FOR A COP COMPASSION CAN BE A KILLER

SYMPATHY BETWEEN HUMANS

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chapter 1

It was late afternoon on Spain's Atlantic coast, the sun turning golden in the lower layers of atmosphere over the water. At the ocean's edge ran a seawall, not a barrier of rocks but a solid stone wall that broke the gentle surf. A section had been cut away to let water feed into a bathing pool, a dark-watered rectangle about half the size of a swimming pool, submerged stone benches cut all around the sides.

It was like something an ancient Roman city builder might have created, both simple and decadent. Egalitarian, as well. There were no fences, and locals seemed as welcome to come here as the well-heeled vacationers. Sunbathers came in to cool off, and children swam, darting across and back from one bench to another, like birds changing roosts in an aviary.

Genevieve Brown had brought me here, Gen who'd once been my partner in the Hennepin County Sheriff's Department.

On the job she'd been measured and cautious, and I'd expected the same from her here. But she'd taken the lead, stepping down onto a bench and immediately from there into the center of the pool, tucking her knees to let the water cradle her cupped body as her dark, shoulder-length hair made a cloud around her head.

Now Genevieve sat next to me on one of the benches, her face tipped up into the sun. Her skin seemed already to be turning a warm, creamy brown. Genevieve was of southern European extraction, and while she'd never been a sun worshipper, her skin would tan in the weakest early-spring rays.

"This is nice," I said, raising my face into the late-afternoon sunlight. Already the salt water was drying on my face, tightening the skin. I wondered if my face would have a faint salt glaze, a shimmer under light, if I decided not to rinse in fresh water afterward.

"You're overdue for some good times," Genevieve said. "Last year was . . . difficult."

It was an understatement. Last spring Genevieve's daughter had been murdered, and last fall I lost my husband to prison. At the end of that extraordinarily bad year, Genevieve had quit the Sheriff's Department, reconciled with her estranged husband, Vincent, and gone to live in his adopted home of Paris.

We'd talked about me coming to visit, of course, almost from her first transatlantic call in December. Five months had passed, though, before I did. Five months of snow and subzero temperatures, of heating my car's engine with an extension cord and myself with bad squad-room coffee, of the double shifts and extra assignments I'd volunteered for. Then I'd taken Gen up on this invitation, to meet her down the coast.

"Have you heard anything about the Royce Stewart

investigation?" Gen asked, her voice casual. It was the first she'd mentioned it.

"I heard a little about it early on, in December," I said, "but then nothing happened. I think it's stalled."

"That's good," she said. "I'm happy for you."

I hadn't told Genevieve about the investigation into Stewart's death, much less that I'd been suspected of the murder. That was curious. If I hadn't told her, who had? She'd said she wasn't in touch with anyone else from her old life in Minnesota.

"Who told you I was under suspicion?" I asked.

"Nobody," Gen said. "It just stands to reason."

A small drop of seawater fell from my wet hair onto my shoulder. "Why does it stand to reason?" I asked.

"Because you killed him," she said.

I looked quickly at the trio of women sitting at the other end of the bathing pool, but they gave no sign they'd heard.

Quietly, I said, "Is that supposed to be some kind of a joke? I didn't kill Royce Stewart. You did."

"No, Sarah," Genevieve said softly. "It was you, remember? I would never do something like that." Her eyes darkened with pity and concern.

"This isn't funny," I said, my voice low and stiff. But I knew this wasn't some mean-spirited joke on her part. Her tone communicated nothing but compassion. It said that her heart was breaking for her friend and partner.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but someday, everyone's going to know what you did."

A siren went off beyond the horizon, piercing and almost electronic in its pitch, relentless in its one-note anxiety.

"What's that noise?" Genevieve said.

I opened one eye to see the glowing digits of my clock radio, the source of the electronic wail, then raised my hand and squelched the alarm. It was late afternoon in Minneapolis; I'd been sleeping before my shift. Through the windows of my bedroom, the elms of Northeast Minneapolis cast greenish shadows on the warped wooden floor; they were in the early leaf of spring. It was early May; that much was true.

Also true: Genevieve was in Europe, and my husband, Shiloh, a cop once recruited by the FBI, was in prison. All this is because of what happened last year in Blue Earth. You might have read about it, if you follow the news, but you didn't read all of it.

At the root of everything that had happened in Blue Earth was a man named Royce Stewart, who'd raped and murdered Genevieve's daughter, Kamareia, and gotten off on a technicality. Months later, Shiloh had gone to Blue Earth, intending to run down Stewart in a stolen truck. But Shiloh had found himself incapable of murder. It was Genevieve who, in a chance encounter, had stabbed Stewart in the neck and burned down the tiny shack he'd lived in.

It was Shiloh who'd gone to prison, though, for stealing the truck, while Genevieve, her crime unwitnessed by anyone but me, had gone to Europe to start a new life. I didn't blame her for that. My husband was already behind bars; I didn't want my old friend there, too.

It wasn't until Genevieve was virtually on the plane for France that I'd been tipped off that I was a suspect in Stewart's death. Disturbing as it was, it made sense. I was the one who'd been in Blue Earth, looking for my husband. It was me who had been seen having unfriendly words with Stewart in a bar, just before his death.

Two Faribault County detectives came to the Cities to interview me, recording my carefully rehearsed, evasive answers. They didn't appear convinced by anything I'd said.

I didn't tell Genevieve what was happening, because I feared she'd fly home to bail me out by confessing. Nor did I seek Shiloh's counsel, because at the prison his mail was almost certainly being monitored, and it was impossible to explain the situation without referring to Genevieve's guilt.

But a strange thing happened, or rather, didn't happen. One month passed, then two, but I was never arrested, nor even questioned again. The investigation seemed to have stalled.

Then the *Star Tribune* ran its investigative piece.

THE SUSPECT'S DEATH, the headline had read, with an extended sub-headline below: *Royce Stewart was suspected of killing a Hennepin County detective's daughter. Seven months later, he died in a suspicious late-night fire. A former MPD cop has confessed to planning his murder, but not to carrying it out. While the case is still technically open, the answers may have gone up in flames.*

It was the *Star Tribune* piece that had mentioned what all the other stories hadn't:

> *In an unexplained sidelight, several documents note that Shiloh's wife, Hennepin County Detective Sarah Pribek, was in Blue Earth the night Stewart died. Faribault County officials have refused to answer questions about whether Pribek is suspected of involvement in the death and the house fire.*

Just two sentences, but they acknowledged at last the rumor that had been circulating in Minneapolis's law-enforcement

community for months. The Monday morning after the article ran, there was a very awkward silence when I arrived at work.

What bothered me most was this, though: after the *Strib* story ran, I saw something in the eyes of the young male rookies when they looked at me. I saw respect. They believed I'd killed Royce Stewart, and they thought better of me for it.

It would have been an easier burden to bear if it had been shared by my ex-partner and my husband. I didn't blame them for not being here. Genevieve had been wise to get away, safely out from under the growing cloud of suspicion and speculation. And Shiloh, of course, had been imprisoned; he was not gone by choice. But I felt their absence every day. They were more than my immediate family. They were my history here in Minneapolis. Shiloh and Genevieve had known each other before I'd met either of them. That was why, even when the three of us weren't together on a daily or even a weekly basis, there had been a web of interconnectedness between us that gave me a sense of stability. Without them, I had lost something deeper than daily companionship, something I felt the lack of in conversations with co-workers that were polite and pleasant and nothing more than that.

As two months turned into three, four, and five, still I wasn't charged with anything, and I realized that the investigation was stalled, perhaps forever. But I understood something else: if I would never be outright accused of Stewart's murder, neither would I ever be exonerated. At work I sensed a silent verdict: *probably guilty by reason of persistent rumor.* My lieutenant did not assign me another partner. The major-crimes and missing-persons work that Gen and I had done dried up, replaced with interim and odd assignments. Like the one I had tonight.

"Excuse me, have you seen this boy?"

A middle-aged woman was showing a photograph around on the avenue where I was working. She was flagging down passersby, trying to find someone who'd seen a runaway teenager.

Out of professional interest, I moved to intercept the woman. She registered me coming and turned to make eye contact. Then her face quickly shut down and she turned away. She didn't see a kind, interested stranger, much less a cop. She saw a hooker.

I couldn't blame her. It's what I'd intended.

Prostitution-decoy work was more commonly done by metro police departments, but there's often a need for fresh faces, so I was on loan. Tonight I was posted on a heavily trafficked avenue south of downtown Minneapolis, not far from the business district, where undercover officers like me vacuumed up out-of-towners looking for a good time, as well as local salarymen leaving the bars after their end-of-day cocktails.

A civilian might have been surprised at how simply I was dressed. That's one of the first things you learn: no miniskirt, no high heels, no seamed stockings. Genevieve had explained it to me, years ago.

"Street workers can't afford to advertise themselves to cops," she'd said. "Besides, I think a lot of them are just too tired. Psychologically, they can't bring themselves to treat this like a job."

So, early this evening, I'd pulled on a pair of jeans and boots, a white V-necked T-shirt, and a cheap reddish imitation-leather coat. The makeup, more than wardrobe, was important. I used a thick, pale concealer stick, not in trouble spots,

as prescribed, but all over my face, creating an unhealthy pallor. After that came mascara and eyeliner pencil. "Eyeliner's the best," Genevieve had said. "Nothing ejects you from the ranks of the Camry-driving middle classes like eye pencil."

The number one tip-off out on the street, though, isn't your clothes or makeup but demeanor. It's that guarded little bend from the waist that street workers do, looking through car windows. That's what tells the men who you are.

But tonight, I was having no luck. Men passed on the street in cars, on the sidewalk on foot. They looked at me, some of them, but none stopped, and I didn't try to stop them. The idea to commit a crime has to originate with the arrestee, not the officer, otherwise it's entrapment.

At least it was a pleasant night to be outside.

May weather in the Twin Cities is anybody's guess. It could bring a record heatwave. Or a series of bone-rattling, drenching thunderstorms, the kind that started up in the mornings and worsened as afternoon came on, until they shaped their anger into destructive tornadoes outside the city, on the farmland and the prairie. Conversely, it was possible that a freak storm could blow into Minnesota in the next few days and dump inches of snow on us.

The latest had been two days of storms, rains that were fitful but kept coming back, often torrentially, overloading the gutters and the drains. Tonight was a pleasant exception; the clouds had parted to reveal a polished twilight sky. But the aftereffects of the rain were everywhere: the roads were still dark with it, and the air smelled clean and damp.

A bus swept to the curb, picking up a teenager in a wheelchair. When it wallowed back into traffic and away, I saw that I'd attracted someone's attention. A late-model, midsize car

was pulled to the curb across the street. Mentally, I wrote up the man inside: white, mid-thirties, hair color brown with some gray on the temples, eye color unknown, no distinguishing marks or scars on the face. Clothes I couldn't see much of, except for the dark knot of a tie against his white shirt.

Something else, too: there was no sexual interest in his eyes. None at all, yet he didn't break his gaze.

Come on, you need a first arrest of the night. Get him over here and bust him.

I walked a few paces, tried to swing my hips a little. Turned to make eye contact again, sending him an overtly questioning look.

The man pulled into traffic and away.

What was that all about? Lost his nerve, maybe. Dammit.

I paced another five minutes before, at last, a car slid to the curb on my side of the street, a Chevy sedan about fifteen years past its prime. It had, I noticed, Arkansas plates.

I walked to the curb and bent slightly from the waist, looking in through the rolled-down window. The driver who looked back was white, with thick, tawny hair that fell over the top of his squarish black-rim eyeglasses. He was thin in build, save for the beginnings of softness at his middle, and his large hands, on the wheel, were freckled from sun exposure.

Disheartened, I glanced toward the backseat. A half-folded map was trying to accordion out across the top of a duffel bag, and a fishing rod was propped diagonally from the floor on one side to the rear-window shelf on the other, on which rested a well-worn Houston Astros cap. I knew it.

It was hard to imagine how this out-of-towner had gotten so lost he'd washed up on one of Minneapolis's most vice-prone boulevards, but he was here now, and I'd give him the direc-

tions he was pulling over for. *Well, Lieutenant, I didn't actually make any vice arrests, but I did help a rube find the Days Inn.*

The driver rolled down the passenger-side window, his eyes on mine, seemingly in anticipation of saying something, but then he didn't speak. The beat of silence stretched out between us, with expectation on both sides, before he finally said, "Well, get in, sugar. Don't wait for me to ask you."

If I live to be a hundred, I'll never have men figured out.

"Why don't you pull around the corner a minute," I suggested, recovering from my misconception, "and we can talk." Going anywhere with a would-be trick is dangerous, and strictly forbidden.

The sedan trundled around the corner to a small parking lot, and I followed. The driver cut the engine, and I slid into the passenger seat.

"How you doing?" he said.

I shrugged, studying him from behind my mask of pallid makeup. His age was hard to judge. Mid-thirties, maybe. I'd read it off his driver's license when I made the bust.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Sarah," I said.

"Sarah," he repeated. "My name's Gareth. You can call me Gary. Most people do."

The sound of the Ozarks in his voice was disarming, but I went forward with business. "What's on your mind tonight, Gary?"

He didn't take the hint. "I'm staying in town tonight, on my way up north, to do some fishing."

"Yeah," I said. "I saw your pole in the back."

He gave me a small smile. "I designed that pole," he said. "That's what I do for a living. Well, I do a couple of things. That's one of them. You want a smoke?"

"No, thanks," I told him.

"Well, I'm gonna have one," he said.

Usually the men are nervous, and in a hurry. This man acted like we'd just sat down together at a lounge for cocktails. He was entirely at ease, rolling down his window to exhale with almost lordly pleasure. "Yeah," he said reflectively, "I heard you've got some of the best fishing in America, up in your lake country. Is that true?"

"I don't fish," I said lamely. I'd never had to make small talk with a john before. This really was not going well at all.

"Some friends told me I should come," he went on. "My wife died a few years ago. I haven't taken any vacation time since then."

His eyelashes were black, much darker than the rest of his fair coloring would have indicated, when his gaze flicked downward as if he were shy about saying that last part. I wondered if he'd been with another woman in those years he'd referred to, or if he was trying to work up to making me the first. And I imagined myself standing before a judge someday, not long from now, and explaining that in a world full of men who beat up prostitutes, spent the milk money on sex, and brought diseases home to their wives, I had gone out on the streets on Hennepin County's behalf and caught a courteous, widowed fishing pole designer.

"Gary," I said, straightening, "are you ever going to ask me for sex?"

He blinked, but I thought I saw a flicker of amusement behind his thick glasses. "Are all you Minnesotans in this big a hurry?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "I can't speak for all Minnesotans, especially since I come from out West, but in my case it has a lot

to do with the fact that I'm a Hennepin County Sheriff's detective. And if you suggest some kind of sex-for-money deal, then I'm going to have to arrest you, and I'd really rather not do that if it's all the same to you. I'm guessing it is."

Gary, who had come perilously close to dropping his cigarette from his mouth onto his lap, said, "You're a cop?"

"On my good days," I said, and opened the door to the Chevy and climbed out. Then I turned in the doorway. "One last thing," I said.

I'd been planning to leave him with an admonition to leave the working girls alone while in Minneapolis, but then I saw something I should have noticed before. His hand, resting on the steering wheel, had a warm tone from the sun even where it wasn't freckled. All except for a slightly paler line on the ring finger. The tan line was too recent for the passage of time he'd been widowed. He'd been wearing the ring much longer. My glib words dried up in my throat. "Never mind," I said.

That should have been the end of it, but Gareth's voice caught up with me.

"Sarah," he said.

I turned back.

"Be safe," he said.

It was an unexpected kindness, and I merely nodded, not knowing what I might have said.

Perhaps five minutes of pacing my spot again let me recover my composure, even a little bit of bravado. That made two men I'd let slip through my net tonight. *The next guy so much as looks at my ass,* I thought, *I swear to God, I'm going to arrest him.*

The next car was a gleaming dove-gray sedan. Again a

window rolled down, and I leaned over to look in. A middle-aged man sat behind the wheel, slender, balding, a little Mediterranean-looking, wearing a well-tailored suit.

"May I offer you a ride?" he asked.

"Why don't you pull around the corner," I said, "and we can talk for a minute, okay?"

Unlike Gary, this man had no interest in learning my name, although he told me I could call him Paul. The car's interior smelled new, and a sticker identified it as part of a rental fleet. Paul was from out of town.

"What's on your mind tonight, Paul?" I asked.

"I thought you might want to make a little deal," he said. "Do you like coke?"

I looked at him sidewise. Better and better, a soliciting bust with a side of narcotics possession. "Who doesn't?" I said.

"I thought maybe with a few lines you could go down to fifty dollars for a half-and-half."

Just what the world needs, a frugal john. "Seventy-five."

"That's fine." Paul's heart wasn't in the negotiation.

"And I need to see the blow first."

"It's right back there, in my briefcase," he said, indicating the backseat with a slight wave of his hand. "Do you have, ah, someplace we can go?"

Ignoring him, I rose to my knees and turned, pulling his slender briefcase onto the front seat with us. "Is this thing locked?" I asked, but didn't wait before I pressed the release with my thumb. It snapped noisily, and I opened the case. There it was, such a world of trouble for this guy in such a little plastic bag.

Paul was unfazed by my coarse behavior. Paul was a man of the world. He knew that an expensive suit pays for itself

in the long run, that business class is a rip-off, and that $75 hookers give their johns a hard time. As I snapped the briefcase shut, Paul restated his earlier question.

"So," he asked, "do you have somewhere that you take men?"

"I sure do," I told him cheerfully, pulling my shield out of my leather coat.

It was after four in the morning when I left work, after staying late to cover for a co-worker whose child was sick. But even when I left, I wasn't tired, just hungry. I was thinking that if I knocked on the back door of a bakery, I might be able to buy something really fresh and warm from the oven.

It was on this errand, which took me toward the outskirts of the city, that I saw a woman refilling a *Star Tribune* rack. Impulse made me pull to the side of the road. Shiloh had taken care of our subscription to the *Strib,* and in his absence, I'd let it lapse.

The days of the newspaper boy, the kid on the bike, are largely over. The circulation driver was perhaps 30, with a pinched, makeupless face and short, flyaway hair. Her Toyota Starlet idled by the curb. The look she gave me as I approached was wary; she thought I was looking for a free paper before she closed the rack.

"Go ahead," I told her. "I'll buy one after you're finished."

The woman set up the display copy in the window and let the door close with a slam. I stepped into the place she'd been, fishing for a pair of quarters.

"Is that a kid, at this hour?" she asked, behind me.

"Is what a kid?" I asked absently, feeding the coin slot.