



SNAKE RIVER

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Snake River Sample Chapters

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Foreword

This is a free sample of my debut novel Snake River. It includes chapters 1 through 6 where we are introduced to two of the main characters, several secondary characters, and it sets up the mystery that unfolds throughout the novel. The book is a paranormal noir detective mystery inspired by The X-Files, Twin Peaks, and True Detective, set in the Canadian Maritimes, full of Canadian ideas, themes, and culture.

I hope you enjoy these first six chapters. If you want to purchase a copy of the full novel, Snake River is available on Amazon in Kindle, paperback, and hardcover formats.

The Body

On a cool October morning the day after Thanksgiving 1995 in the small maritime town of Abalone Falls, a jogger ran the highland forest trail. Light fog settled among the trees and the air was fresh with the sea as he weaved around large rocks and over gnarled roots, heart thumping and lungs pumping. For a moment he stopped at a cliffside overlook viewing the vast Atlantic. No matter how many times he stopped there it always inspired. Sweat cooled on the back of his neck and his pulse began to settle. He was about to set off again when a mysterious white shape on the rocks below caught his eye. He didn't know what it was, but it somehow seemed familiar.

He found a steep trail down to the shore and rock shards spilled beneath his feet as he descended the cliffside. When he approached the crumpled white mass on the stony shore it filled him with dread. It didn't move or make a sound. A startled seagull took flight as he came close and saw it— short black hair swept over and slicked with rain, an exposed hand on the rocks with curled fingers, and the battered face of a native teenage boy.

30 minutes later three RCMP officers in windbreakers and rain boots arrived on a boat and breached the rocky shore. A rushing waterfall cascaded down the cliffside into a small pool draining into the sea and it buffeted them with waves of mist and white noise. Superintendent Bill Mackenzie stepped off the boat first, carefully holding onto the railing as he lowered himself into the shallows with a splash and lumbered toward the shore, watching his step. He had gained stiff ankles in his old age, no need to rush. The body lay there, no more than 20 metres away and clothed in what looked like white pajamas.

“Benjamin Lawrence?” He threw his voice across the shoals and over the sound of the waterfall. He knew the runner from town as the owner of the only photo-finishing lab.

The pale, skinny man stepped forward with arms crossed over his chest as the three officers traversed the shin-deep water. “I haven’t touched him. I just had to get close to see for sure... I couldn’t believe it,” he said.

One of the officers had a camera and started sizing up the scene calculating how to compose his shots. He looked thoughtful and intelligent and had a moustache that drooped like a lazy caterpillar. The other looked younger and wore a naive face which wilted when he saw the dead body face down on the rocks. With a notepad in hand, he pulled a pen from his breast pocket and clicked the top.

“We arrived as soon as we could,” Bill said and turned to his men. “Hopkins, do your thing, and make sure you don’t touch anything.”

“Of course, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me sir. Just Bill is fine.”

Being called sir reminded him of his age, and he felt the ravages of time. His neck ached on cool, damp mornings like

this, and the wrinkles spreading from the corners of his eyes seemed to grow deeper and longer each week. In his youth he'd had a thick shock of dark hair, but that had turned to salt and pepper and lately he had taken to wearing a Stetson like the cowboys and lawmen in the westerns of old that he liked to watch. He was glad to be wearing it now below the grey skies threatening rain.

"I'll need you to tell us how you found him," he said. "Give your statement to Constable Daniels. Tell him everything and spare no details."

While the rookie constable conducted the interview Bill examined the body and Hopkins photographically documented the scene. The boy's feet were bare and caked with mud and there were no broken or fractured bones which he could see. The white pajamas he wore looked like rough linen and they were stained with dirt and blood. He lay face down. His head was cocked to the left and twisted into a grotesque position. All Bill could see of his face was straight black hair and the light brown tone of his cheek. He must have fallen down the slope, and by the awkward way his head was turned, broke his neck in the fall, but why the white linens? Bill looked at the rushing waterfall and then over to the steep rocky slope as if to identify something he wasn't seeing.

He had never investigated a murder in Abalone Falls, a full 22 years of service, and he'd thought his final years on the force would continue to be quiet and easy in the place he'd grown to call home over the years. The picturesque serenity of the town had drawn him from his Halifax origins and comforted him with the decision that it was where he would spend the rest of his days. He'd raised his two daughters here, and his wife had been a nurse at the Abalone Falls General Hospital for two

decades until finally settling into an early retirement which he was secretly jealous of. He saw 60 on the horizon and everyday reached towards the dawn where he reclined in the pleasant safety of the life he'd built in this idyllic place, free to roam the fields and forests on horseback and to practice carpentry in his home workshop. It all seemed so far away now.

Hopkins snapped his camera from every angle around the body, the flash igniting the area with white light. He consumed two rolls of film and loaded a third, then stroked his moustache considering the body for a moment. "We need to roll him over."

"Put your gloves on," Bill said and they both snapped on a pair of blue latex gloves.

They crouched down and turned the body onto its back and its lifeless limbs flopped like noodles as it rolled. Bill heard a gasp and looked over to see Benjamin with a hand over his mouth, trying to avert his eyes but unable to look away. Hopkins grunted and took a moment to collect himself and Daniels' jaw dropped then closed as a wave of nausea passed through him. Bill maintained no expression but the same frown he always wore because it allowed him to contain his growing disgust and anger. Taking his example, Hopkins steeled his nerves, raised the camera again and snapped more photos.

A deep contusion six inches long oozed dark blood on the boy's forehead, his bangs matted and sticking to his face. The wound exposed part of the skull which Bill suspected the coroner would find was fractured. The eyes were half-closed, empty and cloudy. Bill was certain that the boy was native and likely from Snake River, the nearby Mi'kmaq reserve, but that was 30 km away, an awfully long way to wander in your bedclothes. Across his chin there was another dark smear.

"What's this blood on his chin there?" Bill pointed out.

"Maybe he bit his lip in the fall," said Hopkins.

"Maybe..." He couldn't make anything else out of it, but maybe forensics could.

He felt as though he were in a thick fog as he looked down at the boy's bloodied face and clouded eyes. The kid looked about 14 years old if Bill had to guess and had a stout, heavysset build, the type who could make a good goaltender. His face was round, cheeks puffed, and mouth hung open showing crooked bottom teeth. The bloody gash on his forehead may have been the killing blow. Looking down to the extremities, Bill noticed abrasions around the wrists indicating he had been bound. If he had been bound, he was taken against his will. Still what irked him the most was the white linen, not at all what a kid would wear. The whole picture gave him a cold tingle in his shoulders that made him twitch.

Daniels approached with a notepad in hand. "I got all I can out of him. He really doesn't know anything about what happened here. All right to send him off?"

"I'll have a word with him first," Bill said and walked over to the runner. "Thanks for waiting, Ben. Your statement's important. Before I let you go I have to warn you not to tell anyone about this. We don't want word going around town. Whoever did this is still out there and we can't have him knowing we're looking for him. That could put us at a disadvantage. Understand?"

The runner nodded and looked down. "I do," he mumbled. "Can't I even tell my wife? How am I supposed to keep this a secret?"

"I don't care how you do it, just don't say anything. Got it?"

"Sure. Yes. I just wish I could forget... What do you think happened?"

Bill looked at the body and frowned. "We're not sure yet. If you remember any important details that might help us, call us right away. Do you need any help getting back? We can take you on the boat if you need a ride. This is a remote spot."

"No, that's all right, thanks. I parked my car in the highland lot. I do this every week."

"You take care then," Bill said and the runner ascended back up the steep hillside to the coastal trail and went home. A damp breeze made Bill's neck shiver and he ruffled his broad shoulders. Gloomy rain clouds filled the sky and cold mist wafted from the waterfall.

"I think that'll do it." Hopkins cranked the film reel in his camera.

"All right, let's bag him and get him onto the boat."

Hopkins retrieved the stretcher from the boat and Daniels helped Bill lift the body up and onto the stretcher and zipped it shut.

Bill saw the mortified sadness and horror on Daniels' face. "This your first time seeing a body?"

"Yes," he said. "How can you ever get used to this?"

"You don't. You just find a way to deal with it. And if it didn't bother you, I'd say there's something wrong with you."

Bill opened the side panel on the boat's starboard gunwale and Daniels and Hopkins carried the stretcher across the rocky shoals and slid it through the opening. They all climbed aboard as a light drizzle began to fall and Daniels fired up the engine, setting off on a course for the marina following the coastline where maples, oaks, and willows coloured the forest with the red, yellow, and orange palette of autumn. Bill watched the scenery pass as the roar of the engine filled his ears and they came to the town. As they coasted along the seaside promenade

the town stretched out before them with its wooden houses painted blue, yellow, or red and the yacht club filled with sailboats and motorboats and the wharf where the Seaspray Fishery crews worked the day with stacks of lobster traps and clam barrels all around. It looked like this season had brought another bountiful harvest.

It all looked so serene but Bill had a rotten feeling festering inside. The small RCMP branch he was proud to lead had limited resources and his officers were untested and inexperienced. None of the men under his command had ever investigated a murder, and he hadn't handled such a grisly case since his Halifax days. Rain broke through the grey sky and he tipped his Stetson as it pelted the boat like a hail of artillery fire. "I think we're gonna need help on this one."

Monroe

RCMP Corporal Robert Monroe idly strummed his Gibson acoustic guitar on the living room couch, the CityTV morning news playing in the background. The one bedroom apartment on Toronto's west end didn't feel like home, even though he had been living there for three months. He slept in a queen size bed, but it felt empty with no one else on the other side of the mattress. It was too quiet with no one to share his days with, and he found it hard to sleep in, even after being off work for so long. The events which precipitated his paid leave still haunted him from the grim corners of his memory. Over the past three months he had lost weight and taken a more gaunt appearance with troubled eyes and longer hair. He was beginning to look like the rock stars he admired. As he strummed a mournful A-minor chord, the soothing sound of the instrument helped ease his woes.

A dull headache pounded from another night of hard drinking at the open jam night at Duffy's where pint after pint of ale was followed by straight bourbon and a few lines of blow vigorously snorted in the bathroom stall. The events of last

night's performance replayed in his head. With a Fender Telecaster in his hands he had assumed Keith Richards' role as they played through It's Only Rock n' Roll, followed by Satisfaction, and Paint it Black to cap it off. On stage he felt alive and free and he wanted to live that way, but it wasn't more than a dream he had abandoned upon deciding to go into law enforcement. Chasing criminals and solving crimes provided the same sort of rush that performing on stage did, but the stakes were much higher and the consequences more severe.

As he sank into the upholstery and the news anchor droned on about a traffic accident on the 401, his eyes became heavy and he began drifting into sleep...until the phone rang and snapped him back to reality.

He sat up and picked up the receiver on the side table. "Hello?"

"He lives!" said the man on the other end. It was the familiar voice of his boss, Chief Superintendent Lewis McNaughton. Lewis spoke with a measured and controlled tone that carried the concern of a dutiful mentor and friend, and Monroe imagined him sitting in his office with his elbows on the desk, his bald head and birdlike face speaking into the black telephone receiver. "We haven't heard from you in weeks Robbie. How are you?"

He said graciously, "Just fine, thanks. Good of you to check in."

"I'm always concerned for everyone under my command, and that's especially true when they've been gone for so long."

"Well, you can relax. I've just been working some things out. I earned a little time off."

"A little time, sure, but three months is a long time," he said. Then his voice lowered, "Any progress with the whole Rachel issue?"

Monroe sighed and rubbed his forehead, “No,” he admitted. “There’s nothing to be done there. I think it’s over.”

“I’m sorry... Look, it’s the policeman’s dilemma. How do you reconcile with the danger of your occupation when you’ve got kids at home? You’re no different. It’s all in how you accept the risks and process the challenges that come your way.”

“Always a fountain of wisdom.” Monroe let down his guard and gave way to honesty. “You are right though, Lewis. Even though I don’t have a family I still think about that. The future is untold.”

Lewis proceeded with caution. “Well, if you’re up for it, I’d like you to come back to work a case. Something came across my desk this morning and I thought you might be interested, so I had to reach out. It’s different from your old beat. There are no drugs or gangs in this one, but there is a body. I’d take you out of drug enforcement and switch you to violent crimes.”

Monroe perked up at the possibility of working a case again. He hadn’t thought much about work recently, but now the chance to get into the field again fired his adrenaline glands and he felt the thrill of the hunt call him back to the fray. “Oh, yeah? What is it?”

“It’s out in Nova Scotia. A little town called Abalone Falls. Ever heard of it?”

“No. Never.”

“It’s a small town with just about 6500 people. The body of a 14-year-old native boy was found on the shore outside of town this morning. Some strange circumstances surrounding it. We have a regional office there, but they’re in over their heads with it. They need a capable investigator to lead the way. You’d be going on your own, though. You’ll need to work with the local boys over there.”

It sounded unusually enticing. He never worked with a small town branch before, nor did he have a taste for small town life, but the fact that it was a native kid gave the case a distinct appeal that drew him like iron to a magnet. "Is that a fishing town? I've had Abalone clam chowder before. It's good."

"It is, and the Seaspray Fishery cans some of the best clams in the world. The company's headquartered there," Lewis informed him. "But about this case now, your old partner can't join you. He's a brand-new daddy as of 9:00 p.m. last night. Twins, believe it or not!"

"That's incredible. I'll have to call and give him my best." Guilt stabbed Monroe with the mention of kids. Rachel wanted one. They had agreed on having one, and they were trying, but then Monroe found himself staring down the barrel of a Glock 9 mm. When the gang he was arranging buys for had figured out that he was an undercover cop, they didn't like it too much and would have blown his head off if his partner hadn't intervened in time. After that, he had a change of heart. He couldn't bring a child into the world when he held such a dangerous occupation. If he died in the line of duty, it would mean leaving a child fatherless and a widow to raise it alone. He could never burden them like that. "Who would I be working with at the local office?"

"That'll be Bill Mackenzie. He's been running the show there a long time, knows just about everyone in town. He'll cooperate, but he can be a little prickly. They call him The Old Bear."

The nickname made Monroe grin. The case had an unmistakable allure and it presented a chance get out of the rut he saw himself falling into every day. Playing music and indulging his creativity again was fun and exhilarating but he wasn't sure how long his finances would hold unless he went back to work.

Stress leave was not permanent and he had to go back some day. He didn't need time to ponder. The decision came in a moment of crystalline certainty.

"You can tell The Old Bear I'm on my way. Consider me back in action... right after I get properly dressed."

"OK. I'm glad to hear it. I think everyone else will be glad to hear it to. Things aren't the same around here without you." Lewis stopped himself short of getting too worked up. "Get your ass to Downsview ASAP. We're flying you out there. I'll meet you with the case file and you can read it on the way."

"Just give me an hour."

"And Robbie?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget to pack your raincoat."

3

Examination

The Pilatus PC-12 single-prop plane offered all the comfort and safety of a luxury jet and Monroe enjoyed its comfortable seating while reviewing the case report on the one-hour flight to Yarmouth Regional Airport. The plane touched down at 11:43 a.m. local time, and he went straight from the tarmac to the Hertz car rental desk where he picked up a Toyota Corolla and drove the rest of the way.

The highway shot straight through the country side, cutting the rugged Nova Scotian woodlands in two. He blasted the radio as the scenic countryside flew by with big white pines and cedars and multitudes of colourful maples shedding their leaves in the cool autumn air. The highway dipped down a long hill and came up again, then straight along a plain and through more forest. He spotted a bird soaring high up above, gliding on arched wings, and he passed through small townships and farmlands with distant hills where sheep, cows, and horses grazed in green meadows, then across a steel bridge over a river where a father with his two sons was fishing. They wore yellow rain jackets and black rubber boots. Down another highway

for the final stretch and he passed the sign on the outskirts of town; “Welcome to Abalone Falls, Pop. 6,500” and an image of a fishing boat on the water. “Home of the world’s best clams!” it declared.

Monroe took the exit into town and followed Lewis’s directions to the Abalone Falls General Hospital. The neighbourhood streets of the quaint town were rough, narrow, and riddled with potholes and asphalt patchwork. Many houses had rough gravel patches in their front yards instead of pavement, many of them with pickup trucks, trailers, or RVs parked in front.

He pulled into the hospital parking lot with a squeal of the tires and the sound of grungy guitars and nasal vocals echoing from the vehicle as it rolled in: I’m the man in the box... buried in my shit... won’t you come and save me? His favorite song by his favorite band.

A big man in a Stetson hat and an RCMP jacket waited at the front entrance. He held a Tim Horton’s coffee in his right hand and watched in disbelief as Monroe parked. He turned off the ignition, stepped out of the vehicle, and walked over to meet him. He wore black Doc Martens and cargo pants, a blue knit sweater instead of a dress shirt, and an RCMP bomber jacket with the department crest on the arm and a name tag on the chest reading ‘R. Monroe’ next to a small Canadian flag. He looked thin, severe and morose, and Bill thought he seemed more like the singer from a rock band than a professional investigator with his too-long hair parted on one side, clean shaven hollow cheeks, and dark circles under his eyes.

Monroe’s voice was monotone and serious, but he spoke with nonchalance. “You would be Bill Mackenzie, am I right?”

“That’s my name.” Bill clenched his jaw and thought this couldn’t be the guy.

Monroe came up the steps and they shook hands. Bill's large, rough hand clasped around the slight, supple hand of the special investigator. Monroe's hands were those of a man with a delicate touch, thoughtful and careful, and Bill wondered how well he could take a punch. The man had the face of someone who had seen hardships and suffering in his day, perhaps even too much for someone his age, but there was something else about him that suggested a more sensitive man beneath the surface, a deceptive softness in his eyes.

Monroe thought the man before him really did look like a bear who had just come out of hibernation, especially with those beefy paws. He was imposing with hard eyes and Monroe could tell he was used to being in charge. This was his town, and his people, so Monroe recognized he would have to respect his position of leadership if they were to work together harmoniously. He preferred to avoid conflict wherever possible, opting to use words to settle disputes before his fists.

"How was your drive in?" Bill asked as their hands released.

"Not bad. The scenery was beautiful." Monroe didn't mention that the drive especially seemed fast when you had some chemical assistance to wake you up, just a little sniff to fire up the synapses and cure his lingering hangover.

"You haven't even seen the falls yet," said Bill. "Let's go in. We'll walk and talk."

They entered the hospital and passed through the main lobby to the elevator doors. "I read the case file twice on the way over. There's not a lot to go on so far," Monroe said.

Bill pressed the elevator button. "These kinds of things just don't happen around here. I've lived here for over 20 years and never seen a murder. Not even once. It's shaken us up a little bit."

“What about this witness? Can you really trust him to keep quiet?”

“I know Ben personally. He’s a good guy but I had to give him a stern warning. He better keep his mouth shut.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Monroe. “I can imagine it would be a big shock. Dead children are always a hard thing to stomach.”

“The doctor’s done a cursory exam of the body. Maybe you can spot something we haven’t seen yet.”

Monroe turned to Bill. “Bill, I want to be up front with you. I came a long way to work this case. I don’t want to step on any toes, but I’m the lead so you’ll have to accept my insights and follow after me.”

Bill frowned but appreciated his candor. “We’re just glad to have assistance on such short notice. Hopefully we can figure this out before anyone else in town hears about it.”

There was a ding and the elevator door opened. Two orderlies in green scrubs exited without even looking at them, and a civilian came out last eyeing both of them curiously.

“Melissa.” Bill touched the brim of his hat.

“Afternoon, Bill.” She didn’t stop walking, but her eyes lingered on Monroe’s name tag.

Bill and Monroe entered the elevator, Bill pressed B2, and the doors closed.

“I’m told you’re one of their best investigators. You led that big drug seizure in Toronto that was on the news last year. The gang leader was prosecuted,” Bill said.

Monroe had hoped that wouldn’t come up. It was the case that nearly claimed his life, and the last he worked before taking leave. He closed his eyes as images crept through the darkness of memory in the back of his mind threatening to rise into the forefront. He pushed it away. “It was a big deal, but I can’t take

all the credit for it. I'm only as good as the team I worked with."

The elevator opened to the basement. They walked down a sterile and quiet hallway with stark fluorescent lighting, and Bill led the way to where Daniels guarded the double doors of the morgue. Monroe sized him up, and the rookie seemed nervous when he greeted them. He spoke with a quiet voice in a Quebecois accent and his eyes projected uncertainty. "Doctor Lee is inside waiting." He waited outside as they entered the stainless steel confines of the morgue.

Doctor Norman Lee stood next to a metal table with the body covered by a white sheet. He was a short, stout man in his 40s with a round head and small, sharp eyes behind his round glasses, and he moved with economical and precise motions. Whenever he looked up from his work, he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. Monroe sensed that he wasn't given to displays of emotion and approached his work with a firm professional detachment.

"Welcome. I just finished my examination," Doctor Lee said with a clipboard in his hands.

"Thank you, Doctor, I'm sure you were thorough. I'd like to take a close look at the victim."

The doctor nodded and pulled back the sheet revealing the boy beneath, without any expression.

Bill stood back, crossed his arms, said nothing, and watched with curiosity as Monroe stepped closer to examine the boy—the deep gash on his head, and the bloody smear on his pallid face. His eyes and mouth had been closed and his head placed straight.

"Have you determined the cause of death?" Monroe asked without taking his eyes off the body.

"A compound skull fracture sustained in the fall."

“Where do you pin the time of death?”

“Around 2 a.m.”

Monroe examined the boy’s bare chest and stomach. There was some bruising there, and purple contusions on the arms too, then he saw the abrasions around the wrists. “There was a struggle. He was kidnapped, and his taker beat him down. He would’ve had to.”

He looked closer around the arms and legs and saw they were marred with scrapes and cuts from the fall. Checking around the shoulders and neck he spotted something, so he bent down for a closer look and tilted the head gently.

“Please don’t—” the doctor started.

“I need to see something.” A small brown dot on the side of the boy’s neck emerged in stark lighting. “Doctor, did you see this?” Monroe asked.

“What is it?” The doctor came closer and adjusted his glasses. “That could be an injection site. Hold on.” He went away, returned with a magnifying glass, and inspected the tiny dark spot. “Yes. That’s definitely an injection site. Good catch.”

“We should do a tox screening. You’ll find something in this kid’s system. Probably some kind of sedative to knock him out,” Monroe said.

Bill broke his silence, his arms still crossed tightly over his chest. “Doesn’t look like it worked very well if he put up a fight and got away.”

Monroe inhaled and then exhaled through his nose. “Our guy might not have used enough. This is a heavysset kid, probably with a strong constitution. He could have woken out of his stupor, realized what was happening, and put up the fight of his life. The case report says you found him dressed in white linen bedclothes. Were there any identifying tags on the garments?”

Bill shook his head. "No tags."

"Who could do a thing like this?" Doctor Lee said.

"A sick man," Monroe said. He knew from experience there were monsters lurking in plain sight only making themselves known when it was time to strike. It was the province of people like him to stop them. "To capture and kill a kid... it takes a special kind of sick to do that. Now, this blood smear on his chin, when will we have the test results back on that?"

"It should be ready tomorrow morning," said Doctor Lee. "I checked inside his mouth. There's no wound in there."

"So we know he didn't bite himself..." Monroe focused on the boy's face frozen in death and felt there was something to be gleaned from that slash of blood. "If he didn't bite himself, he must have bitten someone else. Our suspect."

"So you think this kid somehow bit the kidnapper?" Bill said.

"Yes. Maybe on the hand or the arm somewhere..." Monroe gazed at the body and visualized what might have happened. "He had to struggle to break free. The kidnapper tried to grab him again, tried to subdue him somehow, but the kid thrashed and fought hard. In a moment of desperation he bit onto whatever he could find."

Monroe rubbed his narrow jaw, covered his mouth, and stepped back from the table. Bill and Dr. Lee were both watching him. "The kid's native. Have you tried the local reserve?" he asked.

Bill uncrossed his arms and put his hands in his pockets. "No, but I was thinking the same thing. Problem is, they aren't exactly friendly with us."

"That's not surprising." Monroe thought of what had happened to the First Nations people in history, an issue he was well familiar with and the source of much dismay and

disappointment in his country. "We'll have to pay them a visit. It's our best shot at identifying him without raising any alarms in town."

"We'll hit the road right away. Just don't expect a warm welcome," Bill said.

"I wouldn't," Monroe said. "And you're sure no one recognizes this kid? No one knows him?"

"We think he might have been friends with some kids from John MacDonald. People from the reserve come into town all the time."

"Ok, that gives us something." Monroe took one last dispassionate look at the body. "Thank you Doctor, that's all."

Doctor Lee pulled the white sheet back over the body and the two lawmen exited through the stainless steel double doors back out to the hallway where Daniels still waited. Monroe felt a strong sense of sadness and foreboding about the case. The circumstances surrounding the kid's death were unseemly and bizarre. He had died for some sinister reason, and Monroe needed to find out why.

The Kids of Abalone Falls

Mrs. Robichaud's 6th period English class was only 75 minutes long, but it felt longer than the historical periods that she was teaching them about. The kids were restless.

Ian Johnson mouthed a furtive message to Justin Campbell sitting two rows over and one seat back. "The spot. Let's go." Justin made a smoking motion and exhaled an imaginary puff. Adam Billows, one row over, saw what was going on and laughed silently. The books were already stacked on his desk and he was ready to go. Mark Musgrave, on the other hand, was gazing out the window through the little rain drops speckled on the glass, vaguely aware of what his three buddies were doing.

An angry rumble shook the room and a Kawasaki dirt bike rolled into the parking lot and stopped. The rider was a mean young man of 18 in a denim jacket, blue jeans, red bandana, and no helmet. His shoulder-length black hair was tied back into a tight ponytail, and his face was angular and clean shaven.

Mark turned to his friends and hissed, "Shit, that's Danny."

Mark's three friends froze like statues, and the teacher went to see what the noise was all about. The biker looked through

the window and let his eyes settle on Ian for a long second until the teacher knocked on the window, opened it, and called out, "Mr. Bouchard, you are not allowed on school property. Do I have to call the principal?"

To that Danny only gave a searing sneer, revved the engine, and peeled out of the parking lot with fading menace.

"What does he want?" Ian hissed. His eyebrows were raised so high they might come off his head.

Adam gave an exaggerated, bug-eyed shrug. Mark said nothing and tapped his pencil while Justin sat up a little taller and watched the bike take a right onto Shaw Street, and likely to the school's main entrance. The teacher resumed the lesson where she had left off, but a minute later the bell rang and the four boys broke out of class in record time.

Within seconds the halls of John MacDonald Secondary School were filled with students rushing to their lockers. The four retrieved their jackets, exchanged a few things in their bags, and then made a quick escape heading out through the eastern exit near the gym as it was more secretive.

"Danny looked pissed. Did you see the look on his face, man? He looked like he was gonna kill us," Ian said as they speed-walked through the halls.

"He always looks pissed. You're being paranoid again," Justin said. "Someone's always trying to kick your ass."

"Yeah, and what would he be mad for? We didn't do anything to him," Mark said.

"If you have to fight him, I'll back you up, man, don't worry. He can't take both of us down. I'll fuckin' destroy him with an elbow smash like this," Adam said and raised his right elbow up as if he were jumping off the top rope. They laughed like a pack of hyenas, all of them except Ian.

“It’ll be a four on one. No holds barred matchup,” Mark said.

Ian scoffed. “You guys are all a bunch of chicken shits. You’d shit your pants the moment he stepped to you.”

They burst through the swinging doors into the stairwell and stopped at the exit door, looking through the glass. Ian peaked around at all angles to see any sign of Danny’s bike.

“Hey, hey, can we keep it moving there, Skeletor?” Justin poked him in the ribs and pushed on through and they all burst through the door.

It was grey and dreary outside, but the wind was calm when they walked around the classroom portables to the football field and athletic track. The bleachers were empty and the field was wet and vacant with a trace of fog wafting inland. They could hear in the distance Danny’s bike engine firing into gear and peeling away and it urged them to walk faster.

They hurried across the field with Ian leading the way. They passed the bleachers on the opposite side of the field and into the trees, then down a dirt path through low branches that whipped their heads and shoulders, to a wire fence that was pulled down from years of kids like them crossing over. They surmounted it one by one and emerged into the open space of the train tracks. Red pines and northern white cedars stood along either side of the tracks laid on a bed of stones and they walked along the tracks. Adam threw a punch at Mark and it sparked a brief play-fight which ended in a friendly draw. Justin lit a cigarette and shared it with Ian. After some time they came to a small path barely visible from the tracks where they turned again into the forest and ducked under a low bough to emerge in a small clearing with thick leaf cover and several logs laid out in a rough circle around a patch of blackened coals. The area showed all the signs off the modern-day delinquent: discarded pop bottles,

candy bar wrappers, potato chip bags, and cigarette butts. They sat down on the logs and Justin unveiled the moment they'd all been waiting for: the doob. He held it straight up in the air from its cardboard filter tip and its white cone-shaped body shone like a beacon in the shady cove. They all marveled at the perfection of his roll.

"It's like it just came off a doob-rolling assembly line," said Mark.

"Many thanks to Adam for providing this bounty here today," said Justin.

"Who's got a light?" said Ian.

"I do," said Mark. "And I believe roller's rights apply here..." He handed his orange Bic to Justin who promptly lit the joint and passed it around. They all waited their turn in the rotation eagerly and anxiously.

"You know what, if Danny's around maybe Charlie's around too. We could play some scrimmage again," Adam said. "You remember how good he was in net yesterday?" He accepted the joint from Justin and took a puff.

"Yeah, he was sick with those saves, man. I couldn't believe this guy," said Mark, and he mimed a wicked glove save.

They heard the faint sound of an engine revving in the distance far away and the joint went around the circle as they reminisced about Charlie and they considered calling to see if he could come out.

"Things are pretty rough out there, ya know, on the reserve," Ian said. "They don't even have drinkable water in a lot of places. Isn't that crazy?"

The joint completed several full rotations and became a roach. Mark pinched it between his thumb and index finger for one last haul before throwing it to the forest just like a hundred

other joints they'd smoked there before. They talked about where to go next, and what about Danny still cruising around out there and supposedly looking for them.

"So what! Let's just see what he wants. I'm not hiding in this bush all day," said Adam.

"I need some pasty killer. Let's go to Bostock. I gotta get some ice tea," said Justin.

A consensus was reached, even though Ian was reluctant, and the intrepid four departed the shelter of their stoner spot to emerge on Deacon Street, a roughly paved road which they followed toward the seaside. They walked for nearly 15 minutes sharing smokes the whole way until they came to Bostock Convenience, so named after its owners Donald and Henrietta Bostock. It was a little shop on an old street corner just a block away from the seaside and it housed an adjoining ice cream parlour which attracted much business after school. Today some familiar faces from school were hanging out: Michelle LeTourneau, the red-haired freckle-face, and Tammy Williams, she of the flowing brown hair.

"Ooooh, well look who it is," Michelle said. "You know Danny's looking for you?"

"You're in big shit now, losers. Big shit!" Tammy mocked them with glee. She checked each of them out like a security officer. "How stoned are you guys too, eh? Ho-ly!"

Michelle chortled. "Yeah this looks real good. I can't wait to see where this goes."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, so what? As if you never blaze too," Adam said. He stuffed his hands into the pouch of his hoodie.

Ian slunk back and tried to avoid any attention. Just the mention of Danny spiked his mood. Mark was trying to make a move on Michelle, stroking his chin as if it helped his brain

think of a good pickup line.

Justin stepped in like a proud lion. “Turns out we’re actually looking for him. We’ve got business to discuss.”

“Pfft.” Tammy rolled her eyes. “What kinda business? Stoner business?”

“You know where he is?” Ian said from the back.

“What’s the matter, you scared?” Tammy smirked.

“Let me through, I need a drink.” Ian went into the store.

Adam was unfazed by Tammy’s sarcastic ribbing. He could take all the verbal abuse in the world and gradually break down her defenses. He kept talking to her about anything but school or Danny looking for them. She leaned against the icebox and tilted her head to one side listening, meanwhile Mark was still in conversation with Michelle, although she was looking away and toward the sky and moved her arms uncomfortably. Justin followed Ian into the store, bought a pack of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups and a Gatorade, and returned outside with Ian who was drinking a Nestea.

The squeal of a motorbike roared up the street. Everyone turned and froze. Danny stopped at the curb and put down his kickstand as he dismounted. He wore old leather riding gloves with the fingers cut off, and had an eagle patched onto the back of his faded denim jacket.

“Hey Danny, we heard you’re—” Ian said.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said. “I’m gonna stomp every one of you if you don’t tell me where Charlie is!”

“Whoa, whoa, what are you talking about?” Justin raised his hands up.

Danny shouted, “My little brother didn’t come home last night. Yesterday he was out with you. So where’d he go then?”

They exchanged confused looks among each other and no

one knew what to say. Adam spoke up. "Yeah, we played hockey yesterday until it got dark and then he went home. Said he went to go meet you for a ride back."

"Well, he never showed up! I waited there for hours and he never came. Called around and no one's seen him. You're the last ones who saw him, so you better tell me what happened." Danny stepped up to Adam and pushed him.

Adam regained his footing and hung back, not wanting to fight. Justin stepped in between them and got in front of Danny. "We're friends with your brother. If anything happened it wasn't us, man."

"You used to make fun of him didn't you? You used to call him fat, didn't you?" Hatred blazed in Danny's eyes and he poked Justin in the chest.

"We never mean any of that stuff. C'mon, man." Justin was on his heels.

"Did you call the police? You should file a missing person's report," Ian said.

Danny turned and looked at him as though he had just noticed Ian was there. He stormed over to the skinny kid. "You think the cops are gonna give a shit about a missing Indian kid? Fuck the police! They're worse than useless around here."

"I'm sorry, man..."

"Don't say you're sorry to me." Danny shoved Ian. The kid tripped back and stumbled against a stack of crates on the side of the store. "Little runt!" Danny sneered and lunged after him with a raised fist grinning maliciously as Ian shielded himself with both arms. Danny swung a vicious hook that connected with a smack and sent Ian stumbling into a stack of milk crates.

Mr. Bostock heard the commotion and burst out the door. "What's going on out here? You know this isn't some jungle

gym! You all get out of here now before I call your parents, every one of you!”

Danny broke away and mounted his Kawasaki. “You better hope he’s okay. If anything happens to him all your asses are grass.” He kicked the ignition, the engine screamed, and rocketed away like a demon.

“Shit, man, something happened to Charlie,” Justin said.

“I don’t know. It’s weird. I hope he’s okay,” Ian said as he rubbed his swelling eye socket.

After that they didn’t talk much, and they didn’t enjoy their snacks. They walked down to the seaside and went to the arcade, but they didn’t have much fun. Their minds were all consumed by thoughts of their friend Charlie, and why he didn’t come home last night.

The Native Reserve

They drove in Bill's Buick down a two lane road straight as an arrow out of town, a rolling grey sky above them. In just 20 minutes they would arrive at Snake River First Nation, the neighbouring Mi'kmaq reserve. Bill's Stetson rested on the dashboard and Monroe watched out the window. As the forest whisked by he rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

"This road coming up here." Bill pointed ahead. "There's an old residential school. They shut it down 20 years ago, but the abandoned building is still there, all boarded up and falling apart. A horrible thing, that."

Monroe read the sign as they drove by, "Holy Oaks Rd", and it made the bile rise in his throat.

Bill asked, "What's got you so interested in this case?"

The question called for a lengthy explanation. Monroe considered his words. "I had a friend back in college. He was Anishinaabe. We used to go out and get into trouble together, going to bars and chasing girls, drinking too much, sometimes things got a little crazy and there was a fight. That sort of thing. We were always close, and we even played in a band together.

He was a great drummer..." He watched the road speed beneath them.

"And he was a residential school survivor. Along with his two sisters they were ripped away from their parents and sent to one of those things. Their identities stolen from them. They were beaten whenever they spoke their own language, put into cages... his sisters were raped more than once. It was a living hell every day. Some kids were taken and never came back.

"He never liked to talk about it much, but I could see it always haunted him. Try to imagine the pain of being stolen from your family, taken away from your community, all against your will. He could never let go of that pain.

"I told him, 'I'm your best friend, and I'm always here for you. You can tell me anything.' But he would never talk about it. I knew that pain was eating him every day, and he tried to escape it through booze and pills as many often do. I saw him go down that spiral. He went so far down I couldn't follow him anymore. One day, after not hearing from him for several weeks, I got a call from his family that he died. He drank himself to death one night. They said he had the equivalent of 40 ounces of vodka in his system.

"Looking back, I keep thinking what else could I have done? But I did all I could. It's not my fault what happened to him, but I hate that he's gone because of what they did to him. So when I got the call today and heard the case involved a dead native kid, it hit a nerve in me. I had to take it. I had to do something."

Bill had no words as he looked over to Monroe.

The investigator looked out the window again, out into the deep forest beyond the glass. The tires bumped over cracks in the road.

"I'm very sorry about what happened to your friend. It's an

awful thing that happened with those schools,” Bill said. “What was his name?”

“George.” Monroe turned from the window to look at him. “We’re gonna find out what happened to that kid, whatever it takes.” He turned back to the window, sinking deep in thought again, and the only sound was the tires rolling over the asphalt.

The sign for Snake River came up and Bill turned left onto a dirt road leading them into the reserve. They passed by rows of identical bungalows, all constructed with wooden siding and many had disused furniture thrown onto their lawns. A stout mother with two plastic shopping bags walked the street in flip flops. She glared as they passed by. A group of young men talking on the corner stopped for moment to check out the two cops rolling in. Puddles and potholes speckled the road as though it had been bombed in a war, and a stray dog wandered the streets. There were teepees propped up and wrapped in canvas with colourful patterns on them, some with plumes of smoke rising through the top. Then they passed a small Catholic church with a graveyard alongside, the tombstones weathered and grey. Bill turned down another street and they passed a large building called “Bear Store” which appeared to be the reservation’s retail outlet. A man came out with a two-four of Labatt Blue and stopped in his tracks when he saw them drive by. Monroe watched him spit on the ground and go to his pick-up truck.

Around the bend and down the road farther with more people watching them pass. One man in a denim jacket and jeans took off his hat and slapped it against his leg, Monroe watched him in the side mirror stepping out into the road watching them pass. They turned into the Community Center, a low building of brown bricks and a steeple roof. The First Nations flag

flapped in the cold fall breeze with its black, yellow, red and white medicine wheel, along with the Mi'kmaq flag below it, a sideways red cross on white background with a red star and moon in the top and bottom left corners.

They were outsiders here, and when a mother and two kids came out the front doors they looked Bill and Monroe up and down, the kids with curious eyes and the mother hurrying them along. An icy bite gnawed at Monroe's skin as he looked around him, the tall pines and the muddy street, the weathered and beaten telephone poles, the litter and detritus at the side of the road, the downtrodden and bedraggled people, the fearful and hateful glances. This was a neglected place full of despair, a cruel trap for the disenfranchised band.

"Now you see why I wasn't so keen on coming," Bill said as he put on his hat. "Guys have been shot out here."

"We did this to them. Pushed them off to these little crumbs of land and told them to survive," Monroe said.

"It wasn't us. We can't change any of that."

"Something's gotta change." Monroe frowned coldly.

"Let's go inside. The Chief's waiting."

Chief Albert Ranier had a pudgy, pockmarked face, small, square glasses, and thin, dark hair slicked back. He was sitting at his desk when Bill and Monroe entered his office. It was a large office with a desk, two chairs, credenza, and a bookshelf. One wall had a colourful tapestry with a black eagle and a background of triangular shapes in the Indigenous style, and above the credenza another tapestry featuring a whale. A large dreamcatcher hung on the wall behind him, and a small totem pole stood on his desk, next to his name plate. He was doing something on his computer when the officers entered and he

stopped and gave his full attention.

“Albert. It’s been a while,” Bill said. “I just wish it were under better circumstances. This is our special investigator Sergeant Monroe, from Toronto.”

The chief took off his glasses and looked at him with ponderous eyes. “You’ve come a long way to be here. I hope you can succeed where so many others have barely tried.”

Monroe met his gaze level and square. “It was a long way, but I’m going to do whatever I can. You have my word.”

Bill produced a case file with some photos in it and laid them on the desk. “As I said on the phone earlier, a morning jogger found the body of a teenager in the highland woods. We don’t recognize him, but figured he might be from this reserve as it’s the closest one to town. I should warn you, the pictures are graphic.”

Albert took the folder and opened it. The folder contained a series of Polaroids taken by Doctor Lee upon receiving the body and a close up shot of the boy’s bloodied face was on the top of the pile. He frowned and winced and breathed heavily through his nose as he flipped through them and became more troubled with each photo. He closed the folder and after a long moment said, “Yes. He’s one of ours. It’s Charlie Bouchard. He went into town to meet with some boys to play hockey yesterday. His mother spoke to me this morning saying he didn’t come home last night.”

“We’re very sorry for her loss. He was young,” Monroe said.

The chief looked down and hid his eyes. “How many more of our children are we going to lose like this?”

Monroe leaned forward with concern. “There have been others?”

“Don’t you know? I swear the police know about the missing

children, but no one ever does anything about it. And you know why no one cares?" His voice grew louder and took a sharp edge. "It's because we're native. It's always been this way."

"You're saying this Charlie isn't the first to go missing? That there have been others?" Monroe said.

Albert rubbed his eyes and put his glasses back on. "He's now the sixth child we've lost in recent years with no explanation, and no police ever conducted an investigation into any of them until you walked through my door just now."

"I'm very sorry, Al," Bill pleaded in defense. "With the others, I know that officers have been sent here to take statements from the community. Standard procedure was followed. The difference is now we have a body."

Albert released a heavy exhale and looked down at the folder on his desk. "There's something I should show you. Come with me."

They followed him out of the office, through the main hallway, and into the great hall where a memorial was set up. Pictures of the missing kids were tacked onto a large corkboard and rows of candles were placed on a table under it. More pictures of the children were on the table as well, some of them framed family photos along with many pairs of shoes belonging to the missing kids. Some were boys, some were girls, but they all looked to be between the ages of 12 and 16. Someone had left a note tacked onto the board written with black marker, 'Lost but not forgotten. We miss you every day.'

"These are the ones we lost. Their families come here every day. I can hear their weeping from my office," Albert said. His tone became damning and accusatory. "Do you have any idea what that pain must be like, Bill? To lose a child and have no explanation? To have to live with that every day? To have no

answers, and no one in the world seems to care?"

Bill bowed his head low so the brim of his hat blocked out his face. Monroe examined the photographs, looking deep into their faces. Each one displayed a joyful innocence. One in particular grabbed his attention; a girl of no more than 12 years on a tire swing. She stood on the rim of the tire and held onto the rope as it swung, her brunette hair flailing, her bright smile beaming.

"There is nothing we can say to ease that pain." Monroe turned away from the photos. "It might be too late to save these kids, but we're going to find out who did this, and we're going to put a stop to these abductions."

"I hope you do, because this is tearing our community apart. I've never seen so much unrest here in all my days."

"I could see that as we were coming in. It was plain as day," Monroe said.

Albert nodded and seemed to look into him for a moment. "You at least try to understand us. That much I can see."

"Thank you," Monroe said. "We should notify the next of kin. You said his mother spoke to you this morning. Can you show us where she lives?"

The Bouchard family lived in a wooden bungalow on a foundation of cinderblocks. One of the windows was boarded up with a scrap piece of plywood, and an old Dodge pickup truck was parked in the driveway. When the three men approached the front door, they could hear a baby crying inside the house. Albert knocked, and a few moments later the mother answered the door. Her hair was tangled and ratty, her oversized t-shirt had food stains, and her face had the lines of a life of worry and strife. She recoiled when she saw two police officers, horror

growing in her eyes.

“Renata. These two officers want to have a word with you,” Albert said.

“Oh, no... did you find my Charlie? He didn’t come home...” Her lip quivered and her voice cracked. Bill took his hat off and held it over his chest and she released a soul-wrenching wail of anguish. Albert took her into his arms and pressed her against his chest as her tears soaked into his shirt. He rubbed her back as she shook and shook. He released her and she wiped the tears away from her eyes and sniffled, but more came when she looked at the two officers.

“Ma’am, we’re very sorry,” Bill said. “We found him early this morning out in the woods. He fell on the rocks.”

She moaned. “He just went to see his friends. He was so happy when he left with Danny yesterday.”

Albert handed her a handkerchief which she took and blew her nose.

Monroe touched Bill on the shoulder and whispered to him, “Let me,” and came close to the aggrieved mother.

“Mrs. Bouchard, I can’t imagine the pain you must be feeling right now. It’s any mother’s worst nightmare. I wish we had answers for you, but right now we don’t. All I can say is that we’re going to do everything to find out exactly what happened.”

She looked at him through her tears. “What about the others, too? All those other kids. I always told him to be careful. I always told his brother to watch out for him.” She had to catch her breath, her face was puffy.

“It’s OK. Take your time,” Monroe said.

Mrs. Bouchard crossed her arms. “There’s something evil in those woods. There’s something out there. Kids go out into those woods and never come back. You can feel in out

there... something evil. It took my Charlie just like it took the others too.”

Bill and Albert exchanged furtive glances.

“You said he went to meet his friends yesterday. Do you know their names?” Monroe asked.

“He plays hockey with that Ian Johnson and those other kids from school. Mark and Justin and Adam. I don’t know their last names.”

Bill said, “That’s fine. I know them, and I’m pretty sure I know where we can find them. We’ll have a word with those boys.”

“Mrs. Bouchard, this is difficult to ask, and I hate to, but we need someone to identify the body. Would you be willing to come with us to the hospital?” Monroe said.

She shook her head. “I won’t do that. I know in my heart it’s him. If you need someone, go find Danny. He went into town today looking for him and still hasn’t come back.”

“I know him, too. We can find him,” Bill said.

“Mrs. Bouchard, did he tell you anything else about where he was going or what he was doing yesterday? Anything at all?”

She shook her head. “No. Just that he was going to play hockey and hang out by the seaside.”

“Does he ever go to see anyone else in town? Maybe another group of friends he goes to see?”

She shook her head.

“Okay. If you can think of anything else that can help us, don’t be afraid to call us,” Monroe said, and Bill handed her a card with the field office contact info. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

The chief consoled her with close words as the two officers returned to the car. On the drive back to the community hall to return Albert to his duties Monroe asked, “What was that she said about the evil in the woods?”

Albert shook his head in disappointment. “Nothing but old ghost stories. People need answers in a world that seems to have forgotten about them, so they find them in whatever makes the most sense. But how do you make sense in such a cold world?”

Monroe turned over his shoulder to see him in the back seat. “So people think some kind of evil spirit is taking these kids?”

“Some say the spirit of the wendigo stalks the forests at night, preying on the lost and vulnerable, and that its hunger is so great it can never be sated.”

“A wendigo? What’s that?”

“It’s an evil spirit of the forest that feeds on death and decay.”

“Sounds ominous.”

Bill grunted. “You believe any of that stuff?”

“Me?” Monroe said. “Not a chance.” Leaning back into the Buick’s leather seat he watched the pines pass by.

Finding Danny

Driving back in the late afternoon Monroe couldn't stop thinking about the missing children; six young lives missing over recent years with no explanation and no investigation. To an outside observer it might have seemed impossible that such a thing could continue to happen unchallenged, but to him it was no great mystery. Everything Albert told them was true. The apathy that society felt towards the disenfranchised native bands was plain to see. He intended to look into that and find out why any pleas they might have made fell on deaf ears. Another trip to the reserve in the near future was a foregone conclusion.

"What do you know about these kids we're looking for?" Monroe said.

"What do you wanna know? I'm friends with Ian Johnson's dad. Went to a barbeque at his place back in August, he can grill a mean steak." He dropped his tone. "Ian's a good kid though, just hangs out with some of the wrong people."

"How so?"

"I catch him around town smoking dope with some of the

other kids from John MacDonald. There's always out on the train tracks getting high or fishing for booze at the LC."

"Well, they're teenagers after all. You remember what that's like, don't ya?"

"I never did anything like these kids do, spraying graffiti and vandalizing things." He stopped for a moment and thought. "It's a quiet, simple town out here, I know. Not a lot of daily excitement, but there's beauty in it. Most who grow up here just want to leave, and eventually, they do. They all end up in Halifax or Montreal. Or even Toronto." He looked over at his companion.

"I think some people back home might want to come out here. There are still people in the world who like a quiet life," Monroe said. "What about this Campbell kid?"

"He's a metalhead. Always wears those ugly band shirts. Looks like a little devil with his black hair spiked up and those studded leather bracelets."

Monroe smirked at the description. He could already see them in his mind: two young punks of the modern era not much unlike himself at that age. "I know the type. Where can we find them?"

"Oh, I know a few places we can look."

Starlight shone through the gaps in the clouds showing a deep sky beyond, faraway stars glimmering bright and looking out to sea he saw red and green lights of the bows and sterns of fishing boats bouncing on the salty waves. The Fishing Union passed on the left, a stout and long square building with steel siding and a triangular roof. An office building 10 stories high rose up behind and looking much newer and fresher than the union hall in its solid concrete and clean windows. It made a strange juxtaposition, old and new side by side.

Another block up Seaside and the route transformed into Main Street where the diner was bustling, and the ice cream parlour had groups of kids out front around the two picnic tables. Cars were parked along the curb, and music played from an Irish pub. A small park lush with shrubbery and oak trees was nestled in between a convenience store and the local NSLC.

Bill kept his head on a swivel, looking everywhere for their quarry. Coasting down the street in slow motion he inspected each person strolling down the boardwalk by the sea. Couples and families walked along the way talking and enjoying the evening. There were some young, some old, but not who they were looking for. He pulled over to park the Buick and they continued on foot.

When they came out of the car Monroe took a deep breath of the ocean air and realized how incredibly tired and worn out he was from the day's activity. He had awakened that morning with a hangover and travelled across the country in a 1-hour flight and a 1-hour drive. He needed something to pick him back up, some kind of kick...but there was no time for that. It didn't matter how he felt. He had a job to do.

The Funland Arcade buzzed with a cacophony of noise and light. Bill led the way inside where kids of all ages played video games and pinball and slowly waded through the crowds checking each face he could see. Most were too engrossed in their games to notice them, but some of them did.

Justin Campbell turned his head while taking a long sip of his Gatorade and saw the unmistakable sight of Bill's Stetson hat. He poked Ian in the ribs with his free hand and they both gawked at the two officers. Old Bill was bad enough, but this other cop coming with him they didn't recognize. He seemed serious and grim in the kaleidoscope of the arcade. A brief

whisper between them and they broke away from the Street Fighter 2 machine and made a beeline to the back.

Bill turned around and headed back out the entrance and Monroe followed behind. When he came outside he bolted around the corner and turned down a narrow alleyway to intercept the kids. They looked helpless and stupid at the sight of the big man blocking their path.

“Right there, Ian Johnson,” Bill said with force and authority. “And you Justin Campbell. We’ve been looking for you.”

The two 14-year-olds were mortified and speechless. Ian was a skinny kid with slumped shoulders and wore a jean jacket over a red plaid shirt two sizes too big for his narrow frame. Now that Monroe and Bill saw him up close in the light, they noticed the purple and red bruising around his right eye.

“Nice shiner, by the way. I don’t think it suits ya though,” Bill said with hands on his hips. “Why’d ya run? Is there something ya wanna tell us about?”

Ian spoke up, “We heard something happened... Danny came around here a few hours ago.”

“Is that who gave ya that?” He pointed. “What did he tell ya?”

“He was looking for Charlie. Said he didn’t meet up with him for the ride home like he was supposed to last night,” the shy kid said.

Justin broke his silence. He was a little bigger and harder looking than his friend and had short, dark hair and goatee, and wore all black clothing including a Slayer t-shirt underneath his oversized zip-up hoodie. “I thought he was going to kill him! But then Old Man Bostock came out and told him off saying he would call the cops.” He stopped for a second.

“Well, wouldn’t ya know it, we need to speak with Mr. Bouchard ourselves. You boys know if he’s still in town?” Bill

asked.

Justin said, "Yeah, I think he went to the baseball game with his girlfriend. You gonna arrest him for something? He was goin' ape shit on him, you shoulda seen!"

Ian broke in. "What about Charlie, though? Did something happen?"

Bill wasn't sure how to tell them. Monroe stepped in and chose his words with care and precision.

"We're very sorry to tell you that your friend Charlie was found in the highland woods early this morning. It seems foul play was involved... We're trying to figure out how and why he was brought out there."

Ian's knees buckled and Justin shrank in horror.

Monroe continued, "We need you to tell us everything you did with Charlie yesterday. From the moment you met that day, to the moment he left to go home."

"How could he get all the way out there into those woods? That's so far..." Justin wondered.

They delivered their statements while Monroe took fastidious notes. The Bouchard brothers came into town yesterday afternoon around 1:00 p.m. Danny went to see his girlfriend while Charlie headed on foot to Ian's house. The three of them met at Ian's place and played Super Mario Bros 3 until around 3:30 and then, seeing that the rain had stopped, called some people up to see if they could get a game of street hockey going. With a little luck, and some minor convincing, Ian and Justin had managed to muster five of their high school buddies for a game on the road in front of his house on Addison Street. Charlie was their goalie. He'd been their star net minder for four games in a row now and they couldn't imagine playing without him. They had played until almost 6:30 and Charlie,

checking the time to find out he was running late to meet his brother for the ride back home, left in a hurry. The reserve was a long, lonely walk at night. That was the last they saw of him.

After a brief pause, Ian asked, "Where did you say they found him? Out in the woods?"

Monroe nodded.

Ian became distressed and hesitant, his mind running wild with something. Monroe focused in and saw his tremulous eyes of fear. "Ian, did you ever go into those woods?"

The kid flinched.

"What did you see out there?"

Ian broke down. "Nothing! We didn't see nothing! It was just... this place was just... We found this little altar type thing. It had this stone table with all this stuff carved into it, words in a different language. We didn't know what the hell it was, but it felt wrong being around there."

"It felt wrong out there... how do you mean?"

"It's just, this feeling, you know? That feeling like you aren't supposed to be there."

Monroe shifted his attention to Justin. "And you were there to see this? Do you know what he's talking about?"

"I just thought it was some weird art project or something. Those goth kids do weird shit like that sometimes," the black-haired kid said. Then he changed his tone. "But yeah, it did feel a little wrong in that place. It was so quiet. It's sort of hidden in a side trail off a side trail faraway."

"Uh huh..." Monroe considered this new information. "How far up in the woods is this place?"

"We went out a long way that time," Justin said. "It was way off the main trail though."

"Could you lead us out there if we needed you to?"

Justin shrugged. "I guess..."

Bill interrupted. "We should get going. The ball game's ending soon."

Monroe acknowledged that and said to the teens, "We may need to talk to you boys about that again. Until then, my partner here will know how to find you."

The teens went away with forlorn looks and walked home as if stalked by a looming shadow. Monroe watched them go with their head hung low and shoulders slumped, and he was certain they would see each other again. Back in the car, Bill hit the gas and they sped off to the baseball diamond on the north side of town.

A black and red Kawasaki stood on its kickstand in the parking lot next to the field and Bill pointed it out as Danny's bike. It looked in need of some care with its scuffed fenders and dirty tires and Monroe thought it would be an uncomfortable ride for two, especially when your passenger was the heavysset type.

They pulled to a stop at the curb with the game in full swing, the field lights illuminating the night as the batter took a swing and hit a shot far out to left field and the people cheered, some rising to their feet and clapping. They crossed the lawn towards the bleachers, passing by a hot dog vendor with smoke billowing from the grill, and made their way to the front aisle between the home team dugout and the first row. Bill squinted, scanning the rows. Monroe had an inkling what to look for; an angry young man with a mean streak and a penchant for rebellion. He knew the type. More than that, he understood the type.

Continuing up the aisle to the visitors' team side as a blistering fastball slammed into the catcher's mitt. "Strike!" the umpire called and they still hadn't found Danny. They checked every

row, and the grassy space between and behind the two sets of bleachers but he wasn't there. Bill led on and said, "I know where he might be," and they passed through the aisle and into the open field beyond. A mighty crack of the bat and the ball went flying high and soared far, far away over the fence and the crowd roared.

Bill led across the field to a massive oak tree with a picnic table beside it where a small group of teenagers smoked and drank 40s of Olde English. The silhouette of his Stetson alarmed one of them and they all abruptly hid their booze and flicked away their smokes. All except one: a fierce young man of 18 with raven hair and a red bandana. He sat on the picnic table in his jean jacket with his leather boots planted on the bench.

"Danny Bouchard. You're not even gonna bother, eh?" Bill confronted him.

"Why should I? I can drink whatever I want." He took a healthy swig of his beer.

"Not here," Bill said, taking on a more serious tone. "You all should leave right now. It's only him we want to talk to."

They all froze.

"Well, what are ya waiting for? Go on home before I change my mind."

They dispersed and left Danny alone with the two officers. He noticed their side arms peaking out underneath their jackets with the holster clips on. He knew Bill all too well. Only two weeks ago the Old Bear had thrown him into the drunk tank for starting a fight at Ronnie's Pool Hall with a guy who flirted with his girlfriend. The angry young man took a drag of his cigarette and looked at the gun under Monroe's left arm, a Smith and Wesson 5946, and wondered what its weight would feel like in his hand.

"I don't care about what you're drinking, anyway. We know you came into town today looking for your brother," Bill said.

Danny looked at them with rage and desperation and said, "Yeah, and did you find him? I looked around all day."

Bill gave him the news. "I'm sorry. We..." He took a deep breath. "We found him in the highland woods this morning. It looks like he fell down the cliffside."

They let him absorb it and rage boiled in him. He shook his head and sprang off the picnic table to his feet. He stood shorter than the officers, but was no less intimidating. "So what then, huh? What are ya gonna do about it? You're coming down here now to tell me this like you're savin' the day. Some big hero. Thanks a lot for telling me."

Bill bristled at these barbs and was about to blast back but Monroe spoke first with authority and care. "It's terrible what happened to Charlie. I know he was a good kid. He didn't deserve it. But we're going to find out what happened that night. I can promise you that."

Hearing his brother's name pierced Danny like a spear of mourning. "That's real nice. I'll believe it when I see it. You cops never did much about the others that went missing, so why now? You ever hear the expression 'too little too late?'"

"Yeah, I've heard that before. The difference is, now we have a body. That gives us something to go on," Monroe said.

"You can help us get started if you cooperate," Bill said.

"Why don't you tell me what you think happened to him, then?"

"I'm thinking he was kidnapped and taken out there," Monroe said. "That's all we can say so far."

"Why would anyone want to kidnap my little brother?"

"We don't know. That's why we need your story."

Danny shook his head and his black bangs swayed. His voice came low and brooding. "You didn't even have to tell me he's dead. As soon as I woke up this morning. As soon as I got out of bed, I knew something was wrong."

"You beat up Ian Johnson. Why?" Bill asked.

Danny smirked. "He looked like he needed a good ass kicking. Guy's his best friend and says he doesn't know nothin'. Says he went home after their game."

"That doesn't mean you get to beat on him," Bill said.

Danny spread his hands out. "Well, what can I say? I was caught in a fit of passion."

"Uh huh," Bill said. "Why'd you go home?"

"I figured he must-a stayed at one of their houses for the night. I thought he'd be fine."

"OK, we need you to come with us to the hospital..." Bill said.

Rage and distrust gave way to grief and resignation and Danny agreed to go with the two officers. He rode in the back of the Buick to the hospital where they took the elevator to the second basement and walked down the sterile hallway, and through the double doors into the stark lights of the morgue where Doctor Lee waited for them, a body covered with a white sheet on a table in front of him. Monroe asked Danny if he was ready.

"Do it." The words were barely audible.

The doctor pulled back the white sheet revealing the face and shoulders, and Danny beheld the battered and bruised face of his deceased little brother.

"It's him..." Danny's voice broke and his face twisted as tears began to flow. "It's really him."