

**DEPRAVED**

**DIFFERENCE**

A Detective Shakespeare Mystery

Also by  
J. Robert Kennedy

*The Protocol*

# DEPRAVED DIFFERENCE

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J. ROBERT KENNEDY

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For my wife, my daughter, my parents, my friends.  
All of you made this possible.



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# ONE

Tammera flipped closed her laptop, the satisfying snap signaling the end of another long day, and shoved it into its well-travelled case. She lifted her dark brown suede jacket off the chrome coat-rack monstrosity she hid behind her office door, stuffed her arms in the sleeves and shrugged it up her shoulders. With her knock-off Prada purse over one shoulder, the case over the other, she pulled her long brown hair from under both, and marched to the elevators, tossing a wave and a half-hearted smile at the bored security guard perched behind the reception desk.

He glanced up from the sports section. “Goodnight, Miss Coverdale.”

“Goodnight, Joseph.” She pressed the down button. “Hold down the fort 'til I get back.”

“Leaving us?”

She jabbed at the button again. “Heading to Boston for a few days.”

The elevator chimed. “Have a good trip!” said Joseph, his head already buried in his paper.

“Thanks!” *Not bloody likely.* Tammera stepped onto the elevator and hit P3 as the doors closed. She leaned against the rear wall of the elevator, resting her head against the glass. She looked up at her reflection in the mirrored ceiling and sighed. The investment bank she worked for needed an extra body in Boston and she was it. A flurry of emails to cancel weekend travel plans had followed the bad news. Her fiancé was *not* happy and a rip-roaring fight ensued. *As if he has a monopoly on being pissed.* He demanded she quit. She called him an idiot. *Quit in this economy? In my industry?* She growled and took a deep breath to calm herself as she fumbled through her purse for her keys.

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When the doors opened, she stepped from the elevator into the nearly deserted parking garage, the few remaining cars belonging to the skeleton nightshift, or other poor SOBs like her—no longer a junior, but not senior enough to slack off. A shoe scraped on the pavement behind her. Her heart raced as she spun around to see a man's gloved hand swing toward her head. She screamed but it was too late. Excruciating pain raced through her entire face from the jarring impact, her eyes filled with tears as she fell backwards, her flailing arms, desperate to find something to hold onto, sent her keys flying over the railing to the next level. Her head bounced off the cold concrete floor and her world blurred, her keys hitting the ground in the distance, the last sound she heard before blacking out.

She awoke, her mind a fog of pain and confusion. She slowly opened her eyes to find her head resting on her chest, her blouse torn and her nylons ripped at the knees spread immodestly before her in what appeared to be a straight back chair. She tried to close her legs, but felt something pulling against her ankles, preventing them from moving. Still groggy from the blow, it didn't occur to her to be afraid. She tried to lean forward to see what the problem might be and winced, the movement sending her head throbbing with levels of pain she had never experienced before. *Where am I?* She steeled herself and tried to lean forward again, but found she couldn't. *How did I get here?* She tried to remember, the fog in her head slowly clearing. Suddenly her memory returned with all the force of a sledgehammer, jolting her back to reality. *Somebody punched me!* Her mouth still stung where she had been hit and she tasted the salty blood from her swollen lip. A run of her tongue over her teeth revealed two loose. She tried to reach up to touch them, as if shoving them back into place would help, but discovered her hands clasped behind the back of the chair, something holding them tightly together. Her heart started to pound and she felt the room spin as her situation became clear. *I've been kidnapped!* She took a deep breath to steady herself. The roar in her ears slowly settled as she regained control. She looked at her surroundings. It was dark, but not completely, some light from what most likely were street lamps, shone through dirty, cracked windows far overhead, years of pigeon feces blocking much of it. She was in what she guessed to be an abandoned warehouse, a musty smell and stray

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pallets strewn about the only contents. She opened her mouth to call out for help when footsteps behind her echoed off the walls and ceiling, their slow, methodical approach shoved her heart against her ribcage, faster and faster, as they neared. Too afraid to turn around, it was everything she could do to not shut her eyes and pray for deliverance from this nightmare.

The footsteps stopped behind her, so close she heard the rustling of nylon scraping nylon, as who she was now certain was her captor reached into a pocket. *It must be a gun. I'm going to die! Oh, God, please help me!* She yelped as a gloved fist thrust in front of her face. She jerked her head away to avoid the expected blow and squeezed her eyes shut. Then she heard something strange. Voices. But far away, almost recorded. Yet familiar somehow. Opening one eye a crack, she was shocked to see a cell phone held in front of her, a video playing on it. Her captor clutched her by the hair and yanked her head to face the phone. Her eyes teared from the pain as he twisted the ball of hair he held tighter. She opened both eyes to watch.

“Holy shit, man!” said a voice on the recording. “Look at what they're doin'!”

“Are you getting this?” asked another excited voice.

“Yeah, dude, we're gonna be famous!” The view flashed to the person's face recording it, rampaging acne betraying his age, then to his equally challenged friend, who hammed it up for the camera with a small dance and a Gene Simmons salute. The phone was turned back and held high to record over the people in front. On the screen Tammera watched two young men kick and punch a woman, her unconscious body offering no resistance. One man lifted his steel-toed boot and brought it down hard on her head, eliciting a collective gasp and another “Holy shit!” from the kid taping it, as the subway car screeched to a halt. The two men bolted out the door and the passengers rushed in front of the camera as the kid moved closer to the woman's motionless body.

“Dude, we gotta get outta here!” yelled his companion. The camera jerked as its operator was dragged out. The angle spun around and froze on the image of a woman as she shoved her way off the train.

It was her.

She sobbed as the memories of that night flooded back, the horror of seeing that poor woman murdered before her eyes, the feeling of

helplessness at being able to do nothing. And the shame. The shame of slinking away, rather than being human enough to at least give a statement, something she did rectify the next day, but only after much soul searching. The man flipped the phone closed, the snap of the case yanking her back to reality as he stepped around to face her. A Yankees baseball cap, drawn down low, and large, reflective sunglasses allowed her to see herself, but not him. A dark blue windbreaker, zipped tight to cover as much as possible, kept most of his emotionless face hidden from view.

He stared at her.

“Wh-what do you want from me?”

Again he just stared.

But she knew what he wanted. He wanted justice, he wanted someone to pay. Yes, she had done nothing, but what was she supposed to have done? She was one woman! They were two men!

“I wasn’t the only one that did nothing!” she cried. It sounded feeble. She looked at herself in his glasses. Blood trickled down her chin, her eyes red and swollen from her tears reminded her of the woman. Pathetic. Helpless. “Did-did you know her?”

Again, no response.

“I-I know I should have done something! I know that, but nobody did anything.” She leaned forward as far as her bindings would permit as she attempted to make a connection, her pleading eyes tried to bore through the glasses, to see if a conscience she might reason with lay behind them. “I was scared. We were all scared!”

He held the phone up between his thumb and forefinger, slowly rocking it back and forth as if wagging a finger at a child.

She knew what he meant. *Not everybody was scared.*

He pressed a few keys and activated the video camera. With his left hand he held it out to record her. With his right he pulled a gun from his belt and pointed it at her head.

Her eyes focused on the end of the barrel as it became her entire world. She saw the gloved finger on the trigger begin to squeeze.

“Oh, God, please no!”

She squeezed her eyes shut and screamed as he squeezed the trigger.

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Merissa winced as she slowly rotated her wrist, trying to loosen the still tender scabs built up over the past week. She pushed the cause, a pair of handcuffs, up her arm in search of some relief. They slipped back down. She growled in frustration and was about to try pulling her hand through the cuffs again, when she thought better of it, and grabbed the chain they were attached to with both hands and yanked it instead. In the darkness above she heard the other end scrape against what she had determined must be a metal pole spanning the ceiling of her dungeon, as it slid towards her, providing a little more slack. *I feel like a dog on a run.* And that was exactly how she was being treated since her abduction several weeks before. Each day a platform lowered from the ceiling above with a bottle of water and a tray of food. She had been too scared to approach the first couple of days, and after what seemed an eternity, but was more likely only minutes, the rattling of chains sent her into a panic, each pull by her captor causing the platform to rise a few more inches, and with each pull, she pushed with her bare feet against the floor, trying to force the wall at her back farther from the horror in front of her. When the platform finally reached the ceiling, it filled the hole in the floor above seamlessly, leaving total darkness. The unknown sounds of her captor set her imagination ablaze with visions of some hellish reality just overhead, the mysterious clanging of metal, creaking of footsteps on wood, the sounds of things impossibly large scraping across the ceiling of her dungeon, followed by a silence even more terrifying.

On the third day her tremendous thirst and hunger won out, hours of sobbing and the occasional screaming fit having exhausted her. This time she welcomed the sounds above indicating the impending arrival of her daily meal. She inched toward the lowered platform and stole a glance up at the bright hole in the ten-foot high ceiling which revealed nothing except the silhouette of her captor, the lack of details far more horrifying to her, leaving her fertile imagination to fill in the blanks of what terror now possessed her. She snatched the food, and as soon as she removed it and the bottle, the platform rose, signaling an end to the feeding.

She cowered against the wall, staring at the ever shrinking hole above as the platform completed its return trip, sealing her in once again. In complete darkness, she placed the sandwich on her lap, and twisted the top

off the bottle, downing at least half of it before she stopped. She breathed a sigh of relief, her thirst temporarily quenched. She felt for the sandwich with her spare hand, seized it and took a tentative bite. As she slowly chewed, the flavors almost overwhelmed her. Either desperate hunger made everything taste better, or her captor was a wizard with food. After swallowing the first delicious bite, she devoured the rest of the sandwich and finished off her water. She was about to toss the bottle when she thought better of it, the pressure on her bladder nearing the breaking point after holding it for so long. She felt the ground for the top she had discarded, and soon found it a few feet away. She screwed it back on the now empty bottle, and placed it against the wall for later.

Later proved to only be a few minutes. She grabbed the bottle, removed the top, then stood up and dropped her pants and panties to her ankles. Carefully positioning the bottle, she let as controlled a stream as she could manage go, the satisfying sound of the urine actually going into the bottle a welcome relief, this being something she had never tried before. *If only I were a guy.* She harrumphed to herself. *If I were a guy, then I wouldn't even be here.* The pitch of the stream quickly got higher as the bottle filled, finally rushing over the top, the warm fluid spilling on her hands. She clenched, cutting off the stream, and cursed. *Lovely.* She shook her hand then screwed the cap back on. She put the bottle on the floor then hiked her panties and pants back up, not completely relieved, but no longer in danger of having to squat in what was her new home.

Her strength restored, she turned to thoroughly exploring her surroundings by touch, confident her captor wouldn't return until the next day. She began first by facing the wall she had been sitting against since she arrived, save the brief moments she had spent retrieving the food and relieving herself. With both hands pressed flat against the wall in front of her, she slowly made her way to her right. She ran her hands over every square inch of the wall she could reach. Immediately in front of her, the wall felt damp and soft. She scratched at it with her fingernails, and she felt some of it peeling away, the sound reminding her of digging a latrine when camping as a child. She scraped some into her other hand and sniffed it, then rubbed it between her fingers, the gritty feeling unmistakable. *This is a dirt wall!* She shook the dirt from her hands, and reached upwards. At about

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shoulder height the texture suddenly changed, from the cool, damp, softness of the earthen wall, to the colder, dry, hardness of another material entirely. She ran her fingers across the rough, pitted surface. It seemed to be consistent, no indentations or breaks in the feel, except for the distinct, even line, separating it from the dirt portion of the wall. *This is concrete!* Excited by this find, her mind raced as she continued along the wall. Could she dig her way out? If this was an outer wall, it might not be that far to dig? She shook her head. She'd never be able to dig enough in one day. *And what would he do to you if he thought you were trying to escape?* She shuddered at the thought, and continued her exploration.

Her shoulder bumped into something.

She yelped, jumping back, listening for what she did not know. Silence. She tentatively reached out, her hand coming into contact with the same cold, dampness she had felt all along. She turned, running both hands along their respective surfaces, until they met. *It's only a corner! Settle down!* She breathed a sigh of relief, and continued along this new wall. It didn't take long for her to confirm there were three more corners. *And no door.* She got down on her hands and knees, and began to explore the floor, reaching out in wide circles, running her hands along every square inch, then crawling forward another few feet. The entire floor seemed to be of the same consistency as the walls. She reached the end of her second pass, and turned to make her third, feeling almost like a lawnmower, trying not to miss any of the surface. She moved several feet from the wall, running her hands about, finding nothing she hadn't already found. She reached far ahead to plant her hands then drag herself towards her next search area, when her left hand found empty space. Falling forward, she felt her hand hit something cold. She continued to collapse, the chain overhead screeching in protest, then breaking her fall as all the slack she was granted was used up. Now on her side, she pulled her hand up out of the cold void, the distinct feeling and sound of ice cold water finally registering. *What the hell is that?* She changed position so she could explore with her free hand, and felt around. There was a small area of concrete, perhaps four feet square, with a smaller square cut cleanly in the middle, that went down about six inches, at which point there was water.

She had no idea what this was, or why it would be there. *Could it be part of the plumbing?* “Eww!” she exclaimed, rubbing both hands on the dirt floor in an effort to remove any unseen sewage. She smelt her hands and didn’t notice anything. She stuck her tongue out to touch it to her hand then stopped. *How desperately do you need to know?* She made a mental note of the location of the hole in the map she was now creating in her head, and continued her exploration, finding nothing else of interest. She crawled to the nearest corner, and thought about what she had learned. She had dirt walls that turned into concrete higher up. The floor was dirt, with some sort of concrete hole leading to water. She knew there was a ceiling above her, with a wood floor on top of her, suggesting a house or cabin of some sort. *I’m in a basement.* She nodded to herself. She was definitely in a basement, dug out to be deeper than any basement she had ever been in before.

She had repeated her explorations several times, but found nothing she had missed. The occasional sound of rushing water from the hole she had discovered suggested it might indeed be linked to the plumbing of wherever she was. Rather than use the floor and live with the smell, she had taken to using this hole as a latrine. Her routine had continued, unchanged, for what she now thought to be weeks, but with no sense of time, she was only guessing.

But today was different.

Today she felt different. After eating, she had fallen asleep, which wasn’t unusual, but when she woke up, she felt different. She felt clean. Her mouth, which had become disgusting to her, tasted fresh. She ran her tongue over her teeth, and they felt smooth, clean for the first time since she had been taken. She tasted the distinct grit of toothpaste, as if she had not had any water to rinse. And her hair! Her head no longer itched. She reached up with her free hand and ran it through the smooth, clean hair, not a single knot, no hint of the matted greasy mess that had been there before. She ran her fingernails against her scalp, and realized they had been clipped. She reached down and felt her toenails finding they too had been trimmed. As she ran her hands up her legs, she immediately realized something else was different. *What the hell?* She felt her pants, then her shirt. They were different. *I’m wearing different clothes!* As she explored her body using only touch and smell, she realized that she had been cleaned and

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groomed. *Everywhere*. From her hair and ears, to her toes, to her—. She shuddered to think of it. But there was no doubt. He had definitely cleaned her. *Thoroughly*. She drew her knees up and she hugged them to her chest, burying her head and closing her eyes. *What else did he do to me?*

As she sat there, moaning, trying to come to grips as she rocked herself like a small child, she heard something overhead, then an odd zapping sound, followed by a flash of blinding light. She squeezed her eyes shut and jumped to her feet, her hands flat against the wall behind her as she felt her way into a corner. Finding the corner, she froze and held her breath, listening for the telltale signs that her captor might be about to join her. There was nothing. She tentatively opened her eyes, holding her free hand up to shield them from the light. She rapidly blinked and tried to focus, her eyes no longer used to the brightness. It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust, but when they did, she found a lone light bulb hanging from the ceiling. She stepped under it, closing her eyes and enjoying the warmth as the bulb bathed her in light for the first time since she had been taken captive. It felt wonderful. *Almost like sunlight*. She stood, lost in this nearly forgotten sensation, for several minutes, then opened her eyes again, and looked around her, seeing her prison for the first time. It was definitely a basement, made of concrete walls that turned to dirt about five feet from the floor. The floor was dirt, the only exception the small square where the water hole was. Above were wooden rafters that appeared very old, the distinct lines of the platform cut into the floor the only break. And there was the pole, running the entire length, a pair of handcuffs clasped to it, then to a chain that led down to her own pair.

She slowly spun around, taking in every detail, not sure how long the light would last. As she did, she noticed something on the walls. She stepped closer and gasped. Long gouges were scratched into the dirt by fingernails, as if someone had tried to climb out, the bloody streaks left on the concrete, three feet from the ceiling, indicated the extent of their success.

She wasn't this dungeon's first captive.

For the first time in weeks, she screamed.

Aynslee Kai leaned back in her chair and tried to stretch all the kinks of a hard day's work from her body. It was useless. When she got home she would pour a glass of cabernet sauvignon, grab a Tess Gerritsen novel, and run herself a hot bath. Though the evening newscast had ended long ago, her work as the entertainment reporter was never over. She loved her career choice but hated her job, covering celebrities not exactly hardcore news. Her dream? CNN anchor. *Yeah, me and every other person in this business.* She hoped her talent would be spotted eventually so she might escape the cubicle assigned three years earlier, its plain, light blue walls pale reminders of the sky of which she had no view, the single plastic "window" merely providing a better view of the enclosed offices lining the outer walls, devouring the sunlight, leaving nothing for the minions like herself, relegated to serving within the bowels. Art prints clashed with a collection of cartoon clippings, their humor long lost, plastered about in a futile attempt to brighten her cell but instead serving to remind her of her miserable existence and lack of success. It was taking longer for her talent to be recognized than she had planned. At first she thought she had hit the jackpot to get assigned the entertainment beat. It meant regular face time almost every night, but she soon realized she would never be taken seriously as long as she did it. Usually reporters rotated out or quit, but she hadn't moved on yet. Friends told her it was because she was too pretty. She thought that was BS, half the female talent on the air these days had implants and West Coast noses.

About to call it a day, she heard the familiar double-tone of an email arrive. She glanced at her watch. Almost midnight. *Forget it, I'll look at it tomorrow.* She shutdown the notebook, disconnected it from the docking station and slipped it into its carrying case. Checking her BlackBerry to make sure it was on, she headed out the door. As she waited for the elevator a young intern joined her. He seemed to always be there whenever she was leaving, almost as if he lurked around the corner in wait for her. It creeped her out. She nodded at him and pulled out her iPod to try and head off a conversation.

"That's a nice iPod, Miss Kai."

*Too late!*

"How many gigabytes does it have?"

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She shrugged her shoulders. “No clue.”

“You probably just got it 'cuz you liked the color!” He laughed. The awkward guffaw made her cringe. Thankfully the elevator chimed a soon definite end to their conversation as the doors opened. She stepped aboard and to her dismay, he did as well. “Me, I got an eighty-gigabyte model. As soon as I got it, I ripped my entire CD collection. It took me weeks, I've got hundreds of CDs you know. I have over six thousand songs on it. If you'd like I could put together some playlists for you.”

Having tuned him out, it took her a minute to notice he was waiting for a response. “Sorry, I didn't catch that, I'm a little distracted, working on a story, you know.”

“I was wondering if you'd like me to put together some playlists for you?”

*How do I get rid of this guy?* In as disinterested a tone as she could muster, she said, “Sure, leave them on my desk.” His face brightened. *That probably backfired.* The elevator opened on the ground floor and she burst from it like a bull at the rodeo. A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed she had left her stalker behind as she raced to the subway. She scrambled down the station steps, swiped her transit pass, pushed through the turnstile and headed to her platform. It didn't take long for her train to arrive. She sat at the front of the car, her body pressed against the side, her purse on her lap, her notebook case strategically occupying the seat beside her, the strap wrapped several times around her arm. She turned up her iPod and retrieved her BlackBerry to check her email, curiosity winning out.

The email contained no text, only a video attachment. She activated it. As the clip played her jaw dropped and her eyes opened wide. She looked around to make sure no one had seen it then ran to the door as the subway slowed at the next station. She dialed the news director as she rushed to the other side of the platform.

Logan kicked a discarded Pepsi can and watched as it clanged away from him, coming to rest near Joe, the resident drunk who slept in front of their building, or in the lobby on cold days. He looked at the shithole he lived in and sighed. It wasn't supposed to be like this. He had never really expected to be rich or famous, but a dishwasher at a pizzeria without a penny to his

name, and a family that refused to speak to him, was not where he thought he would be at eighteen. He had been stoned, after all, when he and Aaron had videotaped the woman being beaten on the subway a year ago. When they returned to his parents' house they posted it on YouTube and every other site they could think of, but not before recording an outro featuring the two of them horsing around for the camera. *That part was really stupid.* He kicked a beer bottle, the hollow echo of the glass rolling on the concrete sliced through the uncharacteristic silence. Joe stirred. Within hours their handiwork had been downloaded thousands of times. It even made the local news and over the next few months the coverage of the incident and the debate over the morality of leaving the recording of a woman's murder on the Internet drove over one hundred million curious and depraved to view it. When his father found out he kicked him from the house, saying anybody who stood by and watched a woman get beaten to death was no son of his.

*Fuck 'em.* Who was he anyway? He had never been proud of him, never patted him on the back for a job well done. *Did you ever do anything to make him proud?* Logan sighed as he looked up at the building he and Aaron, tossed as well by his mom, had rented a small bachelor pad in a year ago. He hadn't even known neighborhoods this seedy existed in New York until they moved in, but it was all they could afford with the odd jobs they were able to find. It had turned into a yearlong bender of booze and drugs. A bender he was tired of. But Aaron seemed perfectly content to keep going this way. *I'm just so tired.*

"You ok, kid?"

Joe's gravelly voice startled him. He looked at Joe, lying on his side, hugging a brown bag Logan was sure didn't hold leftovers from lunch.

Logan shook his head. "No."

He stepped into the lobby, checked the mail, tossed the bills in the garbage and dragged his weary body to his apartment. After he shouldered the warped door closed behind him, he heard voices on the other side of an old acoustic divider pillaged a few months ago to try and give each other some privacy for when they were getting busy with the honeys. There had yet to be any honeys.

"Hey, Logan, that you?"

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“Yeah.” Logan stepped around the divider and saw Aaron and a man he had never seen before laughing on the couch as they watched TV, the hijacked cable feed their biggest accomplishment in three months. How long their rooftop handiwork would last, they didn’t know.

“Dude, this is Wolf, he's new in the building.” Wolf stood and shook Logan's hand. He looked old, maybe thirty, blonde hair, kind of nerdy looking.

Wolf pointed to a case of beer sitting on the table. “Beer?”

Logan already liked him. He grabbed a bottle and twisted off the cap, flicking it toward Aaron who ducked and laughed. After a long swig Logan sat down in a nearby beanbag chair, its innards long-since replaced with newspaper and other semi-soft scraps, and ran his fingers through his shoulder-length, scraggly hair, trying to rid himself of the knots caused by the hairnet his boss forced him to wear all day.

“Tough day at work?”

“I hate that fucking place.” Logan proceeded to scratch his goatee. “It's hot, it's noisy and the boss is a prick. And look!” He held up his hands for them to see. “I've got dishpan hands for fuck's sake!”

Aaron laughed. “Life sucks, dude!”

Wolf nodded and reached into his pocket. “Maybe this will help take your mind off it.” He pulled out a small Ziploc bag and fished out three blue pills.

“That better not be Viagra, you fag!” yelled Aaron, causing Logan to spray his beer toward the kitchen.

Wolf smiled. “Nope, better.” He popped one and handed the other two to the roommates. They both swallowed the pills and washed them down without question. Within minutes Logan began to relax, the tension in his neck and shoulders eased as his troubles of the past year slowly melted away. His entire body felt light, almost as if he could float from the chair if he chose to. He looked at Aaron and giggled, his eyelids starting to feel heavy. Aaron slumped forward and hit his head on the drywall board perched atop four cinder blocks serving as their coffee table. The beer bottles rattled from the impact, caps and beer can ashtrays jolted into new resting places. Logan giggled uncontrollably at the sight. He pointed at Aaron and looked at Wolf who spit out his pill as he watched Logan. This

made Logan laugh even harder as the room spun around him. He reached out to steady himself on the floor, but grasped empty air instead, the floor not where he expected. He spilled his beer as he fell forward and passed out.

Aynslee stood her ground. “This is my story and there's no way in hell I'm giving it up!”

Jeffrey Merle, the news director, sat perched on the edge of his desk, his arms folded over his chest, propped up by a small potbelly. “Aynslee, this is too big for an entertainment reporter. Shaw is our crime reporter, I want him to run with this.”

“No friggin' way, Jeff,” she said as she crossed her arms and avoided eye contact with Jonathan Shaw who lounged in a nearby chair, a look of self-importance on his face she would love to smack off. “This was sent to me specifically, it's my story or I walk to another station with it.” *Might have crossed the line there.* She knew Jeff didn't like to be threatened. But she had his balls in a vise. The killer had sent the email to her, not the station. If she walked they'd lose the exclusive. And she knew he knew it.

Jeff stood and walked around his desk. He sank into his high-backed leather chair and clasped his hands behind his head, revealing a hint of perspiration under each armpit. He looked between her and Shaw intently for a minute as he pondered the situation. Aynslee waited. To say patiently wouldn't be accurate. Her heart pounded and her face was flush. She clenched her fists tight, her fingernails digging into the skin so hard she was sure they were drawing blood. She knew this was her big chance to break out from her three year rut. She also knew this might mean the beginning of a new career. *He's going to fire me.*

Jeff broke the silence with a sigh. “Fine, it's yours. Now get out, we lead with it on the six a.m. broadcast.” He picked up the phone, ending the meeting. Aynslee missed the expression of shock on Shaw's face as she marched from the office, her head held high. She passed her cubicle and headed straight to the bathroom, closed the stall door and vomited.

Logan's chin rested on his chest and his head throbbed as if he had just woken from a weekend bender. He felt someone struggling behind him and

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when he opened his eyes and turned his head, he saw it was Aaron. They were sitting on the floor, backs pressed together. Logan tried to stand, but couldn't, something tight against his chest preventing him. He looked down, and saw some type of cord wrapped several times around his chest, holding him to Aaron, and his arms straight to his sides. He looked around the room and saw Wolf near the window, looking out on the street below. He yelled into the gag stuffed in his mouth, the muffled sound snapping Wolf from his reverie. He slowly shifted his gaze to Logan. Logan went silent, the expression, or lack thereof, on Wolf's face sent his heart racing in fear. Wolf strode over to the coffee table where a notebook computer was set up. He stroked his finger over the touch pad and the screen saver disappeared, replaced by a media player. He clicked the button to play the selected video full-screen so both Logan and Aaron could see it.

Logan's heart leapt into his throat when he saw the video they had posted almost a year ago. *Oh my God! This dude must have known her!* Logan couldn't bring himself to look away from the video; he still found it morbidly fascinating. Fear, and a modicum of shame, helped him keep a straight face at the scene they had added, however Aaron, either not as strong willed, or still ignorant to the danger they were in, let out a single laugh. Logan thought he caught a near imperceptible change in Wolf's expression, but it lasted a mere moment.

Wolf pulled a cell phone from his pocket and started recording, holding the phone out in front as he reached behind him. Logan knew what was coming, but knowing and seeing were two entirely different things. When the gun appeared he screamed into his gag. Aaron sobbed but his muffled pleas had no affect on the impassive Wolf who continued to hold the phone, capturing both in the frame as he raised the weapon. He squeezed the trigger as Logan closed his eyes and turned his head away. The blast caused him to jump as a warmth spread over his legs. He was surprised to feel no pain with so much blood pouring out until he realized it wasn't blood. He had pissed his pants. He twisted his head to see Aaron but couldn't. He spun the other way and saw his friend's head lying on its side, a huge hole oozing blood and brain matter onto his shoulder. The world turned black.

Merissa sat cowered in the corner and rocked back and forth, hugging her knees, as she had for hours, the realization she wasn't the first person to be kept there sinking in. If she wasn't the first, then she most likely wouldn't be the last. And she doubted he had just *moved* his previous captive. *Or captives*. She knew they were dead. They had to be. She wracked her brain, trying to remember any news stories that might have mentioned someone being kidnapped and released. Or found dead. She kicked herself for not paying attention to the news. *If I get out of this, I'm going to start reading the paper*. But she knew she was never getting out of here. *No! Don't give up!* There was always hope. As long as she was alive, there was hope. But if she was going to die, there was no way in hell she was going to give that bastard the satisfaction of dying by his hand. She would fight the son of a bitch with everything she had. If she were going to die, it would be because of something *she* initiated. She wasn't going to just sit by passively and let some deranged psychopath have his way with her, then just kill her when he was finished getting off. *That's better!* She felt a renewed sense of determination, the depression of the past several hours turning into anger. It was time to take control.

Footsteps passed overhead, toward the center of the room, causing her heart to race, and her newfound determination to immediately waver.

*Feeding time.*

The light switched off, plunging her jail into total darkness before the platform began its slow descent. *I guess he doesn't want me knowing what he looks like*. It reached the floor with a thud, the light from above setting it apart from the rest of the darkened room as if its offering the feature attraction at a museum. She knew he would wait until she retrieved the food. Not wanting him staring at her, she quickly got up, grabbed the food and water, and scurried back to the wall. The chains rattled as her captor yanked on them, beginning the platform's ascent, the light from above slowly, relentlessly, shrinking, eventually into nothingness. Her tomb once again sealed in darkness, the light flickered, then blazed, a beacon to her despair.

She took a deep breath, trying to settle her nerves once again. She eyed the food, wondering if it would be drugged this time. *But do you really want to be awake?* She thought about it. At least if she were drugged, she didn't have to know what he was doing with her. But if she were awake, could she

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maintain control? What would happen if he discovered she were awake? Surely he would kill her? Maybe that's what happened to the others? Maybe they figured it out too, and that's what got them killed? She reached for the water, then stopped. *No! You need to take control!* Her hand hesitated, as if in its own battle of wills, inching towards the bottle, then darting back. *Don't do it! Don't do what? Don't drink it because you'll pass out? Or don't not drink it because you'll be awake?* She was pretty sure it was the water that was drugged. After all, it would be the easiest. Just add some drug, shake the bottle, and voila, knock-out juice. She took a deep breath and grabbed the bottle. Twisting the cap off, she raised it to her mouth.

*No!*

She tipped the bottle, the water rushing out towards her mouth. It hit her closed lips, and ran down her chin then neck. She stopped, the horror of her decision and its possible ramifications pumped adrenaline through her body. She quickly poured the water on her hands, washing them as best she could, then gave herself a quick camper's bath. She ate half the sandwich before she could change her mind, and waited to see if it had any affect on her. After a few minutes her eyes drooped and her limbs tingled then went numb. *Dammit!* As she lost consciousness she took satisfaction in now knowing he was drugging the food. *Next time....*

She awoke to sensations of a warm, comfortable bed, soft sheets atop a deep, cushioned mattress caressed her body as classical music played nearby, the smell of burning incense filled her nostrils, the pleasant vanilla scent causing her to breathe even deeper. For a moment she thought someone had rescued her, but when she felt the weight of a warm body on top of her, gently kissing her neck, she realized it was all a terrible nightmare. She was at home in bed with her husband. She breathed a sigh of relief and inhaled his cologne as she reached to embrace him. She stopped, not recognizing the scent. She opened her eyes and saw a man with a physique too well sculpted to be her husband's on top of her naked body, his eyes squeezed shut as he thrust himself at her, a look of frustration on his face. She was about to scream out for help when she noticed her rapist wasn't hard. *Let the bastard suffer!* A smile spread across her face as she watched him, sweat building on his forehead, his face turned red

in anger, the veins on his neck and face popping out as he continued in futility. He stopped and opened his eyes. She closed hers and wiped the smile off her face.

“No!” he screamed. She only felt the first blow, the pain excruciating as the fist connected with her nose, the shock radiating outwards, overwhelming her. She could imagine nothing worse until the next blow landed, hitting the side of her cheek. She felt her captor quickly move. She opened her eyes, thinking it might be over, but as she focused through the blur, she realized he was merely repositioning himself to straddle her chest. She screamed as he raised his fist and dropped it like a sledgehammer. She squeezed her eyes shut as a second blow rapidly followed, this one on the other side of her face. He continued to punch her, left then right, left then right, like an unstoppable juggernaut. She quickly numbed to the pain, it already overwhelming her senses.

*Please, God! Please end it!*

The blows didn't stop, but the pain did, as she finally, mercifully, blacked out.

Logan awoke with a start, puzzled to still be breathing. *I'm not dead!* He didn't feel like he'd been shot. He debated on whether or not he should open his eyes. *Maybe he's gone?* He opened one eye a sliver and immediately squeezed it back shut, the image of Wolf squatting in front of him, still holding the phone, burned into the back of his eyelids. Logan cursed himself. If he had kept his eyes shut he might have lived a little longer. And now he was going to die. *Why is he waiting?* Logan sat there and again curiosity won out. He opened one eye to see what was going on. The muzzle flashed six inches from his head. His brain never had a chance to register the sound.

In the editing room, Aynslee, still shocked Jeff had let her keep the story, debated how much of the killing to show. He had always been sweet on her, something she used to her advantage from time-to-time, the tight fitting top she still wore a shameless reminder of today's success. But the more she reviewed the footage, the more she wondered what she had gotten herself into. *Why was it sent to me? Who sent it? How do they know me?*

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The excitement over a career-making story drowned out the warning bells in the back of her mind. The logical part of her brain screamed to leave this story to someone else, to run in the other direction, but the ambitious part spoke in a whisper, a whisper so alluring she couldn't resist it, the siren call of the promised fulfillment of all her hopes and dreams, of everything she had ever wanted, too strong to not overcome any fears she may have.

She stretched in the chair and spun it around, lifting her feet as she smiled at the fantasy. Something caught her eye and she dropped her foot, stopping the spin of her chair. She spied the intern as he stood behind a nearby divider, staring at her through its plastic window. He smiled and waved. *How long has he been standing there?* She quickly turned and tossed a casual wave over her shoulder in the hope it would be enough to ward him off, and returned to the debate of how much to show. *It's just so graphic!* She leaned forward toward the console and undid the last cut showing the shooting. *But, violence sells.*

A knock at the door caused her to jump. She laughed to herself at the sudden realization of how on edge she was from the video, and turned to see who had interrupted her. The intern's grin stretched from ear to ear, his face pressed against the glass fogged a small section. *Please don't draw a heart!* He waved at her, the exaggerated motions indicated he wanted to come in. Before she could shake her head he opened the door.

"Hi, *Aynslee.*" The way he stretched out the first syllable of her name made her cringe. *And what happened to "Miss Kia"?* His nasal voice caused a momentary feeling of pity. *What a geek!*

"Hello..." She didn't even remember his name.

"Reggie."

"... Reggie. What can I do for you?"

Reggie looked at the floor, his hands grasped at each other, the rapidly forming sweat glistened as he spread it around. Aynslee sat on her hands. "Well, *Aynslee*, I've been thinking a lot about our conversation last night."

*What conversation?* "Yes?"

"Well, I've been trying to figure out what kind of music you'd like in your playlists."

*What the hell is he talking about?* She flashed back to last night. *Definitely backfired.* “Oh, you don't have to worry about that, Reggie. I've got plenty of music on my iPod already, actually I'm not sure if I have enough room.”

“Not enough room?” This clearly excited him. “Do you have iTunes on your computer here? Never mind, I'll get you set up and create some playlists for you so that you can just update your iPod when you leave for the day, depending on the mood you're in.” Before she could stop him he headed out the door then spun around. “I'll set up some themes for you, maybe dance, classical,” and then he paused and raised his eyebrows up and down suggestively, “or love songs.” Another toothy grin followed by a guffaw and the door shut leaving Aynslee wondering what the hell had just happened.

Her BlackBerry demanded her attention as it vibrated across the desk. She snatched it and read the subject line. Adrenaline rushed through her body as she saw it was blank, the incident with Reggie forgotten. She opened the message and saw it contained a lone video attachment. She activated the file and smiled as she saw what it contained. *CNN, here I come!* Then the wave of shame hit.

## TWO

The rain fell in icy cold sheets, so hard Leroy's exposed skin stung with each tiny impact. He pulled the threadbare remains of his trench coat as high as he could in a futile attempt to escape the downpour. Soaked to the bone, his skin numb from the cold, his hands shivered. He plodded forward, unsure if he could still feel his feet. *But at least I still have you.* He caressed the bottle of Jack Daniels hidden in his pocket, the brown paper bag shredding at the touch of his fingers, it too failing to escape the onslaught. He carefully pulled the bottle containing its precious elixir from his pocket, his shaking hands threatened to drop his hard earned reward. He rushed the bottle to his lips, as if once pressed against them, the bottle would never drop. He took a long swig to dull his misery a little more. His hands stopped shaking for a moment then swiftly resumed their previous rattle as he returned the bottle to the one pocket with no holes. "I need to get out of this rain."

"What about the warehouse?"

Leroy nodded. "Good idea." He stumbled forward, willing his legs, numbed from the cold and alcohol, to carry him the few minutes walk to the shelter. He pushed forward, through the driving wind and rain, the occasional swig fortifying his resolve. He rounded a corner and smiled. "There it is!"

"Quit gawking and get a move on!"

Leroy's nostrils flared in annoyance and shuffled the last few feet, all the while warily examining his surroundings, on the lookout for anyone who might seek to steal his own private refuge.

"Get in there you fool, there's nobody around!"

Leroy grunted and pushed open the door with his shoulder. It scraped on the concrete floor, the top hinge having let go long before. He cringed at the screech of metal, looked about one last time to see if anyone had heard, then

entered as rapidly as his tired body could muster, shoving the door closed behind him. The storm howled outside, the wind rattled the peeling walls and painted over windows of the abandoned warehouse, its hollow shell, emptied of anything of value by the owners, the remainder by looters, acted like an echo chamber, the din from the storm a dull roar Leroy found peaceful, much like the roar he heard in his ears on occasion. On cold rainy days like today, or long winter nights, the respite it provided was welcome, much more than a packed shelter with rules to be followed. Here, Leroy was answerable to himself, free to enjoy the peace and quiet this refuge provided from the city noise. Even on a stormy day like today, it was still quiet compared to the din that was New York, the noise from millions of inhabitants so close by, silenced. And that was why Leroy loved his little piece of paradise, a place where he didn't need to worry about thrill seeking kids beating him, or worse, hauled away by cops looking for an easy bust. This was his place and his alone. He took a belt from his bottle, placed it on the concrete floor and peeled off his clothes until he wore nothing but his stained underwear. Taking another swig, he looked around for the mattress he had rescued from a garbage bin a month ago and stashed here. It was gone.

"It's over there in the corner."

Leroy looked and smiled. He stumbled toward it but stopped short when he saw a chair with someone sitting in it, their back toward him.

"Who the hell is that?"

"I don't know," replied Leroy. He tiptoed his way around the chair. "It's a chick!"

"Are you sure?"

Leroy double-checked. Skirt and tits. "Yup."

"Get rid of her."

Leroy eyed the woman, her head slumped forward on her chest. He glanced back at his clothes, decided against dressing before confronting the unwelcome guest, and stepped in front of her.

"Hey, lady, this is my place," he slurred. "You go find your own place!"

"You tell her, Leroy!"

Leroy took another swig. Emboldened, he continued, "Hey, Bitch! Get out of here!" He stumbled forward and tripped headlong into the woman, knocking her from the chair. He crashed to the floor and found himself lying

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beside her, face-to-face. He stared at her through his drunken stupor. Confused, he rubbed his eyes, trying to focus. His vision cleared for a moment, revealing a hole in her forehead, a small trail of dried blood running the length of her face. "Holy shit!" he yelled as he struggled to his feet and ran toward the entrance, his uncoordinated legs causing him to fall more than once.

"Where're you goin'?"

Leroy stopped.

"She ain't gonna hurt nobody now."

Leroy nodded. He approached the body again, picked up his dropped bottle, thankful it hadn't shattered, and took a long drink. As quickly as his shaking hands would allow, he set about taking her watch, ring, bracelet and necklace. He saw a purse on the floor nearby and opened it. He removed the wallet, relieved it of cash and credit cards, then started back toward his clothes.

"We hit the mother lode today!"

He nodded as he thought of how much he'd be able to buy when he pawned his newly acquired goods. He leaned down to check on his clothes when the door blew open and banged against the wall, the sound echoing through the empty warehouse. "Shhh!" he hissed, stumbling towards the entrance. He lifted the door, its single good hinge itself on its last legs, and shoved it back into place. It took several tries to get it to stay closed, but once successful, he returned to his clothes. *Still wet*. He looked at the bed, took another shot of courage and headed back. He lay down, facing away from the woman, and passed out.

Officer Steve Scaramell watched the road as his Training Officer, Officer Brent Richards, poured coffee from a thermos into an insulated cup, tore open two sugar packets with his teeth and dumped them into the dark brew, then retrieved a swizzle stick from the dash and stirred the liquid. Finished, he tossed the stick back on the dash and looked at the road. His partner's eyes where they should be, Scaramell returned to surveying the surroundings.

The downpour had convinced them to do a quick warehouse district tour to kill some time and avoid having to get out from the shelter of their radio car. Scaramell, on the force less than a year, was relegated to the passenger

seat, which was fine by him since he hadn't learned to drive until the Academy and was still a little nervous behind the wheel. His partner, however, seemed able to drink coffee and gnaw at beef jerky while engaging in a high-speed pursuit. His laissez-faire approach to paperwork, protocol and driver safety, had at first shocked Scaramell, but in time he learned to ignore it. He was the "rook", here to learn, and if lucky, correctly distinguish the good habits from the bad.

He spotted an open door on an abandoned warehouse and pointed. "Looks like the winos are busy again." Richards nodded, pulling the patrol car up to the warehouse. They climbed out and trotted over to the entrance, weapons drawn. The sheets of rain prompted Scaramell to shoulder the door open and rush in quicker than his training dictated, leaving him to be first to spot a pile of clothing laying nearby on the floor. "Oh great, a fuckin' *naked* wino." He hated dealing with drunks; they usually wanted to be your friend then puked on your shoes.

"Look." Richards pointed to the other end of the warehouse where someone lay on a mattress and another on the floor, near a toppled over chair. He holstered his weapon and Scaramell followed suit. "Looks like a 10-64," said Richards as he walked towards the pair. Scaramell quickly flipped through his mental file of codes. *Quality of Life*. A little disappointed the call had become completely routine, he followed his TO.

"Okay, wakey, wakey!" called Richards as he approached the man snoring on the mattress. No response. Scaramell gave a gentle kick to the ass of the one lying near the chair, a woman, probably so strung out on crack she had no idea she had just partied with a bum who hadn't seen a shower since the administration changed. Still no response. Richards booted the mattress, unwilling to touch the near naked man.

"Wake up!" The man stirred, looked up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Whaddya want?" he demanded before realizing it was a cop. He struggled to his feet, nearly losing his balance as he rocked on the soft mattress. The man's tired bones cracked, making Richards cringe, the foul stench of body jam occupying every orifice so overpowering, it caused him to gag. "Oh, sorry, officer. H-how may I be of s-shervice to you?" He cocked his head to the right. "Shuddup, I'll handle this." He hiccupped then farted.

Scaramell watched the walking petri dish for a moment, then turned his attention to the hooker. His jaw dropped as he saw the bullet hole in her forehead. "Holy shit!" He yelled as he drew his weapon and spun towards the wino. Richards snapped his head around, looking at him then the girl. "She's dead!"

"What?" Richards drew his weapon and spun full circle, his trained eye searching the warehouse's every corner. Scaramell continued to cover the wino while he scanned the warehouse. Richards turned his weapon on the wino. "Call it in!"

Scaramell grabbed his mike and radioed for backup, his heart thumping against his chest at the excitement of his first homicide.

"I told you we shouldn't have stayed here!" said the wino. He shook his head. "No, you shut-up!"

"Who the hell are you talking to?" Richards approached the man cautiously, his weapon aimed at the man's chest.

"N-nobody," replied the man who lowered his chin and whispered, "Get out of here while you still can, they can't see you!"

"The guy's nuts. Better search him."

"Fuck that, rookie, I ain't touchin' him," replied Richards. "You have at it."

Scaramell holstered his weapon and looked the man over. He wore only underwear, but unless he had a package that would make a porn star proud, he definitely carried something in his shorts. Scaramell pointed. "Empty it out."

"Empty what out?"

Scaramell pulled out his Tazer. "Do you really want me to use this?"

The wino raised his hands. "J-just a second." He inched his hands lower, his eyes never leaving the Tazer. With his left hand he pulled his underwear out by the elastic, stretching the threadbare material, exposing a tear in the front from which a watch clasp dangled out. His right hand shook as he pulled at the gold clasp, freeing the watch and a testicle. Scaramell groaned and almost squeezed the trigger. The man looked at the officers, sheepishly tucked his shame back in and turned slightly to the right, hiding the hole from view. He emptied out the remaining contents of his underwear onto the mattress. Scaramell motioned for him to back up as he snapped on a pair of

latex gloves and examined the stash. Credit cards, cash, jewelry, and a drivers license. He retrieved the license and read the name to his partner.

“Tammera Coverdale.”

Merissa came to in a blinding orange haze and excruciating pain, lying in a heap on the hard, dirt floor she had grown accustomed to over the past several weeks. Her entire head roared as if on fire, the pain so intense she didn't know where it hurt most. She gingerly touched her face and winced as she explored the split lower lip. A trickle of blood ran down her finger, skirted her palm then continued down her raised arm. She gently pushed on the lip to try and stop the bleeding and was rewarded with a gush of blood. It was split in two, her finger merely occupying the empty area where her lip should be. She moved her hand up to her nose and pinched it slightly. She gasped at the sharp pain then again at the pain in her chest. She remembered some of the blows missing her face and landing on her chest and collarbone. She took another breath and shooting pains coursed through her entire upper body. *Something's broken.* She tried to steady her breaths, making them as shallow and regular as she could. The pain subsided somewhat after she regained control and she returned to her self-assessment. She touched her eyes, the lids and surrounding area protruding at least an inch, and determined the orange haze was the light shining through the lids of her swollen shut eyes.

Overhead she heard the familiar sound of footsteps then the chain rattling as the platform lowered. She didn't feel much like eating, she was in so much pain, she didn't know if she even could, however rather than risk another beating, she decided she better get whatever today's offering might be. The platform hit the floor and she crawled toward the sound, her head throbbing now that she was leaning forward on hands and knees, each movement of her body sending shooting pains from her broken clavicle. She found the platform and reached further in. Her hand grasped a piece of wet cloth which after a moment turned ice cold. She jerked back then tentatively reached forward again, gently felt the cool, wet cloth and concluded it was an ice pack. She picked it up and before she could explore the remainder of the platform, she heard the chain rattle as her captor grabbed it to haul the platform back up. *I guess that's it.*

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She crawled back to the wall, made more difficult this time by her free hand now holding the ice pack. The effort left her breathless, her gasps triggered spasms of pain. She sat against the wall and took as long, shallow breaths as she could, until she finally had regained control. After a few minutes the pain in her chest subsided, and she turned her attention to the icepack. She placed it on her eyes and after several minutes of gently applying the cool ice to each, the swelling eased enough for her to see again. Nothing had changed in her surroundings. The lone light illuminated what she now knew was definitely a basement in a home, having just experienced the upstairs. Her split lip throbbed for attention. She pressed the ice pack against it and winced, her eyes tearing. She pulled the cloth away, the slowly melting ice mixing with the blood and flowing down her hand and arm.

*I can't let this go on.*

She held the icepack to her left eye and rested her head against the dirt wall. *It has to stop.* She knew it had to stop. She wasn't willing to be the victim any longer. How many more beatings would she have to endure? How many more attempted rapes? How many more days of being treated like an animal? Staying alive was one thing, but this wasn't life. This was existence. This had to stop. *This will stop.* Decision made. But as she thought about it, she realized that as soon as it stopped for her, it would most likely start for someone else. She had to somehow help them with what she had learned. But how? What had she learned that may help someone else? She knew he drugged the food. She knew he was trying to rape her when she was drugged and it was happening upstairs. How could she let someone know this so they might use it to their advantage? She knew she wouldn't be able to trick him again. This knowledge would be of no use to her, but to someone else it might just let them escape.

*But how can I get a message to them without him knowing?*

She examined her surroundings. She couldn't carve it into the floor or walls, he would see any message immediately, and she couldn't reach the ceiling, it was too high. She growled in frustration then took a breath, reviewing each item available to her. She eyed the water hole and smiled as the solution dawned on her. It might take a few days, but it would work.

*It has to work.*

“Miss Kai?”

Aynslee raised her head off her desk with a start, not certain what had woken her. She rubbed her hand across her chin, wiping off a spot of drool. She reached for a Kleenex to wipe up the more embarrassing puddle on her mouse pad when she heard someone clear their throat. Her hand flew to her chest as she jumped in her chair, shocked to see someone standing at the entrance to her cubicle. A quick glance at the clock on her desk confirmed she had slept for several hours after pulling an all-nighter editing a report for the 6 am broadcast. The voice that had woken her belonged to a tall, lean man in his mid-thirties. He wore a tailored suit cut to hide what was clearly a very athletic frame, his square jaw, pronounced cheekbones and slightly protruding Adam's apple revealed no hint of excess body fat. His short, dirty-blond hair had a functional style, clearly a barbershop cut rather than a salon, and his clean shaven face revealed no scars or blemishes. She found herself assessing him in Hollywood terms, her old beat taking over. *A young Tom Selleck without the porn star mustache.* Tall, dark and handsome. *Who are you and where have you been all my life?*

“Sorry to startle you,” he said, his voice, not too deep but not too high either, drew her in. Its sincere quality made her feel like he *was* truly sorry. She wasn't sure what swooning was, but was certain she was doing it right now.

“That's okay,” she replied as she yanked herself from her fantasy. “How may I help you?”

He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a wallet, flipping it open to reveal a gold shield. “I'm Detective Hayden Eldridge, I'm investigating the murders of Tammera Coverdale and two John Does. Do you have time for some questions?”

“Yes, yes I do.” She stood, straightened out her skirt and blouse, ran her fingers through her hair, giving it a toss, then motioned down the hall, hoping her makeup wasn't smeared down one side of her face. “Perhaps we should do this in the conference room?”

“That would be fine.”

She snatched her purse and led the detective down the hall as she surreptitiously fished a small makeup mirror from her purse, quickly making sure she didn't have a Tammy Faye outbreak, or worse, the imprint of the mouse pad running down her cheek. In the clear, she returned the mirror to

her purse and when they reached the conference room, held the door open for her guest. She closed it behind them and motioned to a seat across the table from where she then sat down. The detective removed his jacket and draped it across the back of his chair before sitting.

“Now, how can I help you Detective, Eldridge, was it?”

He nodded as he pulled out his note pad and pen, swirling it to get the ink flowing. “When did you receive the first video depicting the murder of Tammera Coverdale?”

“A couple of nights ago, Wednesday I guess, while I was heading home on the subway. Actually, that's not right. I guess I received it just before I left. The email arrived before I left but I didn't bother checking it.” She leaned forward on the conference table. “You see, it had been a late night and normally I work the entertainment beat so I figured any email at that time of night could wait.”

“Yes, I've seen your reports on the news.”

Aynslee smiled, about to twirl her long brown hair, when she caught herself. *What am I, fourteen?* “Oh, you have?” She wasn't sure she sounded disinterested enough.

“So the email arrived Wednesday evening,” prompted Eldridge, evidently choosing to ignore the flirtatious note in her voice.

“Just before midnight.”

Eldridge jotted this down. “And you actually read it when?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes later. I read it on my BlackBerry and immediately came back to the office.”

“And that's when you notified the police?”

“Well, no, I called my news director.”

Eldridge looked up. “And then *he* called the police?”

“Well, no, *he* called a production meeting, and our lawyers, who then made contact with your department the next morning, after we aired the story.”

“And it never occurred to you to contact us immediately?”

Aynslee blushed. “Well, of course it *occurred* to me, however Legal said we were within our rights to hold off until it aired.”

Eldridge grunted and returned his attention to his pad. “And you received the second email when exactly?”

“Early yesterday evening, maybe eight o'clock. I was editing my piece for the eleven o'clock news when it arrived.”

“And you notified us ...”

She looked down at her hands sheepishly. “After the broadcast.”

“Uh huh. And you have no idea who is sending you these emails?”

“No, none, and our geeks can't trace the emails either.”

“Yeah, we have our own techs looking into that as well. It seems they are recorded on a cell phone and then the suspect uploads them using a hijacked residential wireless connection.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I'm not a techie, but our resident geeks explained it to me. Apparently if you don't secure your wireless network at home, anyone can piggyback on it and surf the Internet, send email, pretty much anything they want.”

“And that's how he did this?”

“Yes, we've traced the two emails to completely different parts of the city.”

“Really.” Her voice trailed off, her mind spinning, already wondering how to work this into her next broadcast.

“Did you recognize any of the victims?”

It took a moment for her to notice he had spoken. “No, no I didn't,” she said, shaking her head.

Eldridge folded his notebook and returned it and the pen to his shirt pocket. “Okay, I guess that about does it for now.” He stood and put his jacket back on, extending his hand to Aynslee who joined him at the door. “Thank you for your time and I'll contact you if I have any more questions.”

“You're quite welcome.” She shook his hand, his grip firm and, most important, dry, immediately telling her she was dealing with confidence. She stole a quick glance at the other hand. *No ring!* “Do you have a card in case I need to reach you?” *Clever girl!*

“Of course.” He handed her a business card from the inside pocket of his sport coat then headed toward the elevator. He paused and turned back to face her. “And Miss Kai?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Yes?”

“Next time you get an email from a killer, call the police immediately.”

She blushed. “Yes, Detective.” *What, you thought he was going to ask you out?*

Shaw glared as what was obviously a detective left that little bitch's office. *Steal a story from me?* He was pissed. *He* was the lead crime reporter. If there was a crime, *he* got first dibs, no one else. If *he* wasn't interested then it was up to *him* to kick it to one of the more junior reporters. And never in a million years would he pass something on to a walking set of tits far younger than he was when he got his first break. The pencil in his hand snapped, startling him from his mental tirade. He looked around to make sure nobody had noticed and turned to his computer, wondering how to get her emails forwarded to him without her knowing. Looking up from the computer in frustration, he saw the geek lurking about and waved him over.

“Yes, Mr. Shaw?”

*Man, I used to pummel kids like this in high school.* “Reggie, my boy, have a seat!” He motioned toward an uncomfortable chair facing his desk and leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Reggie, is there anyway to get somebody's email forwarded to another person without them knowing?” He knew from the rapid flushing of Reggie's cheeks he was taken aback by the question, almost as if caught with his hand in the cookie jar. *The little shit's probably reading everybody's email.*

“Wh-why? Do you think someone is looking at your emails?” Reggie squirmed in the chair, gripping the arms, the cheap plastic shining with the sweat pouring from his palms.

*Yabtzee!* Shaw shook his head and leaned in closer still. “No. I want you to forward someone's emails to me without their knowing.”

Reggie's jaw dropped. “I-I can't do that!” The glare from Shaw caused him to lower his voice. “I would need management's permission.”

“Listen, kid, I can make your life here a living hell, or I can make it very pleasant.” Shaw leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on his desktop. “Which is it going to be?”

Reggie gulped.

“Tick-tock, kid.”

Reggie looked at the floor. “Wh-who's email do you want forwarded?”

Shaw grinned. On the inside. *Fucking wimp!* “Aynslee Kai.”

Merissa sat huddled in the corner as she came to terms with the decision she had made. She saw no other alternative; she was going to die, she could do nothing about that now. The question was what to do about it. It had taken hours to decide, but she knew she had only one choice. She pushed herself forward on her knees, clasped her hands and looked toward heaven. She wasn't a religious person, she hadn't attended church since she was a child, she wasn't even sure how to do it. She had prayed while trapped here, more to comfort herself than anything else, but this time, based upon what she had decided to do, she figured it was best to pray formally. *Dear God, I know suicide is supposed to be a sin, but I have no choice. I know he is going to kill me, but if I die on my own terms, maybe I can save the next person he takes. Please forgive me.* She made the sign of the cross and collapsed forward, her shoulders shaking as the torrent of emotions spilled out. Her chest filled with despair, her mind with the questions she had asked for weeks. *Why me? What did I do to deserve this?* Her inner strength broken, she questioned her decision. Perhaps she could escape?

“No!”

She startled herself, not having heard her own voice spoken beyond a whisper in weeks. It was enough to shock her from her bout of self-pity. She wiped the tears off her face and rose to her feet. Removing her shirt, she wrapped it around the chain that still bound her to the ceiling, then, using her handcuffed hand, she looped the cloth covered chain around her neck, momentarily appreciating the irony that what had kept her prisoner would soon set her free. She knew it would be painful, but nothing compared to the pain she had already experienced. With the chain secure around her neck, she relaxed her knees and dropped toward the floor, gravity slowly tightening its grip. The pain wasn't as bad as she had feared, the cloth from the shirt softening the chain's pinch at first. It tightened with every inch she lowered herself, the pain taking hold soon replaced by a far worse sensation. Suffocation. She gasped for breath, the reflex actions of her body not succeeding, the chain now too tight to let any air pass. She fought the urge to get up, knowing if she did she would have to go through this all again. Her gasps became shorter and shorter, her clouded mind no longer able to resist her survival instinct. Her suffocating body demanded she stand. With her one hand chained close to her neck, she was forced to reach with the other to try

and pull herself up using the now tight chain. Grasping at it above her head she tried to lift her body to relieve the pressure. For a moment she tasted the sweet relief of a tiny amount of air making its way into her lungs. She pulled harder. Her oxygen deprived body unable to coordinate the attempt at self-preservation, her bare feet slipped on the dirt floor and she flipped over, her feet now extended out in front of her, her body facing upwards, her full weight pulling on the chain as her arms and legs flailed, all coordination now lost. It took less than a minute for her to blackout from the lack of oxygen, the Technicolor display provided by her brain not the least bit interesting to her in her final moments.

Aynslee's eyes drooped as she dialed what must be the fortieth number in the past two hours. As soon as the detective had left, she had written down the name he had mentioned, Tammera Coverdale, then confirmed with Legal the police hadn't released the identity yet and got the green-light to run with it. At the moment all she could do was report on the video clips themselves, but now she had a name. And she also knew the police didn't have names for the second set of victims, meaning they probably hadn't even found them yet, a story in itself. She had searched the Internet for hours, calling every listing for Coverdale she found. Three dozen phone calls to New York based Coverdale's had proven a bust. She had moved onto Jersey, the fourth listing for Coverdale, Hugh and Elise. *Work with me, Jersey!* The phone rang in the earpiece of her headset, pulled low on her ear to lower the volume. It rang several times, Aynslee's finger hovering over the button to end the call. Her heart leapt and she yanked her finger away as the clicking sound of a handset being lifted off its base crackled through the earpiece. She shoved it into position and took a breath.

Silence.

She waited a few more seconds, unsure of what to do, then decided to speak first. "Hello, my name is Aynslee Kai, I work for WACX News, I—."

"Leave us alone!" a woman's voice cried, then the line was cut.

*Bingo!* Aynslee snatched her purse and jacket off her coat rack, ran down the hall and grabbed a camera crew.

Lance, not his real name, twirled the straw in his definitely not virgin Shirley Temple and stared at the vision in front of him. He was all man, he could tell. Tight jeans showed off his firm ass (he had checked!), a white denim shirt, untucked with the first three buttons open, displayed his tight, sweaty chest to the world. Lance was swooning. *He's sooo cute!* A little young maybe, but that just meant he would get a chance to teach him a few new tricks that would change the boy's life forever. They had talked for about fifteen minutes, every moment of it perfection! *I have to have this dreamboat!*

He was dancing with a long time on-and-off partner, when he spotted this vision eyeing him from the bar. A quick smile fired in his direction was enough for Lance to abandon his partner on the dance floor and sachet over to the bar. Introductions (his name was Charles!), a round of drinks, and a little bit of leg and arm rubbing, and he was ready to do anything this boy wanted. *Anything!*

"It's kind of loud in here, you wanna go somewhere quieter, where we can..." Charles paused and looked at Lance slyly as he ran his finger from under Lance's ear, down his neck then as far down his bare chest as he could, yanking at the top button of his shirt. He leaned in and bit Lance's earlobe, then whispered, "Talk?"

Lance didn't know if his loins leapt more from the throaty whisper or the red-hot touch, but it didn't matter. *You dirty dog! Talk indeed!* He threw his boa around his neck, took Charles by the hand and dragged him from the club. They hadn't even made it a block when Lance couldn't help himself. He dragged Charles into an alleyway, shoved him against the wall, and ground his hips into him. Reaching down between his legs to check out his package, he cooed, "Oooh, is that for me?"

Charles smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out a couple of tablets. "E?" Lance nodded and stuck out his tongue, closing his eyes. Feeling Charles place the tablet on the end of his tongue, he flipped it back into his mouth and swallowed. He opened his eyes and turned his head to the side, kissing his young delight on the side of the neck, then flicking his tongue over his Adam's apple. He looked up and a mischievous feeling spread over him. Slowly he dropped to his knees and unbuckled Charles' belt. As he undid the fly he felt the Earth start to spin but kept going, determined to reach his

prize. He fumbled with the button, his fingers suddenly uncoordinated, then collapsed.

Aynslee burst from the station van, her camera man and sound engineer scrambling to keep up. She rushed up the steps to the Coverdale's small Cape Cod style home and, when everyone was in position, rang the doorbell. Her heart pounded as she waited, thinking of the scoop that had fallen into her lap. This was huge. Not only would she be revealing exclusively to the world who the victim was, but also get an interview with the family to boot. *I wonder have they been notified?* She had a moment of doubt about what she was doing, then shoved it aside. *If they know the name, then of course they've notified the family.* As they continued to wait, her excitement started to wane. *Are they not home?* After a minute with no answer, she rang again and knocked several times, but still no one came. She tried to peer through the glass block window to the side and in desperation placed her ear to the door. She listened for a moment and thought she heard sobbing. She decided to take a chance and motioned to the cameraman to start rolling. The red light on, she leaned closer to the door. "Mrs. Coverdale, this is Aynslee Kai, WACX News, I'd like to talk to you about your daughter, Tammera." She listened and this time heard a definite cry from the other side of the door, near the floor. "She's in there," she whispered to her crew, pointing toward the door and down. Lowering her voice, she tried to soothe the door open. "Ma'am, I'm the reporter who was sent the footage of your daughter's murder. I'm just as confused as you are about all of this, and I'd like to talk to you about it, to find out what kind of a person your daughter was so the world can know she was an innocent victim, not somebody caught up in some sordid affair." The sound guy, Steve, gave a thumbs up as they heard someone unbolt the door.

Aynslee doubted the friends of the poor, disheveled woman who opened the door would recognize her, her eyes bloodshot, her nose bright red and swollen from crying, her hair in knots, having not seen a brush in days. She was gaunt, her face pale, her cheeks sunken, dark circles under her eyes adding years to her face. She was a woman who had lost the will to live. When she saw the camera pointed at her she yelped and slammed the door shut.

"No cameras!"

Aynslee waved off her cameraman, Mike, who nodded and turned off the light but left it recording, aimed at the ground. “I’ve turned off the camera, Mrs. Coverdale. Can I speak to you now?” The door slowly opened again and they saw the middle-aged woman step back and head deeper into the house without saying a word. Aynslee looked at Mike and Steve, shrugged her shoulders and stepped inside, following the woman. They found her sitting in a chair in her living room, hugging a throw pillow.

Aynslee sat across from her and pulled out a notepad. “Ma’am, first let me start off by saying how truly sorry I am about your loss.” She looked at a picture sitting on the end table next to her of a young woman. It was hard to be certain, but she bore a definite resemblance to the victim. “Is this her?” The woman nodded. “What can you tell me about her?” Aynslee jotted down the name emblazoned on the school sweater worn in the photo.

The woman took a deep breath, as if steeling herself for what she was about to say. “She was a wonderful child, our only child. She had a terrific job that was taking her places and she had a fiancé who loved her very much. They were getting married this fall.”

Aynslee scribbled in her pad. “And what was the fiancé’s name?”

“Jeremy Rush. They were so much in love. They planned on having children right away.” Her voice cracked. “Grandbabies,” she whispered as she bent over and burst into tears, her hand reaching blindly for a tissue from the box sitting next to her.

Aynslee opened her mouth to ask another question, but found her voice cracking as the enormity of what she was doing hit. *Someone died! This is real, this isn’t an out on the town segment!* She closed her mouth and waved her hand back and forth in front of her neck. This time Mike turned the camera off for real. Aynslee knew she wasn’t going to get anything else from the distraught woman, and didn’t want to regardless. She had enough to throw together a small segment for the next newscast; it would have to be enough. Rising, she walked over and placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder and said softly, “I’m truly sorry.” She motioned to her crew and they walked out the door, a sobbing victim left behind, Aynslee fighting back her own tears, her crew uncharacteristically quiet.

## DEPRAVED DIFFERENCE

Elise heard the door click shut, the reporters gone. She curled her legs up under her and leaned over, resting her head on the arm of the La-Z-Boy recliner, still hugging the pillow. Her body racked in sobs, every muscle ached from crying for days. *My baby is gone!* She couldn't understand why. Why would God do this to her? Why would God take her child from her? No parent should have to outlive their child. *This isn't right!* She looked up at the ceiling and through it, as if directly into God's eyes. *Damn you!* She wailed. She was losing her faith. That, combined with her grief, was leading to a spiral of depression she didn't care if she ever came out of. She didn't want to. She pictured her precious, beautiful, baby daughter. First steps, first words, first day at school. Last supper, last hug goodbye, last wave from the curb, last phone call, last sound of her voice.

And where the hell was her husband? Why wasn't he there to support her? She knew he was hurting as much as she was, but he was too much the traditional male. He needed to be on his own to grieve; no one could see him cry. But she needed him. Here. Now. *I can't be alone.* And at that moment she knew exactly what she needed to do. She needed to be with Tammera. Standing, she strode with purpose to the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out the bottle of sleeping pills prescribed to her husband months before. Opening the bottle, she poured them into her mouth as she heard the front door open.

Merissa awoke to pain, excruciating pain around her neck from where the chain had bitten into and torn her flesh, the shirt she had wrapped around it only delaying the inevitable. But it was nothing compared to the searing, jolting shock she experienced when she took that first breath. It felt as if someone had punched her full force in the throat, her collapsed esophagus trying to pop back into shape as her body forced air through it. She focused on her breathing as she tried to control the pain, keeping her breaths slow and steady. The pain gradually subsided as her airway returned to normal. Her instincts forced a wave of relief to flow through her as she realized she was alive, but as more oxygen made it into her system she became aware of her surroundings. She lay on the basement floor, the light gently swung above her, the platform still in place, the chain removed, not only from around her neck, but her wrist as well. She wore a fresh blouse, her old one nowhere to

be found. *I've failed!* Her relief turned back to despair as she grasped that she was still alive, the exact opposite of what she had hoped to achieve. She had failed, and now with the chain removed, might never get another chance.

A creak overhead snapped her back to reality, signaling the return of her captor and the lowering of the platform, but instead of food, she saw a pair of legs standing on it. Her pulse raced as he pulled on the chain, the thumping in her chest gained strength as his ankles, knees and then waist were revealed. The platform was half way down when she saw he had his back to her, an opportunity she dared not pass up. She rose, careful to remain out of sight, and on adrenaline alone, her body still weak from her ordeal, she charged the platform, throwing herself at it as hard as she could. The platform swung away from her, the chains groaning in protest, her captor letting out a surprised yelp as he fell backwards and toppled off the platform. His head hit the ground hard, knocking him senseless.

Merissa struggled onto the platform, grasped the chain, and pulled on it. Her first few tugs did little, but she kept going, fighting the instinct to try and climb the chain like a rope in gym class, knowing she wouldn't have the strength to make it. As the platform inched toward the hole, and freedom above, she never took her eyes off her captor. She heard him groan and roll over onto his back, his hand reaching up to touch the back of his head. "Come on!" she cried, furiously pulling on the chain, tears flowing freely, her heart pumping so hard she heard the blood pulsing in her ears like a drummer nearing the end of a tribal dance. She watched as he shook his head and when their eyes made contact, he realized what was happening. He struggled to his feet, jumped up and grasped the platform edge. "No!" she screamed as it rocked under his weight. She reached up and gripped the floor above. Pulling herself up, she swung her right leg over as he did the same on the platform below. She almost had her second leg up when she felt an iron grip on her foot pull her down. She grasped at the floor with her hands, desperate to find something to grab onto.

"Help!" she screamed, her partially crushed windpipe limiting the volume. As he pulled her further down, she flipped over onto her back, dropped her free foot below the floor and kicked with all her might. It connected and the grip loosened as she heard a groan of pain. Tearing her foot free, she rolled back onto the floor, jumped to her feet and ran into the darkened room. She

## DEPRAVED DIFFERENCE

bumped into a table and grasped around for something, anything she might use as a weapon, but found nothing. A grunt behind her caused her to spin around and watch as he struggled up off the platform, the light from her prison silhouetting his upper body, all semblance of humanity lost, replaced by the image of a beast crawling from a primeval pit in pursuit of its prey. Charging forward she ran headlong into a wall, then feeling along it she found a doorway and stumbled through. She raced down a hallway, screaming for help the entire time. *There has to be a door at the end of this!* She heard his shoes squeak on the floor as she hit the door at the end of the hall hard. She recovered and groped for the doorknob and after several precious seconds found it. It turned in her hand and the door loosened ever so slightly as she pulled on the knob, but it wouldn't give. He was in the hallway now. "Help!" she yelled again as she pulled on the knob with her entire body weight. She reached up and found a deadbolt. Turning it she tugged again at the door. It opened several inches before he hit her full force from behind, slamming her body against the door, forever closing it, the bolt's click, like the trigger cocking on a gun, signaled the end of all hope. He threw her to the floor and dragged her by the hair back to the platform. She grasped at his hand, trying to loosen the viselike grip. He tossed her like a sack of potatoes back into her dungeon. She plunged through empty space then the bottom half of her body hit the platform, now six feet off the floor, spinning her around so she fell headfirst. She hit the floor hard, her head bending back, snapping her neck, releasing her from the prison that had become her own personal hell.

J. ROBERT KENNEDY

## TO READ THE REST...

Depraved Difference is available to order everywhere.

For the paperback, order from Amazon.com, your favorite online bookseller, or from your local bookstore by providing them with this information:

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## AFTERWORD

*Depraved Difference* is an experiment.

My first novel, *The Protocol*, was traditionally published. *Depraved Difference* was accepted by another publisher in March 2011 for publication in 2013. If this acceptance had happened in December 2010, I would have signed the contract. However Christmas 2010 changed everything in the publishing world forever. The Kindle price dropped to \$139, and millions were purchased as Christmas gifts and now affordable indulgences, and those millions of recipients, including myself, discovered the joy of eBooks. This led to an explosion in eBook sales over the coming months, with eBooks becoming the highest selling format in dollar terms in March 2011, outselling trade paperbacks, despite typically being significantly cheaper (meaning the volume was even higher).

Due to this change, I decided to self-publish, or “go Indie”, as in independent. The result is that I have been able to go live within one month as opposed to two years, in both eBook and print formats.

Selling books is marketing, and as part of that, I have held several contests on my website and Facebook page. I would like to take the time to thank several people who helped spread the word through entering the contests and inviting their friends to join. Having read *Depraved Difference*, you may recognize their names as characters in the books: Brent Richards, Tracy Oswald and Steve Scaramell. As well, a special thanks to an old high-school buddy Justin Shakespeare, who is similar to my character in name only, and to Regis Giasson, who, as is his nature, played a *very* small but important role in reminding me to put together these acknowledgements.

I'd like to thank my parents for reading endless drafts, my wife Esperanza (another name in the book), and my daughter, Niskha (next book!), for tolerating the hours of my delightful company lost to the keyboard, and my friends for listening to me debate going Indie for months, including, but definitely not limited to, Paul Conway, the best friend anyone could ask for.

And finally, a very special thanks to you, the reader. You have this author's humble gratitude.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



J. Robert Kennedy wrote his first story when he was five.

Everyone in it died.

Things didn't get much better from there. After horrifying his teachers in creative writing classes he took an extended hiatus, returning to writing on a whim, haunted by the image of a woman standing in tall grass, the blades streaming through her fingers. The result was a short story, *Does It Matter?*, written in a single evening.

And then he let it sit.

A couple of years later he let several friends read it and they encouraged him to try and get it published. He submitted it to *The Sink* and it was immediately accepted. Encouraged, he wrote a second story, *Loving the Ingredients*, and it too was accepted, along with a reprint of *Does It Matter?* by *The Writers Post Journal*.

With several publishing credits under his belt, he was ready for something bigger. A phone conversation with a best friend led to Robert writing his first novel, *The Protocol*. *Lachesis Publishing*, the first publisher he sent it to, agreed to publish it and cloud nine got a little more crowded.

His next effort, *Depraved Difference*, was accepted for publication, however he turned down the offer, and decided to publish it independently on the Kindle, allowing him to offer his books at the prices he felt readers wanted to pay for eBooks.

## J. ROBERT KENNEDY

Robert was born in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, and grew up an Air Force brat, living in Halifax and Greenwood, Nova Scotia, Goose Bay, Labrador, Lahr and Baden, Germany, and finally Winnipeg and Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. He escaped his parent's clutches to attend university in Waterloo and settled in Ottawa, Ontario. Robert has a wife and daughter, and is hard at work on his next novel.

Visit Robert's website at [www.jrobertkennedy.com](http://www.jrobertkennedy.com) for the latest news and contact information.

