

CHRIS MOONEY

'A SCARY, BREAKNECK RIDE WITH THRILLS THAT NEVER LET UP'

TESS GERRITSEN

THE
**SECRET
FRIEND**

Let There Be
Murder



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The Secret Friend
by
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Darby McCormick had finished hanging the last of the bloody clothing inside the drying chamber when she heard her name called over the loudspeakers. Leland Pratt, the lab director, wanted to see her inside his office immediately.

Darby stripped out of her latex gloves and lab coat and used the sink in Serology. As she scrubbed her hands, she glanced in the mirror. On her left cheek and underneath her eye was a thin, jagged scar partially hidden by makeup. The plastic surgeons had done a remarkable job, considering the amount of damage Traveler's axe had caused. She removed the rubber band holding her ponytail, her dark red hair falling against her shoulders, and dried her hands as she left the room.

Standing behind Leland's desk and talking on the phone was a thin woman impeccably dressed in a sharp black business suit – Boston Police Commissioner Christina Chadzynski.

The woman placed a hand over the phone's mouthpiece.

'I'm sorry, I was looking for Leland,' Darby said. 'He paged me.'

‘Yes, I know. Come in and shut the door.’ The commissioner returned to her phone call.

Christina Chadzynski was the first woman to hold the commissioner’s job, the highest position inside the Boston Police Department. When her name had been thrown into the ring as a potential candidate, the Boston media had anointed her as the ‘great hope’ to build a bridge between Boston police and community leaders in high crime areas like Roxbury, Mattapan and Dorchester, where she had been born and raised.

Three years into her term, Boston’s homicide rate had soared to its highest level in decades. Politicians decided to offer up Chadzynski as the sacrificial lamb, and the Boston media took the bait. Newspaper columnists and other so-called media experts were calling for her resignation. Chadzynski had failed, they said, because she wasn’t devoted to her job, because she was no longer in touch with the common man since she had married Pawel Chadzynski, a former investment banker turned power broker who was active in Boston’s political circles. There were rumours Chadzynski was planning a run for mayor’s office.

‘I’ve got to go,’ Chadzynski said and hung up. She motioned to the pair of stiff chairs set up in front of Leland’s government-issued desk. ‘Miss McCormick, are you familiar with CSU?’

Darby nodded. The newly formed Crime Scene Investigative Unit was a specialized group made up of the department’s top investigators and forensic

technicians who responded to the city's homicides, rapes and other violent crimes. Appointment to the unit was by the police commissioner. Darby had applied for one of the forensic positions. She wasn't asked for an interview.

'Emma Hale,' Chadzynski said, opening a file. 'I assume you know who she is.'

'I've been following the case in the papers.' Last year, in March, the freshman Harvard student disappeared after attending a friend's party. Eight months later, in November, the week before Thanksgiving, her waterlogged body had washed up on the bank of the Charles River in a section of Charlestown locals called 'The Oilies'. Emma Hale had been shot in the back of the head.

'I take it ballistics didn't match the slug to a former case,' Darby said.

'We didn't find a match.' Chadzynski put on a pair of thick-framed designer glasses. A significant amount of money had been invested in her hair, makeup, clothes and jewellery. The diamond ring was at least three carats.

'When Emma Hale disappeared, CSU thought it might be a kidnapping – her father, Jonathan Hale, is very wealthy,' Chadzynski said. 'Then another college student disappeared this past December.'

'Judith Chen.'

'Do you know what happened?'

'The papers say she vanished on her way home from the campus library.'

‘CSU is investigating a possible connection.’

‘Is there one?’

‘They’re both college students. That’s the only connection we have. The slug we recovered from Emma Hale’s skull isn’t connected to any cases, and all her time spent in the water washed away any trace evidence. The only piece of evidence we have is a religious statue. I’m sure you read about *that* in the papers.’

Darby nodded. Both the *Globe* and the *Herald*, citing an anonymous police source, said a ‘religious’ statue had been found inside the victim’s pocket.

‘Have you heard anything about the statue?’ Chadzynski asked.

‘The word around the lab is that it was a statue of the Virgin Mary.’

‘Yes, it is. What else have you heard?’

‘The statue was sewn inside Emma Hale’s pocket.’

‘Yes.’

‘What did NCIC have to say?’ Darby asked. The National Crime Information Center, a nationwide database maintained by the FBI’s Criminal Justice Information Services, was the de facto clearing house for all open and solved cases involving murder, missing persons, fugitives and stolen property.

‘NCIC didn’t contain any homicides involving a Virgin Mary statue sewn into the victim’s pocket,’ Chadzynski said.

‘Did you talk to the site profiler at the Boston office?’

‘We consulted him.’ Chadzynski leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. ‘Leland told me you recently completed your doctorate in criminal psychology from Harvard.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’ve studied at the FBI’s Investigative Support Unit.’

‘I’ve attended lectures.’

‘Why do you think the killer – whom we are presuming is male – took the time to sew this statue inside a dead woman’s pocket?’

‘I’m sure the site profiler shared his theories with you.’

‘He did. Now I’d like to hear what you have to say.’

‘The Virgin Mary obviously holds some special significance for him.’

‘Obviously,’ Chadzynski said. ‘What else?’

‘She’s the primal archetype for the loving, caring mother.’

‘You’re telling me this man’s got mommy issues?’

‘What man doesn’t have mother issues?’

Chadzynski let out a tired laugh.

‘On some level the killer cared for her,’ Darby said. ‘Emma Hale was kept alive for several months. When her body was found, she was wearing the same clothes she had worn on the night she disappeared. And she was shot in the back of the head.’

‘Do you think that’s significant?’

‘It suggests that he couldn’t face Emma Hale –

that he felt some sort of shame or remorse for having to kill her.’

Chadzynski stared at her for what seemed like several minutes.

‘Darby, I’d like to place you on CSU. You can appoint anyone from the lab to your team. In addition to your forensic responsibilities, I’d also like for you to act as the second lead on the unit. You’ll share investigative duties with Tim Bryson. Have you met him?’

‘Just in passing,’ Darby said. She didn’t know much about the man beyond the fact that he had once been married and had a daughter who died of a rare form of leukaemia. Bryson didn’t talk about it. He was intensely private, didn’t fraternize with the crew outside the job. Other cops said Bryson was fiercely dedicated to his work, a quality she deeply admired.

‘This is a tremendous opportunity,’ Chadzynski said. ‘You’ll be the first forensic technician in the history of the department to be placed in an investigative position.’

‘Yes, I realize that.’

‘So why do I sense some hesitation?’

‘If you really felt this way, why did you reject my application?’

‘After your . . . encounter with Traveler, the department offered you counselling and you refused it.’

‘I didn’t see the need.’

‘And why is that?’

Darby folded her hands on her lap. She didn't answer.

'You survived a traumatic event,' Chadzynski said. 'Some people think –'

'With all due respect, Commissioner, I don't care what other people think.'

Chadzynski's smile was polite. 'You caught Traveler. He was on the run for three decades. The FBI's top profilers couldn't find him, but you did. I could use your experience here.'

'I'll need access to all the information – murder book, autopsy records and pictures.'

'Tim will have copies delivered to you today.'

'Have you discussed this with him?'

'I have. His ego is bruised, but he'll be fine. You know how men are.' A conspiratorial grin now. 'I also think these two cases could benefit from a fresh look at the evidence, what little of it we have. Who would you recommend from the lab?'

'Coop and Keith Woodbury,' Darby said.

'Coop . . . Do you mean Jackson Cooper, your lab partner?'

'Yes.' Jackson Cooper, known around the station as 'Coop', was, in addition to being Darby's friend, the closest thing she had to family since her mother died. 'Coop was involved with the Traveler case. I could use his help here.'

'I don't know Mr Woodbury.'

'Keith's only been with us for a few months – he's our new forensic chemist.' Darby had worked with

him on a recent shooting case. Woodbury was thorough and, without a doubt, one of the brightest people she had met.

‘Then let’s bring them in so I can welcome them aboard,’ Chadzynski said.

‘Coop’s off today, and Keith’s at a seminar in Washington.’

‘Then I’ll let you deliver the good news.’ Chadzynski, using a gold fountain pen, wrote on the back of a business card.

‘I may need additional lab resources,’ Darby said.

‘You’ll have them. I discussed the matter with Leland. You have his full support.’

Chadzynski slid the card across the desk. ‘The top number is my cell phone. Tim’s numbers are below it. He’s expecting your phone call. Do you have any other questions for me?’

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Then I’ll let you get to it.’ The commissioner picked up the phone and started dialling.