

Above Reproach *or* Myopia

by J.M. Diener

Victim

In the pale mist of a new morning, Toni Radcliffe steered her SUV over the last bit of the broken road to Bellevue Creek. Light lanced through the thick trees, illuminating a few rocks and the rutted path which she often came to for solace. She cut the engine, closed her eyes, and listened to the tink-tink-tink of the cooling radiator. Faint birdsong made its way into the interior, intrusive this time, rather than refreshing. Toni sighed, opened her eyes, and then pushed the door open. Instinctively, she grabbed her broad-brimmed deputy sheriff's hat and set it on her head before letting the door swing shut. It was only a few yards to the creek, which she could hear gurgling gladly over the rock shoals down to the left as it flowed from a deeper pool up above. Toni closed her eyes again and instantly the case files materialized, the ones she needed to escape from, the ones that threatened to strangle her: six cases of kidnapping, violation, and murder of children between the ages eight and twelve over the past two years; and now another one!

She pushed the thought away with an audible grunt. This was her haven: such thoughts must not intrude! There had to be some portion of her life that was not affected by her job as a deputy sheriff, which she had held for three years now. Before that, she had worked as a police detective in Chicago. A father with Alzheimer's and a mother who could no longer cope with her deteriorating husband had brought Toni back to her home town. The high marks she'd earned in the police academy as well as her impeccable credentials had quickly gotten her a job with the sheriff's department, though the pace was much slower and the cases much more mundane: traffic violations, domestic disturbances, a few crimes of passion, and an abduction or two. No murders, it seemed, until the body of an eight-year-old boy turned up in a pond two years earlier.

Agh! There it was again! No more!

Toni ground her teeth to keep the tears from coming, trying to think of more pleasant things, like her domestic life; but that brought a different sort of pain. She dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands as she thought of her now empty house. How different it had felt with Martin there; and now he was not. Perhaps it was time to swear off men, maybe try something else? Well, no, she wasn't really wired that way, no matter what her social and political views on the topic might be.

"Peace, I need peace," she muttered, forcing her eyes open, observing the beauty of the green leaves, the mottled tree trunks, the moss and grass underfoot. There was the footpath leading down to the water and along it that nice boulder with the lichen. She reached down and touched it, trying to pull in the peace of nature. Like so often it began the process of soothing her back to calmness, a calmness that she would need when walking into the office in less than an hour. If the rock was effective, the cool of the creek would be even more so. She didn't have time to go wading, which would have really helped, but at least she could dip a hand in.

She got up and walked down the short path to the stream, now finally enjoying the birdsong. This was one thing she could not get in Chicago! Coming home and losing her career there was worth these quiet moments in this place. She knew she'd have to watch her step on the uneven path but paused now and again to look up and imbibe the beauty of the light and shadow. Then suddenly she was at the creek. Her gaze immediately went to the rocks to her left, drinking in the foaming and rushing over the short cataract. She squatted down and let her hand slide into the living liquid. The coolness rushed over her fingers, and she let out a sigh. She could feel her life-force replenishing, as it drew out of the depths of nature that which binds all beings together. She blinked and felt herself smile slightly. Ah, if only she had time to actually step into the stream and soak some. Then she would really feel whole again.

She glanced up towards the deeper pool to her right, thinking of how often she'd found solace in its gentle embrace, and froze. For a long moment, she remained perfectly still, then sprang up and grabbed for the radio on her belt.



“Well, we’ve found her,” Lionel Wolfsong exclaimed with a long sigh. The tall, broad senior deputy looked down at the black zippered bag that held the body of the little girl Toni had discovered in the creek that morning. The tranquility of the area was completely shattered by the members of the sheriff’s department as they searched for clues. Thanks to Toni and Wolfsong, this sheriff’s department was one of the more methodical when it came to crime scenes, Wolfsong having achieved a master’s degree in criminology before returning to Belleview, where he’d served with distinction for over ten years now. He boasted in his heritage as a Native American, evidencing an uncanny ability at tracking while bringing great intelligence and intuition to solving crimes. The only case that had stumped him so far was this rash of murdered children. And as before, there were few to no clues.

“I’d guess that they put her in the water somewhere upstream,” Toni told him. “I didn’t find any signs of disturbance on this side or the other.”

“Yeah,” Wolfsong responded, looking up the creek. “This would be a logical place for her to wash up.” He glanced at the rocks and then back up again. “It certainly narrows the area where she could be dumped, though.” He looked back at Toni. “What do you think? The next shallow rough patch is what, three-quarters-of-a-mile upstream? She’d have to be dropped in below that.” That was something Toni appreciated about Wolfsong: he was always asking her opinion.

“I don’t know, Lionel,” she said. “The creek is really slow between here and there. It would’ve taken her a long time to float down.”

“She *has* been missing five days,” Wolfsong pointed out and Toni felt herself bristle.

“Maybe the doc can figure out how long she’s been in the water,” she muttered instead, thinking about how her favorite place had been violated. Would she ever be able to come back here again?

“Any ideas on suspects?” she asked instead. Wolfsong’s only response was a slight shaking of his head. Toni sighed and stepped back to the place where she’d been squatting when she’d found the body. She looked up the creek. She could see a deadfall about fifty yards up before the watercourse curved away and was lost in the woods. Whoever this sicko was, he’d sure picked a great place to dump the body. She reviewed what she knew:

Takisha Morton was eleven. She was the adoptive child of Alistair and Maureen Morton. Originally from the inner city, the shiny little black girl was something of an artistic prodigy. When she’d disappeared, Toni had interviewed Maureen who couldn’t help but go on and on about the wonderful photos that Takisha took. Maureen had pulled out an album of prints and with the delight of a doting mother had displayed several excellent nature pictures she claimed Takisha had taken.

“She’s learning from Sam Heiligenthal,” Maureen explained, a note of pride in her voice that puzzled Toni. As it turned out, this Sam Heiligenthal was the last person to have seen Takisha before she’d disappeared. Toni’s mouth took on a bitter taste as she thought of the interview she and Wolfsong had conducted with Heiligenthal. He was in his early 30’s, of medium height with brown hair and gray eyes hiding behind a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. At first Toni thought he had a nice smile, but as the interview progressed, she decided it was sinister instead.

Yes, Heiligenthal admitted that he’d dropped Takisha off at her house after her last photography lesson. Yes, Takisha’s mother had been there, but had asked Heiligenthal to take Takisha home for her, as Maureen had gotten a call making her have to leave immediately. Heiligenthal pointed out that he was uncomfortable with the situation, since he does “everything possible not to be in a compromising situation with any female”, in his exact words. It was that statement that made Toni dislike him and suspect he was the one who had made Takisha disappear. Heiligenthal explained that he’d driven directly to the Mortons’ house, a

drive that would take no more than seven minutes, dropped the girl off and waited to see her go into the house. Then he'd driven off to take photos of the mayor for his upcoming re-election campaign. Toni calculated that there was a period of about 45 minutes where Heiligenthal's movements could not be accounted for; and *that* made him a suspect!

However, unaccountably, neither Wolfsong, nor Sheriff Sprague were willing to consider Heiligenthal a suspect.

"You of all people know that a gut instinct is not enough," Wolfsong lectured her when she'd brought it up. "Find some evidence to back it up and we'll consider it."

That she would do, she decided as she watched one of the other deputies step into water in his fishing waders. She was certain that Heiligenthal was the culprit, and she would prove it.

Suspect

Toni sat behind her desk, reviewing the files of the children who had been kidnapped and killed, along with a log of vehicles passing the few traffic cameras around the county. She'd looked up Heiligenthal's license plate number and was trying to match times and places to see if he had anything to do with these disappearances. It was all she could do to keep at bay the memory of telling the Mortons of their precious child's death. It was a display of emotion that she'd experienced often but it had never affected her, until now. This bastard needed to be found and brought to justice. Anyone who did something like that to little children was less than human! How was that even possible?

The icing on the cake was when none other but Sam Heiligenthal turned up as they were leaving. Toni was already in her squad vehicle, so she couldn't hear what passed between Wolfsong and Heiligenthal, but it was brief. Toni wondered who had notified him. She didn't know how to interpret his hurried gait. Was he agitated, bereaved, or guilty? Well, regardless, the important thing was matching him up to her logs. She looked back and forth and suddenly noticed a license plate and then another and another. Yes, this was coming together!



"Sir, I have a suspect," Toni announced, stepping into Sheriff Sprague's office. The sheriff looked over his reading glasses; patronizingly, she thought.

"Come in and tell me about it, Deputy Radcliffe," he said. Toni walked up to the desk, pressing the folder containing her findings to her side.

"I have evidence that suggests that one Samuel Heiligenthal is responsible for the disappearance of not just Takisha Morton, but the other children as well." Sprague leaned back in his big leather chair, making it squeak.

"Really?" The question was drawled in a way which immediately made Toni's heart flutter and stomach squirm. Sprague took off his glasses while Toni nibbled on her lower lip, wondering why she was so nervous. She'd done this many times, both here and in Chicago. Sprague, while not a friend, was at least an honored colleague. Could it be she was wrong?

No, she was not! So, she forged ahead.

"I have cross-referenced the disappearance dates with the license plate logs of vehicles in the vicinity of the times of disappearance. I discovered that Heiligenthal's vehicle was near three of the disappearances, not counting that of Takisha Morton."

"Really?" Sprague's tone was interested this time. He picked up his glasses and set them back on his nose then held out his hand.

"Let me see the file." Toni handed it to him and stood at attention while he perused the contents. She felt a single bead of sweat slide down her back and wanted to pull up on her belt but refrained from doing so. After what seemed an eternity, Sprague looked up.

"This is an interesting angle, Deputy Radcliffe," he said. "While I am disinclined to believe it at this point," Toni opened her mouth to protest, but the sheriff continued, "I am still willing to let you run with it. What is it you want?" Toni's mouth was still open, but she snapped it shut and swallowed. When she spoke, she was unable to keep to her usually dry tone.

"I want a search warrant for any and all photographic images in Heiligenthal's possession, as well as for his records of employment over the last two years." She paused. "And I want to be able to search his computer and media devices to prove access to pornographic sites."

"Is that *all*?" Sprague asked. He grimaced, as if trying to make up his mind on something. He took off his glasses and stared hard at Toni with his muddy green eyes. She swallowed, waiting for his response.

"All right," he said, finally, closing the folder and handing it back. "I'll give you the search warrants. We've had no leads at all in these years. I hate to subject someone like Sam to this, but we have to be seen to be doing something. Especially after this last one is a little black girl. We can't be seen to be racist." Toni had trouble keeping from smiling.

"Thank you, sir!" she breathed.

"Don't thank me yet, Radcliffe," Sprague snapped, paused as if he wanted to add something, then said instead, "Now get out of here and get to work."

Toni stepped out of the room, closed the door, and let out a little squeal of delight. She couldn't believe it! She headed back over to her desk, dropped the file on it and sat down, preparing to fill out the paperwork for the search warrant.

"You look like the cat that caught the canary," Wolfsong commented.

"I've got my suspect," she replied smugly. The senior deputy raised one eyebrow, slightly wrinkling his smooth brow.

"Sam Heiligenthal?" he asked, taking the wind out of her sails.

"How did you know?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I saw your request to look up his DMV info," Wolfsong replied. "You're barking up the wrong tree, there, Toni," he said softly.

"Why, because he's your *friend*?" she snarled back. She was not going to allow herself to be dissuaded on this one.

"What do you think would prove his guilt?" Wolfsong asked instead, cocking his head slightly to one side.

"Answer the question, Lionel," Toni pressed.

"Sam Heiligenthal is not exactly a friend, Toni," the senior deputy replied. "He's more like an acquaintance." He thought for a moment. "Before you serve any search warrants, I'd strongly suggest you look into him as a person. I think you'll change your mind."

"Right!" Toni snorted. "Serial killers are usually white male loners, Lionel. You know that. They keep trophies and this Heiligenthal guy is known to be a photographer. I'll bet you a bottle of whiskey that he's got pictures of his victims."

"Pictures of his victims...?" Wolfsong muttered, as if musing. Then his brown eyes took on an oddly calculating look. "I'll take that bet, Toni." He smiled. "Whoever corners the skunk wins." He held out his hand. Toni looked at it for a moment then shook it with a predatory grin, knowing she was right.

"Deal!"

Discovery

Maybe she wasn't right. The thought brought her out of a deep sleep in her lonely bed in her empty room. Toni looked over at the glowing hands of her ancient alarm clock, a gift from her grandmother. It was just past three in the morning. She felt clammy and cold, though the room was stuffy and stagnant in the summer heat. These were doubts she knew, though they had never assailed her this strongly before. She flopped on her back and looked up at the dark ceiling. No, she would not be deterred.

She closed her eyes and tried to find the calm she'd had when she'd laid down, but it would not come. She tossed and turned a bit before heaving herself out of bed and retiring to the bathroom. After a leisurely shower, she made herself a cup of drip coffee, filled a bowl with cereal, and flipped open her laptop computer. She pulled up her note-taking program and looked at the list of things she wanted to follow up on Sam Heiligenthal. The internet search would be easiest, and she could do it from here. Some of the other things would need a few visits around and interviews, but she should be able to get to those once life started for the rest of the people in town.

She pulled up her favorite search engine and typed in "Samuel Heiligenthal photographer". The first item that came up was Heiligenthal's business website. She clicked the link and gasped as one of the most amazing nature shots she'd ever seen materialized on the screen. The site was filled with photos advertising the skill of the photographer. Nature, buildings, animals, people: every image was carefully crafted, a work of art. There was a phone number at the bottom and a contact form, as well as a calendar to request an appointment. Toni made a note of the calendar: she'd need to add that to her search warrant.

There were only two pictures of the photographer himself. One was a more classic head shot, where Heiligenthal looked as she'd met him: a brown-haired man with a longish face and rounded, horn-rimmed glasses. He had a slight smile, as if he found the whole picture-taking thing amusing. Toni grimaced; she did not like that picture.

The second picture of Heiligenthal was quite different. It was a candid shot of him, looking out at a subject he was taking, his camera raised to his chest, his glasses perched on his forehead. There was an oddly luminescent quality to his eyes that caused Toni to actually look more carefully at the image. Was that real? Was it photoshopped or was it a trick of the lighting? She couldn't decide and filed that away as well.

She returned to the search page and followed up on more links. Heiligenthal was well known and respected as a photographer outside Belleview. He had received numerous prestigious awards and had several features in the National Geographic magazine. He also had two issues of Life magazine containing only his pictures. A quick look at eBay and Amazon showed that those two issues sold for very high prices. Toni wrinkled her brow. Heiligenthal was certainly prolific in his photography. Would he even have time to pursue serial crime? She didn't like the idea but wrote the question down in her note program.

More of his pictures turned up, one hanging in the White House, one in the Smithsonian, one in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Toni was getting tired of photography and was about to change her search parameters when she came across a link to Lifespring Church. She clicked it and her jaw dropped: the page contained a list of the leadership of the church, along with photos of each. And there was the same head shot of Sam Heiligenthal as on his website. He was listed as being an "Elder". Toni searched her meagre knowledge of Christianity, remembering that "Elders" were something like lay leaders in certain denominations. Her lips curled wryly. White, male, talented, and a Christian. What a recipe for a serial killer! Now if only he was single....

She accessed the intranet of the sheriff's department and pulled up a search engine that linked to vital statistics. There was no record of Samuel Heiligenthal ever having married, which brought an even bigger grin to Toni's face. She was *definitely* going to win this bet.



Two interviews later, one by phone and one in person, Toni was packaging the paperwork for the search warrant for her suspect. She'd called Lifespring Church because she was not keen on actually visiting such an establishment. Pastor Tom Klein confirmed Heiligenthal's engagement in the church with alacrity, but refused to make any other comments, except one.

"Sam is a good man, deputy. I've known him for over ten years, and he is one of the kindest and most godly people I know. He's the kind of man you can trust to do the right thing and to never harm another human." Toni didn't like that, but Pastor Klein would not be coerced into any other statement. So, she decided to track down Heiligenthal's parents. She found his mother at home.

Mrs. Heiligenthal was warm and friendly, invited Toni to come sit in the shade on the back porch and offered her some fresh coffee. While her hostess was off getting it, Toni noticed an open book on the wrought-iron table. She edged closer, observing the two-column text layout and the word "Psalms" in the upper left-hand corner. A Bible! Well, it would figure that a Christian would have Christian parents. Maybe they were just as duplicitous?

That opinion, however, was not confirmed as Toni talked with Sam's mother. Mrs. Heiligenthal was very open, seemingly not hiding anything, as she told a multitude of stories from her only child's life. There was only one thing that Toni heard that suggested some sort of childhood trauma that might be grounds for thinking Heiligenthal was a serial killer.

"Sam sees too much," his mother said. "He struggles with that and so at times has to withdraw."

"What do you mean by, he 'sees too much'?" Toni pressed. The other woman frowned at the question.

"I can't explain it, Deputy Radcliffe," she said after a long moment. "Sam can't really explain it, either. He always said that he sees people as they are, not as they appear. It's a difficult gift, deputy, but my boy is shouldering it well." Did that mean her quarry had seen something he shouldn't which had warped his perspective? Toni filed it away for further analysis, thanked Mrs. Heiligenthal for her hospitality and made her way through the house back to the front door.

As she passed through the living room, a framed print on the mantle caught her attention and she stepped over. The picture was obviously a selfie of a rather younger Sam Heiligenthal *sans* glasses with a striking, dark-haired woman, both smiling broadly. Heiligenthal's eyes had that odd luminescence again. To Toni, the young woman looked like she was in love, most likely with the man in the photo.

"Did you say your son was an only child?" Toni asked Mrs. Heiligenthal.

"Yes, that is his friend, Jasmine Malik," the other woman said.

"Girl-friend?" Toni pressed, turning to look at her hostess. Mrs. Heiligenthal was quiet for a moment. She pursed her lips slightly and let her mouth shift to one side.

"Yes and no," she replied after a long moment. "They like each other, but Sam... Sam is convinced he's called to be single."

"Really?" Toni looked back at the picture. "Does she live here?"

"No," the other woman said. "She's with some big organization in Florida that works to save children who are being exploited. I think she's a child psychologist."

"Married?"

"Not as far as I know." A glance at Mrs. Heiligenthal made Toni realize she'd overstepped her bounds.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, trying a disarming smile. "I love to hear other people's stories, even if they don't have anything to do with my cases." She paused. "It's my weakness."

"Oh," Mrs. Heiligenthal said, and Toni wondered if she believed what Toni had said. She excused herself quickly and as soon as she'd got into her squad vehicle noted down the name Jasmine Malik. She'd have to follow up on that one.

As a matter of fact, Jasmine Malik kept intruding as Toni worked on the search warrant. Was Heiligenthal's problem that he *really* thought he should be single, or was he too much of a coward to make it work with this potential lover? Could that have driven him to the more criminal expediency of going after children instead? Thinking of her own past, she'd known some men were unable to handle rejection. There were those who thought themselves too much of a gentleman to lash out at the woman who had turned them down and so sought solace in other things instead. She thought of a colleague in Chicago who had turned to mixed martial arts when his girlfriend dumped him and a high-school friend who had ended up an alcoholic when his love-interest had married his best friend instead. Toni nodded to herself. That could explain a lot, she decided.

She posted the paperwork to the judge for approval. They would not be able to serve it until the following day, she knew, and thought about looking into another case for a bit, but then decided to track down Jasmine Malik instead. A quick look at the town phone directory brought up a land line for a Daoud Malik. No one

answered when she called, not even an answering service, so she decided to try again right before heading home. When she did, a stern male voice answered the phone, making Toni bristle instantly.

"My name is Toni Radcliffe," she found herself saying coolly. "I'm with the sheriff's department and I need to get ahold of a Ms. Jasmine Malik. Who am I speaking to?"

"This is her father," the person on the other end said. "Is she in trouble?" There was an edge to the voice on the other end that Toni immediately disliked, however she needed to be conciliatory.

"No, sir," she found herself replying and hated herself for immediately using that honorific. "Ms. Malik's name has come up as a possible witness in an open case and I need to speak to her about it."

"Has it now?" Malik was not bending at all.

"Yes, would you have a phone number where I could reach her?" Toni pressed. There was a long silence before the other party responded.

"I think it would be better if you gave me your number, Ms. Radcliffe," Malik replied. "I'll pass it on to my daughter and have her call you at her earliest convenience." Toni made a face. That was not what she wanted and she was not going to let this authoritarian prig dissuade her.

"I'd prefer to make the call." There was an edge to her voice now. "After all, she shouldn't have to pay for calling me."

"She won't mind," the voice on the other end shot back. "If you want to talk to her, that's how it needs to be. We don't give out phone numbers to just anyone who calls."

"But I'm..." Toni bit down on her response as she felt it was going to be whiny and not at all authoritative. Grace under pressure. Bees were caught better with honey. "All right, but I need to talk to her right away."

"I'll let her know and she'll likely get in touch with you tomorrow or the next day at the latest." It was all Toni could do to not grind her teeth. Having to deal with such a ... grrr! Instead, she dictated her number and extension and hung up, her lip curled in a snarl. She looked over to see Wolfson's amused smile.

"What?" she snapped.

"I haven't seen you that ticked in all the time I've known you," he said. She raised her lip and shook her head mockingly.

"I've at least got some leads." She paused and then it just slipped out, "How about you?" Wolfson smiled cryptically.

"Just have that bottle ready, Toni," was all he replied.

Arrest

Two sheriff's vehicles and the van of the forensics unit pulled up in front of the three-story brownstone in downtown Belleview at eight in the morning. Toni wanted to catch this creep before he started his day.

That way she would have plenty of daylight to nail down her case. There were very few people she knew who were truly morning people, and she hoped Heiligenthal wouldn't break the pattern. Toni and two other deputies quietly mounted the stairs, Toni clutching the blue search warrant in her hand, knowing that this was merely an excuse to get in the door. Anders, the new guy on the force, was aware that she had more planned than a simple search of the premises. Dubois, the other deputy, would not have approved, she knew.

Toni pounded on the door marked "F".

"Sheriff's department, open up!" she yelled. A moment later the door clicked open to reveal a tousled Heiligenthal.

"Good morning," he said, but was immediately shoved aside by Anders as the three officers shouldered their way into the apartment.

"We have a warrant to search the premises," Toni announced, turning to her quarry. He was obviously not fully ready for the day, his hair uncombed, barefoot, and dressed in a pair of comfy pants and a t-shirt.

"May I see it?" Heiligenthal instantly asked, obviously trying to buy time. Toni waved the paper in his direction while Dubois started looking around.

“What is this about, deputy?” Heiligenthal pressed, trying to reach for the warrant, which Toni quickly snatched back.

“I think you know,” she snarled in return. He cocked his head to the side thoughtfully, then shrugged.

“Go ahead, deputy,” he replied. “I have nothing to hide.”

“We want to especially see your photos,” Toni informed him. “*All* of them.”

“That’s fine, deputy,” Heiligenthal said, turning towards his computer that sat in a nook across the room. “Let me log in to my machine.” He then pointed to some sliding doors next to the computer. “All of my prints are filed in the closet, and I have a film that’s still developing in the darkroom. I need to take it out, if you don’t mind, otherwise it will be ruined.”

“We have someone who can do that,” Toni snapped, knowing full well that they didn’t. “Anders!” The tall, young deputy turned towards her.

“Have him get some shoes on,” she jerked her thumb towards Heiligenthal, “and have him wait in the back of my truck.” Heiligenthal’s eyebrows rose at that, and he was about to say something, then shrugged. Toni watched him like a hawk while he went and typed a password into his computer for Deputy Dubois and then went to get his shoes. When he returned, Anders had obviously allowed him to change completely and use a comb, much to Toni’s annoyance. She simply snapped a thumb towards the door and Heiligenthal was led downstairs as the forensics guy who knew about computers came in.

“Where’s the patient?” he asked. Toni pointed at the computer, and he got to work. Another young woman was tasked with finding out how to get film out of development fluid while Toni and Dubois pulled album after album and box after box of photographs from the closet. There were thousands of pictures to look through. At the bottom of the closet was a big metal case with glass doors in which blue and green lights blinked and from which several wires snaked out. Toni had enough understanding of computers to know that this was some kind of a server.

“Hey, Kelso,” she called to the forensics guy.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Make sure you check out what’s on this server, too,” she ordered.

“Okay,” he replied, and they all got to work.



Three hours later Toni disengaged herself from the photos she’d been looking through. Nothing, nothing, and nothing. Oh, yeah, tons of pictures of weddings, birthdays, recitals, portraits, nature, technology. All they did was showcase Heiligenthal’s incredible eye. The film that had been developing was cleaned and washed and looked over, but it simply contained a series of nature shots in black-and-white. Kelso hadn’t found anything on the computer other than a huge archive of digital photos.

“This guy is good,” he told Toni. “They’re all raw images and they are bee-yoo-tee-ful!”

“Yeah, but what about his internet habits?” Kelso shook his head.

“He’s cleaner than my grandma,” he replied. “He’s got an advertisement blocker on every one of his browsers and I don’t think he’s cleaned his cache since he bought the machine. And there is *nothing* there that we could find. Sure, he’s visited some picture sites that host some pictures that a few people *might* find offensive, but no porn, not even a nude shot.”

“Figures,” Toni snarled. “He probably does it with his phone.” At least that was on the warrant, too. “Did you look at his calendar?”

“Yeah, got it right here,” he handed her a USB drive. “Nothing sticks out.”

“Of course, he wouldn’t put his habits on it,” she replied. “I’ll go deal with him directly now. You guys keep looking here. There’s *bound* to be something.” She turned away, ignoring Kelso’s question, “What if there’s not?” She *knew* it was Heiligenthal, *knew* it! And she would prove it, one way or another.



“Hey, Toni, you missed an important call,” one of the other deputies called to her as she and Anders walked Heiligenthal into the sheriff’s office at just a few minutes past 11:30.

“Really?” Who would be calling her? She looked over at Anders.

“Put him in the interrogation room,” she ordered and went to her desk to find a pink slip with the name Jasmine Malik and a phone number on it. Ah, now she had a way to track down the not-girlfriend. She logged into her workstation and pulled up the closed-circuit feed for the interrogation room. As only the sheriff himself and one other communal terminal could actually listen in, there was no audio this way, but at least she could see what her quarry was up to. Anders gestured toward the table. Heiligenthal was obviously asking him something: she could see his lips moving. The other camera angle made it clear that Anders was not replying. Heiligenthal sat in the chair and leaned back slightly before taking off his glasses and folding his hands in front of him. Toni sighed. How was she going to get through to him?

She picked up her phone, pulled up an outside line and dialed the number on the pink slip. It rang three times before being answered.

“Hello?” The voice was female, but slightly husky and a bit hushed.

“Hello, this is Deputy Toni Radcliffe calling for Jasmine Malik,” Toni said.

“This is she,” the other party replied briskly. “My father said your call was urgent. How can I help you?” Toni was just slightly irked at how easily Ms. Malik had taken control of the situation.

“I’m calling in regard to an acquaintance of yours who is under suspicion for having kidnapped and exploited children in the county here.”

“An acquaintance of mine?” There was a pause. “Are you referring to Anton Valkis?”

“No, a Samuel Heiligenthal.” Toni couldn’t keep the edge out of her voice. Who the hell was Anton Valkis?

“Sam?” Ms. Malik gasped. “Sam? You have *got* to be kidding me, deputy!”

“Why?” Toni responded immediately.

“Because Sam would *never ever* do something like that,” the woman on the other end snapped back.

“How do you know?” Toni responded. “Most jerks who do stuff like that don’t tell their girlfriends about it.” There was a very unladylike snort on the other end.

“First, deputy, Sam is a good and honorable man. He is the kind of man who would put himself between a child and harm and never, ever let anything happen to that child even to the spilling of his blood. *He* is one of the reasons I do what I do.”

“Oh, because he went after a kid you knew?” Toni needled her. “Or because he dumped you?”

“Sam did not dump me, nor did I dump him,” Ms. Malik shot back. “I do not see how our relationship plays into these insinuations, deputy, but you are playing a very dirty game here. Let me tell you this: Sam and I dated for about six months nearly ten years ago. We came to a mutual agreement that we were not meant for each other and have remained good friends ever since. Sam is a good man. He encouraged me to go into child psychology, because he saw something in me that others didn’t. I have never been happier or more thankful to him for his nudge. He is the last person in the world to do anything nasty to anyone. You’re looking at the wrong person, deputy, and I strongly suggest you look somewhere else. Sam has some powerful friends who will protect him.” Toni’s dander went up at that last statement.

“Are you threatening me, Ms. Malik?” she snarled.

“No, deputy, I’m warning you. I don’t want you to do anything that will jeopardize your credibility. Sam is not your perpetrator.” She gave a sigh. “Look, deputy, I’ll admit that I still care a lot for Sam. I will stand by him because I *know* who he is. *I know him* and I tell you there is nothing there.” Toni could not believe her ears at how vehemently this woman stood by her perfect perpetrator. For a moment, her certainty wavered. No, Ms. Malik loved him; that colored things.

“Well, thanks anyway, Ms. Malik,” she said coldly. “Your testimony will be considered as we continue our investigation. Have a nice day.” She hung up without waiting for a response. Powerful friends, Ms. Malik had said. What if Sheriff Sprague was one of them?

"I hate to subject Sam to this," he'd said. Did he know that Sam was innocent? Was he just fobbing off Toni so someone else could clear the case? Toni felt cold as she looked back at the screen. She curled her lip and looked at the desk across from her where her partner usually sat.

"Where's Wolfson?" she asked out loud.

"He's off 'catching a skunk'," one of the other deputies replied. Toni glared.

"His words," her co-worker said with a shrug.

Interrogation

Now it was time to deal with Heiligenthal. She stared at the monitor, trying to ascertain how to get under his skin. He'd said he did everything to be above reproach when it came to being one-on-one with females. Could she use that? She thought of how the two women she'd talked to him about had made statements about him being honorable. Pshaw. There was no such thing as an honorable man. They were all beasts and every single one of them would take some if it was offered to them. Yes, her feminine wiles would be useful at this point. She smiled to herself and headed to the locker room. The four cameras in the interrogation room were hidden pretty well. Only someone who knew where they were would be able to place them. For the whole time she'd watched him, he hadn't surveyed the room even once, keeping his hands folded and his head slightly bowed. Well, she'd surprise him!

She retrieved her purse from her locker and pulled out her meagre store of makeup. This time it was a weapon, she told herself, doing her up her eyes and putting on some lipstick. She unpinned her long, auburn hair and ran her fingers through it to let it flow over her shoulders. She removed her belt and hung it in the locker and then unbuttoned the top few buttons of her uniform shirt. She tried several different combinations to find what she thought would be most provocative without being too indecent, because she knew that too much would defeat her purpose as much as too little would. She looked at her cheeks, wishing she'd had some rouge, but her clean, tanned skin would have to suffice. Maybe Heiligenthal would be more uncomfortable with natural beauty? Hm. She smiled to herself. This should do to back him into a corner.

She saw him snatch up his glasses as she opened the door and walked in, swinging her hips just slightly. He blinked twice and raised his eyebrows, obviously surprised at the change.

"Well, Sam," she said, purposefully lowering her voice seductively. "It seems you have been a rather bad boy." He shifted slightly—uncomfortably, she thought—but when he replied his voice was even.

"In what way do you mean that, deputy?" There was not even a catch in it and Toni could feel her chest tightening. She tried to keep her smile in place.

"Oh, a little bird twittered in my ear that you like children," she drawled. "You do like children, don't you, Sam?"

"Of course, I like children," he replied, then suddenly flushed, brows snapping down behind his glasses. "Are you saying you think I did that to Takisha?" he demanded, voice rising. Toni smiled smugly.

"My God, you're twisted!" he exclaimed. "What makes you think I would do something like that? She's a child, for crying out loud! Any man who touches a child and then *kills it* deserves to be executed for what he's done!" He growled then sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, then looked down at them.

"You didn't even think once about that sweet little black girl?" Toni crooned instead, perching herself on the edge of the table, trying to push him to some sort of confession.

"That you would even *consider* insinuating that, deputy!" he snarled back, shoving back from the table and standing up. "I would never look at a woman that way and much less a child." He turned aside and let out a moan. "O Lord, this can't be happening!" Ah, she was getting somewhere!

"What can't be happening, Sam?" Toni purred. "Being stuck in a room with a beautiful woman, all alone?" She laughed beguilingly. "Don't you like what you see?" He turned back towards her, eyes burning behind his glasses.

"What I see?" he hissed. "Do you know what I see?" There was a tone in his voice that sent a chill down her back and suddenly she wondered if she was truly master of the situation.

“What do you see, Sam?” she drawled instead. “Tell me.” She smiled as beguilingly as she could. To her surprise, he reached up and took off his glasses and looked at her full on. That odd luminescence she’d seen in the photos lit his eyes as he took her measure. Then he began to speak.

“I see a sorry, poor, broken woman,” he began sharply. “I see someone who is so wounded, she is doing everything and anything to heal herself, but it’s not helping. It’s only causing more pain, more suffering, more wounds.” His voice softened as he continued. “I see someone who longs to be loved but can’t find it. I see someone who is so sad and bitter, she is rotting from the inside out. I see someone who has lived with evil for so long, her eyes are blind to good when it comes up and stands before her in all its glory.” He sighed and there was a catch in his voice as he continued, almost as if he was trying to keep from crying. “I see someone who needs healing, but won’t accept it, even though it’s there for the taking.” His shining eyes gazed into hers gently. “That is what I see, deputy, and it’s not pretty.”

As he spoke, Toni could feel herself lose control of her posture and her facial expression. She knew she was staring at him, slack-jawed. She knew she was frozen in that provocative posture, unable to relax. She could feel tears stinging the corners of her eyes. How could he see those things that she herself refused to acknowledge when she lay alone in her dark room? How could he be so gentle about them? How could his voice be so tender as he spoke to her? She needed to get up, get out, get away! But she could not move.

Slowly, Sam Heiligenthal raised his horn-rimmed glasses and placed them back on his nose and, as he did, the spell broke. Toni could feel herself take a breath again, and another. She could feel her chest heaving. Unconsciously, she raised her hand and clutched at her shirt, pulling it shut. She was such a fool! She slipped off the table, staggered, grabbed at the door, trying to get it open. All the while he just stood there, looking away from her at the wall next to the door.

Finally, the knob yielded, and she staggered out into the hallway, slamming the door behind her. One sob escaped her lips, followed by a small “Gah!” She gagged for a moment and let out another moan, reaching up trembling hands to button her shirt. She had gotten two buttons done when she sensed someone was standing there. She looked over: Anders! He had an incredulous look on his face as he eyed her.

“What?” she snarled, unable to hide the shakiness in her voice.

“Sheriff wants to see you,” he said, then licked his lips.

“I’m all right,” she snapped back, pushing at her hair. “Don’t ask. Tell the old man I’m on my way. Just have to use the can.” She turned and nearly ran to the locker room, where she pinned up her hair again and washed off her makeup. She stared at her pale face in the mirror. The shakiness was wearing off, but the hollowness was not filled by her anger or hatred. Something about what Heiligenthal had said made it impossible. Like a doctor, diagnosing a dying patient, she thought, then shook her head. No, no, no, a thousand times no!

Conclusions

It was a subdued Toni Radcliffe who tapped on the door to Sheriff Sprague’s door and opened it when she heard the voice. Sprague was there, talking to a tall, black-haired man, immaculately dressed in an expensive blue suit. She recognized him immediately: Harrison Pearson Caldwell III, esquire; one of the most successful and wealthy lawyers in the county. Toni knew him quite well, due to their similar taste in politics. He was a member of the ACLU, an unabashed gay activist, and deeply devoted to the progressive agenda in the area. Toni knew that he’d been the first gay man in the area to have married his lover. She chose *not* to remember that it had ended in a bitter divorce just over a year later.

“Sheriff,” she found herself saying, then nodded at the attorney. “Harrison.”

“Hi, Toni,” Caldwell replied evenly.

“Heard you brought in Sam Heiligenthal this morning,” Sprague said.

“I did,” she replied.

“Have you charged him with anything?” Caldwell asked softly, making Toni’s gaze snap back to him.

“No, not yet; why?” It escaped her before she could stop it.

“As Mr. Heiligenthal’s attorney, I am giving you notice that unless you charge him with something, you are to release him immediately,” Caldwell said firmly.

“You’re his attorney?” Toni exclaimed, wide-eyed. Caldwell merely nodded once.

“Sir?” she asked, turning back to the sheriff for confirmation.

“Did you find anything, deputy?” he asked.

“No, not yet,” she found herself stammering.

“Then cut him loose.” Her mouth dropped open.

“What?”

“Cut him loose, Deputy Radcliffe!” Sprague eyed her with displeasure. “Or did I not make myself clear enough?”

“No, sir. I mean, yes, sir!” she stammered, took one look at Caldwell who was still giving her his steely-eyed attorney glare. She turned around to step out of the room and found him following her.

“Harrison, you’re his attorney?” she found herself asking. “Did he hire you?”

“I’m his *friend*, Toni,” Harrison said evenly. Toni came to a halt and stared at him, uncomprehending.

“You’re his *friend*?” She blinked twice. “His *friend*? The friend of a *Christian*—of a guy who hates everything you stand for?”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Toni,” Harrison said softly. “Sam Heiligenthal is a good man and a very good friend. He stood by me when Ralph left me.” He sighed. “If all Christians were like Sam, churches would be packed to the gills. He is the real deal.”

No, no! This was too much. Then a suspicion intruded, still trying to find a dark corner of Sam Heiligenthal’s personality.

“Then he’s gay, too?” she asked hopefully.

“Sam?” Harrison actually laughed at that. “No way, Toni. He straighter than an arrow.” He chuckled, gently taking her arm, and turning her towards the interrogation room. “I actually proposed to him after Ralph left. I could tell he was shocked, but he actually *thanked me* for the proposal. Then he very gently and firmly said no. He even explained why and for once I couldn’t fault his reasoning. But he’s never been uncomfortable around me. I’ve never been able to understand it. He is unusual, Toni. There is no way he can be responsible for what happened to those kids. Look elsewhere.” She gritted her teeth, but there was nothing she could do about it at this point. She yanked the door to the interrogation room open to find Heiligenthal sitting in the chair again, his glasses off, hands folded, eyes closed. He opened his eyes and saw her then Caldwell right behind her.

“Harry!” he said, voice surprised.

“Come on, Sam, let’s get you out of here,” Caldwell said. Heiligenthal stood with a slight smile, then turned to Toni.

“Deputy, I ...” he began.

“Shut up and get out of here, Heiligenthal,” she snarled.

“Okay,” he said softly, slipped past her. She turned to see Caldwell slap Heiligenthal on the shoulder and the two men walked down the hall towards the exit.

Well, she still had the rights to his pictures. Maybe there was something there and if she found it, she could still hang him, she decided. But the urgency was gone. If even someone like Harrison Caldwell thought he was a good man, was she really right?



It was just past three and Toni had finished going over Heiligenthal’s calendar. All of the instances where the children had disappeared and she had found his car in the vicinity turned out to be appointments he’d had for photography: one was at a church for their directory and the other was a wedding. The third was, of all things, a fundraiser for her preferred political party; one she herself remembered being at. She sighed, tasting defeat. Another dead end and he’d looked so good, she thought bitterly.

Just then a scuffle sounded at the door as Wolfsong frog-marched a sandy-haired young man in. At first, she thought it was Heiligenthal, but then noted the face was different. She knew this one, too.

“Tyler Burris!” she said in surprise. The mayor’s youngest son! She stared at Wolfsong.

“Got me my skunk!” he laughed. “I hope the interrogation room is empty.”

“Well, yes,” she stammered.

“Good, let’s put him in.” Wolfsong was back in a few minutes.

“Is that him?” Toni asked, unbelieving.

“One of them,” her partner replied.

“One of them?” she demanded.

“We know there are at least three others,” he replied, leaning back with a smug smile on his face.

“How?” She was burning now.

“You gave me the break, Toni,” Lionel said. “You said to look for photos and a friend of mine found one of that little girl on the dark web.” He shook his head. “We had to pay a pretty penny for it, but wouldn’t you know, the idiot who took it didn’t realize that his phone had put his location data in the picture; and the seller forgot to scrub the picture before posting it. From there we found where they’d kept her. It was the mayor’s vacation cabin. We found Tyler there, watching his conquest on his phone. He was so into it that he didn’t even hear us come in.” Toni was feeling sick and cursed.

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly,” her partner said. “Damn, but his video showed at least three others. We have faces on two of them and we’re hoping that little prick will sing.” Toni’s heard fluttered.

“Let me in on it, Lionel,” she begged. “I’ll yank him so hard, he’ll give up his own father before we’re done!”

“Trying to make up for fingering Sam?” Lionel teased.

“Don’t make me think about it!” Tony tossed back. She hated admitting she was wrong. “I’ll get you that whiskey tomorrow.”

“Nah,” her partner said, stretching. “Let’s go over to the tavern tonight instead. I think you need a good beer to feel better.” He stood and grinned wolfishly. “Now, let’s go tear Tyler apart.”



Tyler couldn’t handle even one moment of Toni’s professional glower. He quickly confessed and pointed fingers at four other guys who had been working as a ring. Tyler had come in on the third kid, but claimed he was getting tired of it. Toni had her doubts, especially considering Wolfsong’s descriptions of how they’d found their suspect.

That evening, Wolfsong dropped Toni off at her front door after several beers and a few shots of hard liquor. She was a little tipsy as she let herself in and so nearly tripped over a large manila envelope on the floor. She picked it up, turning it this way and that. There was nothing written on it. She opened it and pulled out a large color print of a picture of herself. It was taken at that party fundraiser. She had never looked so stunning! It showed her as she looked off into the distance, long hair loose and slightly windblown, with a smile on her face, and a bright twinkle in her eyes. While a candid shot, it had all the forethought and artistry of a Heiligenthal photo. She turned it over and saw a few lines scrawled in the upper left-hand corner.

“To Deputy Radcliffe. This is how God sees you. Sam Heiligenthal.”

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