

THE FRAILITY OF FLESH
by Sandra Ruttan

"Nothing softeneth the arrogance of our nature like a mixture of some frailties ; it is by them we are best told that we must not strike too hard upon others, because we ourselves do so often deserve blows; they pull our rage by the sleeve and whisper gentleness to us in our censures, even when they are rightly applied."

Sir George Savile, *Advice to a Daughter*

Chapter 1

“It’s just...” The woman’s gaunt face tightened as she clenched the muscles, twisted her jaw and blinked rapidly. She sucked in a sharp breath and continued. “Just not... right, somehow. You raise ‘em. You don’t really think about buryin’ a kid.”

Her hands shook visibly as she pushed her straw-like hair behind her ears, then reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table. The trembling eased as she slipped a cigarette from the container, as though touch alone could transfer the nicotine into her system. Her motions were so fluid the cigarette was in her mouth within seconds, her eyes closed as the tension seeped out of her wiry body.

She almost smiled.

Then the facial muscles sagged again as she slowly removed the cigarette from her lips and stuck it back in the pack. Her actions had been instinctive and automatic when she was taking the cigarette out. Once she’d remembered the no-smoking ban in restaurants she’d devoted her full attention to the process of putting it back in the box, as though if she pried her gaze away for even a split second or dared to breathe it would break her concentration... as though tragedy might strike if she failed to replace the cigarette properly.

Craig Nolan processed all of this as he watched the woman who sat across from him. Before today he hadn’t heard of her. When she asked if he could meet with her to discuss an old case he’d suggested she talk to someone who handled cold case files, but she’d been insistent. Not that kind of case. An old case Steve Daly had handled, years before.

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That was when it clicked. Lisa Harrington had received notification from the parole board. Her daughter's murderer had applied for early release. Craig guessed Lisa had reached for the cigarettes first and the phone second. She'd called the RCMP in an attempt to locate Steve Daly, with no luck, until someone finally suggested she call Craig Nolan instead.

Someone who figured it was personal, not professional. Possibly someone too lazy to look up the name of whomever Steve had partnered with when he'd worked this murder.

Or someone who just couldn't be bothered to ask Lisa what she wanted to talk to Steve about.

Craig wasn't familiar with the case, but his present workload was light. His workload had been light for months, but that was a different issue. All that mattered was that there was no excuse for him to brush her off. It was just to grab a quick coffee, explain how parole hearings worked, and there was a niggling voice in the back of his brain that told him Steve would want to know he'd followed up on this. One small thing Craig could do to ease Steve's guilt.

Guilt about so many things.

A waitress filled a mug of coffee in front of Lisa and reached for Craig's cup but he shook his head.

"You, uh, look kinda young," Lisa said as she wrapped her hands around the mug. "I-I don't remember you at all."

"I didn't work your daughter's case." He watched the truth hit home in her features as she set her drink back down abruptly. The question was forming on her lips as he raised his hand. "Steve Daly is teaching classes at

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The Depot.” Her face remained blank, so he guessed she wasn’t familiar with the name of the RCMP Academy. “Where they train new officers.”

She nodded, as though this all made perfect sense, but the way her eyes pinched with confusion told him that it was so far beyond her focus right now that she couldn’t process it. Her mind was on one thing: Donny Lockridge.

Lockridge, the teenager convicted of murdering Lisa’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Hope.

Lockridge, who, despite being bumped up to adult court and given a twenty-year sentence had served ten years and was now eligible for parole. Life sentences in Canada seldom meant life, and in most cases convicted murderers never came close to serving the usual maximum of twenty-five years.

Release after ten years wasn’t unheard of. Just another thing about the so-called justice system that made Craig’s stomach turn.

“Nobody tells me nothin’, you know? Just lock him up and move on. Steve, he was the only one who said much to me at all.” She lifted the mug with both hands, her gaze on the contents as she took a sip. “I don’t know what this means.”

“Do you have a lawyer?” Craig asked. The quick shake of her head confirmed what he should have already known. This was a woman who, barely in her forties, looked like she’d turned into a compulsive chain-smoker when she’d finally kicked other habits. The way she scratched at her arms, her skin and bones body, her gray pallor and the vacuous stare gave it away. She was a shell, someone who’d tried to fill the void with one

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substance or another and her best years were well behind her, despite the fact that she wasn't that old.

Lisa Harrington was someone who'd probably spent her life in and out of jail, dependent on court appointed attorneys and government assistance programs to make ends meet when she wasn't on the wrong side of a prison sentence. Not that any of that mattered at that moment.

"They sent the letter to let you know he's applied for early release. It tells you when the hearing is scheduled. You can choose to attend."

Her head snapped up and a rush of color filled her cheeks. "Why would I want to see that filth go free?"

Craig waited until he felt she was calm enough to hear him. "He won't be released right away. It's a hearing."

"W-w-why tell me?"

"The families of the victims are notified in case they'd like to participate. You can prepare what's called a victim impact statement. It gives you a chance to tell the parole board how his crimes affected you."

Lisa set the mug down. Her elbows were digging into the table as she reached back and smoothed the hair that was still tucked behind her ears. "Wh-what good does that do?"

"Well, you get to make sure they don't forget about your daughter. He'll be trying to show them how much he's changed and that he's a better person and he'll say he's sorry and ready to rejoin society."

Her eyes narrowed. "Will that work?"

Craig took a deep breath. "If he's managed to stay out of trouble in prison and has good references, says he's found Jesus or something, yeah. He just might persuade them. I won't lie to you, it's possible he'll get out."

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Her face fell. Craig hadn't thought it was possible for her to look worse than she did but she managed to pull it off. Something about the way her cheeks sagged and how her bottom lip quivered... But the glint in her eye told a different story.

It hinted at a woman on the brink of madness, of really, truly losing it. Probably the only thing holding her back was lack of energy. Her one small outburst seemed to have drained her of all her reserves. She didn't look like she had the physical strength required to go off the deep end. Instead, she lay whimpering at the edge of the abyss.

"That's why it's important for you to go, make a statement. You have to tell them who Hope was. You have to make them see the daughter you lost, understand what he did to her and to you."

"I just...just wish Steve would be there. Maybe he'd know the right thing to say."

"He's away right now, but he does keep his own notes on every case. I can take a look if you want, see if there's anything in there that might be helpful."

"Y-you could get those?"

Craig nodded. "They'd be at his house here. He's just on a temporary assignment." *I hope*, Craig thought.

She gaped at him for a moment, and then forced her jaw up as she nodded. "Th-that would... Thanks." Lisa lowered her gaze as she pushed herself up slowly and slid out from behind the table, visibly shaking. She picked up her purse and tried to open it.

Craig stood and put up his hand. "I've got it."

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Lisa kept tugging for a moment. The sharp jerks she was exerting on the zipper were probably the reason it had jammed and refused to yield. Craig reached out and touched her arm. "It's okay."

She released the zipper and took another deep breath while Craig took his wallet out of his pocket. He tossed a bill down on the table, removed a card and passed it to her.

"I'll look at his notes, see if anything might help. If there's anything I can do, just call." Hollow words. She would go home, think about her dead daughter, try to get it together for the parole board hearing and then pace the floor, chain-smoking until she got word of the decision.

He'd go back to work, move on to the next case. Different names, different faces, same look of shock surfacing behind their eyes as they came to grips with the destruction crime had wrought in their lives.

Most days, Craig hid behind the idea that he could at least catch the criminals and put them away. Meeting with Lisa Harrington had been the first time in his career he'd had to face a victim on the other side, dealing with the possible release of their daughter's killer.

As he watched her walk away, shoulders hunched, gaze down, he realized he was kidding himself. He didn't help heal wounds; he just put a band-aid on them while they festered.

Chapter 2

No course, no seminar, no self help book filled with wise words and the best of intentions... Nothing prepared you to tell a parent their child was dead. *No parent should outlive their child.* It's not the way things were meant to be, not as nature intended. Children were supposed to be the legacy. You could comfort yourself, knowing when you passed on you left a bit of yourself behind, knowing you wouldn't immediately be forgotten.

Losing a child just wasn't right.

Tain had heard it all. He understood it. Every time he prepared to speak with a parent it was right there, churning beneath the surface. Let the memories come and all the anguish would be back, fresh, threatening to overtake him, to push him over the edge into a bottomless pit of despair.

The grief enough to make you feel as though your soul was being put through a shredder.

There were few things worse than telling a parent their child was dead. Tain didn't just know that. He *knew* it. It wasn't textbook head knowledge, or practical knowledge from the experience of watching the fall-out. For him, it went far deeper.

Mrs. Reimer, we regret to inform you your son is dead. Your four-year-old boy, the one with the dark, curly hair and big brown eyes. They hit him on the torso and back of the head but didn't mark his face. We all saw it, standing there, looking down at where he'd curled into a little ball, in the fetal position. He was still warm, the tiniest bit of pink in his cheeks. Put a blanket over him and it would have looked as though he was just sleeping,

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as though he'd just worn himself out playing and had curled up on the slip of pavement at the park to take a nap.

Just don't look at the back of his head or the dark stain on the pavement and you could hold on to the idea that he would get up soon and run off to play. You could pretend someone hadn't used him as a human piñata.

They couldn't tell her all of that. And this time, telling a mother her son was dead might just be the easier part of their task. Mrs. Reimer would likely think her world was falling apart, that she had already heard the most unbearable news imaginable.

Under different circumstances that would be correct. A parent's worst nightmare, until they managed to tell Jeffrey's parents the rest.

That their daughter was a suspect in the murder. And that she was missing.

Tain looked up as his partner, Constable Ahslyn Hart, appeared in the door to the ladies washroom. She paused, lifted her hand to her forehead and stood still for a moment. No smile to light her face. Under the circumstances Tain wouldn't have expected one, but there was something else in her expression... Hollow cheeks, pallid skin. He watched her rub her temple, her gaze fixed on some spot on the grass.

They had worked on tough cases together before. This wasn't the first time they'd found themselves standing over the body of a child, but this time he'd seen the tears well up in her eyes for that split second. Then she'd swallowed it down, gotten on with the job, not even the hint of a tremor in her voice as she assumed control of the scene. That's what he'd come to

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expect from Ashlyn. She felt it as deeply as anyone but she was a professional.

Every now and again she had her moments, though, like anyone else. He didn't blame her. If anything, he commended her for taking it off the field, making it a private moment instead of a public display. Now, a raw look in her features hinted at a deeper pain.

And then it was gone.

He trawled through his memories of the past few weeks but couldn't think of any indication that there were problems. Had he been so preoccupied with-

"Is it nice there?"

As his eyes focused on Ashlyn's face, now a few feet from his own, he frowned. "What? Where?"

"The fantasyland you're off in."

"Cheaper than Disney World."

Her tiny smile faded as she looked him straight in the eye. "You okay?"

He bit back the words on the tip of his tongue and instead said, "Tough call."

They knew each other well enough to read subtle changes in expression. The way her left eyebrow rose for a split second in conjunction with the downward turn of the corners of her mouth said it all. Then her lips formed a hard line.

"It is odd," Tain said.

The distant stare was gone as she refocused on him. "I'm not overanalyzing?" she asked.

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He shook his head. “Why would you even think that?”

She sighed as she pushed her dark hair back behind her left ear. “It isn’t like we can do anything about it... It just is, if that makes any sense.” She paused.

“It’s okay.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “You don’t mind?”

“Are you questioning me?” He waited half a second, then continued. “Look, they searched the area and didn’t find anything. It wasn’t until the officers were returning to report in that they saw him.” He knew she wanted him to run her through all the details of his interview with their witness. Other officers might take it personally, feel it was an attack on them, but he knew better. Ashlyn was reprocessing the details because something wasn’t sitting right with her. And she was trying to figure out what it was.

“They found him near the water?”

He nodded. “In the woods, down by the shore. I believe the word used was ‘skulking’.”

She raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

“They couldn’t get anything from him. When they brought him to me I managed to get him to give me his name and address.”

“And you asked if he’d seen what happened.”

“He said yes. That’s it. So I asked if he recognized the attacker.”

“And again, he just said yes.” Ashlyn’s mouth twisted. Her hands were on her hips. The longer Tain worked with her the quicker her instincts kicked in. This case was already bugging her, and her issues centered on their one witness.

Christopher Reimer.

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But she hadn't shared her thoughts with Tain. Not yet. He knew her well enough to know she'd voice them when she felt more confident about her conclusions. Around everyone else, other than Craig, she usually kept her musings concealed. He knew others who didn't like partnering with someone who wouldn't divulge their hunches but Tain respected the fact that Ashlyn tried not to jump to conclusions. She was always processing information, turning the facts over in her mind, looking for the things that didn't add up.

She was sharp. And cautious, and he respected both qualities.

"Ashlyn?"

She turned her gaze back to him. "And you asked the name."

Tain nodded. "He said it was Shannon."

"And you asked her last name..."

"Christopher didn't volunteer a single word. He answered my questions directly, but with no additional information."

Her mouth twisted again, that uncertain, uneasy look distorting her features.

"I know, it's odd," Tain said. "I've had more information offered up by members of organized crime gangs up on soft charges."

"And Christopher Reimer is just a kid."

"But it was his brother that was murdered." A fact which raised another question in Tain's mind, and he felt certain she was wondering the same thing. Once Christopher had identified the attacker as Shannon Reimer, his older sister, Tain had asked if he knew the victim. There had been no change in Christopher's voice, no wavering, no hesitation, nothing.

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He'd said, "Jeffrey," and then, just before Tain could ask, added, "Jeffrey Reimer."

Christopher had removed a wallet from his pocket. Inside, ID confirmed his address, that he was just a few weeks short of his twelfth birthday, and there was a photo of three healthy kids, two of which Tain could already identify.

Once Christopher confirmed the girl in the photo was Shannon he gave the photo to another officer with instructions to circulate her description and begin searching for her immediately.

He'd left Christopher with two Port Moody police officers. They were watching him until Tain and Ashlyn finished at the scene and were ready to take him home and notify the family. Under normal circumstances Tain would have liked to take Christopher to the station for questioning, but he was a child. Tain couldn't sort out what he thought of the boy's behavior. The only thing he knew for certain was that he wanted to Ashlyn there when Christopher Reimer was questioned again.

"Shock?" Ashlyn asked.

Tain shrugged.

He watched as Ashlyn turned and walked along the sidewalk, toward the parking lot where two uniformed officers were waiting for them.

Tain kept pace beside her. He knew she could have covered the short distance in a matter of seconds. Instead, she seemed to be drawing it out, giving herself time to let her thoughts gel.

Two officers were waiting near the front right bumper of their patrol car. One stood, the other leaned back, butt on the edge of the hood of the cruiser, legs spread apart, arms folded across his chest. The back passenger

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side door was open, the tousled brown hair on top of the boy's head barely visible.

The one leaning against the car, whose name was Parker, chomped on a piece of gum without dislodging the cocky grin. He had dark hair. From even the little gossip Tain heard he knew Parker considered himself a bit of a ladies man and a lot of female police officers seemed to agree with that assessment.

Tain resisted the urge to smile when Ashlyn ignored him completely and addressed the other officer.

“How is he?”

“Uh...” The officer, whose name was Bennett, stood with his mouth open as he glanced at Parker, who relieved him of the need to answer.

“We've taken good care of him.”

Ashlyn slowly turned to look at Parker. “Got him something to eat, drink? Offered to put some heat on in the car?” She glanced at the open door and shook her head. Ashlyn straightened up as she turned back to Parker and lowered her voice. “Wonderful job, I'd say. Stellar.”

There was no way for anyone to miss the sarcasm that saturated her words and Tain watched as the cocky grin fell from Parker's face. “We did what we were told. We're ready to take him home, just waitin' on the official okay.”

“We'll be talking to the family, so Christopher can come with us,” Ashlyn said. “You guys are done here. You can check in with Sims and see where he needs you.”

Parker's mouth hung open for just a second too long to go unnoticed and then his jaw tensed. “But-”

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“I am in charge of this case and this crime scene, Constable Parker.” She glared at him for a moment and then walked toward the open door.

Tain watched as the officer’s gaze followed her, and the corner of Parker’s mouth twisted into a scowl. His, “Whatever you say, Ma’am,” response was barely audible, but the tone came through loud and clear.

“Is there a problem?” Tain asked him.

The officer’s focus shifted to Tain’s face and after a second he started chomping on his gum again. Parker reminded Tain of one of those stereotypical US patrol cops they always had on TV shows, with their dark sunglasses, willingness to use force even if unnecessary and inclination to see women as pretty li’l things in need of rescuing.

“No.” The cynical smile was back in place. “No problem.”

Tain leaned closer and said, “There better not be.” His voice had just enough edge that, from the corner of his eye he could see Ashlyn glance back at them but Tain kept his focus on the man in front of him.

He’d worked with guys like that before. Head full of attitude and an undersized dick they were compensating for that was still bigger than their brain.

Kind of guy that was reckless. Who’d screw up on the job and expect his brothers in blue to close ranks to protect him.

Kind of guy that could get someone killed.

Ashlyn felt her cheeks burn but tried to suppress her annoyance. A few years earlier Tain’s protectiveness would have pissed her off, but now it

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was Parker's attitude that got to her. She had a job to do, and so did they. Politics and prejudices shouldn't get in the way but all too often they did.

There were far more important things to think about. Christopher Reimer was hunched in the back seat of the car, where he'd been for over an hour. His face was pale. Not ghostly white, just lacking color, the way skin did this time of year in an area where residents were denied exposure to the sun day after day.

She knelt down beside him. "I'm Constable Hart. We're going to take you home now."

There was no change in his expression. He didn't look up, just sat slouched down on the seat and stared at his feet, as though he hadn't even heard her.

"Christopher?"

"Whatever."

Ashlyn was glad he still hadn't looked up because she was able to push the frown off her face before he had a chance to see it. It was never easy to deal with kids, but this one was particularly tough to read.

"Come on. We're taking my car."

That finally got Christopher to look at her. His eyes were hooded, face still expressionless as he let out a deep breath and muttered, "Whatever."

If Tain hadn't relayed the details of his interview with Christopher she would have wondered if that was the only word in his vocabulary. She straightened up, stepped back and watched as Christopher Reimer got out of the car and walked across the parking lot. His baggy jeans were streaked with mud near the bottom, and from the knee down on the left side they

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were wet. The thin shirt he was wearing barely covered his thin frame, but from the way he carried himself Ashlyn suspected his was pretty strong. He was more of a lean, tough type emerging, rather than scrawny weakling.

Ashlyn exchanged a look with Tain as she reached for the door, pushed it shut and followed Christopher to their car.

It was a short drive around the head of the Burrard Inlet. The city of Port Moody embraced the tip of the fjord on the one side and nestled up against the foot of Eagle Mountain on the other. Port Moody, City of the Arts, was a nature-lover's playground. From where they'd found Jeffrey Reimer's body at Rocky Point Park a network of trails and boardwalks formed an extensive walking path. With the proximity to Belcarra Regional Park it wasn't unheard of for joggers and walkers to encounter bears. There had been problems in recent years with coyote packs living in the forest the walkways wove through, and there were even sporadic cougar sightings..

Traffic heading into Port Moody was light. Ashlyn had only a matter of minutes to compose herself before the next stage of the investigation. People always said stupid things, like practice makes perfect, but no matter how many times they handled notification it never got any easier.

Even Tain seemed unusually quiet, although she suspected that was because of their passenger. Tain's usual brand of irreverent humor could draw criticism from seasoned cops but she knew there was no way he'd shoot off his mouth in front of a child.

Tain slowed the car. "Is this the right address?"

Christopher exhaled. "Yeah," he said.

Ashlyn thought over what Tain had said about his interview with Christopher, and what he'd left unsaid. Christopher had a reserved, cool

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demeanor, as though he was bored and inconvenienced by being detained by the police.

Trauma did strange things to people. She'd experienced it herself and in her mind's eye could look back and see herself reacting to her fear, feeling as though she was looking at someone else. The intensity of own reactions had surprised her, and she didn't recognize that person. It was a side of herself she was uncomfortable being confronted with, but now keenly aware of. Emotionally, she liked to be in control. The experience of actually being in shock, and losing her sense of power over herself had been as difficult to deal with as the events that had put her in shock in the first place.

Still, she couldn't put her finger on what it was, exactly, but Christopher's reactions didn't feel as though they were about shock. There was something else, and she was certain Tain shared her misgivings about their only witness.

As they got out of the car the front door to the house opened. A man appeared. He had black hair, cut short, and looked to be a bit below average height, in decent shape. One of those chiseled faces, dark eyes.

Ashlyn noted that in a split-second summary, but the scowl on his face as he marched toward them was what really stood out. "What's he done?"

The words weren't polite, or born out of exasperation. They were laced with anger and accusations. Ashlyn and Christopher had walked around from the passenger side of the car and the man she presumed was Richard Reimer walked right up between Tain and Ashlyn and grabbed the boy's arm.

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Christopher pulled back and for a moment they were locked in a tug of war. Richard Reimer tried to grab his son's other arm. Before Ashlyn could order him to stop and identify herself as a police officer, Christopher swung. He planted a decent blow squarely on his father's jaw. Richard let go of his son and staggered back, mouth hanging open as he stared at his son. Then he clenched his jaw as his cheeks turned purple, and raised his fist. He looked like he was going to strike back. Tain stepped forward.

"I'm Constable Tain and this is my partner, Constable Hart. Sir--"

Christopher let out a yelp and ran toward the house.

Ashlyn released her grip on her gun, dropped her hand and felt her jacket fall over her weapon. A woman had appeared on the doorstep. Presumably Mrs. Reimer, she appeared to be an older, well-used version of her living son. Pale cheeks and wavy brown hair, Tracy Reimer was what Ashlyn would call solid. Not heavy but not slight, she appeared to be as tall as her husband.

Christopher's sudden display of emotion made an already difficult task that much harder. Ashlyn had expected him to flee into the house, but instead he remained on the front step, with his head lowered. He didn't reach out to his mother for physical comfort but just stood there.

Ashlyn heard Richard Reimer mutter, "What the hell's going on?" but he didn't force the question. Tracy Reimer remained silent, as though there was nothing unusual about two plainclothes RCMP officers bringing her eleven-year-old son home, or the need to break up a physical confrontation between her husband and child on their front lawn.

From the corner of her eye she saw Tain's glance and could feel her eyebrows arch, even as she fought to keep her face blank.

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Tain gestured at the door. “Perhaps it would be best if we spoke inside.”

Richard gaped at him for a few seconds before he turned and moved toward the house.

Ashlyn started to follow. She’d taken a few steps when Christopher said, “Jeffrey’s dead.” Then he ran inside, the sound of footsteps fading as he sprinted up the stairs, legs quickly disappearing from Ashlyn’s limited view inside the house.

Tracy Reimer just stood there, face blank and colorless. She looked from Ashlyn to Tain without so much as a shrug of her shoulders, a widening of her eyes or the tiniest hint of wrinkles on her brow.

Her husband walked up to her and said, “I’ll call the lawyer.”

Ashlyn saw Tain glance at her and she gave a small shake of her head. Let Richard Reimer call. She wanted to know why he thought he needed a lawyer when he hadn’t even asked what had happened to his son.

Or where his daughter was.

She wanted to know if this was the usual level of drama maintained in the Reimer household.

They followed Tracy Reimer inside. The house was neat and what Ashlyn would call showy. Just off the landing there were double glass doors that opened up to a living room, the kind with sofas that looked stiff and uncomfortable, as though they’d been taken out of plastic wrap the day before, and shelves with thick volumes of books that didn’t have their spines cracked. There was no evidence of children in the room, not even family photos. The walls were a non-descript white, and there was no artwork to break the monotony. Ashlyn didn’t sit down. Neither did Tain.

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Tracy Reimer perched on the edge of the loveseat, back straight, hands folded neatly on her lap.

From the hall Ashlyn heard the brusque words as Richard ordered his lawyer to meet them at their house immediately. Everything after that was answered with a “Yes” or “No” so Ashlyn couldn’t get a sense of the context. At one point Richard added, “Family emergency,” but that was followed by another “Yes” and then he hung up.

“Our lawyer’s on his way,” he said as he entered the living room, without looking up. He sat on a chair that was beside, but at a slight angle to, the loveseat, with such force that his wife glared at him for a moment. He was either unaware or ignoring her.

Ashlyn saw Tain’s split-second glance but didn’t intervene.

“Mr. Reimer, may I ask why you felt you needed your lawyer?” he asked.

Richard looked up, his hand mechanically massaging his jaw. “You can’t question Christopher without a lawyer. He has rights.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Reimer, we aren’t here to question Christopher,” Ashlyn said. “We’re here to inform you that your son, Jeffrey, was found dead this morning at the water park at Rocky Point.”

Richard stopped rubbing his chin and lowered his hand. “You mean, you haven’t arrested Christopher?”

“Mr. Reimer, is there some reason why you’d assume Christopher would kill his brother?” Tain asked.

“Well...” He directed a wide-eyed stare at his wife, who quickly lowered her gaze, then held up his left hand, palm up, almost as though asking a question. “You brought him with you.”

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Would you have preferred we leave him at the park to walk home by himself? Ashlyn bit her bottom lip to keep from saying something she'd regret later.

“Christopher was found near the scene and he identified Jeffrey. We-”

Tain was interrupted by a loud bang from upstairs. Richard and Tracy both sprung to their feet, but Ashlyn raised her hand and gestured for them to sit back down.

“Stay here,” she ordered them as she reached for her gun.

Tain led the way to the lobby. Their visual checks were instinctive as they scanned the staircase and what they could see of the upper hallway. She followed Tain to the second floor, both with guns drawn.

These were the moments that required extreme mental focus. You never knew what you'd face around the next bend or behind a bathroom door. You hoped for the best, expected the worst and had to be ready to deal with anything.

Ashlyn was only a few steps behind Tain as he moved down the hallway and approached the first door but she could see that it was open. Carefully, he looked into the room, from the side of the doorway, then he lowered his gun and stepped inside.

She still approached with caution but when she glanced inside she could see enough from a mirror above the dresser to know it was safe to enter.

A child's room, obviously Jeffrey's. Unlike the sterile living room below this was a space that resonated with warmth. A car mat was on the floor beside the bed and a table with a train track on it was between the mat

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and the wall. Buckets in bright primary colors were overflowing with toys. The green walls were filled with posters of frogs, dinosaurs, Spiderman, crayon drawings of space ships, a photo of Jeffrey and Shannon laughing and hugging each other. In the far corner, between the window and the bed, there was a hammock filled with stuffed animals, and below that a shelf that had picture books spilling off of it. Beneath the window there was a child's art desk and chair.

Christopher Reimer sat on the bed and held a string attached to a burst balloon. It was then that Ashlyn noticed the cluster of ribbons tied to the bedpost, one foil "happy birthday" balloon still bobbing in the air. The rest lay limp and lifeless in a pile on the floor.

The tear-stained cheeks were the only evidence of his earlier outburst. Christopher sat, slouched forward, gaze fixed on the floor, expressionless.

As Ashlyn reached back to holster her gun Tain said, "Wh-"

"Leave me alone!" Christopher sprung off the bed, ran out of the room and seconds later they heard a door slam down the hall.

Tain looked at Ashlyn and shrugged. "That went well."

She shook her head and followed him back to the stairs. Richard Reimer had entered the foyer below and was opening the door. A man entered. The Reimer's lawyer had just arrived, and from their vantage point they could see enough to know who it was.

Byron Smythe.

A young lawyer who'd struck hard and fast with a high profile case that had gotten him on speed-dial with every criminal organization and lowlife with money in the Lower Mainland.

THE FRAILITY OF FLESH
by Sandra Ruttan

The kind of guy who never let his hair get a millimeter longer than he liked it, probably got a facial before every major court appearance, definitely invested in manicures and the heaviest thing he'd ever lifted was his ego.

Ashlyn groaned. She'd made the mistake of thinking their morning couldn't get much worse. With a lawyer like Smythe on speed dial one thing was certain: The Reimer's had things to hide. No wonder Christopher was acting strange. One of his siblings was dead, the other missing, and the first thing his parents did was call their attorney.

Bryon Smythe.

And that meant their job had just gotten a lot more difficult.