

KISS HER, KILL HER

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For Wayne ...
Thank you for believing

Before you hand me over
Before you read my sentence
I'd like to say a few words
Here in my own defense ...
Some people struggle daily
They struggle with their conscience
Till the end
I have no guilt to haunt me
I feel no wrong intent
(Gowan, "A Criminal Mind")

PROLOGUE

July 13, 11:10 PM

TARRYN STOOD OVER THE WOMAN, TRYING HIS BEST TO keep focused. She was gagged, bound to a chair, and was struggling against the restraints. Knowing that she was secured, he finally had a moment to relax.

It had become far too difficult after the day's events to know what to do next. He knew that he *had* to kill her. Not only was it in his blood, but the entire day had also been spent working toward this moment. He *wanted* to kill her. By taking her life, she would forever be special—not only in his eyes and his mother's eyes, but also in the eyes of the world.

He had learned so much about her over the past fifteen hours. She felt like ... a part of his mind wanted to say that she had become a friend, or perhaps a better term was a kindred spirit. Her life had been hard, just like his own. After all that she had told him, he was amazed that she was still walking the earth.

The monstrous part of his brain screamed that he owed it to her to put an end to her misery. It was what she wanted—what she needed. He knew that he had to do it. But something was holding him back.

Kiss her or kill her? His mind and body were tired—more tired than they had ever been. He was desperate for guidance. He tilted his head upward and stared at the stippled finish on the ceiling. When he moved his head back toward his victim, the obvious path was crystal clear.

STEP 1—SELECTION

JULY 13, 7:35 AM

ONE

THE EARLY HEAT OF THE JULY MORNING WAS MAKING Tarryn Cooper Love lethargic. Wanting to get through the final part of his midnight to 8:00 AM shift doing as little as possible, he pulled his car over into a strip mall parking lot and reclined his seat. Just a quick catnap would do the trick. The warmth of the sun through his window heated his leather seat and soothed his mind. As he relaxed his limbs and let his heavy eyelids fall, he reminisced about his last kill.

She had been an average girl—nothing spectacular in the looks department. Tarryn remembered the details of her curvaceous body, her crooked smile, her soulful laugh, and her throaty voice. She would never be on the pages of a magazine, and most men would probably pass her by for the bleach blonde with the melon-sized boobs at the other end of the bar, but she had something special. It was the “it” factor that he so often found himself drawn to, an unexplainable element that made her irresistible to him. He tried to wrap his mind around why he was attracted to certain women. Maybe it was the strength in them, the spark of *alive* that he wanted to extinguish.

Tarryn remembered the first time that he had met the curvy redhead. Fond memories of that day swirled playfully in his brain. He had picked her up just a few blocks from where he sat now. Tarryn mentally wandered through the day with a lazy gait. She called herself Crimson and told him that she wanted to be a dancer someday. She was coming out of a club at four o’clock in the morning, exhausted from a long night watering her customers down with more than their fair share of libations. She complained about the lecherous patrons who took the liberty of grabbing more than just their drink. Tarryn, of course, was sympathetic and a good listener, adding in appropriate comments to make her feel at ease.

She was all smiles, wiggles, and giggles, as he flirted with her through the rearview mirror. She was a simple kind of girl whose biggest challenge in life, pre-New York City, had been putting on warm bowling shoes and whose “Pappy” probably reminded her on a regular basis that if brains were dynamite, she wouldn’t be able to blow her nose. Still, despite her mental shortcomings, she was eye-catching and available for the taking.

It didn’t take long for him to realize that she wanted him. He wanted her too—though not in the same way. He dropped her off at her apartment. She had invited him in with the promise of good things to come. That choice had sealed her fate. His back tingled as he remembered the details of her final moments—the initial grin on her face in anticipation of a passionate embrace and then the terror washing over her when she realized she was going to die. It was a milestone kill, number thirty-six. It had been a thrill a second, and he had enjoyed the extreme sense of accomplishment as the light in her eyes had faded to black.

It seemed like an eternity since he had fed the hunger that was in him. It was already three months since he had met the wannabe dancer. The urge was there, but he knew that his success was

contingent on controlling his compulsions. His next kill would officially secure him as *the* master of his craft. He didn't want to rush into it and make mistakes.

Tarryn was rolling the thoughts around in his mind, like a sweet, silky piece of chocolate on his tongue. Almost every moment was consumed with malicious thoughts nowadays. The next victim was more than just a kill—it was a success, an accomplishment that he had worked his whole life to achieve. He knew that there was certainly a number thirty-seven who would present herself when the time was right.

The cab radio interrupted his daydreams with a jolt.

“Thirteen-seventy-five?”

Tarryn, dragged back to reality, grabbed the radio, “Yep.”

“Got a trip for you,” the dispatcher replied. “One-seven-nine Terrace Grove. Name is Carmen.”

“Got it. On my way.” All of the creamy chocolate brain waves melted away.

Terrace Grove sat right in the center of the upscale neighborhood of Bellview Heights on the outskirts of New York City. It housed the rich, the famous, the corporate giants, and the Jewish lawyers; and it was funded mostly by old wealth. As the ancient money moguls were dying from health issues that even their substantial coffers could no longer fix, their massive estate homes were being sold off to the young up-and-comers. It was a neighborhood of large, established sugar maple trees that made a lush green canopy over the streets where the hired help kept the gardens free of weeds and the lawns were manicured so perfectly that most golf courses would be jealous.

Terrace Grove was pristine and not the kind of place where you typically saw a Yellow Cab driving around. Tarryn wasn't intimidated in the least by the wealth and power—he had killed the likes of them in the past—but he was acutely aware of the curious and somewhat suspicious glances of the neighbors as he passed through the monolithic stone archway belonging to his fare.

The driveway went back about a hundred yards and was flanked by colorful flower beds and tall, protective trees. The front façade of the house was huge, and the side walls seemed to go on forever. Tarryn estimated it to be at least ten thousand square feet. The woman standing at the front door was dwarfed by the impressive oak doors that looked too large to open. Tarryn guessed her to be in her midthirties based on her trendy pair of tight designer jeans, black stiletto heels, and a stylish retro T-shirt. Her face was flawless, with very little makeup, and her long auburn hair was tied in a thick ponytail. Tarryn guessed that she was either a second wife or a spoiled child of whoever owned the massive estate property. She certainly didn't look like a money mogul. She was far too pretty and young.

“Carmen?” he asked as she opened the back passenger door.

“Yes,” she replied, leaning into the backseat. “I need to go to the animal shelter in Spruce Hill.” She placed a mid-sized animal carrier into the cab and climbed in next to it.

“Hold on. I don't want any animals in my car. What are you doing?”

“He's in a carrier, and your dispatcher told me it would be all right. Just drive, okay? I don't have much time.” The woman's eyes darted back and forth between her taxi driver and the house.

Tarryn was steaming. He was very particular about the inside of his car. At no point did he take on fares that included people *and* their dogs. The hair was a bitch to get out of the seats, and it could cost him a fare if the next customer had allergies. After fifteen years of driving for Yellow Cabs, Harold, the shit-ass dispatcher, knew all about his rules. He even refused to take guide dogs. *Fuck the human rights laws.* This was not going to work at all.

“Thirteen-seventy-five,” Tarryn barked into his handset.

“Thirteen-seventy-five, go ahead,” the voice came over the car radio.

“I’m at Terrace Grove, and this woman has a dog in my car.”

“Actually, it’s a cat,” Carmen said quickly, “and he’s in a carrier.”

Tarryn shot an annoyed glance her way. “Correction, it’s a cat. Either way, I don’t take animals in my cab. You need to get another driver here,” he spat the words into the microphone.

“Not an option. Sorry. I don’t have anyone else close by,” Harold, the shit-ass, replied.

“Look, I have money, and I will pay to get your car detailed after you drop me off. Just hurry. Please,” Carmen said, waving a wad of green bills toward the front of the car.

Tarryn got a good look at her as he turned toward the back of the cab and thought better of his first reaction. His back had begun to itch, a sure sign that she was worthy of his special attention. Anytime that he heard a great woman singer, the hair on his neck stood up, and every time that he found a potential playmate, the scars on his back would itch. He didn’t consciously will it to happen; it was merely his body, announcing that it was time to add on to his laundry list of victims. He glanced in the mirror at her worried face. She was very pretty, young enough that she got him excited sexually, and she had money. Perhaps this could be an opportunity instead of a liability.

The next kill was meant to be special as it marked a major milestone in his life. He wanted to make sure that the victim was fitting of the honor. She was a strong possibility, and his back had never steered him wrong in the past.

“Okay, I’ll take her, but don’t pull this again, Harold. We’re going to Spruce Hill.”

TWO

TARRYN LOVE COULD WALK AMONGST THE GREATEST of men, the smallest of men and feel comfortable with both. Perhaps it was his clean-cut appearance, or the fact that he was the spitting image of a young George Clooney. Maybe it was that he appeared well educated, or that he also had experience with people on the street. It probably wasn't one thing but a combination of things. Either way, he was always welcome in any social circle; a fact that he was more than willing to exploit.

He had been told that people perceived him as personable, and he was able to carry on titillating conversations with everyone who entered his cab, even the drunks—and there were more than a few of them. He read the newspapers each and every day from cover to cover to ensure that he was never short on topics of conversation. And his grooming habits were impeccable—perfectly ironed clothes, perfectly tousled hair, perfectly manicured nails, and a perfectly white smile.

He was proud of the fact that the persona he had perfected over the years had allowed him some freedoms that the typical selective killer could not have. He could pick his victims from anyone—some had been the very rich, some were very poor, and others were just your run-of-the-mill, middle-class schlumps. He could dazzle them with his wit, get their guard down with his charm, and ultimately lure them anywhere he wanted. After all, doesn't everyone expect that a killer would have some telltale sign of evil plastered on his face? No one was looking for a well-bred white guy who could pass for a movie star.

He had a few idiosyncrasies, but they were well hidden. One such oddity was his preference for the term “selective killer” over the title of “serial killer,” as the latter always reminded him of the smiling pirate on the Captain Crunch box. That fact aside, to a casual observer he was everyone and no one.

It had become so simple to feed his hunger that he knew he would never be caught—although sometimes he wished that he would be. How else would anyone know of his extensive list of victims? He compared himself to the meathead that works out constantly to get a buff body and who can only show it to his wife. Isn't the accomplishment worth sharing with the rest of the world? He wasn't ready for retirement yet, nor was he ready to turn himself in to the police to get the recognition he so rightly deserved. For the time being, he was lounging in the knowledge that he was at the top of his game and was soon to be the most successful selective killer in the US—at least in his mother's eyes. And that was all that really mattered.

While he hadn't taken a life in months, the hunger had been building over the past two weeks. It was time to add to his resume again, but until now no one had jumped out as the perfect playmate. He looked in the mirror again. Carmen seemed like a very strong possibility. He had long ago stopped thinking of the victims as human beings. They were simply a means to an end, a chance to prove himself worthy. It was all consuming some days, occupying every free moment. Today the need felt like a screaming animal wanting to be released from its cage. It wouldn't be held back for much longer, and Tarryn knew he needed to nourish the primal part of himself soon.

He was, however, becoming more particular in his old age. In his late teens he had cared less about the victim and more about the act of killing. His tastes leaned more toward younger girls and a couple of teenage boys. At that time in his life, he was still perfecting his craft—learning the ropes, so to speak. The young ones put up less of a fight, especially when plied with booze and blow.

In his twenties, his hunger was focused on older women. Some would say that he was choosing older women to compensate for issues that he had in childhood. That couldn't have been further from the truth. It was just a time in his career where maturity and confidence were the most attractive traits in a victim.

Now in his midthirties, he was having a midlife crisis of sorts and wanted only pretty women with natural beauty. He was looking for the type of woman that he wanted to have sex with—although carnal acts were never part of his MO. It was all about the cat-and-mouse chase of gaining their trust and then savoring the ultimate betrayal—murder. In that moment the sun was brighter, the sky was bluer, and he was all powerful.

Tarryn glanced in his rearview mirror and surveyed the woman in the backseat. She was pretty enough, but her chest was a bit large for her frame. He was disappointed that it was becoming all too common for girls to go to the plastic surgeon as soon as possible so they could make themselves more in tune with movie star perfection. He preferred a more natural physique, but Carmen seemed to have the “it” factor that he always looked for. There was an energy about her that was interesting. His back was tingling with anticipation. He would evaluate the situation on the forty-five-minute drive to the Spruce Hill Animal Shelter.

As Tarryn maneuvered the cab back down the driveway, the howling began in the backseat. “What’s wrong with your cat?”

“He doesn’t like car rides. He’ll settle down once we get on the freeway,” Carmen snapped.

Tarryn watched as she cooed gently into the cage, poking her fingers through the front gate of the carrier to give the cat some comfort. His name was Sabre, based on the countless times that she said his name in the first five minutes of the drive. The howling continued even after the taxi entered the already blocked freeway. With car horns blaring and sirens wailing, Tarryn was reevaluating his thoughts on Carmen’s fate. She would be covered in cat hair after this drive, and he was not an animal lover in the least. He found them to be filthy, vile creatures that were too needy to be of any real value. His mantra, taught to him by his mother, had been the same for many years—“I will only befriend those that can return my friendship equally.” Consequently, a pet, which required feeding, grooming, and deposited its hair all over the house, did not fit the criteria. Neither had most people, women included, and Tarryn had purposely spent the majority of his life alone. Luckily, with his mother by his side, he had never felt the pangs of loneliness.

“Why are you taking him to the animal shelter? Is he sick?” Tarryn asked over top of the incessant noise.

“Why are you asking so many questions?”

“Are you British? Answering a question with a question? I’m just trying to make conversation to drown out Sabre. Sorry.” He glanced in the mirror as he spoke. She didn’t catch his gaze, her focus strictly on the cat.

“He’s not sick. You don’t have to worry about catching anything.”

Tarryn wondered if he should push the subject further and decided against it. He needed to get to know the woman in the back of his car without the attitude if he was going to execute step two in the plan.

“Nice house you have. Bellview Heights is a beautiful area.”

“It’s my husband’s house.” Her faced muscles tensed as she said the word “husband.”

Abhh ... Tarryn was excited. There was a pretty good chance that she was the second wife, and she was pissed at the husband. If he wanted her for his trophy, he could have her. He giggled to himself; she could be a trophy wife twice over. The conversation was not flowing as it typically did, but he liked a challenge. It made the final act in the play even more delicious.

Sabre had started to settle. The howling had moved from constant to intermittent, with the only ear-splitting sounds coming when Carmen stopped cooing and petting.

“Look, my name is Tarryn, and I’m sorry about earlier—you know, getting upset about the cat. It’s just that I’ve had people turn me down in the past if they see any animal hair on the seats. Executive types can’t go to meetings with hair on their thousand-dollar suits. And then there are allergies. It’s a competitive world out there. I can’t afford to lose fares. If it makes you feel any better, I have three cats myself. I don’t know what I would do without them.”

Carmen softened a little, her voice losing some of the razor-sharp edge, “Understood. You’re just trying to make a living. Not to be rude, but I don’t feel much like talking. Can we just forgo the chitchat?”

“No problem.” He couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was something about the woman that made him nervous. She had the “it” factor, but something else was smoldering underneath—there was something dark and dangerous about her ... and yet something soft and yielding. He mulled it over, glancing at the side of her face whenever he could safely take his eyes from the traffic. She was definitely beautiful. Maybe she wasn’t meant to be a victim but instead a lustful indulgence. He wished that his mother was with him so that he could ask; she would know what to do. Unfortunately that particular scenario was not possible, due to his lack of control so many years ago. *Kiss her, kill her, kiss her, kill her*—the options were endless.

The remainder of the drive was spent in relative silence, with the odd cry of despair coming from the orange mound of fur in the backseat. Carmen whispered softly almost the entire way, telling her feline companion that everything was going to be okay.