

# BABY JANE

a novel by

M. A. Demers



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## ONE

The death of a child is never a good thing. A life taken before it had a chance to bloom: surely there could be no greater purpose, no divine rationale. Claire Dawson's child was dead, and nothing worthwhile could possibly arise from such a tragedy. Her child was *dead*. And it was her fault.

Yet here she was in a house paid for by that death, a house she could never have afforded otherwise, and she was perplexed and burdened by the paradox: her son was dead by the hammer of her stupidity yet that hammer would now build her a home. In what universe did that compute? "Where God closes a door, he opens a window," a well-intentioned friend had counselled, but as the friend had never suffered anything worse than disappointment the gesture had seemed hollow, a bone with all the marrow sucked out. So Claire had dismissed the advice, and despite the flutter of anticipation in her heart when she signed the purchase agreement, despite the tingling in her fingers when she began packing up her tiny, overpriced apartment, her ambivalence remained resolute. Every victory was followed by a robust certainty that she didn't deserve to be happy, that she should wear her culpability like mourning cloth, and thus she spent her days vacillating between waves of recrimination and trickles of tempered optimism.

Claire collapsed onto the sofa, kicked off her sneakers, bent one leg back and began kneading the swollen flesh beneath her toes. *The death of a child is never a good thing!* That she should consider the alternative, should let it sneak past her defences and pose itself, was troubling. Everything happens for a reason, Dr. Fitzsimmons had insisted, but while Claire

had progressed sufficiently to entertain this pseudo-belief she wasn't able to wear it like her shrink did, like a second, thicker skin. Claire was still translucent, her fortifications an illusion: a heavy fog that dissipated with the mildest of winds.

She closed her eyes and wiped the sweat off her eyelids. The day had been hot for the start of summer, the movers' perspiration soaking through their thin T-shirts and onto the boxes, and she was glad she'd had the foresight to drape the sofa in plastic sheeting. The thought of rubbing against a man's scent didn't appeal to her: male company was not something Claire cared for these days, notwithstanding brief moments of carnal weakness that presented themselves as a vague discomfort along the inside of her thighs. Such moments passed quickly, and she imagined they simply moved on to a more receptive vehicle, as if thoughts could be passed on like fruit cake until they landed in the hands of the one foolish enough to take a bite. Passion: it was the candied cherries that made the messy pudding appear enticing, that suckered you in before your taste buds could register love's bitter aftertaste. No wonder it was the cake of choice for weddings.

The thought of the movers reminded Claire of her own unpleasant aroma so she pulled her unwilling carcass up off the couch with a groan and headed upstairs for a bath. She turned on the taps that curved over the end of the chipped claw foot tub, then wandered over to the window to survey the garden below. Its beauty tempered her ambivalence. Resplendent even in the shadows of a setting sun, the garden was awash in colour or the promise of it: giant hydrangea bushes waiting to flower, stunning red and purple rhododendrons already in bloom, roses and dahlias that were as yet just a promise, and a lilac tree that held court over them all. The garden had been the property's sole selling feature, beautifully maintained in stark contrast to the original 1930s condition of the house. It had been a shock to come inside, actually, the sad, faded wallpaper the first indication of a home unloved by time and ignored by its occupants. But the house had good bones, the inspector had assured Claire, and at the competitive price of \$590,000 it left her money to renovate. She snickered at that last thought: "competitive" was a relative term in real estate and Vancouver had long ago dropped any pretence of affordability. For a middle-income earner—and Claire considered her teacher's salary barely even that—this was a two-wage town unless you got lucky enough to win the lottery or land an inheritance or, she thought cynically, to settle out of court.

And settled she had. Hush funds. Blood money. Seven hundred fifty thousand dollars in exchange for her silence. A silence that had proved deafening.

Claire stripped and sank into the tepid water, then leaned back to study the spider cracks that spun a haphazard web on the ceiling. *The death of a child is never a good thing.* The thought re-entered her mind again before she had the sense to stop it, and in her fatigue the tears welled up before she could stop them, too. She covered her eyes with one hand as the salty droplets trickled down her face and into the bathwater, her shoulders shaking from the small convulsions she tried to quell, and within seconds she forgot where she was, only why, and became lost in grief.

Claire's cries crept along the attic floor and echoed down the narrow stairwell, reverberating eerily in the darkening rooms below. At the back of the house a creature stirred in the gloom, its tiny ears trembling at the lamentations from above. The sound of a woman crying was frightening yet soothingly familiar, and the creature silently wondered if the house had reawakened after decades asleep. It listened, fearful yet strangely hopeful, until the sobbing slowly subsided and the house fell silent again.

## TWO

Claire's eyes flickered behind their lids as sunlight poured through her bedroom window and penetrated the thin veil of skin. Without conscious thought she turned away, her soul still wandering in that indeterminate geography between sleep and wakefulness, the place where what is and what was and what might be collide in a kaleidoscope of cryptic narratives and archaic imagery. When she awoke she would remember the essence of her visions, could write it down for later scrutiny, but she didn't do that anymore, was weary of her dreams reduced to psychobabble and picked apart like scabs. She had chosen instead to put her dreams in what she believed is their rightful place: on a high shelf alongside blind hope and indiscriminate yearning.

The creature watched, curious but cautious, as the light slowly coaxed Claire awake. It had been hovering all night, slinking about at the edges of her bed, wondering if she might be its chance at freedom. But Claire seemed fragile, had whimpered often in her sleep, and the creature feared Claire might be as weak as the others whose spirits had already been broken in this house. To reveal itself would risk injury to Claire, perhaps even death; would she prove more resilient than she appeared? And even if she were, wasn't this too much to ask of a stranger who had merely wandered, unknowingly, into the den of a beast?

The creature retreated into the shadows as Claire opened her eyes and rolled out of the foetal position she'd curled herself into. She winced as sunlight burned into her retinas, a dull ache in her head. Her son had dominated her dreams as usual, though this time his face had been obscured,

a curious change she would understand only later as events unfolded. But for the moment the change simply worried her: that the time was coming when she would no longer dream of him, would not be able to conjure up his face on demand, and while she knew this was progress it felt like abandonment. She fought the instinct to bury herself beneath the duvet, to indulge in a few more stolen moments with him, and after a few minutes weighing the advantages and perils of such indulgence she arrived at a verdict, throwing back the covers with a reluctant sweep of her hand and propelling herself out of bed. She stretched her back, shook the lethargy from her limbs, and headed for the bathroom.

In the tarnished mirror above the sink she scrutinized herself, a morning ritual that had begun in early adolescence when Claire had sprouted prematurely, quickly surpassing the boys who would take another three years to match her eventual five eight frame, and until they did taunted her with slurs and sexual innuendoes. She had grown up awkward in her skin, never truly believing that her gangly limbs had become shapely or that her face was worthy of lustful examination; and although she was aware men found her attractive she questioned their judgment. Admittedly, hers *was* an unorthodox beauty: ivory skin, narrow, almond-shaped eyes and dark hair that harkened back to her mix of Viking and Frankish blood, full but pale lips, a slightly upturned nose she believed made her unfairly appear standoffish, and a sprinkling of embarrassing freckles that Claire took pains to diminish with makeup and a compensatory rise of her chin. Her beauty attracted suitors, her insecurity predators, and to her shame she'd mistaken the latter for the former with tragic results.

She pushed that last thought away and forced a smile. "Today is a new day and every day is a new promise," Claire reminded the doppelganger in the mirror, the one who counted on these daily mantras to transform themselves into genuine confidence. It was a technique Dr. Fitzsimmons had taught Claire, had stressed repeatedly in their weekly sessions: the power of positive thinking. The phrase had irritated Claire at first, had sounded like one of the many late-night infomercials she'd come to depend upon when insomnia had been her only companion, but over time she'd come to accept there was truth to the idea. "Life is about attitude," she declared, mimicking Dr. Fitzsimmons' confident, authoritative tone. Besides, she reminded herself as she pressed a toothbrush into her molars, every cloud has a silver lining. Was it possible that the darker the cloud the shinier the lining?

She finished brushing her teeth, plunged her head beneath the bathtub tap and scrubbed herself awake, then dressed and grabbed her purse: nearby Commercial Drive was awash in coffee shops, and maybe if she also bought a bran muffin she could convince herself she'd eaten a legitimate breakfast. *You can't just drink coffee, Claire; now sit.* Her mother setting a plate of poached eggs and toast on the table then hovering about, cloaking her anguish in a stream of maternal nattering. *Come back to Calgary; your family is there. What's for you here? Nothing but trouble. Come home. We'll help you through this.* But Claire had refused, determined not to return to the bosom of a mother whom Claire adored but had struggled to separate from, and unwilling to submit herself to the disappointment of a father whose standards exceeded those of compassion and common sense. The move to Vancouver had been a deliberate accident: deliberate in that Claire had applied for the teaching position posted online, accidental because she never believed she would be chosen. But chosen she was, and she found in that affirmation an unexpected courage. It was that same courage that kept her here despite the fallout from her lapse in judgment, that persuaded her to stand her ground despite its ever-shifting sway.

She locked the door and headed west. Lakewood Road was quiet this late morning except for the *click-click* of hedge trimmers coming from behind a tall screen of green velvet boxwood four doors down, while across the street two older Italian women were in the midst of an animated conversation in their native tongue. Both women had thick ankles, dark moustaches and heavy breasts, with a cheap black handbag over one arm and the other dragging a metal shopping basket. One basket was full, the other empty. One finished, one not yet started, and neither going anywhere in a hurry.

It was this slower pace of life that attracted Claire to the neighbourhood. It possessed a tranquility that suggested peace lay behind closed doors, that no dark secrets lurked in shadows threatening to explode with an unexpected violence. It screamed, yes, but of barbecues and swing sets and a fierce competition for prize rose bushes. It was the classic suburban illusion, a brilliant visage that masked loneliness here, battery there, and neglect behind that green door of envy on the corner. Every street has its skeletons. Lakewood Road was no different.

The morning rush was over when Claire reached Audrey's Coffee House but most of the tables were still occupied. Commercial Drive was a hub for artists and film types mixed in with blue collar shift workers, and



so The Drive (as the locals called it) seemed to follow a different schedule altogether from the rest of the city. It buzzed this day or that night without any apparent logic, the jumbled noise in perfect juxtaposition to the quiet streets it bordered. It was as if one minute you were in your garden and the next you were falling through the rabbit hole. And Claire loved it. She loved its beatnik flavour, its multiethnic hue, its cheap restaurants, artisan shops, and used furniture stores. It was vibrant and chaotic and schizophrenic and far removed from the posh private Eaton Academy where Claire had taught spoiled rich kids whose fathers thought nothing of seducing their sons' English teacher—

*Stop it!* Claire gave herself a mental kick in the shin. She had no one to blame but herself for that. Dr. Eric Mellor, esteemed cardiologist, devoted husband and father, had seduced her, but she had let him. She had let him ply her with flowers and champagne, with passionate, stolen nights, with diamond earrings on her birthday. Blinded by superb credentials, intoxicated by charm, Claire had willingly believed Eric's false professions of a future together, had been complicit in lust masquerading as love. She had no one to blame but herself, she confirmed. Still, her complicity had not prepared her for the brutality of his derision when she told him she was pregnant. "You stupid girl," he had sighed with exasperation, as if their baby had been conceived with no participation on his part. "I thought an English teacher would be smarter than that."

"Well," he'd added after his words were met with a stunned silence, "I assume you'll be discreet and get rid—"

A high-pitched wail broke Claire's reverie and sent a dose of adrenalin coursing through her nervous system. She jumped in her seat and spun around to find nothing more than a new mother settling in at the next table. Claire smiled awkwardly, trying to regain her composure, and hoped her face read surprise, not terror. "Somebody's hungry."

"No, not hungry," the woman replied with what Claire guessed was a Mexican accent, "just unhappy. He didn't sleep well last night." The woman looked to be about twenty-five years old, with a youthful if fatigued round face and large eyes. She wore casual grey slacks and a white cotton twinset with a small beige stain on one shoulder. At her knees was a baby stroller that seemed altogether too big for the tiny cherub nestled within. "He's teething. Hungry is a different sound altogether."

Her last comment intrigued Claire. "There's a difference?"

"Sí." The woman dipped the baby's soother in her coffee and put it

back in his mouth. “At first I couldn’t tell the difference, but I found if I listened closely enough I could hear a change in pitch.” She paused, then shrugged. “Now it’s automatic. You don’t have children?”

“No,” Claire said a little too abruptly, as if the question had been a judgment. She stood up, her faced taut with indignation. “I have to go. It was nice to meet you.”

The woman smiled anxiously. “I’m sorry. Forgive me. I come looking for adult conversation and what do I do? I start talking about babies.”

“It’s okay. I understand. I’m just ...” Claire looked helplessly at the woman and her son. “I’m just late for a meeting with my contractor,” Claire lied, and shot out of the café, leaving her muffin behind.

The walk home was riddled with self-reproach. It wasn’t like Claire to be rude or unkind and yet in a single gesture she’d managed both. The journey back to herself seemed plagued with U-turns. She thought of the woman who had loved Eric, who witnessed a monster masquerading as a prince and looked the other way. She became adept at compensating, at leaving extra tips for mistreated wait staff or steering conversations toward the frivolous so as to avoid the inevitable verbal slaps Eric administered to dissenting opinions. She learned to feign pleasure, sold her self-respect for his approval, accommodated his caprice until she inevitably mistook the chameleon she became with the woman she had been. Friends who voiced their concerns had been vehemently repudiated until only the most loving and tolerant remained, and those she did not lose to her duplicity she later lost to despair.

It hadn’t begun like that, of course; these things never do. It had begun with a need, hers to find an emotional anchor to replace the ones she’d left behind in Calgary, his to exercise a pathological narcissism. She would later discover how carefully he chose his victims: she needed to be vulnerable, so his attentions would feel extraordinary; kind and maternal, so she would pity his marital unhappiness and refuse to abandon him to his condition; incurably romantic, so she would naively believe the fairy tale he fabricated with every loving word and amorous gesture. He was a master storyteller, a skilled weaver of plausible fictions, so capable a manipulator that when he eventually dropped the pretence even that was expertly calculated, perfectly timed to coincide with the final surrender of her heart. Unable to free itself, the heart had remained committed while the mind adapted. It would take a year of therapy to untangle the mess.

Still, she reminded herself, something good *had* come of her stupidity

and misfortune. The house on Lakewood Road was no Shangri-la but it was hers. She would make it a home, a sanctuary, a shelter from the storm. How it had come about was not important. The past was done and buried; all that remained was the future and the now, and the now was looking better every day.

She maintained that positive endnote until self-flagellation was replaced with optimism, and despite the latter's minor but perceptible false note Claire managed nonetheless to push the incident at Audrey's out of her mind as she organized her new space, and by late afternoon she was able to turn her attention to the start of renovations. She taped thick plastic sheets over the dining room floor and doorway then stood before the wall it shared with the kitchen, tapping her fingers on her arm as she contemplated the best approach to tearing it down. The heavy sledgehammer hanging from her hand felt surprisingly light, a contradiction she chalked up to excitement, and when she looked in the mirror after donning safety goggles and a dust mask she found herself giggling. Claire picked the best spot, she figured, for the first blow, took a fat felt pen from her pocket and drew a cartoon of Eric's face onto the pale beige wall, then swung the sledgehammer like a bat. It crashed into the wall with a leaden crack, thick veins snaking through Eric's cheek. A self-satisfied grin crept across Claire's lips as she paused to appreciate the moment, and remained there as she took another swing then another and another until Dr. Eric Mellor, esteemed cardiologist, devoted husband and father, was reduced to rubble at Claire's feet. This is better than therapy, she thought, laughing inside. Could have saved herself *a lot* of money had she simply crushed his head months ago.

The creature watched as Claire dismantled the wall with an intriguing ferocity. With each blow its own resolve was building, too, spurred on by an inexplicable sense of connection to this delicate yet curiously determined woman. But it didn't have a plan, only hope; would hope be enough to pierce the veil?

After about an hour of demolition Claire's euphoria gave way to pain from the shockwaves that reverberated through her body with each swing of the sledgehammer. She surveyed the pile of broken lathe and plaster and figured she was done for the day. A fine, silky dust hung everywhere, coating her hair and permeating every exposed pore, and when she pulled off her goggles the ring of clean skin around her eyes gave her a ghoulish appearance made all the scarier by its reflection in the small antique mirror that hung on the back of the closet door. Claire stripped down to her

underwear, left her filthy jeans and T-shirt where they lay, and headed upstairs for a bath.

She sank her aching body in the steaming water then took a breath and submerged her head to loosen up her hair. One thorough shampoo and body scrub later, Claire was beginning to feel human again. An anti-inflammatory would sort out her muscles she reckoned as she stepped into her pyjamas and dried her hair with a towel. She took two ibuprofens then collapsed onto her bed, tired but pleased with her efforts.

She was just starting to drift off when she heard it. It was faint, muffled, like the sounds from the other side of an apartment wall. Claire's eyes opened wide with alarm and darted about the room. *No, it can't be. Not again!* A weight fell upon her chest; she could hear her pulse swishing against her eardrums. The corners of the room, slung low with shadows, began to fold in upon themselves, rapidly closing in and shrouding Claire in a claustrophobic caul. The sound slowly crawled up the stairs, becoming more and more audible until it became exactly what she feared most: the unmistakable cry of a baby.

Claire's stomach did a somersault. She sprang from her bed and into the bathroom, heaving up the Chinese delivery she'd eaten earlier. *God damn it! Not again!* For months after her son's death Claire had suffered similar hallucinations, hallucinations she'd eventually eradicated with the dispassionate knife of analysis. Their return smothered her in a dark, cold panic—until something made her stop and sit at attention. There was something new, something odd about this now. *A different sound altogether.* A chill ran along Claire's spine as she leaned motionless against the toilet, straining to hear, trying to ascertain the nature of the change when—

*BANG!*

Claire screamed and bolted upright, her heart a bullet train. She pressed her back against the wall, frightened and alert, but everything had gone quiet again. And then she remembered she'd left a window open in the dining room to let out the dust from the demolition, and breathed a heavy, welcomed sigh of relief: the window had simply fallen shut, nothing more. And the baby must belong to a neighbour.

Her overreaction made her feel silly, and she quietly admonished herself as she padded down the stairs to reopen the window. She slipped into the shoes she'd left beside the doorway and entered the dining room, the air still heavy with dust that floated hazily in the waning shafts of light. She covered her mouth and nose with her hand as she crossed over to

open the window—when the glass suddenly shattered! Claire gasped as an unseen force slammed into her back and hurled her toward the razor-sharp shards that clung to the window frame. A strangled cry escaped Claire’s throat; her feet scraped helplessly against the plastic-covered floor as she tried to find her footing. She raised her arms in a desperate attempt to protect her body from the inevitable mutilation—when another unseen force spun her around and pulled her back to the center of the room. A dark shape appeared in the mirror but before Claire could see what it was the mirror shattered and fell to the floor, the shards exploding into a silver galaxy as they collided with the hardwood. And then it started again: the frightened, bewildered cry of a baby. And it was coming from the closet.

Claire stood paralyzed as the crying pounded in her ears and reverberated off the walls that closed in on her. The cries became momentarily muffled, as if someone were trying to smother them, before intensifying again and pressing down upon Claire. She could feel the tension of opposing forces, struggled to stay upright as the room spun around her. The caterwauling continued, incessant and demanding, bouncing off the walls and crashing into Claire in waves. “Stop ... this ... please,” she stammered between waves of nausea. “I ... I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Isn’t that enough?”

It wasn’t. The wailing continued unabated. Claire sobbed as the wallpaper began to stretch then recede, stretch then recede, as if a heart were trapped behind it, pressing against the embossed roses. Claire began to hyperventilate at the same rapid rate as the wall—when a bear-like growl pierced the air and the closet doors began to vibrate! Claire screamed and backed away, beads of glass cracking beneath her shoes. The closet doors trembled violently as if someone were shaking them, demanding to be let out. The crying was eerily distant now, as if the closet were a door that led to other, far off rooms, rooms that Claire knew didn’t exist. “What do you want from me?” she begged her tormentor. “I can’t bring you back.”

The closet didn’t answer. The crying simply became louder and more insistent again, like a colicky baby who remains inconsolable no matter how long you rock it. The child’s lament intensified until it filled every molecule of air in the room, until Claire could feel the tears filling her lungs, suffocating her. The doors were shaking violently, the hinges straining against the weight—then with an angry roar the doors flew open and an energy flooded the room that pushed Claire back and she fell, tripping over the sledgehammer and crashing down on her hip. She cried out as a sharp pain shot up through her spine and caused an explosion of fury within her!

She grabbed the sledgehammer and came up swinging, landing a heavy blow into the back of the closet. Bits of lathe and plaster sprayed out as she attacked the wall over and over and over again, tears of pain and anger mixing with the dust to form grey veins beneath her eyes. She lowered her head to shield her face from the flying debris—then stopped cold.

Two tiny eyes, frozen in time, peered out from between what appeared to be decaying strips of linen. Claire fell to her knees and feverishly began pulling away the wall with her bare hands, praying this were anything but what she imagined.

The crying had ceased. Claire, her hands raw and bleeding, pulled off the last bit of plaster. There was no mistaking it now. “Oh, God,” she sobbed, then pulled herself up onto unsteady legs and staggered toward the phone.

## THREE

Detective Dylan Lewis squatted down in front of the closet and stared at what appeared to be infant remains, then surveyed the room: wall debris and glass scattered about, the broken window, a large sledgehammer cast into the rubble. “Has anything been moved?”

“No sir,” one of the responding officers replied. “As soon as we ascertained the situation we contained the complainant in the living room and called you. She’s pretty shaken up but coherent.”

“I’ll need to talk to her. Keep her around and keep her calm. Anybody hear yet from Anil?”

“He’s on his way. Was at the obstetrician’s with the wife when we called. Hear she’s expecting their third. So a dead baby should really complete his day.”

Dylan shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d been working Homicide for five years now, seen things most people would lose their lunch over without ever tossing his, but a dead child always gnawed away at his insides. And he knew it was the same for Anil. Dylan had seen the pathologist walk out of a field carrying the decapitated head of an accident victim then take a sip of coffee, all without missing a beat, but a child on his slab turned Anil’s stomach into knots. For those who worked with the dead, for those whose job it was to apprehend criminals and comfort victims, emotional distance was a trick of the trade. There was a certain cynicism reserved for violence between adults but a child victim, especially a baby, changed all the rules: distance was impossible, cynicism unforgivable. A dead child encapsulated everything that was wrong with

the world, with the universe, with the idea of an omnipotent god. No one was in charge, it seemed, when something like this happened.

“Hey doc,” the attending officer greeted Anil.

“Hey. You the one that called it in?”

“Yeah. Lewis is inside,” the officer gestured over his shoulder. “There appears to be a baby in the wall.”

Dylan looked up as Dr. Sanjit Anil, his clothes covered by a forensics suit, entered the room and carefully walked over the rubble to squat down beside Lewis. At five foot eleven the two men were equals but whereas Sanjit was slender with delicate features, Dylan was stocky and sturdier. It was the same with their personalities. Sanjit carried himself with an elegance that belied the gruesomeness of his profession while Dylan’s composure said cop at first sight: purposeful, authoritative, intimidating. The men said nothing to each other, their relationship cemented by years working cases together; it was enough for Lewis to nod his head in the direction of the remains.

“Jesus,” Sanjit whistled between his teeth when he caught sight of the baby. “Mummified. That’s unusual.”

“Does it tell you anything?”

“Likely stillborn, I’d guess, then placed in the wall soon after. And probably in the heat of summer: the area would’ve had to be sufficiently hot and dry to allow for mummification. And there couldn’t have been insect or rodent activity until after mummification took place. Other than that, not much until we get it to the lab.”

“Why stillborn?”

“Babies are born without any bacteria in their gut and it’s intestinal bacteria that triggers decomp. Without it the process is delayed until external bacteria can penetrate the body. So if the climate is right mummification can take place before the bacteria have a chance to do their thing.”

“How long before you’ll know for certain?”

“A day for the autopsy, but then tox and trace will take another few days. DNA is backed up something awful but I’ll see what I can do. Dental’s our best bet: the baby’s teeth will tell us how long it lived, if at all.”

“How long’s it been in there, do you think?”

Sanjit shook his head. “No idea. I’ll call the university first thing in the morning, get the bones dated. It might take awhile, though.” Sanjit glanced over and saw the disappointment on Dylan’s face. “I’ll ask them to rush the results.”



Dylan nodded his appreciation and rose to leave. He pulled back the plastic that sealed off the doorway and signalled to the forensics team the room was theirs. “So, where’s the caller?” he asked the constable.

Claire was curled up on the couch, staring at the floor, a cup of tea held tightly between clenched fingers someone—she couldn’t remember who exactly—had been kind enough to treat with antibiotic cream and bandages. A policewoman sat beside her making small talk. Lewis signalled from the doorway and the officer walked over to give a whispered account. “She’s quite distraught. Just bought the house and moved in yesterday. Claims she was knocking out the wall for a kitchen renovation when she discovered the remains. Name’s Claire Dawson. Teaches grade six at Eastside.” The officer paused and raised a flirtatious eye at Dylan. “By the way, you going to Miller’s retirement party Friday?”

Dylan recognized the invitation and chose to ignore it: Becky Wilson was a good cop and a good woman but Dylan didn’t like to date within the force and he didn’t like redheads. “Nah,” he shrugged, “Miller’s a prick,” then pretended not to see the disappointment on Wilson’s face as he left her to join Claire at the couch. “Ms. Dawson?”

She looked up, her face a roadmap of confusion and despair. Her hair, mousy brown from the dust, fell in clumps around her face, diminishing her prominent cheekbones; and red circles had formed around feline eyes the colour of seafoam. Beneath the dust Dylan could see Claire’s face was well-proportioned, and she possessed a nose one might call regal if not for the smattering of freckles that reminded Dylan of Pippy Longstocking and made him nostalgic for a childhood when adults were, at their worst, clumsy fools easily outwitted by a precocious orphan. Dylan succeeded only partially to suppress a smile, an indiscretion he regretted immediately and which would later prove portentous. He straightened his mouth back into a grim line. “I’m Detective Dylan Lewis. Mind if I sit down? I’d like to ask you a few questions.” Claire nodded but her eyes fell away as he sat down beside her and opened up his notebook. “Can you give me your full name and date of birth, please?”

“Claire Cynthia Dawson. July 8th, 1981.” She kept her head lowered but raised her eyes over her teacup to watch him as he wrote down her details. He had clean, well-manicured hands and his fingers were long like a piano player’s. Claire followed the lines of his hands to his wrists where fine black hairs peaked out from behind the cuffs of his black leather car coat. Underneath he wore a crisp sky blue shirt, a navy striped tie, black

chinos and black leather shoes. His skin appeared lightly tanned, his hair jet black and cut short, and when he looked over at her again she noticed his eyes were so dark there was little distinction between iris and pupil. “Are you Native?” she asked impassively.

“Excuse me?” Dylan replied, his annoyance evident. What the hell did his heritage have to do with the situation? What the hell did it have to do with anything? No one was surprised that an East Indian was a pathologist, so why did everyone find it so damn interesting that a *Native* Indian was a cop?

“Your eyes, they’re almost black,” Claire explained, oblivious to his umbrage. “They remind me of the Native children I teach in East Van. They always have the darkest eyes.” Her voice trailed off as she wandered into the black depths believing, perhaps, that she might find in his eyes answers to the mystery that now preoccupied her, answers that would free her mind from the morass of questions that sucked into its stranglehold all other thoughts—including the realization that the silence and intensity of her gaze had shrouded the two strangers in an ambiguity that was unnerving Dylan: she had breached his defences, and that she’d done so without apparent intent or even, he suspected, conscious thought made her doubly dangerous. His muscles contracted involuntarily in a primal fight-or-flight response, and he responded by mentally pushing her back so he could regroup.

“Ms. Dawson,” he said, raising an eyebrow, “I understand this has been a traumatic discovery but I need you to stay focused.”

The strategy worked, wrenching Claire out of her reverie with an embarrassing snap. “I-I’m sorry. I’ll try to do better.” She found a spot on the floor and stared at it, a flush of crimson in her cheeks.

Dylan kicked himself. He needed to keep Dawson on his side, to gain her trust, and he was letting personal issues mar his technique. *Focus!* he ordered himself as he reassured Claire with a smile. “No offence taken,” he lied. “But perhaps we should stick to the matter at hand.” He shifted back to his practiced, professional tone. “I understand you were taking out the wall to renovate the kitchen when you found the remains?”

“Yes.”

“You hurt your hands,” he said gently, eyeing the bandages.

Claire glanced down at her damaged fingers. The image of her frantic hands clawing at the wall came flooding back and she struggled to contain her despair. She nodded: yes.

“Did you tear out the closet wall?”

She nodded again.

“I’ll have to ask you to provide fingerprints so we can separate you from possible suspects,” he said in the same gentle voice. “Are you okay with this?” It was a courtesy question, really, since Dylan had a warrant, but it was always best to create the illusion of cooperation.

“Yes, I understand.”

“I’ll have Officer Wilson attend to that later.” Dylan paused, then slyly shifted his approach. “I’m curious, why were you punching out the closet? It’s not on the shared wall.”

Dylan registered the startled look that swept across Claire’s eyes and the paling of her skin. “Oh, um, well …” Panic was paralyzing her tongue. What could she possibly say that wouldn’t sound insane? She opted instead for evasion, staring into her teacup in the hope he’d forget the question and move on.

He didn’t. “Ms. Dawson, there’s a dead baby in your wall.”

Claire scrambled for a plausible response. “There was a scratching noise. I thought maybe it was a rat’s nest. I overreacted.”

Dylan looked at her sharply. He’d been a cop long enough to know when he was being lied to but he couldn’t pinpoint a reason why she was holding back. After all, it was Dawson who’d called police, who opened the door to the investigation. He chose another avenue. “Who did you buy the house from?”

“Whom” thought Claire to herself, and almost corrected him before remembering she wasn’t talking to one of her students. The paralysis had ceased and she was able to look him in the eye again, his grammatical error having rendered him less threatening. It was petty, really, that an inconsequential error could make her feel stronger—a little superior even—and yet she didn’t want to lose that feeling, didn’t wish to cower again beneath his gaze. “It was a court ordered sale. Power of attorney or something like that. I never met the owners, or even the seller. Just their agent. He said his client was a lawyer. I can get the purchase agreement for you, if you like.”

“Where is it?”

“Upstairs.”

“I’ll need to accompany you, if you don’t mind.”

The request caught Claire off guard and she became acutely aware she was losing ground again. “Is that really necessary?” she asked,

uncomfortable. “My bedroom is upstairs.”

“I understand,” Dylan replied, and though his smile was meant to reassure she knew he was evaluating her. It was nothing more than a cop’s professional mistrust and yet she felt crushed under the weight of suspicion. The sensation was so intense she wasn’t even aware she had stopped breathing until Dylan glanced over her shoulder and hollered “Hey Wilson” and Claire’s breath returned with a gasp. The female officer appeared in the doorway. “Could you please accompany Ms. Dawson upstairs. She needs to retrieve a document.”

Claire smiled awkwardly at Officer Wilson as the two women headed upstairs. “I need to use the bathroom,” Claire said to what felt like her captor. “May I have my privacy or do you need to accompany me there, too?”

“Relax, Ms. Dawson, it’s just procedure. I’ll wait outside the door.”

Claire disappeared into the bathroom, sat down on the toilet and used the moment to collect herself. That Detective Lewis had, even fleetingly, considered her suspect rankled her: if he knew what she had suffered, if he saw her scarred body and wounded heart he would understand the crime he was investigating was beyond her comprehension, that she was incapable of anything so hideously inhuman. Did he know about her past? But even if he did, how could he equate carelessness with murder?! How could he be so quick to judge her?

She was shaking now, terrified to face him again yet knowing she had no choice. She flushed the toilet and washed her hands then splashed cold water on her face until she felt her calm return sufficiently, opened the bathroom door and addressed Wilson. “The document is over here,” Claire gestured toward the second bedroom where she had dumped all her office boxes. She grabbed the purchase agreement then the two women headed back downstairs. Wilson gave Lewis a surreptitious “nothing unusual” signal as she and Claire re-entered the living room then Wilson disappeared back into the kitchen.

“The seller was Benjamin Keller,” Claire read as she crossed back over to the couch. “The registered owners were Therese and Armin Keller.”

*Shit!* thought Dylan, hoping it wasn’t the Benjamin Keller he knew. “Was there anything in the property disclosure to indicate past renovations?”

“No,” Claire answered, handing the agreement to Dylan and picking up her teacup. “The house is in original condition. That’s why I was able to afford it.” She watched him intently as his dark eyes skimmed over the

purchase agreement and his slender fingers wrote down the particulars in his notebook. He was aware of her eyes on him but he didn't let on, reading through the document as if it might hold something of use beyond the names and addresses of the sellers. He knew it wouldn't, of course, but in the moments that elapsed he also knew Claire's anxiety was increasing again, ensuring he retained the upper hand he was certain he'd regained.

"Speaking of which, how does a single teacher afford her own home?" He asked the question as if he were simply curious, glancing up from the papers only briefly to register her reaction. In truth he *was* curious: he was always curious when single people bought property: had they resigned themselves to remaining that way? Houses were for families, in his book. A place to raise your kids, give them security and stability. Until he committed to that he'd never commit to a mortgage: he didn't see the point.

Claire's face paled at the question. That was twice now. "I bought it with the proceeds of a lawsuit," she replied, and in her voice Dylan detected a minute tremor, like the subtle shaking of the floor just before an earthquake hits. What was she hiding from him?

"May I ask the nature of the lawsuit?"

"I don't see how that's relevant," she replied cautiously, her fingers tightening around her teacup.

"*I* decide what's relevant, Ms. Dawson," Dylan snapped before he could catch himself. It was a substantial error: Claire's face was suddenly ablaze and she struggled to contain her indignation.

"I'm bound by a confidentiality agreement," she explained as evenly as she could manage, "so unless you get a court order I can't reveal the details."

"Fair enough," shrugged Dylan. And I just might do that, he added in his head.

"Do you have anything else for me, detective?" Claire asked, still clearly irritated.

"Not at the moment. But I may have to question you again as the investigation proceeds. I'd appreciate it if you stayed in town or provided me with notice if you go away." The moment he spoke Dylan regretted his tone: he'd been aiming for respectfully authoritative but what came out was surly and imperious.

Claire felt the hackles on her neck stand. "Fine," she lobbied back. "And how much longer will your investigators be in my house?"

"Until they're done," came the brusque reply. "It would be best if you stayed elsewhere tonight. Is there someone you can call?"

The question knocked the hauteur out of Claire. She looked stunned, as if she'd been slapped. She stared at the floor and bit her lip as the ground swallowed her whole. When she finally spoke again her voice was small and quiet. "No one I wish to impose upon."

Dylan's brow furrowed. The woman was all over the map; he couldn't keep up. One minute she was testing his patience and the next she was like an injured child he wanted to shield from harm. She had him off-kilter, shy of his game. And he didn't like it one bit. But what to do with her? He had the authority to kick her out of the house until Forensics were finished but he didn't want to create an adversary, especially so early in the game: he might need her later. And he had already antagonized her; any more and he might lose a potential asset. Dylan sized her up, calculated the risk and decided it would be advantageous not to burn any more bridges. Still, he would need to set firm boundaries. "I can allow you to stay here," he said with counterfeit contrition, "as long as you provide me with assurances you will not interfere with my team or attempt entry into the back room until I've released the scene." Claire nodded her agreement without looking at him. "And I need a number where you can be reached."

Her voice still a whisper, Claire gave him the number to the house and her cellphone. Finished for now, Dylan rose to leave. He called out again for Officer Wilson, who appeared so quickly Dylan wondered if she'd been lurking behind the doorway. "I need you to fingerprint Ms. Dawson for a comparison set and help her write up an official statement. And she'll require company until Forensics are done." Wilson nodded and Dylan turned his attention back to Claire. "Ms. Dawson?" Claire looked up and he saw in her eyes a sorrow he hadn't expected and which made him swallow his words. "We'll talk again," was all he managed to say. She nodded and went back to staring at the floor. Dylan felt like a bully.

He almost made it outside before a sense of shame stopped him just shy of the front door. He turned his head to face Claire. "I'm half," he offered, by way of apology.

She looked up, puzzled. "Half what?"

"Half Native," he admitted with a conciliatory gesture. "I'm half Native."

Claire smiled. "What's the other half?"

Dylan shrugged, "Dunno," then walked out the door.

Dylan got into his unmarked cruiser, put the key in the ignition then changed his mind. He leaned back in his seat, rested his elbow on the door

and began an internal review. How could that have gone so awkwardly awry? He was trained to stay even-tempered, to keep his emotions in check, and yet the woman had managed to crawl under his skin without even trying, had upset his equilibrium and left him scrambling to maintain his artfully crafted composure. He felt outwitted, trumped. And it was pissing him off.

He tried to cast off the shackles of discomfort by forcing a shift in thought to more practical issues. The baby in the wall wasn't Dawson's—both experience and gut instinct told him so—and yet he couldn't officially rule that out until any connection between her and the previous owners had been disproved. And she was definitely hiding something.

But then aren't we all? he contemplated next. He hadn't lied when he said he didn't know his father's heritage but he did know his father had been white. White and drunk. His mother had been drunk, too, when Dylan had been conceived, had sobered up only long enough to have him before abandoning him to his grandmother. He'd been lucky in that respect, though, and he knew it: his *ta'ah* was a strong, proud and affectionate woman who raised him to respect himself, his elders, and the world around him. She never tired of telling him he could be whatever he wanted to be, never judged his dreams or squashed his imagination, not even when he was five and announced he wanted to grow up to be an eagle. Ta'ah had just smiled and said chances are he already was one, he just didn't know it yet.

Dylan smiled at the memory then made a promise to himself to visit her on Sunday, maybe take her out for lunch after church. That was another thing about his *ta'ah*: she was a woman who deeply loved the Creator. Her faith was an odd mix of Catholicism and traditional Coast Salish spirituality; and when he'd asked Ta'ah how could she still attend church after the horror of residential school, she had simply shrugged and said she thought Jesus would've made a good Indian.

Dylan started the car and headed for the station. He'd get his preliminary report written then head home. Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

## FOUR

On the outskirts of a forest, at the edge of a river, a lioness gazed upon her reflection in the water but saw only a common domesticated tabby. The image troubled her for she recalled having been born a lioness, yet clearly the river did not lie. “You seem confused, my Lady,” mused a large female bear as it ambled over to the riverbank and sat down beside the feline.

“What do you see, Bear, there, in the water?” asked the lioness.

“I see a lioness who thinks she’s a cat,” replied Bear.

“Hmmm, yes,” murmured the lioness. “Most curious, don’t you think?”

“Not curious,” shrugged Bear. “Unfortunate. Your power, your pride: these were your birthright. You should reclaim them.”

“But how does one reclaim what the king has taken?”

“The king’s authority is not absolute,” pronounced Bear. “And conditional love is not love.”

“I was expected to do better,” the lioness said sadly. “I failed. Should there not be a price for my shortcomings?”

“Perhaps it is the king who suffers shortcomings,” Bear said dismissively.

The lioness laughed lightly. “I envy your certainty, my friend.”

“Reclaim your power, my Lady. You will need it.” And with that Bear took her leave of the lioness. And Claire awoke from her dream.

Most curious, was her first semi-conscious thought, but the dream was quickly lost as the events of the night before slipped stealthily into her consciousness and pushed aside all images except those of the baby. In its mummified state it had looked almost simian, its skin blackened



and shrunken tautly over its skull. From her perch on the sofa Claire had watched as the small body bag was carried out to the waiting van, and hours later, when the door had closed behind the last of the officers, Claire had sat in the dining room on the dusty pine chair and finally let flow the tears she had fearfully kept in check.

She glanced down at her bandaged fingers, the black ink on their tips still evident despite her best efforts with a fresh lemon and vigorous scrubbing. The act of being fingerprinted had felt invasive, the air thick with imagined accusation made all the more pervasive by Officer Wilson's barely concealed irritation, which Claire, not having witnessed the awkward exchange earlier between Wilson and Lewis, had interpreted as suspicion and contempt. The repressive atmosphere had made Claire nervous, and she had strained to hear the chatter of the police over the din of the television she'd pretended to watch, terrified they would find evidence of the guilt she carried about her person and believe it relevant to the case.

But now, as the morning light banished the shadows that had given form to her fears, the trauma of finding the baby was yielding to a curiosity that perplexed Claire: she felt oddly detached, and she wondered if her distance were a coping mechanism or something more disturbing, like relief. Relief that this hadn't been all in her mind; that she wasn't descending into madness or even over-imagination. That her house was haunted seemed strangely concrete, not preposterous as a sceptic would insist but a rational explanation, though one which now raised its own disturbing questions: Why now? Why Claire? Was there a relationship between her dead child and this one, some cosmic connection Claire didn't yet understand? Or was the relationship illusory, merely the kind of synchronicity that beguiles the gullible into seeing patterns in the universe where none exist?

And yet the former owners had lived here for decades, Claire reminded herself as she rolled out of bed and headed for the bathroom; surely they wouldn't have stayed had they suffered the same haunting on a daily basis. So then now what? What more did the spirit expect beyond discovery? What if it returned, demanding more?

And there had been something else in that room, something sinister. It had tried to maim Claire, had tried to smother the child's cries. What if it came back, too? The thought made the hair on Claire's arms rise, and her first instinct was to call back the movers and run; but something else was rising in her too, an unexpected fortitude that rapidly swelled while she scrubbed her hair and face, and by the time she rinsed out the last of

her toothpaste she was in a fighting spirit: something had tried to harm her and something had caused a child to suffer, and damn it if Claire were not going to get to the bottom of both offenses!

But how? And where to begin?

*Reclaim your power.* What? thought Claire, and then fragments of her dream came floating back: a lioness gazing into the river, a bear, a conversation about ... what was it again?

Lost in thought, Claire tromped down the stairs only to be surprised by the smell of fresh coffee and cinnamon. Puzzled, she followed her nose to the living room and found a plump, grey-haired woman transferring a coffee pot and a Bundt cake from a tray to Claire's small pine table.

"Hello?" Claire asked.

The elderly woman spun around and clutched at her chest. "Oh, dear, you startled me," she gasped. Her accent was German, faded but still noticeable. She was wearing a lace-collared floral print dress, gathered at the waist, and flat, thick leather sandals over sagging stockings. Her face, wrinkled with age and framed by wispy grey hair pinned back in a bun, was bright and gentle.

Claire figured the surprise should be the other way around. "Who are you and what are you doing in my house?" she asked, polite but confused.

The woman chuckled and nodded earnestly. She struck Claire as the animated type, the kind who spoke with the grand gestures and exaggerated expressions of one who believes all of life is entitled to the exuberance of a thespian. "Of course, forgive me. I thought you might appreciate some sustenance after all the excitement of last night. I knocked on the back door but you mustn't have heard. It was unlocked so I thought I would just leave this for you with a note. Though I'd think you'd be more careful after a break-in."

"Break-in?"

"Yes, the police, they came and asked me questions. I asked them if the house had been burgled and they said"—she paused and raised a finger to pursed lips—"well, actually they didn't say anything, now that I think about it. But you really should lock your door."

"Thank you but who are you?"

"Oh, forgive me again," she said, clasping her hands together. "Yes, yes, of course you wouldn't remember me from a passing wave. I'm Frau Müller. I live next door."

The image of the elderly woman glancing up from her flowerbeds and

waving as Claire had walked past with the home inspector came back to her. “Oh, yes, I remember now. You were gardening.”

Frau Müller nodded enthusiastically. “Getting my spring bulbs in. A bit late this year, I’m afraid. My arthritis was acting up.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before Claire remembered her manners, and sensed a possible opportunity. “I’m sorry. Would you like to join me for some of your cake and coffee? They both smell wonderful.”

Frau Müller’s face lit up at the invitation. She’d been hoping for just that: it’s not often one sees so many police cars and men in funny white suits poking about and loading heavy black bags into a van. Her weekly ladies’ Rumoli game had been abandoned for the window and they were all expecting an update at bridge on Friday. What would they think of her if she attended empty-handed?

Claire rummaged about in a box and pulled out two dessert plates and forks, coffee mugs, and a knife. “Would you like cream? I have some in the fridge. Sugar might be a tad more difficult. I haven’t unpacked all my staples yet.”

“Don’t fret. Black is fine for me.” Frau Müller cut two large slices of Bundt cake as Claire poured the coffee and set the cups down on the table.

“How long have you lived next door?” she asked, settling into a chair.

“Oh, a very long time. Since 1939. My parents fled Hitler’s Germany. We were liberals, and,” she added weightily, “we were Jews. In 1950 I became engaged and my parents gave me the house as a gift. They moved nearer to the university. My father was a professor.”

Claire perked up. If Frau Müller has been living next door for seventy years she must know almost everything about this house. Maybe even something about the baby. “What can you tell me about this house?” Claire asked, managing to conceal her anticipation. “I’d love to know its history.”

“Oh, let me see now. It was built in the early thirties, if I remember correctly. I was told there was a smaller house before, a shack really, and the owners tore it down when they started to do well. They were also German. Everybody stuck together in those days, Germans in these few blocks, Ukrainians over there, Russians a few blocks north. It wasn’t until after the war that the Italians took over.”

“The original owners, then, was that the Kellers?”

“No, that was the Zimmermanns. The Kellers moved in the year before I got married. Came after the war. Elsi and Franz Keller and their two boys, Armin and Randolph. Armin was the eldest, at twenty-two. Randolph was a

year or two younger. They were only here for a few years when Armin got married. He bought the house from his parents. I don't know where they and Randolph went. Our two families didn't talk much." Her face puckered as if she'd bitten into a lemon. "Armin had been a member of *Hitler-Jugend*, the youth wing of the party."

"Did Armin have any children?"

"Two. A boy and then a girl. The boy was the reason for the marriage, though it wasn't polite to talk about that in those days. Karl was born about five months after the wedding. Elisabeth came a few years later. Such a beautiful little girl. So different from her mother. At least at the beginning."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh," Frau Müller replied, lowering her voice and leaning across the table as if someone might be listening, "Therese was such a *Mauerblümchen*—"

"A what?"

"A wallflower. She always looked like she wanted to disappear. There was a brief period when I thought I should at least try to be friends but any time I said hello she would just tuck her head down and keep walking."

"And Elisabeth?"

"Oh, Elisabeth," Frau Müller sat back up and smiled, "she was such a charmer." The image of the little girl, her brown hair falling about her smiling face as she turned cartwheels on the grass, filled the elderly woman's memory. "So full of life and energy. She had a cousin—Benjamin was his name—they were about the same age and they would play for hours in the garden together, always laughing. So much laughter. I used to give them apples from my tree." Frau Müller paused, the smile fading from her lips. "It was so sad what happened to her." She shook her head and sipped her coffee.

Claire's curiosity piqued. "What happened?"

"She went crazy. I think the family was touched that way. Therese certainly wasn't right." Frau Müller feigned discomfort. "I don't wish to disparage them; it's just the truth."

"Of course," Claire said reassuringly. "When was this?"

"Well now, Elisabeth must have been about thirteen, I guess, when things went wrong." The sparkle of anticipation in Claire's eyes made Frau Müller smile inside: she loved a captive audience. She intentionally took a sip of her coffee to create more drama before continuing. "They had to take her out of school: she was becoming disruptive. Poor thing. Benjamin

stopped coming to the house to play. The whole family stopped visiting, actually. Elisabeth never left the house again. Not until Armin had his stroke.”

The wheels in Claire’s head were turning. Was it possible Therese had had another baby, one she didn’t want, one that also “wasn’t right”? “Did Therese ever have any more children?” Claire asked.

“No, just the two.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“Yes. Why?” Claire saw the expectant look in Frau Müller’s eyes, knew she was hungry for some reciprocation, a little insider information about the “excitement of last night,” the mention of which had not passed by Claire. She paused, debating in her head whether to tell Frau Müller about the infant remains, then concluded it would only be a matter of time before it reached the media, so why not?

“Last night I found the remains of a baby in the wall of the dining room.” Frau Müller gasped and clutched at her chest. “Are you sure you never saw Therese pregnant again?”

Frau Müller nodded. “Yes, but I suppose I *could* have missed something.” Her face was flushed with shock but it was shock tempered with a good dose of excitement. She couldn’t wait for Friday’s bridge game.

And Claire couldn’t wait to talk to Detective Lewis again.



Dylan was contemplating a late lunch. He’d had a productive day so far but now he was on hold, waiting to hear from Anil and the university’s Department of Forensic Anthropology. Anil had done as promised and by nine a.m. a section of the baby’s femur was in an accelerator mass spectrometer. He’d already determined sex—a girl—but age was the domain of the forensic dental specialist and the man for the job was at a conference in Boston until Monday. There would be a DNA profile in a week but until Dylan found a relative to match it to the profile wouldn’t be much help in identifying the remains. As for cause of death, Anil wouldn’t even be able to guess until later in the day.

Dylan hated this part of investigating, this lull between questions and answers. He wasn’t a particularly patient man, a fact obscured by what

appeared to be a precise and methodical approach to solving whatever mystery was presented to him. He considered all angles, contemplated all motives, and even when he'd ruled out a possibility he kept his mind open to the unexpected twist that sometimes sprang from nowhere to land a swift uppercot to the jaw. Those were especially painful: the ones he didn't see coming just when he thought he had it all figured out.

Dylan drummed his fingers on his desk and glanced over the property search he had procured first thing that morning. Prior to Dawson the house had had only three owners, the Zimmermanns and then two generations of Kellers. This certainly narrowed the search for possible perpetrators or at least accomplices after the fact, assuming the house or its rooms had never been rented out. Dylan prayed this was the case: up until the war Commercial Drive had been a hub for migrant workers and if that house had known any of them it could make identifying Baby Jane essentially impossible. On the upside, Dylan considered, all the Zimmermanns who had lived there were deceased, as were Elsi and Franz Keller, so that narrowed the list a little bit more, though if the remains dated that far back Dylan would likely have nothing but dead suspects and a lot of unanswered questions.

The younger Kellers were a more interesting lot. Randolph was charming widows in a retirement community in Orlando. Therese and Armin were both in assisted living facilities, but not the same one Dylan had noted with curiosity, while daughter Elisabeth was in Bellevue Home for Psychiatric Care. Karl was dead: Bosnia, 1993. Then there was Benjamin Keller, star criminal defence attorney. Dylan bristled. He'd probably need a warrant just to *talk* to Ben. No, Dylan would start with the old folks first, he calculated, maybe get lucky and get some info before Benjamin got wind of the situation. The daughter was another story: Dylan would have to dance around hospital staff for her, and then it all depended on just how nuts she was.

As for Dawson, so far Dylan couldn't see any connection between her and the Kellers beyond buying their house. She hadn't even lived in Vancouver until four years ago when she'd left substitute teaching in Calgary for a part-time position at the private Eaton Academy over in Shaughnessy. She now taught full-time at the inner city Eastside Elementary—a demotion despite the pay raise, Dylan thought with a cynical chuckle. She was popular with the children, a “dynamic educator who inspired her students to dream big” the principal of Eastside proclaimed; they'd been fortunate

to find her. Dylan had run Dawson's name through all the crime databases but none had spit out anything more interesting than a minor speeding ticket, which had been promptly paid he'd noted with a snort. His contact in Calgary had nothing to add on her. The only blotch on an otherwise immaculate sheet seemed to be "a personal indiscretion which had resolved itself" the headmaster at Eaton had volunteered before thinking otherwise and refusing to elaborate, citing privacy concerns.

Dylan put the property search aside and picked up the preliminary forensics report, hoping by some miracle something new had been added in the ten minutes since he last looked at it. There hadn't, of course, and so he dwelled instead on the one bit of good news the report contained: no evidence of further victims in the Dawson home or its grounds had been found: a cadaver dog had scoured the house from the attic eaves to the darkest recesses of the crawl space without pause, and the garden had yielded up nothing more than a few old chicken bones. So if Baby Jane had been murdered—and Dylan didn't know yet if she had—at least it seemed unlikely her death had been at the hands of a serial killer.

Dylan's musings were interrupted by the phone. He snapped up the receiver, hopeful for test results, and was disappointed when he heard the voice of the front desk clerk. "Detective Lewis, there's a Claire Dawson here to see you." There was a momentary pause for effect before she added, "She says it's about last night."

Dylan rolled his eyes at the accusation in the clerk's voice. Stupid old bat assumed this was a personal visit and was, as usual, jumping to conclusions. She was a constant irritation to everyone in the department but that didn't seem to be sufficient grounds for dismissal. There were some, Dylan knew, who secretly counted the days until her retirement, and when she'd had emergency gallbladder surgery last spring there had been a private betting pool on her prognosis. Dylan had put a fiver on fatal septicaemia.

"Tell her I'll be right down."

His mood soured by the clerk, Dylan found himself anticipating further irritation as the elevator descended to the main floor. The last thing he needed was Dawson poking her nose in his investigation so unless she had something pertinent to tell him this was going to be a short visit.

He found Claire pacing in the lobby under the accusing eye of the desk clerk. "Ms. Dawson?"

She turned around to face him and Dylan felt a rush of air hit his



lungs like the sticky, portentous wind that heralds a storm. Her beauty was seductive in its simplicity: eyes that in the greyed light of trauma had been the colour of seafoam were a striking peridot in the sun; and her face, all dewy skin and rosé lips, was framed by cinnamon-sprinkled chestnut hair that shimmered and tumbled down onto the shoulders of a crisp white shirt opened to her breasts. His gaze fell to her cleavage then followed the lines of her body down, past the waist of low-rise jeans to curved hips and shapely legs until it came to rest on unpainted toenails that peeked out from a pair of strappy flats Dylan judged to be expensive. His eyes longed to make a slow assent but he corrected himself and quickly raised them to her face, which to their shared embarrassment had flushed beneath his unabashed inspection.

Claire swallowed nervously. “Detective Lewis, I’m sorry to come unannounced like this. You didn’t leave me a number and I have some new information I thought you might find useful.”

“Have a seat.” Dylan gestured to the nearby deck of chairs and watched her as she moved ahead of him. Her hips swayed tantalizingly and the temptation to flirt caught him before he could smother it. “Where were you when I was in school? I would have paid more attention to Hemingway.” Claire smiled uneasily as she sank into a chair, and Dylan immediately regretted his aloofness. “Sorry.” He paused to underscore the sincerity of his apology, then pulled out his notebook. “You said you have new information?”

The question offered a hasty exit from the awkwardness that had developed between them, and Claire launched into a spirited recounting of her conversation with Frau Müller, eager to be helpful. Her information was nothing new, however: the canvass team had already blanketed the neighbourhood and the whole of the morning had been spent confirming facts and tossing out fictions. Still, Dylan didn’t have the heart to tell Claire he was way ahead of her: he was enjoying the sparkle in her eyes and the way her breasts bulged slightly upwards when she clasped her hands in front of her for emphasis. So much so he was a little saddened when she reached her conclusion. “So you think Therese Keller had an unwanted child,” Dylan said, more a statement than a question.

“It’s a possibility, don’t you think?”

“Anything’s a possibility at this stage,” Dylan shrugged, putting his notebook away.

“But it should be easy enough to prove,” Claire replied with a wave of



her hand. “You just get Therese’s DNA and compare it to the child’s.”

Dylan smiled privately at Claire’s naïveté. “I wish it were that simple, Ms. Dawson. Unfortunately, I have to show a direct link between Therese and the baby before I can get a DNA warrant, and at this point we don’t even have a timeframe for the remains. Also, Therese was neither the only female occupant of the home nor its only owner. I don’t have grounds yet for a warrant.”

“Why do you need a warrant? Can’t you just take DNA off her juice box or something? You see it all the time on television.”

This time the smile was public. Such misconceptions usually annoyed Dylan but in Claire Dawson he found them endearing. Had he paused to ask himself why he might have inwardly acknowledged the unflattering fact that his libido was making allowances for her, his tolerance exchanged for the opportunity to educate her, to appear erudite in her eyes. But he didn’t ask, he simply indulged, leaning inward just a little when he answered her. “Well, yes, that’s true. It’s called castaway. But the police can only collect castaway in places where there isn’t an expectation of privacy. Therese Keller is in a private hospital, which might be construed by the courts as no different than if she were in her own home. And she’s mentally incompetent so I can’t get a voluntary sample. I have to tread carefully here. As much as it might frustrate me to operate within the boundaries of the law, I have no choice if I want to secure a conviction. And it’s also important not to get ahead of oneself. It’s possible this may not even be a homicide.”

“But even if it isn’t a homicide, don’t you want to *know* what happened to it?” Claire asked, her eyes suddenly ablaze. “Don’t you care to give it a *name*?” She regretted the question even before she asked it but the words spilled forth anyway, unfettered and raw, the implied accusation hanging heavily in the silence that followed.

“It is a she, Ms. Dawson,” Dylan declared, rising to leave, “but thank you for your information. It’s interesting and may prove useful.”

Claire felt a crimson flush in her cheeks. She kept her eyes on his face but struggled to hold his gaze, for it seemed as if he were growing taller or she smaller; and so she quickly rose in the hope of regaining some semblance of equality and salvaging what was left of her good intentions. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

Dylan’s cellphone rang. Saved by the bell, he thought as he fished the phone out of his pocket. He glanced at the text message from Anil: *Prelims*

*in. Bad news.* Dylan tensed, and his annoyance at Claire's insult was pushed aside by expedience: he had bigger worries now. "I'm sorry, Ms. Dawson, but I have to address this. I appreciate you coming in. And please don't hesitate to call if you have anything further." He pulled out a card from his breast pocket. "This has my direct line and cellphone numbers."

Flustered by the abrupt dismissal, Claire nervously smoothed back her hair behind one ear. "Of course. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"It was no bother," Dylan smiled, but the smile was tense. He held out his hand.

Claire shook his hand then raised her own to her chin. "There's just, um, one other thing."

"Yes?" he replied, impatient to move on to Anil.

"Shortly after I started at Eastside, a woman—a prostitute actually—died on the school steps one day. The children were traumatized and so a Native medicine man came in and cleansed the school. It seemed to work. The whole atmosphere changed for the better. I was thinking," she paused, anxious, "I was thinking it might be good to have my house cleansed the same way. I was hoping that since you're Native—"

"Half Native," he corrected her.

"Since you're half Native that you might know someone."

"I'm sorry, I don't," Dylan lied. "Have you thought to call your colleagues?"

Claire nodded. "I called this morning. The medicine man, he died six months ago and they don't know of anyone else."

"I'm sorry, I can't help you there."

Claire smiled but her disappointment was evident. "Right. Well, um, thank you anyway." She turned to walk away when an inexplicable urge made her stop. "Detective," she asked over her shoulder, "do you believe in ghosts?"

"Excuse me?"

"It wasn't a rat's nest. I heard the baby crying." She said this matter-of-factly, in a voice not entirely her own, and the confession caught them both by surprise. Her expression read shock then confusion, then she turned her face away and fled the station.

Through the lobby windows Dylan watched Claire sprint furtively up the street, then he dialled Anil. "Hey, it's me," Dylan said into the phone, too distracted by Claire's admission to pay attention to his tone. "Tell me something useful."

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” Sanjit answered with obvious sarcasm. “Been here since six dissecting a baby so I’m a bit wiped. And you?”

Dylan winced under the weight of the reproach. “Jesus, Sanjit” was all Dylan managed to say before Anil cut him short: “My first guess was wrong. The baby was full-term and born alive, at least in theory: lung floated, liver sank. Mind you, won’t stop a good defence attorney claiming she was stillborn and there was an attempt to resuscitate but at least you’ll have reasonable doubt.”

“Anything on race?” Dylan asked, hoping for more.

“Caucasian, brown hair and green eyes. That’s useful: the combination is statistically small. Most often found in North America in those of Icelandic or Germanic descent.”

“Age?”

“Can’t tell for certain without dental. There’s no fat left on the body to give us an accurate weight but I can tell you the length: 19.5 inches. Statistically that puts her between newborn and one month old.”

Dylan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Cause of death?”

“So far indeterminate. Tox and trace will tell me more. But there’s no obvious physical trauma to the body, no hematomas or broken bones. Spinal cord and brain are intact. Babies are difficult, Dylan, you know that. All it takes is a light pillow over the face and even the gods couldn’t prove murder, assuming it was murder. You might have to settle for concealment.”

“Fuck that. A baby in the wall deserves more than two years.”

“I hear ya,” Anil agreed, then paused. “There’s something else.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s off the record.”

“Go on.”

“Was having a chat with a friend over breakfast. Emergency room doc. Your homeowner was brought in about seven months ago hallucinating about a dead baby. Doc remembered her because she was ranting about a married colleague in cardiology. The guy claimed she was some nut job who’d been stalking him.”

Dylan’s head shot up. He bolted outside the entrance and surveyed the street but Claire was long gone. “Shit!” he muttered into the phone.

“I know. And you didn’t hear it from me,” Anil said, then hung up the phone.