

# BEATEN

A Mason Gray Story

By

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I've recently discovered that the creatures of myth and legend are real, even if the stories are twisted, exaggerated reflections of their true nature. But looking back, I've always known that monsters walked among us. They are capable of great evil. Greg Helmsworth was one of them. So was Nelson Summers.

Greg moved to town in fourth grade. Up to that point, school had been pretty good. Everyone in my class got along for the most part. We went to each other's birthday parties, we played nice on the swings, we were all happy-go-lucky little kids. Sure, we had our arguments about whose turn it was to be line leader, or who broke the purple crayon, but they were trifles.

Then Greg showed up with his big head and close-set eyes. One look told me he was going to be trouble.

On his first day at school, he pushed Marcy Heatwole out of the beanbag chair during silent reading time. Things went downhill from there.

He was bigger than the rest of us, having been held back the year before, and he used that to his advantage. He'd shove someone down, or steal the swiss cake roll from their lunch, then stare them down and say, "What are you going to do about it?" And none of us ever had an answer. We lived in fear, and Greg reveled in it.

The teachers knew what was happening in the way that teachers have a sense for that sort of thing. But as dumb as he looked, Greg was smart enough not to get caught. Glares and muttered curses and the "accidental" shove were enough to keep us off kilter until the teachers weren't watching. And teachers can't be expected to watch everyone all of the time.

The carefree days of elementary school were gone, taken from us and ground into the mud and ice of the playground like Jimmy Miller's glasses on a particularly memorable Tuesday afternoon.

I was a pretty average kid back then—four a half feet tall and 65 pounds. Nothing special. And for a while I let Greg run all over me just like everyone else did. And then on a Tuesday in early December, I didn't.

We were outside for recess. There were patches of hardened snow scattered around, but kids from northern Illinois were used to the cold.

A couple of us had banded together and taken to posting sentries to keep an eye out for Greg. If he came too close, the lookout would signal and we'd scatter as unobtrusively as possible and regroup on the other side of the playground.

We were hanging out on the monkey bars discussing Die Hard. It had come out over the summer, but none of us had seen it in the theater, despite numerous pleas to our parents. Brandon Michaels had a VCR at home and planned to get the tape for his dad for Christmas. The rest of us, of course, would have a sleepover at Brandon's and watch it then.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jimmy Miller climbing the ladder for the metal slide. Jimmy was a short bespectacled kid with a perpetually runny nose. His parents were divorced and he lived in a trailer with his mom. He was friendly enough, and no one avoided him per se, but no one went out of their way to be his friend either. So he was kind of a lone wolf, although I guess a stray dog would be a more appropriate comparison. It had taken Greg less than three days to single him out as a victim.

Now he stood at the pinnacle of the slide. A boy surveying his domain. Except it wasn't his. And it was a stupid position to be in because it was smack in the middle of the playground and there was no way Greg wouldn't see him. The perfect target.

Greg had seen him, of course, and was approaching from the flank. He had a chunk of snow ice that he'd pried loose from one of the mounds clutched tightly in a gloved hand. Slowly, the other boys saw what was about to happen, and we all watched in slack-jawed horror. I doubt any of us paused to consider lending aid at that point. We would become the target then.

So we watched as Greg crept closer, staying out of Jimmy's line of sight until he was directly beneath the A-frame of the slide. It was the perfect hiding spot. There was no way Jimmy could spot him now. And no way we could warn Jimmy. Greg stood there, relaxed, confident, a smirk on his face.

After two minutes, Jimmy seemed to realize his situation. His expression fell from one of triumph to one of terror and his eyes darted about, searching for his nemesis. Then, seeing him nowhere, Jimmy lowered himself into a sitting position and scooted to the edge of the slide. We could see the relief on his face that Greg wasn't around, which made our positions even more uncomfortable.

He slid down the warped, frozen sheet of steel. Before Jimmy's feet hit the ground, Greg stepped out and planted himself three feet back from the end of the slide and hefted his weapon.

Jimmy landed, stood up, and was about to take off, but Greg's voice froze him in place.

"This is my slide," he said, his words thick and bovine—like he'd been forming them on his tongue for the last two minutes.

All color drained from Jimmy's face as he slowly turned around stammering, "I...I'm sorry."

Greg didn't wait for him to finish. He launched the dripping chunk of ice at Jimmy's face from five feet away. Jimmy didn't even have time to throw his arms up. The projectile hit him dead on center, smack in the nose. His glasses flew off and landed several feet away. Blood streamed. Jimmy screamed and collapsed to the ground.

Greg stalked off, then paused as he caught sight of the glasses lying just ahead of him. He smiled and stepped over to them. He looked down, then looked back at Jimmy who was still

writhing on the ground. "Hey," he grunted. He stood there until he had Jimmy's attention then placed his foot on the glasses and shifted his weight. They crunched. Jimmy flinched.

"Oops," said Greg as a wicked grin spread across his face and he turned to go.

Something in me snapped then. Seeing Jimmy lying there, blood and snot and tears smearing together in a hot mess, his eyes showing fear and hatred and shame was too much. Someone had to do something, and in that moment I knew it was going to be me.

I sprinted across the playground, legs pumping hard. My eyes were locked on Greg's form, which was moving slowly and easily away from the scene of the crime. Within seconds I was hurtling past Jimmy, lowering my shoulder, spearing into Greg at full speed, my arms wrapping around him and driving him to the ground.

The fall knocked the wind from both of us and we rolled apart, gasping. I scrambled to my feet and Greg did the same. He glared at me, shocked into silence.

I'd never been in a fight before. I had no idea how it worked. It seemed Greg didn't either. We stood still, staring at each other. I'd seen plenty of action movies, but my dad always told me real life wasn't like that. Fighting wasn't about flashy, showy moves and dancing around each other. It was about fast, efficient blows that dealt the most damage in the least amount of time. I'd never seen my old man get into a fight either, but he was always giving me advice about "real life." Apparently, no one had ever shared that tidbit with Greg. He started to puff out his chest, to posture, angling for intimidation again. I didn't let him.

I balled up my fist and drove it straight into his nose. It hurt like hell. I didn't realize punching someone with your fist felt like that. But it hurt him worse. Blood poured from his nose and tears welled in his eyes.

"That's for Jimmy," I told him.

In my naivete, I thought the fight was over. I was wrong.

Greg swung, but it was poorly aimed and I leaned back and half turned, and the blow caught me on the shoulder. It hurt, but not terribly. All it really did was piss me off. Since my hand still hurt, I didn't want to punch him again. Instead, I kicked him in the balls as hard as I could.

Then the fight was over. He crumpled to the ground and puked all over himself. So I walked away. It had all happened so fast that a crowd hadn't had time to form, but my friends were walking toward me from the monkey bars, mouths agape.

In the aftermath, I assumed I'd be in big trouble, maybe get suspended, but no one ever said anything to me about the incident. Apparently, the teachers hadn't seen anything. After all, they can't be expected to watch everyone all of the time.

My parents never mentioned it. Although, in hindsight, I think my dad looked at me a little differently, with a little more pride. And that Christmas, I didn't have to go to Brandon's. Under the tree was a brand new VCR and a copy of Die Hard.

That incident replayed over and over in my head the day I sat in the courtroom as the judge made a statement in the case of *The People v. Nelson Summers*.

I was dressed in my police blues, perched on the edge of a wooden bench, sweating despite the blasting AC. The trial wasn't going well. All the pieces were there, but the defense had ripped them to shreds, getting one thing after another thrown out on technicalities.

Summers sat next to his lawyer, a smug look on his face. He was a psychopath who'd murdered two NYU girls for no other reason than they were wearing white after labor day. He told me as much in the interrogation room after I caught him. It was all part of his confession. None of which was admissible because it was coerced. Which was bullshit. The cameras clearly showed that I never hit the guy, but the defense argued there had been physical abuse during the arrest, which there might have been, and there was an implied threat of future violence if he didn't confess, which there wasn't. But the judge didn't like my attitude and I had enough complaints on my record that he sided with the defense and tossed the confession.

The current hearing was in response to the murder weapon also getting tossed. It was determined that I had not identified myself as a police detective prior to entering Summers's apartment, which I hadn't because he wouldn't have let me in if I had. Normally that isn't an issue if you already have a warrant, but I didn't, so it was. Therefore any and all evidence found as a result of the illegal search was disallowed. Which included the murder weapon.

Without the confession and the weapon, the defense filed a motion to dismiss the charges due to a lack of compelling evidence.

"In the eyes of this court," the judge was saying, "despite the findings of the grand jury, there is insufficient evidence at the present time to warrant prosecution. The charges against Mr. Summers are dismissed."

A groan rippled through those in attendance and the judge smacked his gavel. I gritted my teeth and got to my feet. I avoided making eye contact with anyone. I could already feel the assistant DA's accusatory glare from across the room. This was my fault, it said. You're the reason this one got away.

I wasn't the first person out the door, but I was at the front of the pack. Sticking around seemed like a bad idea, so I went back to the station and buried myself in paperwork. Sometimes the justice system seemed completely backward. Criminals were always given the benefit of the doubt, which to me didn't do enough to discourage criminal behavior. I believed it was my job to keep the public safe and the severity of certain crimes warranted the disregard of certain rights in order to apprehend the perpetrator. Evidence was evidence. It shouldn't matter how it was obtained and long as it wasn't planted.

No one spoke to me the rest of the day. I guess they could taste the bitterness emanating from my cubicle and figure it was best not to poke the bear. When the shift change rolled around, I hustled out to the street.

I needed to blow off some steam so I went to Richard's. It's a well-known Near North cop bar and was my usual off-duty drinking establishment at the time.

There weren't many people in the place when I got there, but it would fill up fast. Other cops getting off shift would show up in about twenty minutes. So I got an early start on the night's drinking.

Gin was and still is my beverage of choice. I was three deep by the time my partner, Jack, got there. He came straight over and sat down on the stool next to me.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Peachy," I said.

He grunted and ordered a beer.

We sat in silence for a while and eventually some of the other guys and a couple of girls from the station stopped in. Each of them clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Tough break" or some similar sentiment and then wandered to another table. Eventually, the alcohol kicked in and my mind lightened a little and I started bitching about the legal code and how it kept us from doing good work. Jack nodded and grunted when and where he was supposed to. Since I was talking, some of the other guys joined in the conversation—commiserating over pinches gone bad, or a perp cut loose on a technicality, or worse, a plea bargain.

An hour and two more drinks later, things were looking up. I was feeling better; not good, but better.

And then Nelson Summers walked through the door.

Most everyone ignored him. They hadn't been at the trial. Maybe they'd seen his picture in the paper like two million other people, but they hadn't been in the courtroom and had his face burned into their memory. They hadn't dreamt about him. I had.

He sauntered further in like he belonged, like he was meeting old friends for the umpteenth time. Then someone recognized him. A young cop with an eye for faces. He stood up and eyeballed Summers hard. Summers ignored him. He'd seen me and was trying to get closer.

Jack saw Summers too, and got to his feet and blocked his path.

Summers walked right up to him, not giving him more than a glance. His eyes danced this way and that, soaking in the details of the bar.

"You shouldn't be here," Jack told him.

Summers smiled. "It's a free country," he said. "What are you gonna do about it?"

Greg Helmsworth's smug face flashed through my mind. I pictured him crunching down on Jimmy's glasses with that wicked grin on his face. Summers was far worse than that. His weapon wasn't a simple chunk of snow and ice, but a five inch Schrade skinning knife. His

offence was not a simple blow to the face, but the soulless act of slicing two creamy white throats from ear to ear so deeply that their heads nearly fell off when the EMTs placed their bodies on the gurneys.

The rage burst out from where I had beaten it down and locked it up. Someone had to do something, and in that moment I knew that it was going to be me.

I slid off my stool and took two steps so I was directly behind Jack. I placed my hand on his arm and pushed him aside.

I've learned a lot about fighting since that first tussle with Greg years ago. What my old man told me turned out to be true. It was about dealing the most damage as quickly as possible, but it was best not to use your hands—too many bones to break. It was better to use elbows, forearms, and boots.

But all the hours of training were hemmed in by the outrage flooding my brain. Some part of me knew it would hurt, but the satisfaction would be worth it. So just like I did with Greg Helmsworth, I launched a jab toward Summers's face. But this time, I wasn't aiming for his nose. I was aiming for a spot about eight inches through and behind his nose.

Summers registered the incoming blow six inches before contact, but by that time it was too late to do anything. The average fist moves at one and a half meters per second. I'm a little faster than average. Call it three meters per second, which meant it would take fifteen-hundredths of a second for my fist to make contact. Reaction time—the signal from eyeball to brain and brain to muscle— is twenty-five hundredths of a second. No time to move out of the way.

I felt the crunch of bone and cartilage. His head snapped back as the force of the blow tried to drive through. His eyes glazed over and he toppled backward. One knee locked up and he twisted as he fell so that he landed awkwardly on his arm, his elbow popping out of joint, instead of smacking his head on the unforgiving concrete floor. But it probably saved his life.

I let my momentum carry me forward and past Jack then launched a vicious kick into the killer's side. Since I hadn't driven the bridge of his nose into his brain with the first punch, maybe I'd break his ribs and puncture a lung. I'd never killed anyone before, not even in the line of duty. I'd never wanted to kill anyone either. That would blur the line between me and the bad guys too much. But the rage had complete control of me now and what I wanted was to stop this man from ever hurting anyone ever again..

I launched another kick and another. Then hands latched onto me, one pair, then two, and dragged me away. Someone was shouting. Horrible curses were being thrown into the ether. Then I realized it was me.

That sobered me up. Someone shoved me down into a chair hard and I was about to fight back when I realized it was Jack. I looked around the bar. It was dead silent and everyone

was staring at me. And why wouldn't they? As far as most of them knew I had just beaten a man senseless unprovoked.

I sat for a long while, breathing hard. Jack hovered over me, not letting anyone get close. Eventually, the haze of anger subsided and I started to think about what I'd done more rationally. I still wasn't sorry. He deserved it. He deserved more than what I'd done to him, though I was glad I hadn't killed him. They say you lose a piece of your humanity when you take a life, even if it was a piece of shit like Summers.

A few minutes later, EMS arrived and hauled Summers off. Then Jack got me to my feet and carted me back to the station.

I didn't get a pat on the back from the Captain. No "attaboy." Instead, he wrote me up and filed charges. Assault and battery. Of a murderer, a monster.

I didn't understand it. The guy was guilty as sin. They should have been giving me a medal. I was sure the parents of those two girls would have bought me dinner.

But no, I was made an example of. I was given a choice: quit or be fired. If I quit, the charges would be dropped. If I stayed, a full investigation would be launched and I would be prosecuted to the fullest extent.

Maybe I should have fought it. Maybe I would've won. But I didn't.

It took a long time before I figured it out. There's no place on the force for retribution. Vigilante justice can't be tolerated because it interferes with due process. I get it now. But not then.

I fit better in the civilian world anyway, doing what I do. I still get to help people. I stand up to bullies. I put things right.

But I know what happens when the anger takes control. And there's always been a well of righteous anger deep down. With recent developments, that well seems to be very, very deep indeed. I'll have to be very careful. So will the monsters.

If you enjoyed this story, be sure to check out the first Mason Gray novel, [MISSING](#), available on [Kindle now!](#)

Also, be sure to check my website [www.williamcmarkham.weebly.com](http://www.williamcmarkham.weebly.com) for updates on the next book STOLEN.

Keep reading for a sample of MISSING.

I liked the Deluxe Diner, though I'm not sure what was so deluxe about it. The service was shitty, but the coffee was good. Not that fancy cat-shit barista stuff they serve at Starbucks, but old-school coffee, the kind that comes with the little thumb-sized paper creamer containers that the waitress carries in her apron. Not that I ever take cream. I like mine black. Usually, I pocket the cream to take back to the office to feed to the stray tomcat that lives out back. One-eyed Willy. Yeah, I named him after the pirate from *The Goonies*. It's a good flick. But I digress.

I took another swallow. My coffee had gone cold. I waved at Lorraine for a refill, then struck a match and lit a Camel because I knew it would be a couple of minutes before she hobbled out from around the counter. I don't use a lighter. Sure, I carry one, just in case, but I rarely use it. The smoking experience is more visceral, more real somehow, when a match is used. I think it's that whiff of sulfur and the acrid fumes that burn the eyes a little. After taking a nice long drag, I set my cancer stick on the ashtray and watched the lacy ribbon of smoke climb its way toward the ceiling.

This was my booth. I never sat anywhere else—not that I had to, since the place was always empty. I'm not sure what I'd do if it got busy and my seat wasn't available. Sit somewhere else, I guess. But it was a good booth for me. The flickering neon sign just above the window created enough glare that someone outside had to look really hard to see in, but I could see out just fine. Not to mention my flat was right across the street.

Because the place was never busy, it was always quiet—and I like quiet. It makes for good thinking. And right now, I needed to think.

Outside, it was dark and raining. But this was no surprise. It had been raining for two weeks straight: not a constant deluge, but a light drizzle with intermittent showers interrupted by the occasional downpour. At least that's what the weatherman said. Right now, it was a downpour. Small rivulets of rainwater flowed down the window beside me, converging near the bottom before disappearing from view. The weather fit my mood perfectly.

I looked out to the ugly rose-colored building across the street and took another drag. My flat was on the second floor, and the light in the front window was still on. Of all the screwed-up things I've seen, this one beat 'em all. There was a dead man in my front room, and I had no idea how he got there.

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I was working late at the office, which was pretty typical. I'm not much of a morning person, so I stay late to catch up on paperwork. It suits me fine; I get more work done when I'm there alone. My boss, Frank, is a good guy—actually, he's a great guy, one of the best—but he's a talker. About eight, I grabbed a couple of files I was working on, locked the place up, and went

to meet a new client. Nothing special, just some accountant who suspected his wife of infidelity and needed evidence for the divorce proceedings. We get them all the time. It's a pretty simple job: follow the mark and snap a few compromising photos. We call it a "tail and nail."

After the meeting, I swung by the corner market to pick up some snacks and a bottle of gin. One of the perks of not having a car is that I can drink all I want and not worry about DWIs. Not that I'm an alcoholic; I just like my gin. It's like Christmas in a bottle. I headed on home after that.

As soon as the cab pulled up in front of my flat, I knew something was hinky. There was light coming from the front window. Most people would think they'd accidentally left the light on, but not me. I never, ever turn on the overheads. They hurt my eyes. I don't even know why I bothered putting bulbs in them when I moved in. If I have some reading to do, I turn on a lamp. They all emit a nice, soft yellow glow, not the harsh white glare shining through the window.

I paid the cabbie and went around back. I always use the back steps; that way it's not so obvious when I come and go. At the top of the stairs I set the groceries down on my pathetic excuse for a balcony and drew my pistol from its shoulder holster, feeling the weight of its false reassurance settle in my hand.

I'd never shot anyone before, not even back when I was on the force. Sure, I went to the range on a regular basis, and I could put five out of six rounds in a three-inch bull's-eye at thirty yards, but there's a big difference between throwing lead at a paper target and at a living, breathing human being. It doesn't matter how good of a shot you are if you ain't got what it takes to pull the trigger when it counts. For a man with a soul, it takes conviction, a certainty that whoever's on the other end of that barrel deserves to die. Now, considering how the deadbolt was busted and the door was pried away from the jamb, I figured my first time might be right around the corner.

I nudged the door open with my foot and glanced inside, pistol leading the way. The kitchen, illuminated faintly by the living room light filtering down the hallway, was empty except for the pile of dishes in the sink. I stepped inside and eased the door shut behind me, muffling the noise of the outside traffic. I stood there quietly for a few minutes, listening for any movement in the place. Hearing nothing, I moved down the hallway, checking the bathroom on the right and the bedroom on the left, making sure they were both clear. At the end of the hall, I froze. Illuminated by the overhead light was a figure lying on the floor—a man in black jeans and a black T-shirt.

A dark puddle of blood emanated from his head and was slowly soaking into my area rug. Dammit, that rug had belonged to my grandmother; they'd better be able to clean it.

File folders and loose papers littered the floor around him. My desk had been thoroughly ransacked.

I moved closer for a better look, being careful not to contaminate the scene. I could see two entrance wounds in the back of his head—small caliber—what the cops call a double tap. It was the sign of a professional hitter.

Certain now that the apartment was empty save for the corpse adorning my living room floor, I went back to the kitchen and grabbed a pair of gloves from “the drawer.” I got the term from my mother. Anything that didn't have an otherwise logical home was tossed into it. With the gloves on, I carefully fished out the man's wallet.

By this point, my nerves were a little frazzled, so I went across the street to the diner to figure out my next move.

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“Miserable night, ain't it, honey?” said a voice to my right, hoarse and gravelly, like a moped with a bad muffler. Lorraine had come by at last with the coffee. She once told me she'd been working at this diner for twenty-five years. *Twenty-five years*. Can you imagine? Coming to the same greasy hole in the wall, waiting on the same cheap bastards for eight hours every day with no chance of ever getting a raise. When I asked her why she stuck around, she said, “Well, honey, I been here so long I don't reckon I know how to do nothin' else.” Damn. I'd have put a gun barrel in my mouth years ago.

“That it is, Lorraine,” I replied without taking my eyes off the window.

“You all right? You look pale as a ghost.”

“I'm fine,” I lied. “Been a long day, is all.”

“Well, if you need anything, you let me know,” she said over her shoulder as she walked back to the counter.

Pale as a ghost. I didn't doubt it. At least my hands weren't shaking anymore. They hadn't started until I got to the diner. Guess it took a bit for the fear to settle in. I couldn't even drink my first cup of coffee without spilling it down the front of my shirt. Ten minutes and two smokes later, they'd finally quit. Now I just needed to slow my thought process and focus on one question at a time.

I took another long drag, savoring the harsh smoke that carried the precious nicotine into my blood. I remembered reading once that nicotine binds to the same receptors in the brain as adrenaline and promptly pictured two school boys fighting over who was going to sit in *that* seat. I hoped the nicotine was winning.

Glancing down at the dead man's wallet lying open on the table, I tried to place the face in the picture. I knew that face from somewhere, but it was a vague recognition, maybe someone I'd seen a few times on the bus or train. The name on the ID card didn't ring a bell at all. Victor Sanz. It wasn't a state-issued ID, though, and there wasn't even a number on it. That had to say something—most likely that he was illegal. The other contents of the wallet weren't helpful either. A CTA card was standard for anyone living in the city. Sixteen dollars in cash was a

little odd—I mean why sixteen? What had he bought recently that cost four dollars? Did that mean something? Impossible to tell. Most disturbing, though, was the slip of paper with my address written on it. Unfortunately, there was no other address or social security number I could check into. I just had a face and a name to go on. The cops should be able to figure out who he was faster than I could.

Yeah... the cops.

I hadn't called them yet. I'd have to eventually, but not until I'd thought things through.

My separation from the CPD wasn't exactly amicable. I'd messed things up pretty bad, pissed a lot of people off, and burned a lot of bridges. Certain individuals still held a grudge and would be thrilled to send me up the river if they got the chance. This would certainly give them the opportunity they were looking for. Of course, if I didn't call them, it would only make me look that much more guilty.

I still had a few friends that wouldn't sell me out, hopefully. My old partner, Jack, was one of them. If I talked to him, he could probably send someone out who didn't have a bone to pick. I'd call him shortly.

The question my brain kept going back to was: who did kill this guy, and why? A number of possibilities came to mind, none any more likely than the next, although one particular scenario demanded serious consideration. What if the killer had been after me? What if it was sheer coincidence that two strangers had been in my flat at the same time and the shooter had assumed this Victor guy was me? Of course, I couldn't answer these questions until I found out who Victor Sanz was and what the hell he was doing in my home to begin with.

This torrent of thoughts and the rain pounding on the window beside me both slowly began to subside. Just as the world gradually became visible through the glass, so too a plan of action took shape. It was fuzzy at first, but grew clearer as my swirling thoughts ebbed to the recesses of my brain. I couldn't see very far ahead, but hopefully, after I'd taken the first few steps, more would reveal itself.

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I grabbed the phone from its clip on my belt and unlocked it. I'm not sure how people survived before cell phones were invented; I've become inseparable from mine. I've watched scenes in movies where someone chucks their mobile into an ocean or lake and relishes the freedom it brings. I don't buy it for a second. I'd die of a panic attack if somebody did that to me. If I don't want to be bothered, I turn mine off.

Cycling through my contact list, I found the name I was looking for and hit "send." It rang twice before someone picked up.

"Larsen," said the man on the other end.

"Jack," I said, "It's Gray. I need a favor."

Gray is my last name. I don't give out my first name because it's stupid, and people laugh. See, my mother was an Anglophile, so she named me Earl. As if that's not a god-awful name to begin with, add to it the last name Gray, and... Well, I'm sure you can put it together. My middle name is Mason, same as my old man's. While I don't have anything against him, the name Mason Gray is his, not mine, so I just go by Gray.

"I'll do what I can, Gray, but I'm pretty swamped here. What's going on?" Papers rustled in the background.

Jack and I went back pretty far. We'd gone to school together, taken the same criminal-justice classes. I could tell he was busy by the sound of his voice, but this was important.

"I need you to send an unmarked car to my place. Send the coroner too. And someone to process."

The rustling stopped.

"Gray? What's going on? Are you okay?"

I filled him in with the details and my concerns.

"Okay. I'll do my best to keep it quiet. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

I knew where he was going with this. "Yeah, take me off the suspect list. The entry wounds are small caliber, probably a .22. The ME will confirm it. I carry a .380, and that's my only piece."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. The stiff's name is Victor Sanz. It doesn't ring any bells. The face is familiar, but I can't place it."

"Okay, I'll run it and see if anything pops up. Are you in the apartment?"

"No, I'm at the diner across the street."

There was a brief silence. I imagined he was trying to decide if I was serious. Then, "Okay, stay where you are. One of my guys will be there shortly."

"Thanks," I said. Then something else occurred to me, something disturbing. "Jack, one more thing."

"What's that?"

"If somebody is gunning for me, they might go after Frank too. Could you send a squad car over to check on him? Give him the heads up."

"Sure thing. What's the address?" he asked.

"3356 North Seeley," I said. "Over in Roscoe Village."

"Got it," he replied. He reminded me to stay put, and we got off the phone.

I leaned back in the seat and tried to see the next step. Right now, there were too many questions, too many possible causes of my current situation. I needed to narrow them down and focus on one question at a time.

I reached into the inside pocket of my trench coat and took out a notepad and pen—a stereotypical detective accessory, but it’s practical. I’m a list man. Some people, like my father, never write anything down. They think it’s beneath them. Not me. I use my notepad for everything—grocery lists, to-do lists, facts from interviews, random thoughts, and organizing questions. I’ve tried using my phone to do it—there are plenty of apps for it—but it’s not the same. I’m also aware that my gray trench coat is cliché. That’s why I wear it. Like it or not, that’s my style.

I started writing down the questions running through my head.

Who was Victor Sanz? The cops were working on that, so I put a “c” beside it.

Who killed him? No way to answer that yet.

Why was he killed? Too many possible answers, but the mistaken identity scenario required that I keep a low profile until I knew the answer.

Why had Victor been in my house? I visualized the scene in my apartment again. Nothing had been broken. No valuables or electronics seemed to have been disturbed, but my desk had been ransacked. Somebody was looking for something, something specific. It could have been Victor or whoever had killed him.

Had they found it? I’d been in such a hurry to get out of the flat I hadn’t taken the time to see if anything was missing. I’d have to go back and look. I briefly entertained the idea of dashing across the street to take a quick inventory before the boys in blue showed up, but there wasn’t enough time, I decided. If they showed up while I was in there, they’d be pretty pissed. They might even take me in. That wouldn’t be good. I might be safe in the slammer, but I sure as hell couldn’t get any answers there.

As if to confirm my wise decision, a black Crown Vic with four antennas pulled up in front of the diner, and a suit got out and came through the door. Very subtle. The detective brushed the rain from his shoulders and glanced around the place. Seeing I was the only patron, he walked to my booth and said in a smooth tone, “Mr. Gray?”

I nodded.

“I’m Detective Rowe. Mike Rowe.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“No relation,” he said flatly.

He slid into the booth across from me and asked about the night’s events, so I told him and handed over the dead guy’s wallet. Others, he informed me, had parked in the back alley and were processing the scene. He checked my weapon and permit, then handed them back to me and made a note on a pad he’d pulled out while I was telling my story. It was a leather-bound deal, fine-grained, embossed in gold with his last name, with a little elastic loop on the side to hold a pen. A stab of jealousy shot through me. The feeling was stupid, but I couldn’t justify dropping twenty bucks on something like that when I could pick up a 4-pack of notepads

from the dollar store. Even though I'd love to have something like it, being an independent has its financial limitations. I could feel a divide open between us.

"What time did you arrive at the apartment?" he asked.

I checked my watch. It was straight-up midnight. Damn. How long had I been sitting here? I ran a quick timeline in my head. I'd left the office at eight, met the accountant downtown at eight thirty—that took about an hour—stopped by the store, and then grabbed a cab home. All of which put me home at about...

"Ten... ish."

"Any idea why this guy was in your house?" he asked drolly.

"Nope," I said simply. "I'll let you guys figure that one out." It was just a little fib to keep this guy from interfering in my investigation. Calling Jack was one thing—I knew he'd feed me the info I needed and stay out of my way otherwise—but I didn't know this guy from Adam. Given the reputation of the Chicago Police Department, I figured I'd be better safe than sorry.

"Okay, Mr. Gray," he said. "I don't envy your situation, and I understand your concerns about your... safety."

Crap. I could hear a "but" coming, the inevitable lecture about not interfering with police business. It was now, officially, his investigation. Yadda, yadda, yadda. And then—

"I'm here to help. I'm sure you're aware that we have procedures that must be followed. Certain questions must be asked and answered to clear you as a suspect. I want to make sure that's done as efficiently as possible so that you can proceed with your own affairs. I know you want to solve this puzzle as much as anyone. I only ask that you share whatever you discover with me posthaste. Are we clear?"

I blinked a couple of times as his words sank in. He'd skipped the lecture and the warnings. He must have known they wouldn't have done any good. Rowe was smarter than he looked: rather than playing the bristling, territorial copper, he was going the route of the sympathetic colleague. Maybe he was sincere, but I didn't buy it.

"Absolutely," I said, and I felt the distance between us widen.

"Good. There's just a few more things we need to take care of: fingerprints and so on. I'll introduce you to the Crime Scene guys. Shall we?"

I nodded. I put a couple of ones on the table to take care of the coffee, then we both stood and walked out into the rain and across the street. Lorraine stood behind the counter, scowling suspiciously at Rowe. Guess she didn't like him any more than I did.

When we arrived in my apartment, three technicians were well into processing the scene for evidence, taking pictures from every angle and dusting my desk for fingerprints. Nothing appeared to have been moved or bagged for evidence yet.

"Once all the pictures have been taken," said the detective, "perhaps you could look through your belongings to tell us if anything is missing."

I was hoping he'd say something like that.

After several minutes, they let me pick through the mess surrounding my desk. Its contents had been rifled through and left lying willy-nilly, but everything appeared to be present and accounted for. Damn, no help there. I gave the detective a shrug.

"All right, Mr. Gray, we've got your number. If we need anything else from you, we'll call. Unfortunately, we can't allow you to remain here. Is there someplace you can stay?"

I thought about it for a few seconds, came up with nothing, and said, "Yeah."

I left the apartment and walked out to the street corner.

It was still raining outside, so I stood on the sidewalk under the front awning and waited for it to let up. I wasn't sure what to do next. There was a hotel nearby where I could hole up for the night, and I was pretty tired, but I kept worrying about Frank. Until I heard from Larsen, I wasn't likely to get any sleep. Someone had obviously been looking for something in my apartment, and just as obviously hadn't found it—or had been whacked before they did.

The one solid fact I had was the identity of the dead man, Victor Sanz. Though Larsen was running the name for me, I decided to see what info I could dig up on my own about the guy. The cops might have access to more privileged databases than I did, but they were always short on time and manpower. I might be able to turn something up faster.

Seeing as the weather wasn't about to give me a break, I flipped up the collar on my coat and flagged down the first cab I saw.

Our office is in Old Town—an area right smack between Lincoln Park and the Gold Coast, the two wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. It's also a stone's throw away from Cabrini, one of the poorest. A lot of rich people live in this area: doctors, lawyers, and such. Most of them are north of 40: people with secrets, people with money. It's the perfect spot for a business like ours.

The cabbie dropped me off in front of the brownstone building. I walked the perimeter, checking the second floor for lights. None were on. I made my way up the back stairs and unlocked the door, listening carefully; I wasn't in the mood for any more surprises. The office door was locked and appeared un-tampered-with. Inside, everything was quiet. Satisfied that no assassins were lurking in the shadows, I sat down at my desk and booted up the computer.

Computers are wonderful things, especially when connected to the Internet. I did most of my work in front of one. Most people think my profession is a thing of the past because any moron can log on and search for whatever they want. This is true, but it takes a lot of time to sift through that much information and find what you're looking for. And time is money. The trick is knowing how and where to look for that needle in the haystack. Plus, a lot of sites require membership fees, which discourages your average Joe. That being said, the Internet is only a starting point. It can help focus your efforts in the field, but real detective work inevitably takes you out of the office and into the brick-and-mortar world.

I started by Googling "Victor Sanz Chicago." 315,000 entries popped up. Great. I hit the images link, which narrowed it down to 200,000, and scrolled down the page. I figured a face would be easier to recognize. Seeing nothing familiar, I narrowed my search even further. A couple of newspaper articles mentioned the name Victor Sanz in connection with alleged thefts, but nothing really stood out. I checked the Cook County Circuit Court site for cases involving a Victor Sanz and came up with the same petty theft records but no convictions.

All the while, I wondered why this guy looked familiar if I didn't know the name. I must have seen him somewhere. But where? On a whim, I checked our in-house database of all the cases we've worked. Maybe I'd met him on an investigation and snapped a few photos of the guy.

I was so intent on my search that I just about crapped myself when the phone buzzed in my pocket. I fished it out hastily, checked the incoming caller id, and swiped my finger across the screen.

"Gray," I said.

"Gray, it's Larsen. Frank's fine—a little irritated at being woken up at one in the morning, but unharmed. The patrolman filled him in on what happened, and he seemed rather baffled. I can't spare a car to post watch, but knowing Frank, he'll take care of it."

"Thanks," I said, and hung up.

I felt better knowing Frank was okay, but now that I was involved in looking for something, I couldn't get any shut-eye until I'd finished the search. Unfortunately, our in-house records turned up nil. At some point, my eyelids got awfully heavy, so I stretched out on the couch in my office to rest them for just a minute.

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The next thing I knew, sunlight was streaming through the window. I guess it had finally quit raining. But that's not what woke me. I must have heard the front door close in my sleep and decided there might be a threat. Now I heard someone shuffling around outside my office area. I lay very still, slowly reaching for the small semi-automatic pistol at my side. Through my open door, I saw movement across the hall... and then heard whistling to the tune of "Go Tell Aunt Roadie"—well, it was supposed to be. I'm not sure what key it was in, but I did know it was the wrong one.

I immediately relaxed. A morning whistle was one of Frank's annoying little habits. Yesterday's tune had been "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." No telling what he'd come in with tomorrow.

I sat up on the couch and dug something crunchy out of the corner of my left eye. I checked my watch. Eight a.m. I must have groaned, because Frank stuck his head in my door and said, "Oh, morning Gray. Heard you had a rough night. Let me make a pot of coffee, and we'll talk."

I walked over to the bathroom in the hallway, took a leak, and splashed some water on my face. My neck was stiff from sleeping on the couch, and my eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. Brad Pitt's got nothing on me in the looks department, I thought.

The coffee brewing down the hall in the kitchenette reached my sniffer, and I felt the drool forming in my mouth. I followed my nose, grabbed a mug off the counter and poured

myself a cupful. As I stood there letting the caffeine do its job, Frank wandered around the corner.

“So,” he began, “long night?”

A lot of people complain about stupid questions like that. They seem to think that if the answer is obvious, the question needn't be asked. I'm not one of those people, especially in the morning. In fact, I prefer being asked asinine questions that need no real explanation. It requires less thought on my part.

I grunted an affirmative.

“I can only imagine. Listen, I was thinking that you might want a little downtime in the next couple of days. My load is pretty light at the moment, so I can field any new cases and take the ones from yesterday off your hands if you haven't started on them yet.”

“That'd be great, Frank. I did interview that accountant last night, but you can have all the others.”

“Okay, I'll switch them in the system and you can hand over the files whenever.”

“Great,” I said. And it was great. I had a feeling that running down this Victor Sanz guy was going to require most of my attention for the next week or so.

Frank went into his office, and I went back to mine. He had assigned me four cases yesterday—the accountant one, a missing person, a premarital screening, and an identity theft—all fairly standard. I pulled the files out of my briefcase, replaced the accountant one, and then made a pile of the others. I checked my watch. It was 9 o'clock on the nose. I took another swallow of coffee, picked up the stack of folders and took them over to Frank.

Dropping the folders on his desk, I said, “I've got a couple of things to look at while I'm here, then I'll take the camera out for a while.” I'd made some notes on the accountant's wife's daily schedule; her husband seemed to believe the hanky-panky was happening around lunch time. I figured I'd stake out their neighborhood and see if I could snap a few photos of the adulterous duo. It would also give me time to think of what to do about Victor Sanz.

I went back to my computer and resumed my search. After fifteen fruitless minutes, I was thinking about shutting everything down and heading out when the desk phone intercom thingy rang.

I punched a button. “Yeah.”

“Are you sure I gave you this missing person file yesterday?” asked Frank.

“Pretty sure. Why?”

“I can't find it in the computer. You sure it isn't an old case that got mixed in?”

“I don't think so. You want me to see if I can find it on my end?”

“Maybe I just forgot to enter the dad-blamed thing.” He was getting a bit forgetful these days, but I remembered seeing it in the system the day before.

“I don't think so. I'll take a look over here. Maybe you've got a glitch.”

“Maybe,” he said, and hung up.

I opened the database and browsed through the files with yesterday’s date on them, but I didn’t see the name I was looking for. That was strange. I deleted the date and just ran the name, Ellie McCarthy. Again, the computer came up with squat.

I walked over to Frank’s office.

“Weird, I can’t find it either, but I’m positive I saw it yesterday. Let me have a look at the file.”

Frank handed it to me. I opened the manila folder and looked over the paperwork. A twenty-one-year-old girl, missing for three weeks, father filed the report, and the cops hadn’t turned anything up. It was a typical missing person case, but something tickled the back of my brain.

“I’m gonna hang onto this, Frank. Something’s not sitting well. I’m going to head out. If you figure out what’s going on with the computer, let me know.”

Frank grunted, and I stuffed the McCarthy file into my briefcase, grabbed the camera and made for Lincoln Park.

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I’ve had people ask me how I can do a stakeout without a car. Most people think of stakeouts as something that happens late at night, sitting in a black unmarked cruiser while detectives eat crullers and drink scorched corner-store coffee. But what do you expect if they get all their info about law enforcement from reruns of *Cops and Lawyers* or whatever?

The whole point of a stakeout is to watch the target without them knowing that they’re being watched. I don’t know about you, but if I walked by a car with two people sitting in it with a camera, I’d think something screwy was going on. So I do most of my watching from coffee shops, diners, or cafes. Think about it: when was the last time you paid attention to someone sitting at the Starbucks across the street, even if they did have a camera? Lots of folks carry cameras, and most of them are more interested in taking a black and white photo of the plastic bag that’s blown against the fire hydrant because somebody might think it’s “artistic” than they are in taking pictures of you. But I digress.

By two o’clock I had plenty of photos of Mrs. Accountant and her new beau, so I figured I’d head downtown and drop off the SD card with Mr. Accountant. I took the El train to the loop, pondering the craziness of the previous night.

The feeling that I’d seen Victor Sanz before wouldn’t let go. Why he’d been in my apartment to begin with was, likewise, still a mystery. Add to that the weirdness of the missing file from our database, and my head started to hurt.

The light coming through the windows dimmed as the train went underground. I stared out at the concrete tunnel walls as we sped by, occasionally passing a small access door. I had often wondered what was behind those doors. Was it just a maintenance closet, or was there a

network of tunnels webbing their way through the underbelly of Chicago? Did mutant mole people spend the entirety of their blind lives foraging there in the perpetual darkness? I think I read a book about something like that once. Mole people... what an imagination.

Just then, a thought bubbled up through the mire of my brain. I could tell it was something important. I waited for the bubble to reach the surface so I could see it more clearly, and then...

"This is Lake. Doors open on the left at Lake," said the melodious and ambiguously ethnic female voice over the intercom. Crap, this was my stop. I jostled my way out the doors and felt the thought bubble burst. I had no idea what was inside it.

### 3

After delivering the photos, I paid a visit to the father of our missing girl, Ellie McCarthy, who was also now missing from our database. I dialed the number in the file on the way to the train station. It rang a few times, then a grizzled voice picked up. I told him who I was and that I wanted to come by to talk. He said he'd be there and hung up.

McCarthy lived in Canaryville on the Southside near the old stockyards, the neighborhood made famous by Sinclair's "The Jungle." It's not a place I go very often; I generally stick to the north side of the city, because that's where my business is. Don't get me wrong, there are some affluent areas on the south side, but not nearly as many as north of the loop. Also, I kind of stick out down there.

Few people are "from" Chicago itself: we're mostly transplants from other places. Generally when someone tells you they're from Chicago, they mean one of the surrounding suburbs. Neighborhoods like Canary Park and Bridgeport, however, are some of the few places people are actually "from." With a long history in the city, they maintain a strong sense of community, and outsiders simply don't fit in—and if your grandparents didn't grow up there, you're an outsider.

McCarthy's house was a small bungalow typical of the neighborhood. As his name would suggest, he was thoroughly Irish, like most of the folks there.

The Irish in urban areas of America have gotten a raw deal over the last couple centuries, stereotyped by Hollywood as bigoted and hot-tempered. What many people don't realize, or choose to ignore, is that like many ethnic minorities, they were oppressed and taken advantage of in the early years of our nation's history. They weren't slaves, by any means, but they did endure horrid conditions.

McCarthy didn't exude any of the stereotypical anger, resentment, or animosity usually attributed to such people. Instead, he was blanketed by an aura of deep sadness. He was most likely in his late fifties, but he looked older: his full head of hair was snowy white, and there were deep creases around his mouth and eyes. The last couple of weeks obviously weighed heavily on him.

After letting me in, he walked to a small corner table in the living room, poured two fingers of Glenlivet into a tumbler, and handed it to me. Though not my typical drink, I graciously accepted. Then he poured a second glass for himself.

We settled on the couch, then I spoke up. "I've got a copy of the police report you filed last week, but I was hoping to get a more personal sense for your daughter. What can you tell me about her? What are her hobbies? Where does she spend her free time?"

He sat quietly for a moment, then said, "I'm not sure what I can tell you. We've grown apart the last several years. I don't know much about her personal life anymore. We used to be

buddies. We'd go bowling, go to the movies. After her mother died, I'd take her down to the pub with me, and she'd tell me all about her dreams while I had a pint. She always wanted to be an architect, and she'd draw me sketches of what the city skyline would look like when she got through with it. But when she went to college, I started seeing less and less of her until she finally got a place of her own closer to downtown.

"She always called me every Monday, though. That's how I knew something was wrong—she didn't call the other week."

"What about friends? Did she ever talk about the people she spent time with?"

"Not really—not to me, anyway. I got the feeling there was somebody, a boyfriend maybe, but she never did talk about him outright. She would mention things she had done, places she'd gone, that wouldn't be right to do alone. I don't know... it seemed like she wanted to keep me in the dark where that was concerned."

"All right. These places she went, do you remember where they were? Any place she mentioned more than once?"

"Not really. Mostly restaurants. There was a club she went to a couple of times. Some place called Neo. You know that one?"

"Yeah, I've heard of it," I replied.

Neo is the oldest nightclub in Chicago. There are older bars and speakeasies in the city, such as the Green Mill, one of Capone's favorite hangouts, but that's a different type of place altogether. Neo plays host to goths, emo kids, and anyone else who wears a lot of black, and it's one of the few places in the city that plays trip-hop music. I've never been there, but it looked like that was about to change.

"What about social media? Does she use that much?"

McCarthy met my question with a blank stare.

"Computers. Does she have one?"

"Huh? Oh yeah. She's been trying to talk me into getting one, but I'm one of the last geezers to hold out, I guess."

I didn't think the old man would provide any more insight into the whereabouts of his daughter, so I thanked him for his time, confirmed Ellie's address, polished off the last swig of whiskey, and said my farewell.

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As I headed back to the Red Line, I passed a billboard near the Sox field that stopped me short, an ad for someone named Dooley running for alderman of the 3<sup>rd</sup> ward. That, of itself, was meaningless to me, but it's funny how the brain works, how one thought connects to another. I'd read in a book that certain external stimuli can unearth buried memories if they somehow trigger the right synapses in the brain to fire, no matter how meaningless those

stimuli might seem at first. Somehow, seeing this billboard sent me down a pathway of synapses that ended at a gala I had attended a year ago, hosted by a different alderman in another ward.

I'd figured this reception, held so the locals could meet the alderman on a non-threatening level with no agendas being pushed, was a good opportunity for me to schmooze and possibly drum up some new clients. There'd been a buffet of finger foods and a mimosa bar, but my brain freeze-framed on the face of none other than Victor Sanz. Ha! I knew I'd seen him before. In my mind's eye, he was dressed in a white uniform, filling champagne flutes with orange juice.

I did a little shuffle step on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette to celebrate this victory. I know, it doesn't seem like much, but in my line of work, it's often the little things that count the most. They add up to big breakthroughs.

I also now knew the next step in my investigation: to talk to the folks at the alderman's office. Either Sanz worked directly for them or for the caterer who'd worked the event. Either way, there would be paperwork with an address or something. I fished out my notepad, wrote this down, and made for the train.