I heard about you losing your wife Len, and I just want to say I’m sorry. Actually, Amanda told me, and she didn’t learn about it until a few weeks after it occurred or both of us would’ve surely shown up at the funeral parlor to give you support.”

“Thanks for saying so. It’s been a difficult adjustment living alone in that house—everything there reminds me of her.” He then looked

her in the eye, “Well, it was nice seeing you again and if anything should come up, no matter what the hour, I want you to phone me.”

“I’ll keep in touch,” and she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Watching Rhonda at the front door, she gave a wave before stepping inside, and seeing her awakened many memories from those days when he dated Amanda.

He’d only driven five minutes from her home when he received a cell phone call from Rhonda, and she sounded upset, “Len, I think someone’s prowling around in my backyard.”

Harris made a sharp U-turn to return to her house, “Where are you at?”

“I’m in my bedroom wearing my robe. I was getting ready to shower when I heard a noise outside the window.”

“Stay where you are, I’ll be there in less than two minutes.”

Quickly driving back to her house, he switched off his car lights when turning onto her street, swerving to the curb to park a few doors from her address. He quickly got out of the car, crouching while letting the door close quietly until the dome light went out and he heard it catch. Removing his .45 from the shoulder holster inside his sport jacket, he pulled the slide back to chamber a round and ran swiftly in the dark across neighbor’s lawns to come to Rhonda’s fenced in backyard. He opened the gate without making a sound and now held the semi-automatic clenched with both hands in a forward manner outstretched before him.

Moving surefooted, he peered about to get a closer look at where bushes and shrubbery clustered next to the back of the house. Light from a partially open window showered an area near the middle of the house, enabling him to target the face of a prowler peeking in the window. He came forward stealthily holding his weapon firm and steady, his finger resting against the trigger and ready to squeeze it.

Hearing the shower running inside the house, he came in close to press the muzzle of the weapon against the side of this person’s head.

“Freeze! Move and I’ll splatter your brains all over the place.”

Now seeing this individual’s youthful appearance, he placed his finger against the trigger guard, and holding the grip of the pistol with one hand, he collared the teenager with the other. He then called out,

“Rhonda, I don’t know if you can you hear my voice, but I’ve caught a peeper.”

Her voice carried from inside the house to where he stood, “I’m coming to the patio door to go out on the porch.”

Rhonda came to open the patio door in her robe, and turning on the porch light, her jaw dropped. “Robert Jensen, what are you doing outside my house in the dark of night? This man is a detective and he could’ve shot and killed you.”

The young man, who wasn’t much more than a boy, looked embarrassed, and was speechless.

Harris continued holding him by the collar as he moved forward, “Do you want to call the police?”

“No,” replied Rhonda in a disappointed way for finding out her peeper is a neighbor she never would’ve suspected. “He lives in the house directly behind mine, and I know his parents. I’m phoning his mother.”

Rhonda still looked surprised when dialing her cell phone, “Bobby, I can’t believe you were sneaking around my house looking in windows.”

She spoke on the phone to a neighbor explaining the situation and how this young man had nearly gotten killed.”

His father rushed over with his hair mussed, wearing a T-shirt and shorts.

Seeing Harris holstering his .45, the neighbor slapped the boy alongside his head, speaking angrily, “What’s the matter with you sneaking around people’s houses after dark? This man could very well have shot you and he’d be in the right. He doesn’t know whether you’re an armed intruder looking to burglarize the house or what.

“Get home now,” and looking to Rhonda and Harris, he used a soft spoken voice, “I apologize for this disturbance. Nowadays, you need to watch your kids every minute and that’s impossible when you’re working class people like us. It’s that damn Internet—the kids have access to everything under the sun available at their fingertips, and I wouldn’t be surprised if an entire generation grows up to be perverts. The temptation to browse is enormous, all they have to do is type in

the word *girls* and you know what kinds of sexually exploitive pictures are sure to pop up.”

After the neighbor left, Harris shook his head, “That kid has no idea what’s happening in your life, nor does he have any idea how close he came to meeting his maker tonight.”

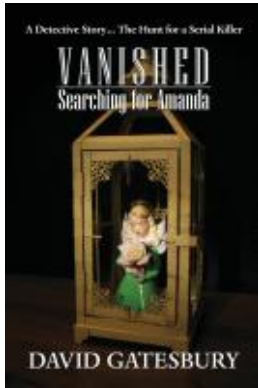
It now dawned on Rhonda that over a period of time this boy may have been looking in her window on other occasions. “When I shower, I like the water hot and steamy, and I often open up the bathroom window first so the mirrors don’t fog up. I’ll have to leave the door open to my bedroom from now on instead.”

Rhonda’s left eyebrow raised, “I’m sure he got an eyeful tonight.” She then gave Harris a curious look, “He wasn’t exposing himself in some way when you caught him, was he?”

Harris had a peculiar grin, “At the moment I snuck up on him he was merely peering in.”

They took chairs at her kitchen table and talked for a while. Rhonda told him that if he was ever in the vicinity and dropped by to find her not at home, he should use a key she kept under the flowerpot on the front porch to let himself in. She also mentioned that with her father needing assistance with his recovery, the casino was allowing her flexibility in her work schedule and she expected to have her evenings free.

Harris left that evening with thoughts about Rhonda, as he’d always been fond of her, and he was looking forward to seeing her again soon.



Hardnosed Detective Leonard Harris gets caught up in a missing persons' case that's possibly linked to a serial killer. Harris was once romantically involved with Amanda Kramer, the woman who's vanished. She was Anthony Tokar's private secretary, a casino owner with a nefarious reputation. While probing Tokar's connections to organized crime, Harris's no-nonsense methods get him into hot water with authorities and, as suspects are eliminated, a trail of murder and bloodshed is left behind...

VANISHED: Searching for Amanda

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