

NAILS

By Nik Barnabee

CHAPTER ONE

One minute, Dave Kennerly was dumping a bag of groceries onto the front passenger seat of his white Yukon Hybrid SUV, silently grumbling to himself about the exasperating experience his wife had just put him through (Jesus, how's a guy supposed to wade through all that crap? Light days, heavy days, ultra-thin, with "wings," whatever the hell they are. And the smirk on the face of that kid at the cash register, as if he thinks I'm some pervert who's going to be using the damn things myself. And Bev wonders why I get pissed at her sometimes). Then, just as he began to remind himself that at least he'd found that cookie dough ice cream their son Scott liked so much, he heard the swish of the plastic as it brushed against him.

Had he been born and raised in the big city, he would probably have been paying more attention in the first place, keeping an eye out for strangers lurking about, this late at night. But this was Titan's Brook, Pennsylvania, population 38,000 or so. Not a tiny town, but still a place where, as cliché as it sounded, a lot of people didn't bother to lock their doors at night.

And so he merely glanced up, saw a man in a dark plastic rain poncho go by, and thought nothing of it. Hell, he was right outside the Stop-N-Shop supermarket, with bright white light illuminating the entire curbside area.

"Shit!" he muttered, as the keyless remote fob slipped out of his hand and down into the grocery bag. He reached down inside, felt around among the items, and quickly found it. Slamming the door, he walked around to the driver's side. It was darker here, shadowy. The Yukon was between him and the store lights, and although there were tall light poles throughout the parking lot, none were nearby.

Kennerly opened the door and stepped up into the vehicle.

Bzzzt!

A burst of sound both sinister and oddly familiar. His mind instantly flashed to a scene in an old B-movie: Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, where electricity arced from one point of a madman's contraption to another.

In that same second, agony erupted within every molecule of his being. The force of the jolt threw him over the console onto the passenger seat; every muscle stretched to its full extension, jaws clamped together, teeth gnashing, eyes bulging. A strained, high pitched squeal attempted to burst forth from a throat that was long and taut and arched back toward the heavens.

His body began to convulse.

The Taser had done its job.

And now he was shoved headfirst down onto the floor mat, his feet kicking at the roof of the SUV. His attacker slid into the driver's seat, closed the door, and pulled out a roll of duct tape. Within seconds, Kennerly's body lay over the seat and the storage center armrest, his legs stretched out between the seats, into the second row. Silvery duct tape was wrapped tightly around his shins, both arms were bound behind him in the same manner, and a swatch of tape was across his mouth. His chin rested on the box of feminine pads. The quart of ice cream and a jar of Folgers freeze-dried coffee were pressed against his ribs. Fresh strawberries littered the front seat.

There was very little movement from him now, and only a faint gurgling sound.

As a woman and her teenage daughter rolled a shopping cart up to a sedan parked only ten feet away, the Yukon pulled away from the curb.

And disappeared into the night.

* * *

"I'm up, I'm up," Trey Westfall muttered, as he shuffled down the hall. Bare feet padding silently on the carpet, he stretched as he walked along, though you could hardly tell. The red plaid bathrobe that had once been his late father's swallowed him up; rolled-up sleeves hanging down to mid-knuckle on his fingers, hem trailing along the floor. He was well-built for a kid of fourteen, a bit above average in height, but his police detective dad had been six-foot-six, with shoulders like an NFL linebacker. Still, this huge piece of flannel was one of the few connections to him that Trey had left. He didn't care that it was so immensely baggy that he looked — yes, even he had to admit it — comical. Sometimes when he wore it, he could almost feel his father here with him. The big man had been wrapped in it during so many of Trey's most touching memories. Christmas mornings under the tree ... Sundays with the comics, down on the living room sofa ... spreading Vicks VapoRub on his sons' chests when the whole family had the flu ...

Trey didn't wear it every morning; that would only hasten the day when it inevitably frayed and unraveled and gave up the ghost. No, he just slipped into it when he felt the need. When unpleasant surprises were sprung on him, for instance. Such as being shaken awake, out of a sound sleep, long before the alarm was set to go off. A jarring way to start a day.

Trey couldn't help feeling magnanimous. He was taking this amazingly well. Most of his friends would have been pissing and moaning after such a rude awakening, but he was being terribly mature

and understanding, he told himself. Especially considering that the sun wasn't even up yet.

The robe was sliding off his shoulder again. He pulled it closed and stepped onto chilly floor tile, dancing around for a few seconds until his bare feet adjusted. He closed the bathroom door behind him. In recent months, this room had become a sort of sanctuary for him, where the prying eyes and incessant chatter of his tiny sibling did not follow. A guy needed a private place. Particularly, if his best friend had given him a copy of Penthouse Magazine for his birthday.

His birthday. The end of August. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Now it was almost November, and today was a school day, which complicated things. He was used to his mother getting called away on her day off, during dinner, or even while they were at the movies, but this early in the morning was a first. People generally didn't get murdered or swindled or extorted before sunrise. Not here in Titan's Brook. Maybe they did back in Philly, where she had begun her career as a detective, and his dad had been one before her, but Trey couldn't remember her having been called in like this even back then. Pre-dawn, for crissakes.

Oh well, when life gives you crap, make crappburgers, he always said.

Peering into the mirror above the sink, he squinted. Made a face. Stared some more.

"Man, you look like shit," he whispered. Tufts of blonde hair stuck out in all directions, there was a red line pressed into his cheek from lying on a fold in the pillowcase, and his eyes were heavy-lidded, revealing grogginess and not much else.

Ordinarily, he was pleased with his reflection, but drag him out of bed practically in the middle of the night ...

A brief but intense search assured him that at least no mega-zits had popped up overnight, and no telltale bumps indicated an infestation in the near future, either. What more could a guy ask for at this time of day?

Using his fingers, he combed the hair back from his forehead.

And abruptly, his eyes widened, suddenly focused on something deep within the mirror. The expression in those sea-blue orbs swiftly grew dark, troubled. He slowly ran his forefinger along a thin, crescent-shaped scar that stretched from his hairline to the outer edge of his right eyebrow.

A sick feeling crept into his stomach, as images began to form in his head. This same conglomeration of emotions had haunted him since Labor Day. He couldn't seem to pry them apart, to get a handle on them individually. All intertwined and melded together, he didn't know what the hell to make of them. Although, like virtually all boys his age, he longed to be considered an adult, this recollection always made him feel like a small child. One who'd been thrust into the grown-up world unprepared.

He forcibly shoved both the feelings and the memory into a shadowy corner of his mind. He would figure it all out one of these days. He'd told himself that many times in the past few weeks. One of these days.

"Trey! Come on!"

His mother's voice snapped him out of it. He sighed, closed his eyes, shook his head to clear the cobwebs.

If she only knew.

* * *

A short while later, he slapped American cheese, globs of mustard, and thin slices of cucumber — his 5-year-old brother's favorite lunch — onto a couple slices of bread, stuffed the sloppy sandwich into a Baggy, and tossed it into a SpongeBob Squarepants lunchbox alongside a tangerine, a pack of graham crackers, and a bottle of water.

His mother had already left, after extracting his absolute solemn promise to make sure Brett got on the school bus. Not to leave the little bugger on the corner when he saw the big orange vehicle approach, not to assume Retty had entered the bus with a crowd of kids, but to personally boost him up the steps. Okay, Trey could see her point. If you believed the TV news, every other guy on the planet was a goddamn perv, out trolling for little victims. But, geez, couldn't she just trust him to do the right thing, the big brother thing? For a while there, he'd half expected her to demand that he write down his promise in blood and have it notarized. Cop families. They were probably all alike. Rules and regulations, and punishment to fit the crime.

And so unnecessary. Did he ever get into trouble at school? No. Huff paint fumes and come staggering home, slurring his words, like Pete Hanover did? No. Knock somebody up, like quarterback Jesse Raines? Hell, no (At this point, he'd be more than happy to settle for his first kiss). Dear old Mom had no reason to consider him anything but the ideal son, if she'd just take the time to compare him to some of the guys from school who cut classes and hung out at the fountain outside the mall, brazenly passing around blunts stuffed with weed and staring down people walking by, daring them to do something about it. She'd never heard him use the "F" word, would never come across his small collection of dirty magazines, buried so deep in his closet you'd need a backhoe to get to them, and she had a built-in babysitter willing to work for free in emergency situations. That ought to rate at least a 9.3 on the fruit-of-my-womb scale, he believed. Here was someone who was not only polite to her fossilized friends, but also diligent in his schoolwork and indispensable at home.

The perfect son.

Damn straight.

Trey's one imperfection, which had loomed large in the mirror only twenty short minutes ago, was forgotten for now. But it would confront him again. It always did.

* * *

The location had been chosen for shock value. Hidden from southbound traffic, it faced the opposite lane and sprang into view as soon as you came out of the broad, left-hand curve and cleared the thick brush that grew along the west side of the road.

Lily Westfall's blue Toyota Camry did that now.

"Holy Mother of God."

The detective almost crossed herself, actually raising not only one hand but two for a split second, before realizing that, oh shit, she was driving! Instantly grabbing the wheel before the car could swerve, she bit her lip — *hard* — and stared in disbelief as she guided the Camry over beside a police cruiser.

She barely noticed Chief Payton standing off by the left side of the building; hardly saw anyone or anything, in fact, but the lifeless form that was the center of everyone's attention. She hadn't understood earlier that the Chief had meant his words to be taken literally. Informing her of a murder, he'd added that some sicko had "nailed the poor bastard's hide to the barn door."

Yeah, that about covered it.

The victim stood out vividly. He had been secured to an actual barn, which was no more than 120 feet from the edge of the blacktop and had stood unused for several years. Its dark brown boards were weathered just enough to give the structure character, but not enough to provide a fitting canvas, evidently. Instead, a full-body halo had been created with brilliant white paint, tracing the man's outline and spreading outward three feet or so in all directions. Pale-skinned, blonde, and dressed in only a white t-shirt and white boxer shorts with a pattern of pale gold dollar signs all over them, he wouldn't have been all that noticeable had it not been for the blood. A copious amount which ensured that this victim was quite dead. It had streamed down his face, his neck, his chest; saturated his underwear, run down his arms, his legs, and pooled at his feet, which were bare and planted in the mud, his legs splayed and stretched out just as his arms were, as if he were a gore-covered ghoul doing jumping jacks.

A display which was meant to be seen, to assault the senses, to overwhelm an unsuspecting "audience" as their vehicles rounded the curve on an otherwise pleasant and uneventful morning. And it did that. Even when you knew something awful was coming, it did that.

Thank god a truck driver came across it first, and not a carload of school kids, the detective told herself. The road was closed off for now, so they were free of that worry. Taking the longer route to work or to class, more than a few people would be late, and would no doubt bitch about it all day long. They'd have no idea just how lucky they were not to get an eyeful of this. Had the trucker not caught the horrific scene in his headlights in the dark and called it in, some of them surely would have, once the sun had come up.

Lily took a deep breath and climbed out of the car. She was dressed in a brown pantsuit, beige blouse, and rather clunky footwear, having been warned ahead of time that the crime scene was a field of mud, ankle-deep in some places.

"Mornin', Lily," greeted Walter Brower, her soon-to-be-retired fellow detective. Gesturing at her feet, he said, "Somewhere in this world, Granny Clampett is shuffling around barefoot." Always affable, his white hair, rounded physique, and rosy cheeks gave him the look of a clean-shaven Santa Claus moonlighting in the off-season, but Lily Westfall had a different impression. His frequently mischievous grin (in full bloom at this moment) reminded her of an adorable four-year-old who was very deliberately holding in the punch line of a new elephant joke, knowing that the fun — his own, at least — was in the anticipation.

"I'll have you know they're the height of fashion," she replied, as she schlepped past him. The shoes were high-topped leather, with smart buckles and a fairly narrow toe, but also soles almost an inch high and tall, square heels that helped her balance herself in this mess. Each time she pulled one of them out of the muck, she heard a soft shplitt! A sound she found more than a little disgusting. Patting Walt on the cheek, she added, "Which is, I admit, a sad commentary on the fashion industry. So ... this is what happens to dirt when it gets rained on for three days straight. Yuck."

"Yeah, lovely, ain't it?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Morning, Detective."

Police Chief Rafe Payton had met her halfway, with long-legged strides somehow not affected by the condition of the ground beneath his feet. Though dressed in a dark grey suit, his nearly bow-legged gait, raw-boned look, and the handsome cowboy boots he wore today seemed to indicate a western lawman — perhaps a Texan — who'd relocated. But that couldn't have been further from the truth. Payton had never been west of Chicago, had never had a saddle beneath him, and wouldn't have touched a chew of tobacco. Now, a cigarette ... that was a different story. He'd quit almost a month ago, but the urge was still there, tempered only slightly by a nicotine patch and the small mountain of sunflower seeds he went through every day. Not that it showed. No outwardly frayed nerves, fidgeting, or other behavior betrayed his struggle with withdrawal symptoms. He was all-business, all the time, not inclined to allow his personal feelings, problems, or interests to intrude upon his professional life. Which was why he leveled such a serious and impersonal gaze at Lily Westfall, then glanced over at the dead body, reminding himself of just why both of them were here. Because, otherwise, it might have crossed his mind that she looked quite lovely as she stood there before him, sunbeams reflecting off of shiny, auburn hair, pale green eyes looking up at him with a barely perceptible Asian tilt that seemed at once unique and mysterious, and plain ol' ordinary perfection.

Oh yeah, he had it bad.

Yet, not only was Lily unaware of his attraction (or perhaps "infatuation" was closer to the truth), but for the most part, so was he. He'd long ago convinced himself that it was just an instinctual male reaction to a pretty face and a shapely body, no more than that. To have admitted the truth to himself might have broken his heart. After all, the Chief of Police could not consider a romantic relationship with a subordinate. Not that she'd have been interested anyway, he was sure. Oh, he was only six years older than she was, true, but what the hell did that matter? She was this feisty, lively, utterly fun-loving and sociable creature, and he ... Hell, he was the proverbial fuddy-duddy, who got so sweaty-palmed and tongue-tied on first dates that he usually prayed someone would just come along and shoot him.

Payton's dark eyes grew wide for a second as he realized that these totally improper thoughts had somehow managed to meander through his head. Hell of a thing, when your own mind starts to betray you.

"Good morning, Chief," his lovely detective answered, as she looked past him at the body.

Women seemed to do that a lot lately. Look past him. He almost stopped to wonder exactly when this change had taken place. He'd been considered quite the catch a few years ago. Well, maybe it was more than a few. But a sideways glance at that shocker hung from the barn door snapped this train of thought. What the hell was wrong with him today?! Must be the early hour, after last night's late movie and the pizza rolls that had sent him to the pharmacy for Mylanta at midnight. He began to scan the crime scene, avoiding his detective's eyes as she spoke. This strange mood was completely unlike him, and most unsettling to a man whose emotions always took a backseat to fact and logic.

"I see even Ronnie beat me to the scene," Lily said, sighing, as she watched perpetually-late Officer Ronald Hayes photograph the scene. "Sorry, Chief."

"Don't worry about it, Lily," he told her. "The victim's in no great hurry. Besides, Hayes and Walt and I live a damn sight closer to this location than you do. Now that you're here, and you and Walt can put your heads together, I'll be heading back to the station. The media people will be looking for a statement, expecting information we couldn't possibly have yet, as usual. You know the drill.

Anyway, I'll be getting back. I'm putting you in charge of this one, Lily. You're the primary."

She managed to mask her surprise, but not her concern. Rafe Payton, though, was way ahead of her.

"Before you even start worrying about stepping on the man's toes, Detective, I want you to know that Walt is the one who suggested it to me. And I agreed with him wholeheartedly. That retirement date of his is getting closer every day, so it's time for you to get your feet wet. To have full responsibility. Not that he won't give his advice if you feel you need it, but he's perfectly content to follow your lead this time." The Chief lowered his voice as he added, "And, just between you and me, I'm not so sure Walter could really wrap his mind around something like this. To even come close to figuring out how somebody like this killer thinks. I mean, it had to be one sick s.o.b. who did this. And I know you've studied this sort of thing quite a bit. I have complete confidence in your abilities, Lily. We all do." His tall, lean frame seemed to relax, as if he felt relieved to have this portion of the conversation over and done with. Scraping a wet blob of muck off one boot with the toe of the other, he straightened up and said, "Anything you require to help you along on this, it's yours. Extra manpower, extra hours, whatever. I'll have the folks over at the M.E.'s and the lab give the case top priority, and any info you need ... well, you know Chepulis. He's never far from a computer, on-duty or off. He'd plug his brain directly into one, if he could." Payton's eyes were intense and constantly moving, as if he were the detective searching for clues.

Lily Westfall stared silently at him for a moment, until he was forced by common courtesy to return her gaze. She never had been able to gauge his emotions, and was just as unsuccessful now. But she knew him to be an ethical man, and so she believed him, believed there was no hidden agenda, that he'd merely decided now was the time to pass the torch.

What an honor.

What a break.

To handle this well, to solve a high-profile case like this, could do wonders for her career, which had hardly begun, back in Philadelphia. Although her eyes were scanning the crime scene, her mind was elsewhere. A shortlist of personal necessities swiftly raced through her mind. Being well prepared would be essential to surviving this new responsibility. Back-ups for the babysitter had to be in place, rides with friends in case of missed school buses ...

She nodded stoically as the Chief put his hand on her shoulder and said, "I know you'll find this man the justice he deserves, Lily," then walked away.

That sentence ... those soft, sincere words ... resonated in her head, and her eyes instantly locked on to the victim as her feet carried her even closer, only inches away now. She was virtually face-to-face with this individual who had died such a terrible, degrading death, and whose suffering, whose very presence, had been completely overlooked by her for a few brief moments. Or perhaps it had only been seconds. It didn't matter. That was unacceptable. She'd never behaved so callously, and was stunned to find that she was capable of it.

But then, consider the things other people were capable of doing.

The man's face was ashy, eyes closed, mouth taped shut. The bruises and scrapes were inconsequential. The wound at his temple was not. But it was the rest of the body that put Lily's minor indiscretion into perspective. Someone had set their humanity aside; not for a minute or two while contemplating perfectly innocent decisions, but permanently. No one who did this could ever truly be human again. If they ever had been.

"Meat wagon's on the way, Lily."

Wrapped up in silent atonement, she jumped a bit at the sound of her partner's voice, though it didn't show.

"Maggie Lambrough just might beat 'em to it, though," Walter Brower added. "She does so love the more interesting cases. I guess dissecting old geezers who croaked from heart attacks must get boring after a while."

Right. Back to business, Lily told herself.

"Good. We need her expertise as soon as possible," she answered. "So I take it we have no clue as to who this guy is?"

Brower shook his head. "Haven't found a wallet, or the contents of one, stuck in the mud or lying around inside the barn. Haven't come across his clothes, either, for that matter."

"Well, the uniforms can continue the search. In the fields across the road, the house back there. Do we have a search warrant in the works?"

"Yep," Brower replied. "The Chief called Judge Ramirez before we opened up the barn itself. The warrant's been approved. The house is included, along with that falling-apart chicken coop on the far side of it."

"Good. And this guy, he doesn't look familiar to you at all? You've lived around here a whole lot longer than I have, but I don't remember ever seeing him anywhere."

"Neither do I. But, hell, this burg's been expanding for years. New people moving in all the time. Yuppie-types, most of them. The old days of knowing practically everybody, and everybody's business, are long gone."

The two of them turned their inspection from the face to the body, searching for scars, moles, tattoos, any abnormality that might help identify the man.

Moments later, a voice from behind them said, "My, oh my, this is a strange one, isn't it?" They hadn't noticed the faded yellow Volkswagen Beetle — circa 1968 — that had driven up. Nor its driver, as she'd clomped up to them wearing a pair of galoshes that made Lily Westfall's footwear look downright elegant.

Margaret "Maggie" Lambrough had arrived.

Her staff called her Miz Maggie, and she was definitely not what most people expected when they heard the title Chief Medical Examiner. Her style of dress was somewhere between bag lady and hippie-era psychedelic, complete with at least one unique ring on every finger of each hand, excluding the thumbs; baggy, colorful clothing, a few of them personally tie-dyed; and an unlimited supply of long, silky scarves that looked like they'd come from a 1930's thrift shop. She was a bird watcher, an organic vegetable grower, and one hell of a *Jenga* player. No one was sure of her age — some put it at around mid-fifties, while others were sure she'd passed her early sixties long ago — but no one who met her ever went away ignorant of her opinions. She never beat around the bush, never held in a thought because some "pompous ass" or "prissy witch" might not like it. She'd never married, and was not only content with that fact, but also quite proud of it. Independence was paramount to her; solitude, something to be treasured.

The humidity in the air had made her frizzy, grey hair even frizzier, to the point where, piled high on her head, it resembled a giant, elongated steel wool pad. Streaks of jet-black, once her natural color, made it look even odder.

"Why, Miz Maggie, your homage to classic cinema is most impressive. The Bride of

Frankenstein look truly becomes you," Walter Brower teased.

He and Lambrough went way back. Though they frequently traded barbs, and honestly enjoyed each other's company, their original introduction had occurred under awful circumstances. Maggie Lambrough had done the autopsy on Brower's seven-year-old daughter, a hit-and-run victim, over twenty years ago.

Two decades hadn't soothed the pain.

Walter Brower's memory of that fateful morning was in striking detail: the smell of the extra bits of putty he was wiping off of the new basement windowpane he'd just put in, the discomfort of the gravel through his jeans as he knelt there, the sound of the chattering mockingbird overhead, which he'd recently named Edna because, like his mother-in-law, it never seemed to shut up. And the sound of the phone ringing and ringing inside, so insistently that Walt had a bad feeling about it before he even picked it up.

The Department's officers, clerical workers, hell, it's maintenance people, had all taken it hard. The bloody scene had horrified and infuriated Brower's fellow cops, who vowed to find the sonofabitchin' driver quickly and make sure he "resisted arrest." But despite roadblocks that went up in record time, the vehicle seemed to disappear into thin air, and it's driver along with it. The case dragged on for almost 18 months, with officers continuing to work long after their shifts had ended, scouring the town, the rural roads surrounding it, and every junkyard within miles. And finding not a damn thing.

But that's the thing about hit-and-runs. More often than not, they're perpetrated by drunks who've driven that way every weekend, summer holiday, and tailgating football Sunday for most of their adult lives. They might be scared sober for a while, but sooner or later it wears off.

And so eventually the car had been discovered hidden in the garage of an extraordinarily drunken driver, after he plowed his newest vehicle into an outdoor cafe, miraculously missing the panicky patrons as they scrambled out of the way. A computer check had shown he also owned a dark blue 1985 Chevy Malibu, which matched the description of the car that had struck little Chelsea Brower. The driver, James Aaron Layton, had scrubbed and detailed the Malibu with bleach, destroying any DNA evidence there. But it hadn't occurred to him to do the same to the undercarriage, even though the child had been dragged more than twenty feet. That was his undoing. The jury took less than three hours to convict him, a judge only minutes to sentence him to 10 - 20 years in state prison, and a fellow convict not much more than a month to execute him. Apparently, he'd refused to give up his lime Jell-O at lunch. Not surprisingly, there were few tears shed for Mr. Layton. His mother and his elderly grandmother mourned. His ex-wife smirked. His neighbors breathed a sigh of relief. And the world was a slightly better place.

TO BE CONTINUED ...

