

C. J. is hired to capture a deranged serial killer.

The Butcher

by Michael R. Lane

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THE

A C.J. Cavanaugh Mystery

BUTCHER

MICHAEL R. LANE

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CHAPTER TWO

It was a little past five a.m., pitch dark with a light rain adding to the void of night. Harry could not ask for more natural cover than if he were buried under a blanket of leaves. Harry drove the silver BMW with the headlights off. He prowled through a quiet northeast Portland neighborhood, searching for a place to park. This was one of the neighborhoods Harry had scouted for this express purpose. He was interested in neighborhoods with low theft and automobile break-ins. Nothing would be worse than to have some car thief spoil his plans. This calm middle-class neighborhood had very low incidents in that regard. It would be the perfect place to dump his cargo.

All of the street-legal parking places were taken. Harry hadn't planned on that. Each of the other nights he had scouted the area, there were four or five available parking spots. Harry parked in the deeper shadows in front of a private driveway. He had a good view of the entire street from there.

Harry killed the engine and glanced at his gloved left hand. He removed the glove and studied the fake tattoo of the heart with a lightning bolt cutting through it. Harry had done a good job, if he said so himself. He opened his coat and shirt and studied the fake serpent tattoo on his neck and chest. He had done an even better job on the serpent than he had on the lightning heart. *Maybe I should have tried my hand at art instead of what I do for a living*, he thought. Both fake tattoos had been symbolic gestures for him. The heart pierced by lightning represented the violent manner in which

people he loved had been ripped from his life. The serpent marked his means of revenge.

A plump, middle-aged man wearing a security guard uniform rushed out of a gray two-story house mid-block east of where Harry parked. Harry quickly buttoned his shirt and coat and slipped his glove back on. He watched the security guard get into his car and hastily drive away in the opposite direction from where Harry parked. Harry wasted no time claiming the parking space.

Harry tossed the keys into the glove compartment and got out of the BMW, leaving it unlocked. He walked briskly west. He was unforgettable but indescribable, wearing a long black trench coat, dark sunglasses, black leather gloves, and a wool raven-colored toque hat with earflaps. Turning north at the next intersection, Harry walked one block and then turned west onto NW Pettygrove. Parked right where he had left it was his green Toyota Camry. He unlocked the car and jumped in.

He looked around to see who was about. The streets were clear. He removed his hat, gloves, and sunglasses. It was done. Harry was exhausted. The whole process had taken more out of him than he had expected. Fortunately for him, he hadn't made any appointments for the day, in anticipation of last night's big event. Harry Boulder wore a warm smile of weary satisfaction as he drove off into the night.

The morning sun was up with the promise of an overcast day. Harry retrieved the artificial electronic larynx from his coffee table and the cell phone next to it. The discovery had best happen in daylight for all to see. After testing the device by reciting the alphabet to make certain it was working, Harry pressed a speed dial option on the cell phone for the Portland Police Homicide Division. Three rings later, Detective Alvarez answered. Harry engaged the artificial larynx.

"Detective Alvarez," Harry said as if the two were dear friends, "there is a silver BMW, license plate ALPHADOC, parked on NW Overton Street, west of the intersection of Overton and 19th. The doors are open and the keys to the vehicle are inside the glove compartment. In the trunk of this vehicle, you will find four packages. Inside those packages are the remains of Kylie Preston.

You should retrieve them immediately if you want them to be of any use for the greater good.”

Harry hung up before Detective Alvarez could respond. He laid the artificial larynx and cell phone back on the coffee table. He would toss the cell phone down a storm sewer later. It was a disposable cell that Harry had paid cash for at some mom-and-pop sundry store outside of the city that he knew for a fact had no working video surveillance. *Good luck tracing it back to me*, Harry thought.

Harry stretched out on the sofa and pondered what would happen next. With terrorism being what it was, Harry expected the detectives would be concerned about the contents of the packages. That moment of choice could be critical. If the detectives decided to leave the packages where they were and let the bomb squad handle matters, it could ruin his plans. On the other hand, if the detectives elected to be proactive and do what they could to determine what was in the packages before the bomb squad arrived, all would be well. Harry was banking on the latter.

Harry yawned and stretched for a moment. He could hardly keep his eyes open. He contemplated going to bed. Harry never made it. He went to sleep right where he lay.

CHAPTER TEN

Angel Alvarez could never get used to the stench of death, even masked in the sterile environment of the medical examiner's office. Laurie McCaskill wondered if she would ever become accustomed to it. The Chief Medical Examiner appeared oblivious.

Dr. Blake Saba had been with the Portland Police Bureau for twenty-seven years. He'd been recruited right out of medical school as a full time medical examiner by the late Colin Greene, founding father of the Portland Medical Examiner's office. The walnut-complexioned indigenous Klamath found that he preferred unlocking the causes of death to diagnosing the living. Blake had alert brown eyes and pitch black hair streaked with steel gray, which he wore in a ponytail held in place by an elastic black ponytail holder accented with a cracked eggshell bead. He stood five-nine and weighed in at a solid one hundred eighty pounds. Blake had a slight paunch not due to his lack of exercise, but for his love of rich cakes and pastries. The only jewelry Blake wore was a turquoise, red coral, and orange spiny oyster squash-blossom necklace made for him by his daughter when she was twelve. Blake kept his twenty-two-year-old gold wedding band, a symbol of love and commitment, in his pants pocket while he worked.

Dr. Saba moved with self-assured deliberateness and often spoke in the same manner in reference to his charges. That aspect of his personality—or lack thereof, according to some—had emerged over the years from a man who had seen all of the grotesque ways a human being can die. Blake had long ago gotten over the shock and depression that could accompany his job. Investing feelings in his

work (he determined with help from his mentor Colin Greene) was a waste of time. How Dr. Saba could best serve the dead was through applying his intellect, medical education, and training towards aiding law enforcement in sorting out causes of death. That had become his professional purpose in life.

Blake appeared a natural in his crisp white lab coat and Kintpuash bolo tie as he waved his surgically gloved hands over the ghoulish jigsaw remains of Kylie Preston, assembled on a mobile dissection table.

“What’s this?” McCaskill looked both disgusted and dismayed. She had never before seen a dismembered body. It made her squeamish to think that in our final days we are little more than what she saw.

“This is the body of one Kylie Preston—or what remains of her,” Blake replied with an almost detached clinical fascination. “We were able to determine her identity based upon a number of distinguishing markers, including her fingerprints.”

“You *found* her all cut up like this?” McCaskill was struggling to comprehend what she was looking at.

“Nothing gets by your partner.” Blake gave McCaskill one of his lambent smiles that felt warm and caring even in jest. McCaskill could not resist smiling back at Blake, even with the knowledge that she was the object of his ridicule.

“She’s doing all right.” Alvarez came to the defense of her partner. Angel realized that this was the first intricate homicide case that Laurie McCaskill had the opportunity to work on. Angel Alvarez was trying to bear that in mind and be more patient with her. Laurie seemed to appreciate the gesture.

“Whoever killed Ms. Preston removed all of her major internal organs, including her heart; beheaded her; and severed her body at the joints—and it gets more bizarre.”

“How’s that possible?” Alvarez looked on in disbelief.

“Whoever did this went through a lot of trouble to preserve our victim.”

“Preserve?” McCaskill said.

“They packed everything in coolers filled with ice.”

“Where are her internal organs?”

“You can let me know when you find them, Detective Alvarez, because they weren’t packaged with the rest of her.”

“You’re kidding?” Alvarez and Blake stared stone-faced at McCaskill in answer to her question for a moment before Alvarez asked, “Why would someone go through all of this trouble?”

“My thoughts exactly.” Blake paused as if giving the question additional thought. “What I do know is that all of her missing internal organs can be used in transplants.”

“I saw an organ donor card among the victim’s personal effects. Think there might be a connection?” McCaskill’s queasiness was giving way to her instinctual curiosity.

“It’s possible,” answered Alvarez.

Blake chimed in. “This could be an elaborate way to cover up what organ or organs they were really after.”

“This sounds like black market organ harvesting taken to the extreme.”

“Does organ harvesting go on here, doctor?” McCaskill asked.

“If by ‘here’, you mean the U.S., then not to my knowledge. The United States has some of the strictest laws, rules, and regulations in the world regarding the procurement and transplanting of human organs. And they are stringently enforced throughout the medical community.”

“It’s been my experience that when enough money is on the table, all laws, rules, and regulations go right out the window for some people.” Everyone nodded in agreement to Angel’s remark. “We’ll look into it from the black market angle and will investigate possible matches to organ donors.”

“It would be a bright spot to this grisly affair if her death benefitted others,” McCaskill said.

“Kylie Preston didn’t sacrifice herself. She was murdered. Knowing that their murdered mother’s organs are part of someone who might be responsible for her death won’t bring comfort to her children.” Alvarez knew McCaskill was looking for the silver lining, but she was having none of it. The victim had her life ripped from

her by a predator: a fact that Angel wanted her partner to embrace to her core—to hell with rationalizing the killer’s motivation.

“Whoever did this knew what they were doing. From what I can tell from my preliminary examination, the arms, legs, and head were whacked clean off—probably using a meat cleaver.”

“The same kind a butcher uses.” McCaskill had overcome her queasiness. She had also shaken off Angel’s rebuke to her attempt at optimism. She was in full homicide detective mode.

“Precisely, and they knew how and where to cut. Every hack appears to have been done with swift, accurate blows.”

“He sounds strong.”

“And possibly someone with experience in the meat industry,” Alvarez added.

“Conceivably,” Blake responded to Alvarez’s comment. “The internal organs were surgically removed.”

“Our killer is both a surgeon and a butcher?”

“Aren’t they pretty much the same thing?” Blake smiled sympathetically at McCaskill’s lame attempt at humor. Alvarez stared blankly at her partner. McCaskill cleared her throat and averted her eyes to Kylie Preston. “Is there any chance that more than one person was involved?” Angel glanced with pride at Laurie for her insightful question, returning her attention to Blake before Laurie noticed.

“Don’t know. It’s feasible. Whoever removed her internal organs had solid surgical skills. They used textbook mortuary incisions. I couldn’t have done better myself.”

“Butcher, surgeon, and/or mortician: what the hell is going on here?” Alvarez and Blake ignored McCaskill’s query.

“They also knew how to pack the remains for optimum preservation. See that discoloration around the mouth and nose?” Blake pointed to the area on the guillotined head.

“Yes,” McCaskill said.

“That suggests she ingested a fast-acting poison.” McCaskill and Alvarez nodded.

“He put the blood he drained from her body into plastic jugs and packed the jugs in ice.”

“Any guess as to why he went through all of this trouble?” Alvarez said.

“At first I thought it might be his twisted way of toying with us.”

“That doesn’t add up.” McCaskill appeared to be studying the dismembered body parts rather than observing them.

“Why would you say that, detective?” Alvarez gave her partner the floor.

“Even the most arrogant homicidal socio—or psychopath wouldn’t go through all of this trouble to play cat and mouse. Or to do something this horrible.” McCaskill waved her hands over the remains of Kylie Preston much as a magician expecting her assistant to rise from the ashes of her death defying trick. “You have to be disturbed. Someone this meticulous, capable of going to this extreme, is looking to discourage discovery; not aid it.”

Good, she’s thinking in terms of profiles, Alvarez thought. My little dressing-down hasn’t put her off her game.

“What’s your guess about the killer?” Alvarez prodded. Blake looked on, observing Angel’s training session in deductive reasoning in progress.

“Whatever motivated this person to kill,” Laurie said, “didn’t overshadow his humanity.”

“Can you draw a conclusion from that?” Angel asked.

McCaskill was stumped, and it showed on her face. Alvarez and Blake realized Laurie had hit a brick wall in her rational. Blake took over.

“Right you are, Detective McCaskill. I believe whoever did this wanted to make use of every part of Kylie Preston to help others.”

“Just like it said in the letter: a sort of human recycling thing,” McCaskill said.

“More like a *humane* recycling thing,” Alvarez retorted. “It’s likely that in our killer’s mind, his murder of Kylie Preston did society a favor.”

“He is further contributing to society by preserving as much of her as possible. Every part of Ms. Preston has been conserved to the point that much of her can be donated to help those in remedial

need—once all of the necessary medical tests are concluded and proper matches are found, of course.”

“Except for her internal organs.”

“I suspect our killer took the same cautionary care with her internal organs. If whoever did this was as careful and forward thinking as they were to preserve what you see before you, then they already had plans for the internal organs that are missing. They were probably also aware of the time frame for transplantable organs.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The lungs and heart have to be delivered to the recipient within 6 hours maximum, although the heart valves can last up to 10 years under the right conditions. With the liver and pancreas, you have about 24 hours; the kidney 72; and corneas, 14 days. Bone and tissue like what you see here can last for up to 5 years.”

“So what we see here can still be used even after the court trial once we catch this guy.”

“We’ll see to that.”

“Corneas?” McCaskill stared at the decapitated head. Her eyelids were sewn shut. The victim’s head had been shaved clean; the skull stapled back together in what made the top of her head appear as though she were wearing a grotesque skullcap. “He took her brain, too?”

“No, that was my doing, I’m afraid. I needed to examine the brain and we needed some tissue samples to analyze.” Blake’s statement seemed to calm McCaskill.

“There are over one hundred thousand people on a national waiting list for organ donations.” Blake felt compelled to lecture on a subject he was passionate about. “More than a third of them will die before an organ can be found. The need for organ donors is increasing at a rate of around 1,000 people every month, with another name being added about every 10 minutes.”

Compassion for victims beyond their assistance required a moment of silence before they were back on the case.

“Are you certain poison killed her?” Alvarez asked.

“We’ll know for certain once the toxicology results come back from the lab. My professional guess would be yes. The tox report

will also give us a head start on screening whether or not the tissue and bone matter the killer bequeathed is viable for transplant.”

“Any sign she was forced to take the poison?”

“None.”

“You think the killer knew our vic?” McCaskill asked Alvarez.

“If her consumption of the poison was voluntary, it suggests she at least felt comfortable enough with him to eat or drink whatever he gave her.”

“Unless he was able to threaten her into taking the poison herself, like at gunpoint.”

“That’s also a possibility.” Alvarez looked over the physical evidence. “I don’t see any stomach contents.”

“Alas, there are no gastric contents. The stomach and intestines were not included.”

“Did you find any specific clues that could point us in the direction of her killer?” Alvarez asked with a hint of frustration.

“Nothing so far, but we’ve just gotten started. If there’s any trace left of the killing agent, we’ll find it.” Blake took a moment to think before he spoke again. “Something strikes me as fascinating at the outset.”

“What’s that?” Alvarez asked.

“There’s no evidence at any point during the dissection of this woman that the killer was angry. If anything, all indications seem to point to it being well-planned and methodical. Whoever butchered Ms. Preston did so without malice.”

“That’s interesting in a disturbing way.”

“Thank you, Detective McCaskill,” Blake said with a soft chuckle. “I’m glad you agree with my assessment.”

“Why is that both interesting and disturbing?” Alvarez asked McCaskill.

“It just is.”

“That’s not an answer.” Alvarez was hoping Laurie would draw upon her deductive reasoning and training. “Does that tell you anything?”

“Not really.” Laurie appeared embarrassed.

“I believe the answers Detective Alvarez is searching for are that the murder was probably premeditated and that the victim was specifically targeted,” Blake said with the empathetic tone of a teacher.

“Someone stalked this woman before killing her?”

“It’s a strong possibility,” Alvarez said.

“Any suspects, detectives?”

“One who coincidentally happens to be a doctor,” McCaskill said. Angel concurred with a nod. “He may turn out to be the only suspect we need.”

“One bad apple.” Blake shook his head.

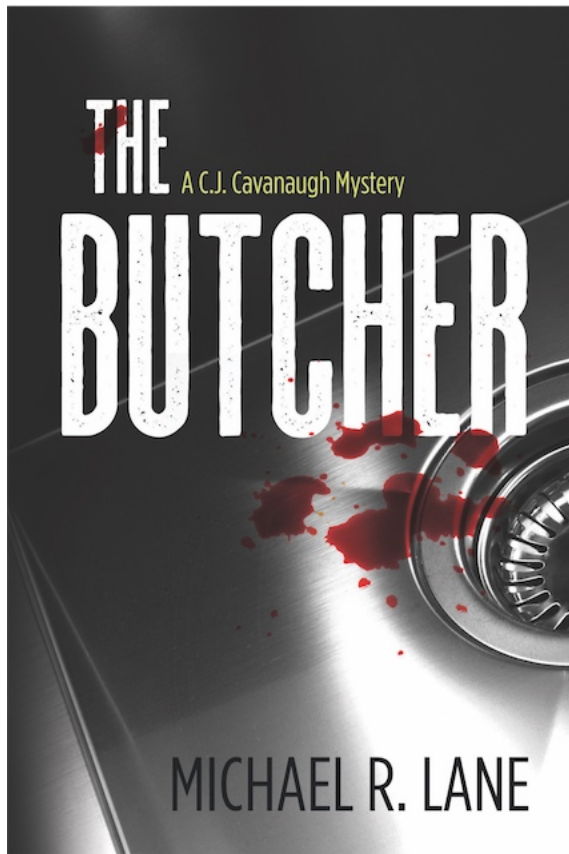
“I hear you.” Alvarez gave the dismembered cadaver a final scan. “Keep us posted, Doc.”

“Sure thing.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Detective McCaskill. Good hunting.”

Alvarez and McCaskill left, buzzing with conversation surrounding recently discovered facts. Blake had already set aside ample blood, skin, and tissue samples for future lab analyses, if needed. The corpse evidence had been photographed. Cataloging those photos was still in progress. The Medical Examiner wasted no time draping the remains of Kylie Preston with a white cadaver cover and returning her to refrigeration. As an acting member of the Gift of Life Donor Program, Blake, along with a national network of coroners and medical examiners, were doing their best to ensure successful organ and tissue donations. Blake’s office had done an exemplary job over the years of contributing to their success. This macabre offering would be no exception.



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