

## Chapter 3

They say breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Breakfast with Martin, it turned out, would be the most important meal of my life.

“Have you heard of Gerald Keelier?” Martin asked.

“The convicted serial killer?”

“Yeah.”

Who hadn't heard of him? Keelier was one of Canada's most notorious criminals. He had gone on a 20-year killing spree where he maimed and sexually assaulted more than 20 women. But he always sought out a particular kind of woman: A well-educated, professional who often worked in a traditionally male-dominated industry. In other words: a woman with clout and power. He was caught and convicted about nine years ago and is now serving umpteen life sentences at a psychiatric hospital in Saskatchewan. The only serial killer more notorious in Canada was Robert Pickton. Pickton allegedly killed and dismembered the bodies of 27 women on his pig farm in Port Coquitlam British Columbia. He, too, was now serving consecutive life sentences, since Canada doesn't have a death penalty.

“Why are you asking me about Keelier?” By this time, I was *really* curious.

“It's because, um, well”, his voice broke off, and he took a handkerchief from his pant pocket and gently wiped his brow.

“You'll have to forgive me. This is my first day on the job”, he nervously.

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“On the job?” I couldn’t imagine what type of job would cause someone to hunt me down on Facebook, call me in the wee hours of the morning, and lure me to a hotel for breakfast.

“Yeah. It’s a new post with RCMP.”

“*The Royal Canadian Mounted Police?!?*”

Martin nodded affirmatively. Then he discreetly removed his black leather bifold badge wallet from his pocket, and slid it across the table for my review. I opened it. On the right was the familiar hat badge: the crown sitting atop the word “Canada”; a bison head surrounded by the motto *Maintiens le droit* (“Maintain the Law”); a wreath of maple leaves framing the motto; and the “Royal Canadian Mounted Police” banner at the very bottom. The left side of the badge wallet contained de Witt’s identification card with his name (Martin Charles de Witt), a three-fourths frontal head-and-shoulder color photo of Martin, the expiration date of his card (2-15-2017), and his rank: Inspector. Still, something didn’t seem right.

“But the Mounties don’t have policing jurisdiction over Quebec,” I said suspiciously. “Besides, where’s your red uniform? And ‘new post?’ What ‘new post’ do you hold, exactly, Mr. – oh, excuse me—*Inspector de Witt?*”

“Now, Miss Vollet, I can understand that this must all seem very shady to you”, he said apologetically. “I’ll answer any questions you have. Let’s start with the ones you’ve just asked. First, you are correct: The Mounties don’t have jurisdiction over Quebec. But this is a national case and covers many provinces throughout Canada, and it just recently came to involve Quebec. The nature of this case requires the special expertise of this new post that I’m now working in, so the RCMP is working with and through Quebec’s provincial police, *Sûreté du Québec*. You might say I’m on loan from the RCMP to the *Sûreté du Québec*.”

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Martin paused to take a long, slow, deliberate sip of the Red Rose Tea from the delicate white teacup adorned with small blue flowers around the rim. He carefully put the cup back into its saucer, and daintily dabbed his mouth with the snow white napkin.

“As far as the red Mountie uniform,” he continued, “that would make it a trifle difficult for me to be undercover, now wouldn’t it?”

I sat silent for a moment, absorbing what he said and trying to decide if I believed him. Not yet convinced, I asked him to tell me about his new post.

“You mentioned this is your first day on the job, in a new post. How does one get to be an inspector, and exactly what is this ‘new post,’” I asked as I folded my arms in front of me.

“Well, I’m afraid I’m one of those people who can’t seem to hold down a job for very long,” he said with his now trademark nervous laugh. “I had worked with the Mounties several years ago, but I was mostly on desk jobs. Even back then I was physique-challenged and was relegated to Official Paper Pusher. I got bored, so I left to pursue something more fun. “

He adjusted his glasses, and leaned in closer.

“You know, Miss Mollet, I always had had this fantasy of becoming a writer. So,” he said, throwing his hands up in the air as he fell back in his chair and smiled broadly, “I wrote!”

“And what did you write,” I asked, assuming he had written for some inane police industry pub.

“Crime novels. I was doing that when, about nine months ago, I get this call from my former super at RCMP, and...”

“Wait a minute,” I interrupted. “*Waaaaait* just a minute. I’m a voracious reader, and I’ve never heard of Martin de Witt before meeting you today.”

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“I went by the pen name Brad Martin.”

I stared off into space as my memory did a quick search of my reading history. “Oh, yeahhh”, I said, vaguely recalling a pathetic novel I had read by a Brad Martin. My memory gradually brought back details of a graphic, gory crime story. “You wrote, *Bloodbath in Banff*.”

“That’s right.”

“That was awful.”

“Ouch.”

“Anyway”, Martin continued, “As I was saying: My former supervisor from the RCMP called me and wanted me to be part of a program they recently started up where they hire novelists and other creative types to help catch psychopaths and serial criminals. It’s called the ‘Creative Crime Division.’”

“If the RCMP was going to hire a novelist, they would have picked someone better than Brad Martin,” I said before I could catch myself.

“Hullooo! I’m sitting right here,” Brad, er, Martin protested. I had obviously hurt his feelings.

“Sorry,” I offered. I didn’t mean to be mean, and I felt bad about my harsh remark. An uncomfortable silence followed. He paused for a moment to regain his composure. After taking another long, slow sip of his tea, he finally spoke.

“I wasn’t, as you might surmise, necessarily hired for my writing prowess,” he continued. “I was hired for my mind. As I mentioned, the Mounties developed a new Creative Crime Division. It’s modeled after a program by the Department of Homeland Security in the States where novelists and screenwriters who concoct horrific crime stories are brought in to create possible terrorist scenarios so

that the good guys can stay a half step ahead of the bad guys. It's been extended to other types of crimes, too—not just terrorist threats.”

*I wonder if he meant to say horrible crime stories*, I thought as he further explained the idea behind the new post.

The theory is that creative types use the same parts of their brains as criminals and, therefore, think like criminals.”

“Do you?”

“I must,” he shrugged. “I passed the test.”

“The test?”

“Yes,” Martin continued nonchalantly. “They have a test to verify whether someone has the mind of a potential psychopath. It's a series of scenarios where they ask you why someone did the thing they did. If you answer a correctly, you think like a killer.”

“So I suppose I should unfriend you on Facebook then?”

Martin grinned wryly and raised his eyebrows. “That's totally your call.”

By this time, I was regretting not vetting my Facebook Friend requests more carefully. Someone sends you a Friend Request, you click “Confirm,” and you don't give it a second thought. It's a virtual friend, after all, and for some reason that makes you feel immune to danger. Was this guy—this Martin de Witt—for real? Was he playing an elaborate prank on me? Or, was he a dangerous person? He certainly didn't seem like someone to fear; I fancied him more the type to commit a crime of negligence rather than a crime of evil intent. Still, I decided it was best—safest—to continue to play along until I

knew for sure, without letting on that I was nervous about being in the same room with him, let alone at the same table.

“So, Mr. psychopath-Mountie,” I joked, trying to disguise the unsettled feeling that was starting to settle in the pit of my stomach. “How can I help you?”

“I—we—are hoping to get your help, and that of Project 101, in capturing the person whom we believe to be Keelier’s accomplice, who’s still on the loose.”

“I don’t recall Keelier having a sidekick. That was never brought out in the trial, was it?”

“No, no it wasn’t. But the RCMP has suspected he had one all along. And now we have proof that he did. We just have to bring this guy out of hiding.

“And does this guy have a name?”

Jeremy Covelak.

The waiter returned with our breakfast entrees. (*Thank God! The main reason I had agreed to meet Martin in the first place was to get a decadent breakfast.*) Our conversation momentarily stopped as we waited for our food to be placed in front of us. I hadn’t realized just how hungry I was until the inviting aroma of the smoked salmon wafted through the air, into my nostrils, making my mouth water. The uneasiness in my stomach gave way to hunger pangs. I was lost in the pleasant aroma and inviting appearance of my smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, temporarily forgetting the strangeness of the circumstances, when I looked up from my plate just in time to see Martin’s elbow knock his tea cup off the table. As he clumsily clamored to catch the falling cup, he knocked over his water glass with his other arm, and the contents splashed into his plate of French toast and ham. As he was trying to catch the water glass, he stood up and knocked his chair over. Every eye in the dining room turned to look in

our direction, the source of the loud clashing and clanging sounds made by dishes and furniture being tumbled about.

*Great. I'm having breakfast with Columbo,* I thought as I had a flashback to the American TV series I had seen while visiting my aunt in the States in the late 70s. Columbo was a seemingly slow-witted, fumbling, overly polite police detective who appeared unlikely to solve *any* crime, let alone a serial murder. Right now, the only difference I could see between Columbo and Martin de Witt was that Martin was a better dresser. And he took better care of his skin; he had the kind of peaches-and-cream complexion that can only come from pampering with high-end skin care products.

"Oh excuse me. I'm so sorry," Martin said as another waiter rushed over with two fresh towels.

"That's' quite alright, sir," the perfectly mannered waited said. "Please. Let me take your dish and bring you a fresh one."

"Thank you, but that's really not necessary."

"Please, sir. I insist," he said, and whisked off with the water-soaked toast and meat before Martin could respond.

Martin brushed his shirt with a napkin, trying to sop up some of the water that had splattered against it. Finally, he looked up at me.

"Um. Sorry. Where were we?" Martin asked in perfect absent-minded Columbo style.

"You were about to divulge details of Gerald Keelier's alleged accomplice."

"Oh. Right. Yeah. Covelak isn't just your run-of-the-mill serial killer. (*There is such a thing?*) He also fancies himself a novelist. A few months ago we raided a cabin in the West Island Forests, which our intelligence unit discovered had been his latest hangout. Covelak had fled by the time our agents got

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there, but he apparently ran out in a hurry because he left behind a thumbnail drive that contained a half-finished crime novel. Now, this is where it gets interesting: Based on the electronic time/date stamp on each chapter entry, it seems as if he writes the chapter on how and where he plans to kill his next victim, and then carries out the plan outlined in the chapter. Once the deed is done, he moves on to write the next chapter, killing the next victim, and the storyline and process continues from there.”

*Sounds more like the true crime genre than fiction, I thought. Novelists often talk about how they have to “live” with their characters, or become their characters as they are writing. But this guy—this Covelak—was his own lead character in a true crime story!*

“That’s how we know he was working with Keelier. The first four chapters of Covelak’s book give exact details of the last four killings attributed to Keelier. The stories contain items, schedules, and other information about the crime scenes that were never made public and never came out in court; they were known only to the crime scene investigators. And the personal details Covelak included about each of the victim’s – their likes, dislikes, favorite foods, favorite colors, bank account balance, Social Insurance Numbers, prescriptions they were taking, hobbies, pets, you name it – are things that only those close to the victims could know.”

“Holy crap! How could he get their bank account balances and SI numbers?”

“He’s a good computer hacker as well.”

I fell back into my chair and let out a long breath. Jeremy Covelak wasn’t just some fictitious killer in a crime novel, someone you could forget when you went to sleep at night, someone who doesn’t exist in your world. He’s real. He’s not just alive in the imagination. He could be...anywhere. He could be *here*.

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I started to nervously look around the room, wondering what a serial-killer-as-novelist would look like. What would he eat? How did he choose his next victim?

“Miss Vollet. Are you okay?”

“Um, yes”, I stammered. “All of this is interesting, Mr. de Witt, but”,

“Martin, please.”

“...but, Martin, then, I still don’t understand how you think that I and Project 101 can help you find and capture Jeremy Covelak.”

“Ah, yes. Well, now that you know about Mr. Covelak’s penchant for writing fictional crime stories that he himself turns into true crime stories, it shouldn’t seem a stretch to imagine how enticing it would be for someone like him to want to participate in a novel project such as yours. What we find with these serial killers is that they are often after notoriety—and a public forum for their message. In this case, it seems the message he wants to spread is that women do not belong in professional or powerful positions. “

“Talk about a chauvinist!” I snorted.

“He is. But he’s a *dangerous* chauvinist.”

“Aren’t all chauvinists dangerous to diversity, acceptance of all people, and a free society?” I said.

“Absolutely,” Martin agreed. “But not all dangerous chauvinists are psychopaths and pose a *physical* danger to the community,” he corrected. Then he elaborated on exactly how I fit into this scheme: “Project 101, with its crowdsourced approach and high visibility on social media, could help give Covelak the fame he so desperately seeks – and give him a public forum for his message. In the *Copyright, 2018, Vicki Kunkel. All Rights Reserved. Authorized copying or reproduction in any form is prohibited.*”

process, we can set a trap to get this guy off the streets and protect his future victims. The thumbnail drive we discovered during our raid of his cabin hideout contained a list of his next three victims who will, unfortunately—if his past pattern continues-- be the main characters in his next three chapters. They're all in their late 40s or early 50s."

"Same as Keelier's victims," I said, remembering news accounts about the victims that I had read in the local papers.

"Right. So, we know who the next three women are on his list; we just don't know how he plans to carry out those murders. We suspect those chapters haven't been written yet because they weren't on the thumbnail drive. Either that, or he has those on his laptop hard drive and just didn't get around to copying them to the smaller drive before our raid. Anyway, as I said, you and your colleagues could play a pivotal role in getting this guy off the streets."

I furrowed my brow, not liking where I suspected this was going. Just then, the waiter returned with Martin's fresh breakfast plate. His eyes remained fixed on me. He didn't touch his breakfast. And it was clear from the way he just sat there looking at me that hadn't come to breakfast to eat; he had come to close a deal. Realizing he wasn't going to give up easily—at least not until he had a chance to tell me his entire plan—I reluctantly encouraged him to continue.

"You expect me and my fellow editors at Project 101 to do this *how*?" I sighed.

Martin de Witt spent the next ten minutes detailing an elaborate plan he had for Project 101 to evolve into a crime novel that would lure Covelak out of hiding and entice him to divulge where and how his next heinous crime would happen. The first part of his plan involved writing a new chapter that would introduce an intelligent, successful, single female character into the crowd-sourced novel—one who had no problem living without a man.

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“The character traits would be based on the traits of Covelak’s next victim, which we researched from the next name on his hit list,” Martin explained. “We would write the chapter so that the traits of *our* female character exactly matched the traits of *Covelak’s* female character in *his* next chapter. That would, most likely, entice Covelak to submit a follow-up chapter to Project 101—a chapter that we hope will detail exactly when and where he plans to kill his next victim.”

“We?!” I blurted out. “We will write this chapter?! Who, exactly, are the people who comprise this ‘we’?”

“Well,” Martin started to stammer a bit. “I... I...thought we could...we...you and I...could collaborate on the chapter.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I deadpanned.

“No. I’m totally serious. Look, you like to write—you said so on your Facebook page—and I’m a published author who was hired by the RCMP to do specifically this type of creative work to help solve crimes.”

“I’m still astonished that your novel got published!” I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

“At. Any. Rate.” Martin’s tone was becoming staccato and annoyed, “As I was *trying* to explain: We could collaborate to create a chapter that would be sure to entice Covelak to write a subsequent chapter for Project 101 that would give us the specifics on when, where, and how he plans to commit his next murder. That information will give us – the RCMP and Sûreté du *Québec*, not you and me--a chance to apprehend him before any more lives are lost. Of course, you and I would write under a pseudonym.”

“Oh, of course,” I said sarcastically with a wave of my hand through the air. “Pardon me, Inspector, but this is preposterous! It’s ludicrous! Is this a joke? Or perhaps your overactive imagination is running away with you, and you have visions of writing another bad novel yourself. And how do we know Covelak is even aware of Project 101?”

“He had a link to your site on the hard drive we recovered.”

“Really?” I grinned, admittedly a bit flattered. “Still,” I said as I once again assumed a posture of seriousness, “This plan of yours is completely unethical. We can’t set up Project 101 as some sort of ruse to *possibly* catch a criminal that the great minds at RCMP aren’t smart enough to bag on their own. I won’t compromise my standards, my colleague’s standards, or those of Project 101,” I announced indignantly. “Besides, it’s not fair to all of the legitimate contestants who work so hard on their submissions.”

Inspector de Witt ran his hand through what was left of his thinning hair. He slowly and deliberately pulled off his glasses, held them up to the light, pretending to clean them with his napkin.

“So you would rather adhere to your little set of rules, Miss Vollet,” he said, as he slipped his glasses back onto his round face and looked up at me, “than save someone’s life. Is that right?”

I was surprised—and impressed. This was the first sign of a backbone I had seen in Martin all morning.

“It’s not that simple,” I protested. “We’re already several weeks into the competition. We’ve already selected some finalists for the first chapters. We can’t just change the rules in the middle of the game. And we certainly can’t compromise the integrity of the contest.”

“You could if you wanted to.”

“It’s not up to just me,” I huffed. “I have to run this by our entire editorial board and the other judges.”

I shuddered as I envisioned how *that* meeting would go: *Hey guys, I know this sounds strange, and I know we’re already into the contest but, gosh, over the weekend I met with this fashion-conscious, vertically-challenged, God-awful novelist-slash-investigator with the RCMP who wants us to completely abandon the contest rules and have him and me write one of the ‘winning’ chapters under a pseudonym so that we can possibly attract a serial killer. Anybody game?*

Good grief. I’d either get a pink slip or sent to a psych ward.

“We absolutely cannot do that. Not only does it go against the contest rules, but also against my personal ethics,” I said firmly. “I certainly don’t want to give a voice to some psychopath chauvinist who is so intolerant of one segment of the human race.”

“Sounds pretty prejudicial for someone who likes to play the tolerance card,” inspector de Witt said flatly.

“Excuse me!?” I said indignantly.

“I’m just saying: How can you justify condemning Covelak for being intolerant of women when you are clearly showing intolerance for him? Aren’t you being prejudiced?”

“Uh, yeah...against a *murderer!*”

“But have you given any thought as to why he targets women? What if he had been abused by his mother, or what if a former female boss fired him without cause? Or what if...”

“None of those things excuses *murder*,” I retorted incredulously. “Why are you suddenly sticking up for him?”

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“I’m not. I’m just trying to open your mind enough to hopefully get you to consider the good that you could do if—just this one time—you allowed yourself to break the rules. You would help stop this guy from hurting anyone else.”

My head was spinning. Martin had a point. Even prejudice against a murderer is still prejudice. Although I believed that all writers have a right to express themselves, did that include a murderer who has a writing hobby? But how could I break the confidence of so many wonderful, talented writers who were working so hard on their submissions? And, could I live with myself if I rejected inspector de Witt’s plan, and then this Covelak guy murdered someone else?

Suddenly, I was getting weary of this conversation, and I wanted to leave. My appetite was gone, and I needed to get away from Martin de Witt.

“Look. I’m sure your intentions are admirable and that you believe that this half-baked plan of yours could actually work. But I have somewhere I need to be soon, so I really must leave now. It’s been, well, interesting to meet you.”

I started to stand up, but he grabbed my arm.

“Please,” he said, with a look of near desperation in his eyes. “I know this is a lot to throw at you all at once, and I realize you need to think about this. But promise me at least that you’ll talk to your editorial board and the other judges, and get back to me.”

He pulled out his card, and scribbled a number on the back.

“My office and cell numbers are on the front. Feel free to call the RCMP and the Sûreté du Québec if you want to check out my story. I’m writing my home number on the back, just in case you can’t reach me at the other two numbers. “

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I took a deep breath in, and held it for several seconds. “Oh all right,” I sighed out of sheer desperation. *If I agree to pitch it to my colleagues—even half-heartedly—and they reject it, which they will, then I maybe this guy will leave me alone.*

I opened my purse and thrashed around for a pen and a small notepad. “You said you have a list of the next three victims. If I’m going to be persuasive with my colleagues, I’ll need their names. So, who’s gonna be the next main character in Jeremy Covlak’s murder mystery?”

Martin’s pale blue eyes—the kind that make you think of the clear crisp sky above a mountaintop or those dreamy pictures of Earth taken from space – were both apologetic and earnest.

“You.”