

8

The detective kept his hat on at first.

It was a black felt fedora, the kind that can be crushed and retain its shape, and he had it pulled low on his forehead so that Malcolm could not see his eyes.

That's weird, Malcolm thought.

“Sam Baker,” the detective said, extending his hand. “I’m one of the officers assigned to this case. Thanks for coming in.”

Malcolm shook his hand. Baker’s grip was weak, his palms moist. The limp handshake surprised Malcolm so much that he looked at the man’s hand as he shook it.

I already don't like him, Malcolm thought.

“Coffee?” Baker said.

Malcolm shook his head.

“You smoke? I can get you some if you like.”

“No, thanks. I’m not a smoker.”

The room was spare, almost empty. A plain wooden table, solidly built, with a couple of hard-backed stained pine chairs and a digital clock on the wall; that was it. The furniture looked like it had been picked up at a

scratch and dent sale. The fluorescent lights overhead flickered constantly. It was like having an eye twitch.

Malcolm wondered if this was intentional.

The detective sat down at the table and plopped down a legal pad.

“First, the formalities. Name?”

“Malcolm King.”

“What sort of work do you do?”

“I’m a doctor. A surgeon.”

“Ah-hah. Live here in Savannah?”

“Yep, for the last 14 years.”

“Married? Kids?”

“Wife, Amy; one daughter, Mimi, short for Millicent. She’s fifteen.”

Detective Baker grinned. His teeth flashed white beneath the shadow of his hat.

“Teenage girl, eh? Good luck with that.”

“She’s a great kid,” Malcolm said.

“As far as you know,” Baker said.

Asshole, Malcolm thought. But he simply smiled back, tight-lipped.

Baker scrawled something on the pad.

“You know a Philip Kretschinger?” he asked, looking up.

“Knew him, barely. He was a patient of mine, years back. Filed a bogus malpractice lawsuit against me and lost. He stayed pissed at me the rest of his life because of that.”

“He’s dead.”

“So I heard,” Malcolm said.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Detective Adams told me.”

“Did he also tell you that one of your cards was found near his body?”

“He did.”

“What do you make of that?” Baker said.

“Coincidence. Kretschinger used to be a patient of mine.”

“And when was the last time you saw him as a patient?”

“Over ten years ago.”

“Do *you* keep people’s business cards for ten years, doc? Just lying around?”

“Not usually.”

Baker leaned back into his chair and fished around in his jacket. He pulled out a pack of menthol Marlboros and a lighter.

“Hope you don’t mind me smoking,” Baker said.

Malcolm shook his head. “Didn’t know you could smoke in a public facility, though,” he said.

Baker smiled.

“My house, my rules,” he said.

The flame from the lighter illuminated Baker’s face. He had deep-set green eyes that glittered darkly in their sockets. His eyebrows knitted together above his nose like mating caterpillars.

The cigarette tip glowed a deep red.

“Did Detective Adams tell you anything about the murder?” he said, exhaling a thin plume of smoke.

“A few things.”

Baker opened a folder and spread a set of 8 X 10 glossy prints across the table.

“What do you make of this, doc? Look surgical to you?”

Kretschinger’s body was splayed open like one of Frank Netter’s anatomy diagrams. His colon was draped over his legs, omentum spread out like a fan. The small bowel coiled in his peritoneal cavity like a nest of snakes. The surgical sites from the man’s Crohn’s surgery and colon cancer resection were clearly visible; the killer had even taken the time to tie loops of string around each point of resection, drawing attention to them.

“You recognize this, doc? ’Cause you’ve been there before.”

Malcolm felt a warm flush rise in his neck, spreading into his cheeks.

“Years ago,” he said. But his voice was a hoarse croak.

“You sure?” Baker asked.

He puffed his cigarette.

“You sure it was all that long ago?”

Sweat popped out on Malcolm's forehead.

"This is . . . horrible," he said.

"Did Ben tell you how Kretschinger died, Dr. King?" Baker said.

"No."

"Well here's why: we don't know. The incisions here were so painstakingly done that the actual cause of death is impossible to determine. I mean, we kinda know why he's dead at this point. His organs are all cut out, and as you know, people generally don't function very well in that condition. Even us non-medical people can figure that one out. But our pathologist—and he's pretty damn good—says that whoever did this had enough surgical skill to *cover up the exact cause of death.*"

Baker took off his hat and placed it on the table. His hair was thinning, the eroding waterline of his scalp clearly visible in the ugly sputtering light. The detective leaned forward, shoulders hunched like the wings of a vulture picking at its prey.

"What was it that you said you did for a living, Dr. King?"

"Surgeon," he mumbled.

"What's that? I didn't hear you."

"I'm a surgeon," Malcolm said again, louder this time. He looked directly into Baker's coke-bottle-glass eyes, seeing them clearly for the first time.

The detective's eyelids closed. He took a long, slow drag on his cigarette and pursed his lips together, spewing smoke directly in Malcolm's direction.

"Look at the rest of them," Baker said.

"What?"

He spread the glossy photos across the tabletop.

"These. Take a look," he said.

He spun one of the photos so that Malcolm could look at it.

"Phillip Kretschinger," Baker said. "Remember him?"

Kretschinger's head was sitting on a blue-and-white porcelain tray in the center of what appeared to be a dining room table. His glassy eyes were wide open, their pupils dilated. Dark blood had filled the base of the

tray and spilled over the edges.

And the killer had jammed a Granny Smith apple into the dead man's mouth, as though he were the main course at a holiday meal.

"See that?" Baker asked, pointing to a rectangle positioned neatly next to the man's head.

Malcolm felt ill. He recognized what Baker was pointing to—knew the insignia, the inscription on it, knew every word.

"Oh, God," he said, his mouth dry as sand.

"So you do recognize it?"

Malcolm nodded.

"That's my card," he said.

"So you can see why we thought you needed to come in to answer some questions?"

Malcolm nodded.

"But do you really think I'd just kill someone and leave my card there like that?" he asked.

Baker shrugged.

"I've seen stranger things," he said.

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and flipped to a fresh page on his legal pad.

"So where were you the night before last?" Baker asked.

"At home."

"Anyone who can confirm that?"

"Only my dog. My wife is out of town and my daughter spent the night with friends. But the police came to my house in the middle of the night that night after my home was broken into. I'm sure there's a report about it here someplace. I spoke to a Lieutenant Chu. He came to my house."

Baker's caterpillar eyebrows creased.

"Really? Nobody told me that."

"Look it up," Malcolm said.

The detective scribbled furiously on his legal pad.

"How about yesterday during the day?"

"I was cleaning up after the break-in that morning. I did surgery

yesterday afternoon. And last night I stayed home again. Spoke to both my wife and daughter—they can confirm that for you.”

Baker gathered up the pictures and shuffled them as though he was going to put them all away.

And then he stopped, scratched his head just where the hairline had begun to recede, and looked up.

“Does the phrase ‘From hell’ mean anything to you?” he asked.

Malcolm felt ill.

“Dr. King?”

“Well, it’s something from the Jack the Ripper mythology.”

“And how do you know this?” Baker said.

Malcolm sat still for a moment. The overhead light dimmed and jittered, threatening to short out.

Damn you, Ben, he thought.

“I was a history major. My Master’s thesis was on Jack the Ripper,” Malcolm said at last.

“Is that so?”

Baker plucked two of the glossies from the folder and laid them out on the table in front of Malcolm.

“See anything familiar?” he said.

And Malcolm did.

The first picture did indeed show the words “From hell” written on the victim’s wall in the exact script that the Ripper had used in writing that phrase in his letter. Every curve, every nuance of the Victorian killer’s scrawl had been painstakingly reproduced. The resemblance was uncanny.

The second picture was even more chilling—an anatomical diagram, written on a sheet of paper, of what had been done to the now-departed Mr. Kretschinger in full-blown surgical detail. Nerves, arteries, and veins were identified by name; all of the muscles and organs were clearly labeled.

And at the bottom, written in what appeared to be blood, was a name:

Jack.