

A SKIN KADASH / LEGEND OF JOEY CROSSOVER

THE MISSUS



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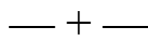
By the award-winning author of COUNTY LINE

THE MISSUS

A Skin Kadash/Joey Getchie Crossover Story

by Bill Cameron

A cop's wife murdered, an 11-year-old boy accused, and the detective who broke ranks to find the truth, no matter the cost.



AUTHOR'S PREFACE

This story, told from the point of view of my longtime series detective Skin Kadash, references events from *Property of the State*—the first in my young adult mystery series featuring Joey Getchie. Though the events in “The Missus” are of singular significance to Joey, they occur five years before *Property of the State*, and Skin’s view of them is very different from the fragments Joey remembers. That said, this story could be seen as containing a minor spoiler or two for *Property of the State*, so if you’re concerned about such things, you might consider reading the book first.

Learn more about *Property of the State* at www.bill-cameron.com/fiction/novels/property-of-the-state/.

THE MISSUS

I used to work with one of those, “Today is the first day of the rest of your life” chippies—an eternal optimist in a push-up bra with a day planner in one hand and a Powerball ticket in the other. She was an admin in the Portland Police Bureau training division, the person responsible for hounding us when we fell behind on continuing ed requirements, weapons re-certifications—you name it. If a memo had an exclamation point in it, you knew Ali Trotta wrote it.

Still, credit where credit is due. Because of Ali, I studied hard enough to pass the detective’s exam. My first wrongful death call-out as a homicide investigator was definitely the first day of the rest of something.

As was the day, eight years later, when I returned to the Homicide pit after a long medical leave. Ali held the door for me on her way out. It was her last day at PPB—she was opening a knitting shop. When I shook her hand, I may have picked up a mild contact high from the way she saw each day as a shiny penny of possibility.

It lasted about ten minutes, right up until my new lieutenant, Susan Mulvaney, handed me the job of sending a kid to Death Row.

“You’re taking over the Yearling case.”

“I thought Davisson and Stein were working that mess.” Susan had been my partner for a long time before being promoted to herd the cats in Person Crimes. She was the exact opposite of capricious. The last thing I’d expect from her on my first day back in the grind was a high-profile case to work on my own.

“Moose is friends with Sergeant Yearling.”

“So? He knows his job.”

“Just take care of it, Skin. The case is a slam dunk.”

Arson, aggravated murder. The DA—a woman named Kallista Jessup with balls of ballistic steel—had already stated she’d be making a motion to try the boy as an adult. I’d even heard talk of a few post-9/11 domestic terrorism charges because, well—freedom! A slam dunk, sure. But Susan was still asking me to hang a noose on a kid.

An orphan, no less, according to *The Oregonian*.

“What exactly did I do to make you decide to take a dump in my hat?”

“The boy killed a cop’s wife.”

“Then Moose should be thrilled by the chance to help out a friend.”

Susan closed her eyes and I knew she was counting backward from ten. I have that effect on people.

“We need a clean file, Detective Kadash. There can’t be a hint of bias, not one thing some defense attorney looking for scalps can use against us.”

“That clarifies the situation.” It was my turn to count down. “Everyone knows I got no friends.”

Her lips went white. “Sergeant Vincent will bring you up to speed.”

Out in the homicide pit, Vincent handed me the case book, a black binder with the Office Depot label half torn off the spine. A sticky note on the front told me the kid's caseworker could be found at Good Samaritan, where the boy was in a psych hold.

As if things weren't bad enough, the case was already thirty-six hours old, counted from the moment someone at Portland Fire buzzed Homicide. Two alarm blaze in a northeast Portland tavern, body in the rubble, evidence of arson. The victim: wife of one of the owners, which happened to be klatch of cops. The terrorism talk stemmed from the fact a propane canister on the premises exploded during the fire.

"Seriously?" I said to Vincent. "A propane canister?"

"Maybe the kid brought it with him."

"And maybe I shit cupcakes."

Sergeant Zach Yearling, the victim's husband, worked out of the Southeast Precinct. I'd never talked to him, but I knew his face. Big, blustery guy, the kind who made a loud impression at gatherings. The other thing I knew was he'd been riding a desk since he shot a guy holding up a Plaid Pantry a year back. It was a clean shooting, but I guess the experience gave him a taste for admin. No judgment here. I'd pulled the trigger myself, and had no enthusiasm for an encore performance.

I'd seen Yearling a few weeks earlier at the retirement party for Susan's predecessor. Alone in a corner, I sipped a celebratory Glen Garioch and watched as Yearling cracked the kind of jokes you make when you know your target can no longer retaliate. I remember his wife as a mousy woman in beige who drank wine spritzers and offered strained smiles at every forced punch line. Later in the evening, I saw her chewing him out, quietly, when they thought no one was looking. During the party, she never joined the other cop wives.

According to the case book, they'd taken on the kid as foster parents. Joey Getchie, age eleven. In foster care since six, but in the system since birth. His biological mother was a piece of work—in and out of jail herself until she fled the family hovel out near Sandy as it burned to the ground. Joey survived, but his father and younger sister didn't. The Yearlings were the boy's fourth foster placement. Someone had scrawled in the margin of the DHS summary. "The little bastard has a knack for disruption."

Yearling wasted no time accusing his foster son. "Joey has all the signs: withdrawn, hostile, prone to violent outbursts." In the case notes, Getchie's fiery history was cited as a factor in the arson. Pretty much everyone had rallied round Yearling, and why not? His wife was dead. But as I skimmed the file, I found holes you could drive a truck bomb through.

I said as much to Sergeant Vincent. "Has anyone actually read this thing?" All I could assume was Susan had sanitized it of "bias" before being handing it off to me.

"Just do your job," he said. "This thing is on fire—"

"No pun intended?"

He glowered. "Jessup is waiting for the medical examiner and crime scene reports to file formal charges, but they're being expedited. You've got a day, two at the outside."

"Thanks a lot, Sarge." Nobody builds a capital case in a day. All I could do was shake my head and walk away.

Good Samaritan was a short drive from the Justice Center—took me longer to find my way from the parking garage to the pediatric psych ward. There, in clipped tones, Hedda Petty introduced herself. She was the size of a thimble, but somehow managed to project a more forceful physical presence than all two hundred eighty pounds of Moose Davisson. When I asked if I could talk to Joey, she scanned me toe to head and laughed bitterly. It counted for something her gaze didn't linger on the swollen birthmark, like a heap of raw hamburger, on my neck. Probably a talent she learned in sociology class.

A nurse buzzed us into the secure ward. Angry, high pitched cries sounded from one direction, whimpering from another. As I struggled to keep up, Petty ran down her creds: twelve years with the Oregon Department of Human Services, nine as a foster child caseworker. Joey had been her charge since the state took full-custody five years previously.

We stopped at a reinforced window which looked into a tiny room. Bed, table with every hospital room's requisite plastic water pitcher and cup, a cushioned chair. Not homey, but not quite a cell either. I suppose I expected to see him in restraints.

Joey was curled up on the bed, arm flung over his head. His mouth moved, but I couldn't hear what he was saying through the glass. The indicator on a surveillance camera glowed from inside its protective bubble in the corner near the ceiling.

"You caught up with him in Woodburn."

I hadn't caught up with anyone, but I knew what she meant. My tribe. The Police. "That's impressive," I said.

"You think?"

There was no detention report from the Woodburn police in the case binder, but if she was right, Joey Getchie had traveled forty miles on his own. At his age? Hell yes, it was impressive.

Yet the scene before me told a different story. The lump on the bed was less a boy than a bundle of rags. Not even a teenager and screwed for life. I shook my head.

"Did you have a question, Detective? Or is this visit merely pro-forma?"

"Pro-forma?"

"Dotting your T's and crossing your I's."

In other words, I was part of a screw job. "You don't think he did it?"

"Does it matter what I think? You assholes have already circled the wagons around your man."

I felt my lips press tight. Under the circumstances, most cops would dismiss Hedda Petty out of hand. Hell, the case binder already had the basic narrative outlined. Against that, this one woman's bitter certainty, like a static charge in the air around her, wasn't worth much. Moose would know exactly what to do.

Fry the kid right there in his cell. Hospital room. Whatever it was.

I guess I wasn't Moose. "Maybe he has another story to tell." I nodded toward the window. "If I could talk to him—"

"He's done talking."

"Okay." I glanced down at Petty. "You talk to me, then."

The look on her face would crisp bacon. Probably damn good at her job.

"Ms. Petty—?"

"Mrs. Petty." The way she said it reminded me of Yearling at the retirement party. He referred to his wife only as *The Missus*—like the brand name of an appliance that toasted his waffles and scrubbed the skid marks out of his drawers.

“My apologies.” I drew a breath. “If you have something to say ...”

“Two days before the fire, Joey ran away. Mr. Yearling didn’t inform me until after I got the call from Woodburn.”

“Is that normal?”

“Foster parents are supposed to check in whenever anything serious happens. There’s individual discretion, obviously, and I sure as hell don’t want my phone ringing for every stubbed toe or screaming fit. But a runaway? Then waiting two days—?” She blew through her teeth. “Mr. Yearling said he didn’t want to bother me. He thought he could find Joey on his own. Using his super police powers, I suppose.”

“I see.” I licked my lips. “You don’t like cops.”

“That’s not it at all.” Anger radiated off her in the infrared. “I love *good* cops.”

“You don’t like Sergeant Yearling then.”

“He waited *two* days, Detective. And then the first thing he did was accuse the child whose welfare he’s responsible for.”

I peered through the glass, at the kid on the bed. I couldn’t see his eyes, but his mouth wouldn’t stop working. “What do you think happened?”

“To Mrs. Yearling? No idea. What I do know is the Woodburn police found Joey sleeping behind some shrubs at the outlet mall a little after midnight, four hours after the fire. Impressive? Even a social worker can do math.”

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Four transfers got me a shift supervisor at Woodburn P.D. who knew about the Getchie pickup. He promised someone else would get back to me, so I sat in my car in the Good Sam parking garage and scanned the case binder.

The first documentation of Joey in custody was the intake report at Good Sam, noon the day after the fire. According to the report, Getchie had a screaming freak-out upon being confronted about the fire and couldn’t be calmed down. Apparently Moose and Stein had attempted an interview, but there were only a few handwritten notes. “Suspect demonstrated violent hostility to/d foster fam ... Suspect expressed rage during int.” There should be tape, even if the transcript would take a while. Moose’s scrawl was little more than an interpretation.

The rest was background. Around the time the fire started, Sergeant Yearling was attending a support group for cops who’d unleashed hell in the line of duty. Not knocking himself out to find his runaway foster son, apparently. No one could say why the Missus would have gone to the bar, which was closed for renovations, but Yearling reported dark threats made by the boy in response to some discipline at home. At the time, he took it as a typical kid blowing off steam.

“I never thought about how his family died in a fire until after. Now I’m wondering who started *that* fire, you know what I mean?”

Thank you, Dr. Freud.

My phone rang as I sat there contemplating circumstance and innuendo. The woman on the line identified herself as Officer Martinez from Woodburn. She said she was the one who found Joey during a routine sweep of the outlet mall after hours.

“What was he like when you found him?”

“Asleep.”

“Did he seem upset?”

“Resigned, more than anything. You know these kids. At this age, I don’t think they believe they’ll get very far. I was surprised to hear he’d come all the way from Portland.”

“Did he try to get away from you?”

“Not really. He made to run, but his feet got tangled in his rain poncho and that was that. The first thing he said to me was, ‘I guess you should call Mrs. Petty.’ Had her cellphone memorized.”

“No mention of his foster parents?”

“Not a word.” She hesitated for a moment, then added, “This was all in my report.”

Of course it was. “I’m afraid my case file didn’t include your report.”

Her sudden anger all but melted my cell phone. “I don’t know why I bother writing this crap up. Half the time I can’t get overtime approved for writing reports, but it’s not like I get to go home till they’re filed.”

“Trust me, I wish I had it. I wouldn’t have to bother you. I’m sure you have a lot to do.”

Too easy. She let out a slow breath. “Not your fault.” I should have felt guilty. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

I thought for a minute then, remembering Mrs. Petty’s last comment, asked if she’d mind checking around, see if anyone spotted him in the area earlier. She said she’d try, but I didn’t expect much. Patrol cops have more important things to do than chase the phantom of a runaway two days out of their jurisdiction.

I returned to the binder. The fire bureau investigator’s report indicated the fire was started with lamp oil, apparently kept in a free-standing storage shed at the rear of the property. The shed was locked—no sign of forced entry—but Yearling noted his wife’s keys were missing. They were later found in the boy’s room at the Yearling abode.

So far, no one had come forward who could place the kid at the scene of the fire. Justin Marcille, a crime scene spec with the State Crime Lab, was running Getchie’s clothing and personal effects. PPB criminalists were more than up to the task; Susan must have wanted some distance there too. Marcille’s report could very well make a witness—and the rest of my investigation—moot.

I called the State Lab, but Marcille wasn’t in—so I heard him tell the tech who answered the phone. Stalled, I decided to check out the crime scene. It was starting to get dark, but I turned my wheels toward Northeast Portland anyway.

Not like I had anything better to do.

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Aside from a bulldozer pushing debris off the street, nothing had been done to clean up after the fire. The night air held the scent of wet ash. A mercury vapor security light transformed the rubble into a moonscape. I poked around the edges of catastrophe, but whatever I thought I was looking for wasn’t there.

The shed was separated from the burnt-out structure by a bit of lawn and a strip of gravel. The structure was made of cinderblock, about the size of a four-car garage with a loading dock at one end. A path led from the back of the ruined tavern to a heavy metal door.

Unlocked.

“Hello? Anyone there?” No answer. “Sergeant Yearling?”

A couple of lights were on inside, bare hanging bulbs above well-ordered shelves. I stepped inside and

called out again. A round, felt-topped table and half a dozen chairs were set in an open area to one side, desk against the wall beyond. The rest of the space was taken up by industrial shelving.

There was liquor, naturally—an alcoholic's wet dream—and cases of mixers. A couple crates of the infamous lamp oil alongside a bunch of fancy crystal table lamps which suggested the bar was a step up from my usual haunt. That speculation was quickly belied by row upon row of boxes labeled QUESO SAUCE, and a bunch more of SALSA, MED, LOW-SOD. I guess Zach planned to sell a lot of nachos. Yet when I lifted the lid of one of the boxes, I didn't find cans of faux cheese, but elegant brass fixtures.

From outside, I heard footsteps on gravel. I crossed back to the open door, stepped outside under the silver light.

He was waiting for me in the parking lot. "Who the hell are you?"

To his credit, he wasn't pointing his service piece *at* me. He held the Glock at his side, finger on the trigger guard like a good boy.

"Detective Kadash. We met last month at Owen's retirement party." He didn't recognize me, even if I recognized him. "I'm looking in to your wife's death."

"Nothing to look in to." His finger twitched on the gun, but before I could make a run for it, a second figure flowed out of the shadows near the rubble. "Skin? What are you doing here?" Moose Davisson. He put a hand on Yearling's arm, then stepped around in front of him into the gleam of the security light.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Investigating. What are *you* doing here?"

"What's to investigate?" Moose's voice came out as a growl. "The kid did it."

I smiled and held my hands out, palms up. "You know how it is, Moose. Gotta build the case." Which wasn't so easy with half the reports missing. I kept that thought to myself.

Behind Moose, Yearling released an exaggerated belch and took half a step toward me. "The D.A. said she'uz gonna file tomorrow." Drunk, but whatever. Not up to me how another man grieves. Unless he's armed.

"Sergeant," I said to him, "you mind securing your firearm?"

Yearling seemed to notice the gun for the first time. Moose whispered something to him. At first, Yearling objected, but when Moose's whispers grew increasingly insistent he finally acceded. Moose tucked the gun into his jacket pocket, then turned back to me.

"What can we do for you, Skin?"

We. Susan was smart to take this away from Moose, even if it made no sense to give it to me. "I just wanted to check out the scene. Everything is moving fast, and I didn't have a chance to get over here sooner."

"Not much to see in the dark."

Unless you discount the intact storage building, and all its carefully ordered contents. I looked past Moose's shoulder and fixed my eye on Yearling. "You know, Sergeant, your boy made a hell of a run. All the way to Woodburn."

"What of it?"

"Long way for an eleven-year-old on foot in just a few hours."

"Mebbe stole a car."

His tone told me not to argue, as did the step Moose took toward me. "You done here, Kadash?"

Evidently.

I kept an eye on both of them all the way to my car. Back home, as sleep eluded me, I thought about boxes of light fixtures marked as canned salsa and nacho cheese, and how quality brass generally ran a bit higher

than industrial *con queso*. All things considered, the phone call which pried my eyes open the next morning was no surprise.

A witness had turned up, and I had a 9:00 a.m. appointment to hear what he had to say.

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A train was bearing down on me, and I was running out of time. Before I got out of bed, I grabbed the case binder from my nightstand and looked up a phone number.

She picked up on the first ring. “Hedda Petty.”

“Mrs. Petty, this is Detective Kadash. We spoke at the—”

“I know who you are. What do you want?”

The woman had a singular focus.

“How many times has Joey run away before this?”

In the background, I heard a revving car engine and music. Something loud which after a moment resolved itself into Led Zeppelin. For a moment, I had an image of her at a concert, wearing a denim vest and waving a cigarette lighter over her head.

“Why do you want to know?”

This was the test. No way was I going to mention the witness; Susan would have my balls. But I had to give her something. “Let’s just say in light of information received, I’m rethinking which T’s to dot and which I’s to cross.”

There was a moment of hesitation during which the volume of the music dropped. “Are you willing to meet me at my office? I’m heading in to work now.”

“What’s there?”

“The answer to your question.”

“You can’t just tell me?”

“Not that question.”

I can be slow on the uptake. But then, “I’m on my way.”

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She worked out of the Lombard DHS office, North Portland. Twenty-five minutes in good traffic, almost an hour during morning gridlock. She met me at the door. Her gaze drilled a shot group between my eyes you could hide under a quarter.

“Did you stroll?”

“Rush hour.”

She sniffed, then led me through a cube farm. I heard voices, saw heads with phones tucked under their chins, hands pawing through heaped files on desks. I followed Petty into a conference room with a TV on a tall stand against the wall. She closed the door behind us.

“This is why your man Davisson was pulled from the case.”

She inserted a VHS tape into the VCR, fired up the TV. Before she hit play, she said, “I’ve fast-forwarded to the key moment.”

I might have asked what she skipped over, but I had a feeling all I’d get for my trouble was the bullet

stare.

The screen displayed the view from the camera in Joey's hospital room. I recognized the heap on the bed, arm over his eyes, mouth working.

"She wouldn't stop screaming." This time I could hear what the boy was saying, reedy and harsh. "She just kept screaming."

"That's what mothers do when their kids don't behave." The second voice was Moose's. I recognized his bulk in the chair near the bed.

"No. No. She screamed at—"

"Is that why you burned her?"

Moose leaned toward him, but I don't think the kid realized with his eyes covered. Just as well. Moose more than earned his nickname.

"Is that why? You didn't want her yelling at you so you burned her?"

"No. I don't know why she was screaming. He wouldn't—"

"So you burned her." Moose's favorite interview technique: repeat what he wanted to hear until his suspect slipped up or broke down. "You burned her, right? You lit her up because—"

"The noise. It was so loud ... so loud in here."

Moose looked over his shoulder, his eyes a question. I heard another voice, his partner Frannie Stein. "I don't know, Moose. It's a stretch."

Moose shook his head. "Stretch nothing. I've heard enough—"

He walked out of the frame. A fist pounded on the door, which then opened and closed. On the bed, Joey continued muttering.

"She kept ... he—I asked him but he wouldn't—" Then the boy rolled over, turned his back to the camera. I could no longer make out his words.

Mrs. Petty switched off the VCR. When she turned to me, her glare was molten.

I held her gaze. "Joey had invoked, I assume. But Moose and Frannie went in anyway."

"You assume correctly."

"That's why no transcript." I was talking more to myself. "Nothing to transcribe."

"I have other cases, other emergencies come up. I shouldn't have to stand guard over my kids. There are laws—"

"I get it." I let out a long, slow breath. "Trust me. I get it."

The psych ward staff should have known better, but they have their own problems. I leaned against the table, looked out a window onto the parking lot. Saw nothing. The air in the room smelled like ozone.

"Detective, did you ever meet Mrs. Yearling?"

"Once, in passing."

"Did she strike you as the kind of woman prone to screaming fits?"

I pictured the Missus at the retirement party, skin the color of oatmeal. Her mouth never opened except to sip fizzy wine and to pretend to laugh at her husband's lousy jokes.

Mrs. Petty had a point.

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The witness's name was George Ruffian, which would have gotten a laugh in other circumstances. We

met in a conference room at the Justice Center, with Susan sitting in.

"That first week after they took over," he said, "I met the guys who bought the bar. Cops. Good guys."

"Sure they are." Susan frowned at my tone, but Ruffian didn't seem to notice.

"I live around the corner, you see. The old joint had been a bit of trouble in the neighborhood. Fights, noise. The boys said they wanted to create a different vibe. More brew pub than biker bar, you know?"

Sure. *The boys*. George Ruffian had made himself some friends.

"Tell me about the kid."

He turned one meaty hand over. "I didn't know who he was. I figured he was some street rat nosing around a construction site. Those bastards get into places and steal the copper, you know?"

"Not my area, but I watch the news."

"It was about sunset, so, what, seven-thirty? Eight? I yelled at him and he run off. Not long after, the place was burning, but at first I didn't make the connection. It wasn't until they showed his picture on the news last night that I recognized him."

Convenient, the way a child's picture had been released to the media just in time to scare up a witness. Must have been the eleven o'clock news, since I talked to Yearling just after dark. I stole a look at Susan, but her face was expressionless. I pushed a picture across the table toward Ruffian. "This the boy?"

He glanced down at the photo and nodded. "Yeah, that's him."

"Thanks for coming down, Mr. Ruffian."

"You talk to Zach, give him my condolences?"

"Sure thing."

Susan escorted him out while I stared at the photo. When Susan returned, she gave me a look. "What's the problem, Skin?"

I handed her the photo. It was of a ten-year-old Latino boy, an image I'd pulled from the missing persons files. "Will you be sharing Mr. Ruffian's condolences with Sergeant Yearling, or shall I?"

"Skin—"

"Excuse me. I have work to do. Remember?" I pushed past her through the door.

"Detective!"

I kept walking.

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I didn't give Justin Marcille the chance to brush me off a second time. I drove out to the State Crime Lab in Clackamas, caught him sorting files on the big island counter when I walked into the lab. At first, I thought he would bolt, but instead he just shook his head.

"My report isn't ready. You wasted a trip."

His body language said otherwise. "Just give me the highlights. Jessup is breathing down my neck." I hadn't actually spoken with the DA yet, but he didn't have to know that.

"You're not going to like it."

The room smelled like Super Glue. On one wall, someone had tacked up photos of hands with bloody or blistered fingertips—dimwitted ne'er-do-wells who'd tried to burn or sand off their fingerprints. Marcille emitted a weary sigh.

"The boy's clothes and shoes were filthy. He'd been wearing them for at least a couple of days. Bacteria

and fungus off the charts. But no traces of accelerant.”

He took my silence as disappointment.

“I know, Detective. I know. But I’m afraid I can’t state with any certainty that he was wearing these clothes when he set the fire.”

One of the things I liked about crime scene techs was they don’t make things up. Most of them. Justin Marcille was one of the best. “Anything else?”

“Not from me. The medical examiner did the autopsy last night, but I’ve only heard the prelim.”

I waited—a lesson I learned from Susan—and after a moment he filled the silence. First with another sigh. “Preliminary tox screen showed high levels of Xanax.”

“Have you met Yearling? If I was married to him, I’d be eating that shit like popcorn.”

“That could explain it, I suppose.” He sounded doubtful.

“What else would explain it?”

“Maybe she *was* self-medicating. She did have excessive amounts of alcohol in her system, as well as acetaminophen.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’re the detective.”

“Are you saying she was so blown on booze and Xanax she couldn’t drag herself out of the burning bar?”

It took him a long time to answer. “I’m saying she was so already dead she couldn’t drag herself out of the burning bar.”

“Wait. What?”

“No soot or other particulates in her lungs, and no evidence of carbon monoxide toxicity. She was dead before the fire started.”

“What killed her?”

“The drugs and alcohol would do it. The M.E. thinks acute liver failure, but you’ll have to wait for her final report.”

“Jesus.” My thoughts started to race.

“You’re telling me. Not a pleasant way to die.”

“Are there any?” I didn’t expect an answer, but he gave me one anyway.

“I’d go for carbon monoxide myself. Not like the boy gave her a choice.”

Justin was like everyone else—so fixated on the approved narrative he couldn’t hear what the post-mortem and his own analysis was telling him.

I turned to go. But before I reached the door, I thought of one more question.

“How long does it take to die from liver failure?”

“Too many variables to really say.”

“Ballpark it for me. Couple of days?”

“Sure. It’s possible.”

“And you’re gonna know something is wrong.”

“Oh, yes. Very painful. Everyone in earshot would know something was wrong.”

Including, I’d be willing to bet, Joey Getchie.

To quote Cicero quoting someone else no one ever heard of, "*Cui bono?*" An eleven-year-old boy may or may not want a woman to stop screaming so badly he'd do anything to shut her up. But it strained credulity to think he killed her liver with Xanax and Tylenol, then carted the body to Dad's tavern for a bonfire. Arson could be the act of a troubled boy, but I was starting to think the real *Cui* was someone a little older.

I called the DA from my car. "What do you want, Detective?"

"Hello to you too, counselor." Kallista Jessup would rather find a spider on her toothbrush than talk to me.

"Do you have something for me or is this just a little grab ass to make me think you're doing your job?"

Asking for Yearling's financials would get me exactly nothing. "Figured you'd want the heads up. Marcille found no evidence of accelerants on Getchie's clothes."

"So he changed. Pin down his movements, find the clothes, end of story."

Even if there were no clothes? Susan's countdown was coming in handy.

"Is there anything else, Detective?"

I'd let her find out about the Missus's liver failure from the M.E. "Not at the—" She didn't give me a chance for a snarky goodbye.

I sat there for a minute, then dialed another number.

Jeffrey Auxier was new to the Multnomah County DA's office, in his first year in Portland after getting his start in Marion County. His beat was felony property crimes, but he'd assisted on a case I'd worked the previous spring, a chop shop partnership which ended in a fatal dispute over proceeds. I thought he was worth a call since he hadn't had his tit in the wringer long enough for all the idealism to get squeezed out of him.

As a bonus, Jeff was the kind of guy who would actually offer a few empty pleasantries before asking what the hell I wanted.

"I just wondered if you'd be willing to destroy your career."

Took some convincing. I had to make promises impossible to keep, though I was fairly confident I could protect him from the worst of the blowback. He was dubious, but he warily agreed to see what he could find out.

I was home by the time he got back to me three hours later, glowering at a beer and wishing my cancer would recur. He refused to give me anything on paper. "If this ends up mattering, we can retrace it in a more formal capacity." And if it didn't, he could hide his tracks.

Smart young man.

As with so many things, the information was suggestive without telling me much.

There was life insurance on the Missus, but sadly not a recent, oversized policy taken out in secret. Fifty grand, enough to cover the funeral with spare change for a plasma TV and a fishing boat—a standard policy offered through the Bureau's benefits package. We all had one.

Of greater interest was the situation with the bar. The partnership was leveraged to the eyeballs, but renovations had stalled when a bridge loan fell through. While the re-application was under a long, dragging review, the bar sat empty, generating zero income. In the aftermath of the fire, property insurance would render the bridge loan moot. Convenient for Sergeant Yearling.

But convenient enough? As motives went, I'd seen thinner, but not by much—especially with a faux witness to murk things up. No doubt George Ruffian would have his crap ID nailed down by the time I saw him again. I needed more than supposition and inference.

I finished my beer, then picked up my phone again. Auxier was a tougher sell this time around, but when I promised a faxed affidavit in twenty minutes, he agreed to pretend Jessup couldn't be reached.

I was taking a big chance, but I had a feeling that's why Susan dropped this mess on me to begin with. Risk big to win big, and if I flamed out, no one would miss me. Either way, the file would close.

Half an hour later, as I walked to my car, my phone rang. I almost didn't answer when I saw on Caller ID it was Justin Marcille.

"Did I do something to piss you off, Skin?"

I'd asked almost the exact thing of Susan. "I just want it done right, Justin."

"Thanks for nothing."

Exactly.

— + — + —

By nightfall, the heavy lifting was done—mostly by others. Even so, I was beat. As I drove back to the burned out bar to keep an eye on the evidence I thought of Ali Trotta. First day of the rest of her life.

The rubble was quiet and dark. My plan was to make sure no one tried to clear out all that expensive queso before Justin Marcille and his guys arrived. As evidence, it wasn't critical to the case, but I'd rather make sure the DA had everything than have to explain why I let evidence which spoke to motive walk away. I parked across the street in the shadows of an ancient elm tree to watch.

Quiet time. Actually felt pretty good.

Until a light came on in the storage building.

"Thank *you*, Susan, for making me work this one on my own." My voice sounded whiny in my ears. I put in three calls, first to dispatch requesting cover and then to Susan and Jessup. Susan, to her credit, told me to sit tight and await the cavalry. Jessup acted like I'd interrupted foreplay. I was content to follow Susan's orders until a car pulled into the driveway and a man mountain got out.

Let him burn was my first thought. Apparently I didn't have a second thought. I caught up with him half a dozen paces from the storage building door.

"Moose, don't go in there."

He startled and spun, and for a second I thought he was going to go for his gun. But then he relaxed. Slightly.

"What the hell are you doing here, Skin? Can't you leave the man alone?"

"I know you're his friend, Moose—"

"And what are you?"

"A cop. Trying to be."

He read the implication in my words. "Go to hell, Skin."

Light glowed through the windows of the storage building. I heard laughter, then a shouted name.

"Yo, Zachster!"

Moose turned and went through the half-open door. I followed, feeling stupid. A half dozen guys sat around the green felt table, one with a young woman in his lap. She seemed to have misplaced her blouse.

I recognized the faces as those who'd laughed loudest at Yearling's jokes during the retirement party. His partners in the bar. At the sight of me, the girl leapt from Yearling's lap and tried, with limited success, to hide her breasts with her hands. She scooted into the shadows as Yearling swarmed to his feet.

This time, he didn't hold the gun at his side. He aimed right between my eyes. Somewhere behind him, the stripper let out a squeal, and I heard the clack of spike heels against concrete.

“What are you thinking, Sergeant?” I smiled at him as if my bowels hadn’t turned to liquid. “That it’s easier to pull the trigger a second time? This isn’t a convenience store hold up.”

“I’m thinking no one would miss you.”

“Maybe not.” I stole a glance at Moose. His face was blank, his body a stone. “But my name is on the affidavit in support of your arrest warrant. Once you get past the institutional blindness, the trail that led me here wasn’t hard to follow.” I was talking to Yearling, but my words were for Moose. Assuming he was able to hear them. “You just have to be able to see that even a well-liked cop is capable of murdering his wife and framing an orphan for it.” Neither Yearling nor Moose responded, so I threw in one last tidbit Auxier dug up once Jessup saw the way the wind was blowing. “Especially when it was the wife’s money being pissed away on every cop’s favorite vanity project, his own goddamn bar.”

The click as his thumb pulled back the hammer was the loudest sound I’d heard since Vietnam. Not his service Glock, but an old S&W revolver. Well cared for, but showing its age in the burnished finish on the barrel. No doubt untraceable.

If he decided to pull the trigger in this room full of cops, I wondered if there would be any witnesses.

“Just so you know, Sergeant. Justin Marcille found traces of lamp oil on the shoes you hid in the rafters in your basement.”

That was for Moose too, but it was Yearling’s face that darkened. “The kid planted them. The witness—”

“Recanted when I showed him the security footage of Joey ripping off a rain poncho from the Nautica factory outlet in Woodburn half an hour before the fire started.” I’d be buying Officer Martinez a bottle of Glen Garioch to say thanks for digging that clip up. “Even if he stole a car, he couldn’t have gotten back to Portland in time to burn up your wife’s dead body.”

There was more. The empty Xanax bottle in the garbage from a prescription he’d refilled less than a week before. The fact that he hadn’t signed in at the support group meeting his buddies claimed he’d attended. A lot of it was circumstantial, but the weight added up. I honestly didn’t know if he tried to kill his wife but didn’t understand Xanax doesn’t work like barbiturates, or if she’d tried and failed to end things on her own. What was clear was, given the chance to take her to the hospital, he didn’t. Maybe he fed her Tylenol for the pain, unaware it would exacerbate the damage to her liver. Maybe she took it herself. Either way, her agonized screaming was what sent Joey Getchie running. Forty miles—impressive indeed.

Yearling’s finger went white on the trigger.

“Zach, buddy?” A quiet voice: Moose. “This ain’t the way, man. You know we got your back.”

Not sure if it was Moose, the fact the revolver had a heavy pull, or the sound of approaching sirens. Maybe all three. All I knew was I walked out of there alive.

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I put an envelope on top of the Yearling binder, dropped both on the lieutenant’s desk. Susan looked at it, then up at me.

“What’s this?”

“You knew how it would go down, didn’t you? With Yearling.”

“I expected you to build the case. That’s all.”

“Right. Except you know I don’t play well with others. Moose would have carried Jessup’s water and crafted whatever narrative was necessary to protect his buddy. Me? I got no buddies. So you get your man and

Moose gets to keep his job and act as character witness at the sentencing phase of Yearling's trial."

Her lips went two-dimensional. She tapped the envelope again. "I asked what is this, Detective?"

I thought of Ali Trotta. "I'm thinking of opening a knitting shop."

Countdown. "In English? Please."

There's a fraternity, so I'm told. Oh, none of my brother—or sister—cops ever left me hanging when mayhem was at hand. But when it comes down to it, all we really have are the same old cliques we pretend we left behind in high school. Susan was perhaps the first cop with whom I felt a genuine fraternal connection, but even she left me to twist the first time she needed someone to take the heat for what would be an unpopular prosecution.

"I'm putting in for retirement, Lieutenant."

"Skin—"

"Don't bother. We both know you wouldn't mean it."

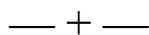
She fingered the envelope for a moment. "So ... what? You're a martyr?"

Hell knows Justin Marcille and Jeff Auxier didn't deserve to take the heat for bringing down Zach Yearling. But honestly, I was just tired. "Maybe I just want to take my pension while there's still time to enjoy it."

On that note, I turned away.

"You'll be missed, Detective."

Nice of her to say so.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Cameron is the author of gritty mysteries featuring Skin Kadash: *County Line*, *Day One*, *Chasing Smoke*, and *Lost Dog*. Bill's stories have appeared in publications like *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Portland Noir*, and *Killer Year*. His work has been nominated for multiple awards, including the Spotted Owl Award, the Left Coast Crime Rocky Award, and the CWA Short Story Dagger. In 2012, *County Line* received the Spotted Owl for Best Northwest Mystery.

Property of the State, a young adult mystery introducing troubled yet resourceful Joey Getchie, arrives in 2016 from The Poisoned Pencil.

Learn more at <http://www.bill-cameron.com>.

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The Missus

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