

# SKIN

PART ONE OF THE TATOO SERIES



**A. J. MALONE**

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*PART ONE OF THE TATTOO SERIES*  
*An Urban Fantasy Crime Novel*

By A. J. Malone

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Published in the United States of America.

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First Printing, 2014

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## ABOUT SKIN

The relationship of tattoos to antisocial personality disorder would seem obvious. However, as we live in politically correct times, nothing can be taken for granted any more. Knee-jerk responses like this one need to be hypothesized and then studied under conditions of clinical accuracy.

Preliminary results seem to confirm what we all thought anyway; forensic psychiatric inpatients are more likely to have tattoos.

No kidding.

They are likely to have a higher percentage of overall body area tattooed. They are also more likely to have histories of sexual and substance abuse and suicide attempts than non-tattooed offenders.

So why do they get more tattoos? What are they trying to do? Externalize? Internalize? Keep themselves safe from demons the rest of us can't see?

Are they just crazy or do they know something the rest of us don't?

The oldest known tattoos date back 5000 years to a male found frozen in the Alps in 1991.

He was very, very dead.

The latest tattoo in human history is the one that is about to be drilled into the stretched out skin on my back.

And me? I'm as good as dead anyway...

The needle pierces my skin at 3000 jabs a minute. What's that per second? 50 times?

My math's not bad.

How likely am I now to take drugs, sexually abuse and engage in suicidal anti-social behavior?

Answer; very, very much indeed.'

What would you do to save your family?

You probably don't even want to know.

Neither did Dennis Small, but he sure as hell was going to find out.

## CHAPTER ONE

Rocco stared at the moon and couldn't quite believe his luck. It was a warm night and the last thing he thought he would be doing was lying on his back in the open air at midnight with a hot girl writhing on top of him. He wasn't a virgin, not by any means. Although shy with girls by nature, and still in his teens, he was not inexperienced. He was quite successful even, especially with his growing reputation as a rising star in European MMA cage fighting. But he had never encountered a girl like this one.

He had just finished training in the boutique and exclusive Contender Club; Ireland's number one fight club located in the hard inner city of Northside Dublin. The club was exclusive but the neighborhood was not. Step outside the doors and you were in gangster land where guns and knives were weapons of choice, not fists and feet. A fighter became just another ordinary Joe out on these mean streets of crime bosses, heroin dealers and street gangs.

Rocco didn't mind. Since he had taken some of the ranking titles in European MMA often when he stepped outside the club there were girls waiting for autographs with happy endings. The first time it had happened he was more frightened than he had been on any fight night. By now he was only too ready and willing to oblige, provided of course, he wasn't in training for a bout. His new found fame saved him having to chat girls up; a skill which still eluded him despite his confidence in the ring.

On this particular night he had trained until late and found no-one waiting for him in the shadows of the club door. As he walked to his bus stop he saw something he didn't want to see. The girl was trying to scream but her voice was stifled by the hand across her mouth.

He quickly gauged the man's height and weight; 6 foot 5 easily and at least 250lbs. Heavyweight for sure, maybe even a super heavyweight. Rocco had been gaining weight to go up in the classifications but he was still only at light heavyweight. There would be 60 to 70 pounds in the difference and reach would also be a problem. Rocco stood just 5 foot 11 tall.

In the micro second it took him to evaluate the odds, the girl had been dragged around the corner into an alley. He dropped his training bag and launched into a sprint.

Strike first, ask questions later.

Training was already kicking in.

Unless the guy was a heavyweight MMA champion, he could take him.

He rounded the corner and skidded to a halt.

Five, no six pairs of eyes met his.

*What the hell is going on here?*

His heart went into overdrive, beyond adrenaline and into evasive fear. He saw the flash of blades reflected in a street lamp. The girl was trembling, in shock, too terrified even to scream, the stain between her legs evidence that she had already wet herself with fear. Her eyes cried out desperately to Rocco

for help. He was good, but six against one? That was something he'd never done before, never even thought about doing.

*Too late to back out now.*

"Let her go!" He shouted.

Without turning his head he could feel another body circling behind him. Was that 5 or 6 now? Or 7? Before he went into cage fighting Rocco had been a reasonably good street fighter. On a Friday or Saturday night at the main crossroads in the centre of Darklow Town you could always find a sparring partner with a good mix of styles; local boys, travelers and foreigners. His interest in MMA started there. But like every trained fighter, he knew that one against 6 or 7 was a fantasy for computer games and graphic novel movies. If this wasn't a test for his new tattoos, nothing was.

The big man took out a knife from nowhere, a Gerber Mark II, easily recognizable with its distinctive shape and length.

"What's the plan hero?"

Rocco hated knives but he knew all about them from his Dad who liked to collect vintage weapons and the Gerber II was a well-known piece; popular in Vietnam before being retired from use for being 'too brutal'.

The savage looking blade waved in front of his face.

"I said what's the plan, hero?"

There was no plan.

In seconds Rocco had kicked the knife from the big man's hand with a blow that left him doubled in pain, probably with a broken wrist.

The second went down with an Inner City Uppercut, as Rocco's Dad called it; a straight and ruthless kick in the balls. He wasn't going to take chances with anything too fancy.

Already the remaining four in front were hesitating. Rocco's instincts kicked in and with a swinging roundhouse kick to the rear he went for the lone figure behind him, but they were already gone or he had misjudged where they had been. His foot sailed through empty air.

The four in front began to advance but they were slow now, cautious and fearful.

"What about it lads? Come on then. Rapists." He spat the last word. "What's the fuckin' plan?"

He stamped on the big man's knee, the abductor who had held the Gerber II, and a howl tore through the night.

The bodies began to melt away.

"That's right, fuck off the lot of you," he shrieked in rage, indignation, ready for blood if they fancied themselves able, "fuck right off, right now!"

He considered chasing them but then remembered the girl who still sat in shock on the ground.

"Are you OK love?"

*Stupid question.*

She couldn't answer. Rocco went to help her up and she backed away from him. The two injured would-be rapists were still on the ground next to her.

"Don't worry about them." He took her hand and helped her up, scooped up the Gerber Mark II as well with a scowl to its owner. It would be a good present for his Dad.

"Did they hurt you?"

She was still shaking with shock, Rocco still rippled with adrenaline. He gave her a quick scan.

"I think you're OK. Let's get to the police, we need to report this."

"No, no, no please no. Just help me get home, please."

He would have protested but the girl was too frightened, he didn't want to make it worse.

She didn't live far away so he escorted her home although she seemed nearly as frightened of him as she had been of her attackers. As she closed the door to her apartment she gave him one scared look, hesitated as though she had something to say, then closed the door in a choked silence.

*Not even thanks.*

He blew some air, ground his teeth and frowned.

*Oh well. Poor girl is in shock. No need to get pissy Rocco.*

He turned to go back to his bus stop, still alert. After all, there had been a lot of guys and they were armed. They might decide to come back for him once they had gotten their balls together again. He would need to be ready just in case.

As he walked he could feel eyes on him already. He stopped to look around but saw no-one.

*Stay ready.*

But then, with his new tattoos he was always ready. His friends and the other guys at the Contender Club hadn't believed him, but since he had gotten the bizarre new tattoos on his upper back, occupying the entire diamond shaped area of his bulging, rock hard trapezius muscle, he hadn't put a foot wrong. He had begun to feel and act as if he were bullet proof and with his success rate since then, he was beginning to believe he was.

Suddenly all the fighters wanted to know where his crazy tat had come from, but that was a secret. What would be the point if they all had one? That would just set things back to zero again, his fighting advantage diluted to nothing.

Those damn eyes were still on him but when he looked around again there was still no-one there. Must be the adrenaline and shadows making him paranoid.

When he got to the bus stop he sat down and tried to calm himself. He wasn't afraid to get into the ring with any human being, had mastered hundreds of obscure martial arts skills but still he hadn't taken out his bloody driver's license. With the way the buses operated in Dublin this was a serious inconvenience. Next year. Once he had the European title in hand, then he could focus on taking the test.

He was checking text messages when a pair of legs to his left made him jump on the cold metal of the bus shelter seat. Alert as he was he hadn't seen them come near him.

They were female. 100% girl. Long. Slender. Pale and provocative. With his head still down he couldn't see where they ended.

*Not a junkie prostitute, please. Not after the night I've just had.*

Although he still didn't lift his head, his eyes couldn't help but follow the tapering lines of her legs upwards. She wore new and expensive ankle high leather boots. Not typical prostitute attire. The ankles were thin. He followed the lines of her shin bones to the knees. Steel-studded roller-girl, roller derby knee pads?

*You're joking me.*

His eyes went higher. It wasn't like he could really stop them anyway. Somewhere near the top of her upper thighs he found the line of a tiny black mini-skirt.

She looked clean, and the clothes were new, but she could still have been just a non-junkie prostitute. Better than a whacked out smack or meth head anyway. At least she might be reasoned with to go away and leave him alone.

He permitted his eyes to go further, past the curve of her hip bone to the tight leather belt, slim waist, short black leather jacket.

In gentlemanly fashion he skipped her perfect round breasts and raised his eyes to her face. He let out a gasp and his eyes dropped for a second before he could force them up again.

She was jaw-dropping. Sensational. Like nothing he had ever seen before. Not in real life anyway. Maybe in some hip-hop music video or a virtual girl in a video game, but not in the scandalously beautiful, fully accentuated, statuesque and angelic reality of the here and now.

"What's your name?" She asked. Her accent was foreign, east European.

"My... my name?"

"Yes. Name. Your name." She repeated. Her features were long, sharp, exotic. Her long blonde hair was tied back into a tight pony-tail, her eyes were large, oval, and glistened in the street light.

"Uh...," he almost struggled to remember, "Rocco. Rocco's my name."

"Are you sure?" She smiled, teasing him.

He flustered silently.

The bus stop was empty but she sat down close enough to press her thigh against his.

"You are hero, yes?"

"Excuse me?"

"You save girl. Fight bad guys. You are hero, yes?"

Rocco was always shy with girls but this was no girl. This was a beautiful woman. She must have been in her twenties at least. Old by his standards.

He could face down seven guys with knives in a dark alleyway but one beautiful woman, like this and his words began to stick in his throat like chunks of raw meat.

"I was just, you know, trying to help."

"Yes. You are hero. I like heroes."

He gave a nervous laugh as his eyes involuntarily looked her over, scanning face, breasts, arms and legs all in one obvious and blatant instant. He was only 19 after all.

"You like what you see hero?"

"No. God no. I mean yes."

She sniggered mischievously.

"Don't you know little boy? Or can't you make up your mind?"

Rocco didn't know what to make of her, but he was beginning not to care.

"Ah Jesus," he smiled, forcing himself to relax, "of course I do. Sure wouldn't there be something wrong me with if I didn't?"

"This is better. Now you begin to speak like man, not frightened little boy."

He smiled again, the half shy, half cocky smile that made young Irish girls weak at the knees.

"Are you Russian?" He asked her.

"You are smart, hero. I like that. You are like Irish Sherlock Holmes, yes?"



"I may have some sleuthing powers alright."

"Sleuthing. I don't know this word. Maybe we go back to your place and you 'sleuth' me, OK?" Her emphasis of the word sleuth made it sound lewd, wet, irresistible. Rocco's eyes bulged, his tongue tied itself into a knot.

"You live near here Irish hero?"

"Uh, yes, kind of."

Rocco was still afraid, but the fear was making him more excited. It wouldn't be the first wild thing that had happened to him since he started to look like a full-grown man. With his new tattoo and the series of ring victories that followed, his sexual conquests had become easier, more frequent and at times, definitely more wild. The memory of his confidence with lesser females than this gave him his voice back.

"Do you feel like coming back to my place for, um... coffee?"

"Only coffee?" She pouted with little girl disappointment, but then quickly smiled and stood up, the curves of her breasts about level with Rocco's bulging eyeballs.

She was tall, maybe even a little taller than him. Or was it her boots? What difference did it make anyway; this was going to be a night to remember.

"Let's go this way, hero, my house closer. Very nearby." She pulled him roughly from the bus stop and led him towards a nearby city park.

Within minutes they were inside and on the ground. It was an unusually warm night and Rocco couldn't remember ever having been so excited about anything in his life, not even fight nights. The girl, or woman rather, had pushed him firmly, but not unwillingly to the ground and was then instantly on top of him.

He didn't want that though. He wanted her alright, just not on top of him. That was against the rules.

"Wait."

Her lips began to cover his face and neck.

"Stop, please."

It was weird for him, like some kind of perverse role reversal, but exciting at the same time.

Her sure fingers unzipped his training clothes and explored his chest and abdomen.

"No really stop." He said more insistently, but she wouldn't take no for an answer and in seconds he was naked to the waist. He didn't want her to stop really, but he knew he didn't want her on top of him. He never allowed any female to get on top, it was a rule he had to keep, ever since he got the tattoo.

But it had been a long time since then, nearly a year and as his sexual conquests had multiplied the rule which had been easy to keep in the beginning, had become an increasingly hard one.

Now that his shirt was off she lifted herself from him and moved down to his hips. He was relieved; he wouldn't have to use force to get her off him. Her long fingers reached inside the top of his training pants and jerked them to the ankles. He felt the Gerber knife in his long side pocket bump down the side of his leg. She gave a lascivious guffaw as his erection sprang up and bobbed nervously in the shadows.

She felt through the rumpled fabric in his trousers, then pulled out the knife and held it awkwardly above him.

"What is this?" she said.

"Huh?" Rocco lay exposed, dazed, gazing up at the blade.

In a second she spun it in her hand and stabbed it expertly into the ground between his ankles. He flinched as it thudded into the leaves and dirt.

Next he watched, transfixed as she removed her underwear, advanced over him and then dropped herself down onto his stomach, pinning his erection between her vulva and his abdomen.

He was definitely under her now.

"Please. Don't."

But it felt so good. Maybe he could break his rule just this one time?

"I hope you know how to slow it down little boy." She said this, but the look on her face indicated that she didn't really care. A couple of soft pelvic thrusts and he felt himself disappear inside her. It was too late now, the rule was broken, for better or worse.

*Hold on. Jesus Christ. Hold on Rocco. Fuck's sake.*

He struggled. After all, he didn't want the most thrilling experience of his life to end in one short, ugly grunt.

"You look like scared rabbit in headlights again little boy."

She was moving on top of him now, holding him inside of her.

"Aren't you... agh... uhh... going to take off the rest of your...uhh... clothes?"

"Of course not. Why would I? Then I would only have to put back on."

He wished she would though, because keeping her clothes on was making it even harder for him to contain himself.

"What about me though I'm... agghh... pretty... ahhh... naked."

"Yes, but you don't need to put clothes again."

Whatever the hell that meant, it didn't matter anymore as he felt her clamp down onto him, and then lean her hands heavily against his shoulders, pushing him into the dirt and leaves below.

It was like nothing he had ever felt before and after religiously avoiding any girl sitting astride him for so long, it felt good like nothing on earth could have even come close to feeling at that particular moment.

He had to say something to slow things down or this would not only be the most exciting moment of his life but also the shortest.

"Do you... aaghh... like my.... my... uhh... tattoos?" He finally managed.

She leaned in close to him, looked intensely into his eyes, stroked her long fingers over the tattoos on his chest, abdomen and then most greedily of all, on his shoulders and down his upper back.

"I... fucking... love them." She hissed into his ear and then clamped down even harder, causing him to wince in pain this time.

She opened her jacket a little and Rocco saw an electronic glow coming from underneath her blouse.

"Do you like mine?" She purred.

The design was beautiful, intricate, like living circuitry on her skin. Rocco knew a lot about tattoos for a guy his age but he had never seen tats like these before, never in all the years hanging around in his dad's tattoo parlor.

The lights glowed around her rib-cage and then tapered down to her groin, disappearing into a glow between her legs, pressing to his pubic bone.

"Wow, that's... aggh... beautiful. Aaaagghhh!"

He couldn't hold the painful cry in. He didn't want to admit that she was hurting him but it was getting kind of uncomfortable. If it got any worse he might actually have to ask her to go easy. For a moment he had been just at the point of

finishing off but the pain had drawn him back again. Maybe all that pain wasn't such a bad thing after all.

He shut his mouth and decided to hang on.

But she kept on moving, kept squeezing, clamping herself around him.

"Aaaaagghh!" His mouth was shut but he still couldn't hold it in. The mix of pain and pleasure was too new and too much.

And he was breaking his rule.

"Eh..." he tried to think of her name but realized that he hadn't had time for that before she had dragged him into the bushes.

Her grip on him was getting really painful now. He was still excited but the balance of pain and pleasure was beginning to shift towards the unpleasant side.

"Stop." He managed to gasp.

The woman continued to move, slow, rhythmic, powerful, tight.

"Please, you're... aggh... really hurting me."

He still didn't want to manhandle her off him. He was a gentleman at heart. A shy guy.

He tried to put his hands to her hips to control her movements, reduce them, but she pushed her hands down onto his. He tried to slide them under her buttocks, lift her a little away from him, but she was much stronger than she looked. He was just going to have to flip her, no other option.

Then suddenly, before he began to put his full resistance to the task she eased the pressure, released him a little so that he relaxed.

"Whew, thank God for that. You were really beginning to hurt me there.... uh... what is your name again?"

She gave him a disobedient smile and then began playing with his hands, loosening and relaxing his arms before snapping them into a pronating wrist lock on both sides. He instantly recognized the hold and the surprise showed on his face.

"What the...? Are you a fighter or something?"

From any other angle he might have easily escaped, after all, it's not like wrist-locks weren't standard fare in martial arts, but as she tightened the lock she squeezed hard down on him again and the searing pain in his loins combined with the bone breaking lock on his wrists served to weaken him into submission.

"Aaaaagghh."

His disbelief at the situation wasn't helping him either. He couldn't seem to get his hands free and with a growing sense of alarm he realized that there was no easy way out of this lock short of kicking her in the head, which he still didn't want to do. It was wrestling alright, but not as he knew it.

She eased up on the pressure again, allowing him to take a breath and he got some words out.

"Don't make me hurt you baby."

She gave a loud laugh. "What's wrong little boy, aren't you having fun? Is too wild for you hero?"

"Too wild?" He snorted. "No way, not at all. You don't know me babe."

"Very good, because we are not near to finish yet."

She clamped him again and put another turn onto his wrists. The pain was excruciating.

"Aaahhh, no, come on...."

That's it, he would have to kick her in the back of the head or get her in a neck lock with his ankles. He had both the strength and flexibility to reach her neck

with his ankles, even if she was leaning low down on top of him. He flicked his right leg but nothing happened except a little jerk that lifted her a fraction and seared his groin.

She grinned.

"Is that all?" She asked.

Oh yeah, he remembered that his trousers and underpants were around his ankles so he would have to kick her with both feet at the same time.

He gave another powerful jerk, hurting himself and lifting her a little more. Something was pinning his feet to the ground, he couldn't lift them more than an inch from the dirt.

"That's right hero, I have you right where I want you." She grinned into his face.

It was the Gerber. She had staked his trousers to the ground between his ankles using the army knife he had taken as a gift for his Dad.

*Fuck me. How my goin' to get out of this one?*

He thrust his groin up again, like a helpless amateur, and the pain was awful. He watched her throw her head back in pleasure at the move.

Now he tried to head-butt her, it was the only option left, but she kept her head just out of his reach and laughed wildly as he struggled and floundered, causing himself more pain each time.

"Ready to give up little boy?"

She squeezed hard again.

"Aaaaggggh! Please.... no... OK. Tap out for fuck's sake, tap out. You win."

"That's better baby, a little politeness not going to hurt, eh?"

But she still didn't let him go.

He wondered if he was actually going to have to cry out for help. 'Please help me, this woman is having sex with me and I want her to stop.'

*For fuck's sake, don't be ridiculous, Rocco, this is a fuckin' fantasy come true! Just relax and go with the flow.*

He fully relaxed now. Or as much as he could with the constant contraction on his groin.

She sensed it immediately and used his relaxation to push his wrists in under her knees. The studded knee pads pressed into his soft wrists, pinning his arms to the ground and causing more sharp, debilitating pain to shoot up into his forearms.

Suddenly the roller-girl look didn't seem so cute any more

She clamped down harder than ever now and he shrieked out in pain. He could feel a warm liquid running down onto his testicles and inner thighs. Was it her? Was she that wet? Maybe he had already come? He wasn't even sure any more. Was it blood?

*Oh Christ, no fucking rubbers, Rocco you fucking idiot...*

Then he realized that although he was shrieking, everything was still silent in the woods. All he could hear was the rustling in the leaves and the dirt as the woman on top of him moved, relentlessly, riding up and down on his shaft. He was shrieking and choking at the same time.

That's right, her hands were free now that her knees were pinning his aching weakened arms to the ground.

He tried to lift his head but she slammed it back down into the dirt with her right hand. He felt her left hand on his Adam's apple, squeezing.

His head was spinning from the blow against the ground and the panic set in for real now. The woman's fingers searched his throat for the carotid arteries. The knee pads seemed to almost break his wrists. Was the bitch really trying to kill him? As a trained fighter he was well aware that 7 to 14 seconds was all it would take for him to lose consciousness once the throttle hold was fastened on his throat. He tried to scream but her right elbow pushed up against his chin forcing his mouth closed. He could only grunt and snort through his nose.

His young, healthy, super-fit heart and struggling body sent a powerful pulse through his neck. She easily found her goal and then expertly pinched the blood vessels to a halt. He could feel himself begin to black out. Only seconds to go.

His body thrashed, involuntarily now, and he could feel himself, still so annoyingly fucking excited finally release himself inside her and then he relaxed, looked up to see her huge, soft, oval eyes watch him go into unconsciousness.

The Gerber Mark II was in her right hand, poised over his throat.

## CHAPTER TWO

The relationship of tattoos to antisocial personality disorder would seem obvious. However, as we live in politically correct times, nothing can be taken for granted any more. Knee-jerk responses like this one need to be hypothesized and then studied under conditions of clinical accuracy.

Preliminary results seem to confirm what we all thought anyway; forensic psychiatric inpatients are more likely to have tattoos.

No kidding.

They are likely to have a higher percentage of overall body area tattooed. They are also more likely to have histories of sexual and substance abuse and suicide attempts than non-tattooed offenders.

So why do they get more tattoos? What are they trying to do? Externalize? Internalize? Keep themselves safe from demons the rest of us can't see?

Are they just crazy or do they know something the rest of us don't?

The oldest known tattoos date back 5000 years to a male found frozen in the Alps in 1991.

He was very, very dead.

The latest tattoo in human history is the one that is about to be drilled into the stretched out skin on my back.

And me? I'm as good as dead anyway...

The needle pierces my skin at 3000 jabs a minute. What's that per second? 50 times?

My math's not bad.

How likely am I now to take drugs, sexually abuse and engage in suicidal anti-social behavior?

Answer; very, very much indeed.

So why is a 'normal' guy like me getting a tattoo etched onto his back? Well, although I'd rather not talk about it, you're in my head already, so you might as well hear it.

It all started with a murder, like a lot of dumb, sordid human stories do. Some time ago a body was found in the woods to the rear of the quiet Sunnyvale estate in Darklow, Co. Wickford. Known for its taciturn people and industrial history, Darklow is a small, beautiful town, with a population of approximately 12703 at the last census. Sleepy, lost, depressed, and of course, like everywhere else in Ireland these days, increasingly poor and violent.

I live there. Or at least I did until quite recently. The Sunnyvale estate is a gated community in a lush rural setting, just outside Darklow centre and with a beautiful view of the Wickford Mountains.

The body was inside the perimeter of the 'compound', as some residents like to call the estate. Had it been outside, no big deal. But it wasn't. It was inside, in a wooded area just opposite a row of houses. Directly opposite number 17 Sunnyvale Avenue.

An 8 year old boy found the body.

The deceased was naked and covered in tattoos except, it was rumored, for one large section missing from the middle of his upper back and across the shoulder blades. To the relief of everyone, he wasn't a local resident, not one that we could think of anyway. Those kinds of tattoos would have stood out on our little estate even today when so many ordinary Joes feel compelled to decorate themselves like prison inmates.

A meeting of the residents association was convened by founder member Dennis Small. That's me. I invited the local police to attend. Fortunately, our local police sergeant is also a resident of the estate so the meeting was well attended by the Gardai. My fellow citizens were angry and afraid. I was angry too. It was Thursday and normally at this time I would be in my basement restoring antiques.

I was not happy.

"Who was this young man?" Mrs. O'Grady asked.

"We haven't identified him yet." Sergeant Mike Biggs replied.

Mike Biggs had been with the Darklow police station since as long as I could remember and that was a good ten years. I'd never seen him look so nervous. Small town cop with a big crime on his hands. I didn't blame him. I was unsettled too. He lived in Sunnyvale, number 17 Sunnyvale Avenue. The body had been found directly opposite his house. It was his son who had found the body. I felt for him and for his family. Policeman or not he was also a human being and no child should have to ever see something as gruesome as that. He was here in uniform tonight.

"Is it true he was missing a piece of skin?" asked a traumatized Mrs. Dunne.

"I can't confirm or deny that Mrs. Dunne, not until the autopsy report has come in."

"So there was no tattoo missing?" Derek Reilly, hard local resident asked. Mrs. Dunne gasped. "A tattoo? There was a man with tattoos on our estate?" She looked terrified, horrified. I knew how she felt, but of course. If she hadn't been so short-sighted and befuddled she would have observed that half the people in the room around her sported skin art and she would have passed out on the spot. It can't be easy for more traditional older people like Mrs. Dunne to watch this continual decline in taste and values that goes on year after year.

"As I said Mr. Reilly, I can't confirm or deny. All I can say at this point is that all avenues of investigation are open including that of foul play."

"Including foul play? Did he cut off his own head?" Derek said, he seemed to be more incensed than anyone else in the room and not prepared to let Sgt. Biggs off the hook. If anyone could put Mike under pressure it would be him. There were gasps at this suggestion. Not everyone had heard the rumor. Mrs. Dunne looked very shaky on her feet so I helped her to find a seat and sit down. She was a widow, living alone on the estate. Of course she would be terrified.

"Who told you that? Nothing has been established." Mike Biggs said. "It is by no means confirmed that foul play was involved. I would urge you to keep unsubstantiated rumors like this to yourself."

"I heard about the head too." Peadar Croney said. "And if you want to know where I heard it then just ask me." He had heard it from his own son, a school friend of Mike Biggs shortly before the Sergeant had clamped down on his son's communications. Maybe it was just children exaggerating or maybe not. There were a lot of resources here; the whole of Darklow Garda station, both of the town ambulances and the forensics team from Dublin hadn't even arrived yet. I sat next to Mrs. Dunne with my arm around her.

Sgt. Biggs didn't ask Peadar the question.

"Why would anyone do such a thing?" Mrs. Dunne said in a frail voice.

"Now look what you've done Peadar." Sgt. Biggs hissed. "That has not been confirmed Mrs. Dunne. There is no need to concern yourself for the moment. Just take your usual security precautions, nothing more and stay away from this area. It's a crime scene. Any contamination of evidence and you may be subject to prosecution yourself."

Mike Biggs was a good man. Only in his late 30s but with all the rectitude of a senior pillar of the local community. Today he was being unusually strict and formal, no doubt in view of the serious nature of the event.

"Has there been any unusual criminal activity in the area of late?" I asked.

He gave me an angry look.

"I assure you Dennis, the Gardai know how to do their job. We don't require suggestions from amateur detectives."

It was a bit sharp. I was only trying to stay informed and offer any help if I could. Obviously Mike was under a lot of stress so I decided to leave him alone. After all, he was on our side, a resident of the estate and just as concerned as us. For God's sake, the poor guy would see the crime scene sitting down to eat his breakfast tomorrow morning.

On the other hand, if he wasn't doing his job properly as a result of stress, the Mike Biggs I knew would be happy to be called out on it. I decided the estate as a whole was more important than keeping Mike happy.

"I propose we set up a neighborhood watch patrol immediately." I said.

"Hear, hear." There was a lot of support, particularly from Derek Reilly, Peadar Crony and another tough looking local Dad by the name of Michael Nulty.

Mike Biggs didn't look happy at all.

"Now come here to me Dennis, we already have a residents' association," he was a member himself, "and the squad car comes through here all the time. Sure what else would a neighborhood patrol do? This poor fellah probably wasn't even killed here."

"So he was killed then." Derek said.

"I didn't say killed."

"Yes you did."

"I did not. Not officially."

"Come off it Mike, this isn't the evening news or your boss in Dublin you're talking too. I'm your neighbor and I live in this estate. Tell us what's going on."

Mike paused and took a deep breath.

"OK. I'm still not saying there was foul play here, but in the case that there was, it would still not indicate that there would be a repeat of the crime or that it represented the beginning of a trend. This would just be a convenient spot for a gang to drop off someone they've hit. Now in this case a neighborhood patrol isn't going to make any difference, is it? The horse is already out of the field, what's the use in closing the gate now?"

So, already we could assume that it was, in fact, a crime. A murder, probably gangland, right here in our safe little estate in the countryside. A patrol, I thought, would at least make everyone feel more secure. Particularly people like Mrs. Dunne.

"Well what harm can a patrol do Mike? Is there a law against it?" I said.



"There is no law against it and you know that, so we can do whatever we want." Derek Reilly said. His attitude wasn't helping. I was glad I had someone fired up, but I wanted Mike on my side as well.

"Obviously we would prefer the Gardai to be involved Mike, but this is short notice. I think we would all like to have something done tonight so we may have to involve you later and just keep you posted for now."

"OK Dennis, you can do what you want, all I'm saying is that this is still a safe neighborhood and you don't want to overreact to an event like this. Even if this was a gang related crime, and I'm not saying it is, there would be no direct threat to the estate itself. It is just unfortunate that this man's body landed here on our doorstep."

"Mike, all I want to do is help out the Gardai. We'll just do a patrol to keep an eye on things and be sure to call you if anything is out of order. There's no question of us trying to intervene or take things into their own hands."

He didn't say anything.

"Show of hands. Everyone in favor of a neighborhood patrol?"

Derek Reilly was first up and gave a menacing stare around the meeting hall, daring any man to keep his hand down.

Nearly all hands went up.

Mike looked even less happy.

I did feel for him, but I also believed that we could be of assistance to him. For God's sake, he had a wife and two young children, it would make them feel more secure to know that we were walking past the house regularly throughout the night, keeping an eye on things. The Gardai can't be everywhere at once.

"Volunteers for tonight's patrol?" I asked.

About five hard looking local dads put their hands up, and a couple of the more spirited local ladies.

"Now let's be very careful here." Mike's disapproval was making him distinctly nervous. "We don't want any vigilantism in this town. We had a problem with that kind of thing back in the 80s and 90s and we don't want those days to come back again."

I hadn't been aware of the problem back then, at least not in Darklow. Surely in this little town it couldn't have been that bad. Nothing like where I grew up in Dublin. These small town Gardai have no conception of just how extreme things are in big cities.

"It's a neighborhood watch patrol Mike. If there's any problems you'll be the first to know." I meant it, but Mike didn't look convinced.

"Look, Sergeant Biggs," I used his official title to show some respect, "I'm just trying to be civic minded. You know how I feel about these things. If you let something small go, whatever it is, a bit of graffiti, minor vandalism, it's seen as a license...." He cut me off.

"I know all about the broken window theory Dennis. I was in New York to do training on the method for God's sake, so please don't lecture me on criminology and crime prevention. I'm not going to tell you how to do insurance, now am I?"

"This isn't a broken window Mike," I reverted back to his first name, "this is a bloody murder." There were murmurs of assent from the group. I had always been good at motivating groups likes this, even in a country as notoriously difficult to rile people in as Ireland.

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