

Chapter One

“Save me,” said the little girl. She stood in front of a house, his house, looking like an angel. He didn’t know her.

“Save you from what?” He asked.

“From the boogey man.” She turned and dashed into the house, her teddy bear dragging on the ground behind her.

“Wait,” Iain called out after her, his feet already carrying him towards the house, “You can’t go in there.”

He didn’t make it to the door before it burst into flames. He raised his hands against the intense heat that tried to pull the air from his lungs. Try as he might, he couldn’t get close enough to make any attempt at saving the child trapped inside. He expected to hear her screaming, shrieking for help, but there was just the fire.

He stood there, helpless, unable to get any closer when he heard a sound that sent shivers down his spine. He lowered his arms and tried to make out the shape of the person inside, the maniac that was laughing as he burned. As he stared into the bright flames the sound began to change, taking on a more bell like tone.

Iain cracked open his eyes and reached for the ringing telephone. His searching fingers eventually found it and he lifted it up to see who was calling him at this late hour. Seeing the name Roberts displayed in big letters on the screen made him wince. Whatever the reason for this call it was bound to be something he wasn’t going to like.

“What?” Iain barked into the phone not meaning to sound as terse as he did.

“Iain, sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if you might have some time to stop by the precinct as soon as you can. I’ve got something that I was hoping to get your input on.” Detective Roberts sounded as if he was regretting every word he was saying even as he said it.

“My input? On a case?” Iain asked. It was the last call he had been expecting to receive.

“Yeah. It’s a weird one and we’re hoping you might have some insight into this one.” Roberts said. “I wouldn’t have called you if I didn’t think it was important. This weird shit was always your domain.”

“Weird?” Iain asked swinging his legs out of bed. “What sort of weird?”

“You’ll see when you get here. Should I send a car?” Roberts asked.

“I haven’t even agreed to come.” Iain grumbled as he pulled on a pair of pants.

“You’re getting dressed right now, aren’t you?” Roberts asked, and Iain could almost hear him grinning.

“Get me a taxi.” Iain said and hung up the phone. He couldn’t decide whether he was happy or angry about the phone call. He had retired only six months ago. It was an early retirement on terms that were less than ideal. He missed it some days, but most days he was too drunk to care. After the fire nothing really mattered besides the job and when that was gone there was nothing. He pushed the thought from his mind deciding that he should be happy for the distraction.

A taxi was waiting for him by the time he had gotten outside. He pocketed the pack of smokes he had been opening and got in to the cab. He didn’t say anything to the driver knowing that he already had his destination. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what case they had that was so far into the weird that they were resorting to the desperate act of calling him. He had seen nothing in the papers, so whatever it was, they were keeping a tight lid on it.

He got out across the street from the station and stared up at the old cement building. He hadn’t stepped foot in that place since the day he retired. After all that had happened and the rumours of his own stability that had sprung from those events, he never expected anyone would want to see his face around here again.

He finished his second cigarette and sighed. Staring wasn’t going to make it any easier. It was better if he got it over with sooner instead of later. Crushing the cigarette underfoot, he jogged across the street. He paused again at the bottom of the stairs that would take him up to the double glass doors. He forced himself up the steps, his heart growing heavier as he approached the entrance. Taking a deep breath, he walked inside.

Iain felt relief wash over him when he didn’t recognize the uniform at the front desk. He approached the counter, forcing a friendly smile onto his unshaven face. “I’m here to see Detective Jack Roberts.”

“Please take a seat. I’ll be with you shortly.”

Iain let his smile slip as he looked at the name on badge. “That’s not going to work for me. I’m expected now. Sergeant Lee, is it?”

“I said I would be with you in a –” Sergeant Lee spoke louder this time, his voice no longer the passive bored voice of a front desk clerk.

“My name is Iain Ryan,” Iain informed him. He didn’t miss how the sergeant’s eyes widened in recognition. He had no doubt that the reason for his retirement was still topic of gossip. “And I would like to get things sorted now. I think that would be best for everyone involved.”

“Right.” Sergeant Lee said, his voice wary. “Let me just call up to make sure and if everything checks out I will get it all sorted right away.”

“Thank you.” Iain said and leaned against the cage on the counter.

“If you would take a seat,” Sergeant Lee asked. He paused and then added, “please.”

“No.”

Resigned to the fact that he was being listened to, Sergeant Lee called upstairs and confirmed what Iain had told him. He kept stealing nervous glances, as if Iain might suddenly attack him or turn into a demon. Neither was likely to happen, Iain had chosen to stay so that the young sergeant would spend more time on doing his job and less on gossiping.

“Okay, everything is good. I just need you to sign a few things and then I will get you a visitor’s badge.”

Iain signed the forms that the sergeant pushed in his direction. With his visitor’s badge clipped to his jacket he walked towards the elevator to head up to the fourth floor. He didn’t stop to ask for direction, he knew his way around this place, not much had changed in six months.

He ignored the stares from a few of his old colleagues. Shock and surprise, were the most common looks he saw, but most quickly looked away when he met their gaze. He nodded his acknowledgement at a couple of people he was still on good terms with, those few who didn’t avert their eyes when he looked at them.

He had expected to feel something more walking in here, but he felt nothing. No embarrassment or regret for the events that had transpired. No guilt, not over his forced retirement. If it weren’t for the familiarity of his surroundings, he may well have been a stranger here.

His old desk sat empty still, they hadn’t found anyone to replace him yet. He looked away from it to where Detective Roberts was sitting, stuck on the phone and making notes. He walked up and took the chair on the other side of the immaculate desk. He waited for Roberts to hang up. “Hey, Jack.”

“Hey. I was almost wondering if you had changed your mind about coming in on this one. Thought you’d be here sooner.” Detective Roberts stood up and stretched. He looked tired and Iain guessed that he’d been working himself hard on a case.

Iain nodded towards the phone. “Anything to do with this weird case you didn’t tell me a thing about?”

“Naw,” Detective Roberts said. “Something more mundane than that. Come with me. Cap wants to talk to you about this one.”

“Please don’t say Williamson.” Iain couldn’t stop his face from wrinkling with displeasure at the thought of having to deal with that man again.

“Sorry to say, but he’s the one that even suggested we call you.” Roberts clapped his old colleague on the back and urged him forward.

“Damn,” Iain said. “If he’s asking for me than this must be one hell of a tough case.”

“Yeah, let’s save the details for behind closed doors. We’re trying to keep this one as quiet as possible.” Roberts knocked twice on the door to Captain Williamson’s office. They waited for permission to enter which came quickly. Williamson had been waiting for them.

“Close the door. Sit.” It wasn’t a request, it was an order. Already Iain was starting to regret coming here. If there was anyone in this building he wanted to see less than Williamson, he couldn’t think of it. He was sure the feeling was mutual.

“Ryan, good to see you.” Williamson sat rigidly in his chair, the look on his face making a lie of his words.

“I’m sure I wasn’t called down here for casual pleasantries.” Iain said, not willing to the play the game when he didn’t work here anymore. Williamson wasn’t going to get under his skin this time.

“No, you weren’t.” Williamson agreed. “Roberts, you are the current lead detective on this case. Inform Mr. Ryan of the pertinent details.”

Detective Roberts took out a notepad, more as something to hold than to really remind himself of the details of the case. He knew that Jack never had issues remembering any details in a case. Iain had always been amazed at how good his memory was. “First body was found twenty-five days ago. A young boy, approximately five years old, found in an alley on the east side of the city. Eyes and mouth stitched shut, he was wearing a black – uh – frock, and heart was removed post-mortem. Symbols of an unknown design were written in blood, belonging to the child, in a manner suggesting that this was a ritual killing. Identity of the child remains unknown.”

Iain winced at the thought of that young child that had to suffer in such a way. He understood why Jack wanted to stare at his notepad as he read out the facts of the case. The details of this case were to horrid to talk about while looking someone in the eyes. He was amazed that the identity of a child so young was still unknown after nearly a month had passed.

Captain Williamson pushed a folder towards Ian. He opened it to find himself looking over crime scene photos. He glanced through them quickly not wanting to spend too much time thinking about them. He’d seen a lot in his years, but the cases involving kids always got to him. He paused when he reached the picture of the child’s face. He had no idea how this hadn’t ended up in the news.

“Ten days ago, another body was found. A girl, approximately eight years old, eyes and mouth also stitched shut, dressed the same as the previous victim and heart had been removed. Once again, there were symbols painted in blood in the alley where the body was discovered, in the Denman subdivision. Identity of the victim is still unknown.”

“Shit.” Iain muttered. Two deaths. Two children. Iain flipped through another file of photos and reports. Quicker this time. There would be time to go over the information in more detail later. For now, he just wanted to get a quick idea of what he was looking at. He placed the file aside with the other one. It was a terrible case, but he still wasn’t sure why they had decided to call him in.

“And this morning,” Detective Roberts continued, “another victim was discovered. Greenly neighbourhood. Same circumstances. Victim appeared to be about four years old, female, and remains unidentified. Body was treated the same as the others. Symbols painted in blood were found with one unique difference.”

Iain reluctantly took the case file that Williamson handed to him. Since Jack didn't continue talking he assumed that the unique difference would be evident in the file. He almost gasped as he opened the folder but managed to restrain the reaction. He recognized the girl in the photo. She was the one he had seen in his dream. He flipped through more crime scene photos until he came to the reason they had called him.

Under where the body had been, two words were scratched into the pavement. Blood had pooled in those carved out letters and turned two innocent words into a grisly message. ‘Hello Iain’. He stared at the words in silence for a minute before closing the folder and placing it with the other two. Williamson and Roberts were both watching him closely for any reaction.

“That is...” Iain grasped for the right word to convey what he was feeling, but he couldn't think of any, “...odd.”

“Do you know any of the victims in these pictures?” Williamson asked.

“No.”

“Any suggestions on who the killer might be?”

“No.” Iain said again. “However, I would assume who ever it is knows me, but probably doesn't know I retired a few months ago.”

Williamson grunted and locked eyes with Roberts. Iain felt a twinge of anxiety. He wasn't sure why. He wasn't a suspect, but there was more going on than just a simple conversation about a strange case. Roberts placed a friendly hand on his shoulder and tried the more personal approach. “Anything at all come to mind? I know you've worked a few cases dealing with cults before, is there anything you recognize at all?”

“Just my name,” Iain said. “I'm not sure why it's there other than someone wanted to get my attention for some reason.”

“Anyone that might hold a grudge against you?” Williamson asked. Iain knew what he was thinking, but he wasn't going to let the captain get him riled up.

“Not that kind of grudge.” Iain leaned back and crossed his arms, done with this meeting. He wasn't interested in answering questions that they already knew the answers to. He had been a good detective and that meant he'd made enemies, but it took a really twisted individual to do something like that to innocent children.

“Look, Iain,” Detective Roberts softened his tone. “I know you didn't retire on the best of terms and I know this is probably the last place you want to be, but whoever this person is,

they're reaching out to you. They know you even if you don't know them. Someone wanted to get your attention and, now that they have it, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm retired," Iain reminded them, "which means I am going to go home, have a drink and wait for you to solve this one."

"Or you could help." Williamson said with obvious distaste.

"What makes you think I'd do that?" Iain shot back, not in the mood to humour the captain.

"Because you're still a damned good detective above all else." Roberts said. "And I think your input would be valuable on a case like this. This was your territory."

Iain considered the offer carefully. As much as he hated seeing a crime like this, he wasn't sure he was in a place where he could deal with a case like this. Not when there were children involved. He was torn. It was Williamson who, surprisingly, helped him decide.

"I'm going to be blunt with you Ryan. I don't want you here, but there are children dying. We want your expertise on this case. Full access, paid consultant. We need to catch the killer before the media picks it up."

"If you're going to be honest with me then I will give you the same courtesy." Iain said with a little smirk. "I don't want to be here either, but I don't want people dying if I can do something about it. So, unless something happens, I'll work the case with Detective Roberts. If it's too much for me to handle, I'll let you know. Fair?"

"Fair and appreciated." Williamson stood up and held out his hand. Iain stood as well and shook the proffered hand. He was happy to leave that stuffy office as he followed Roberts back to his desk.

"Thanks for agreeing to help out. Captain Cranky won't admit to it, but we need you on this. There isn't a single person on this force who can handle the strange stuff the way you can."

"Don't thank me yet." Iain glanced at his old desk. He hoped that he wouldn't have to sit there in view of everyone. "Where can I go to look over the files and evidence. I've got nowhere else to be, so I might as well get started."

"One of the interview rooms?" Roberts frowned as he followed Iain's gaze. "Yeah, I think that would be best. If you have any questions, need anything let me know. I'll have someone bring everything up for you. For now, you can start with those files in room three."

"Sounds great." Iain said. He still knew the way well enough. As soon as he was in the room he dropped the blinds for a little privacy. He had seen the looks a few people had given him when he came in. He wasn't ready to face all those old colleagues yet.

In the privacy of the interview room he had a chance to really study the picture of the third victim, hoping that it was just his imagination that drew the correlation. He studied it closer.

There was no denying the resemblance right down to the birthmark on her cheek and her curly red hair. Only thing he couldn't see was her bright blue eyes in this picture.

Save me. She had said before walking into the burning house. It had already been too late when he had dreamed that. He wouldn't be able to save her or the other two, but he could save another child from becoming a victim of this psychopath – whoever they may be.

Iain looked up at a knock on the door. A young officer was holding a box and looking at him awkwardly. "Are you Detect...uh... Mr. Ryan?"

"Yeah, put that on the table." Iain said not trying to think about what stories the kid may have already heard about him. "Thanks, kid."

He didn't get a response. He hadn't expected one.

Chapter Two

Iain was almost happy for the phone call that broke him from his usual nightmare. Still groggy, he stumbled into some clothes and hurried downstairs to the waiting cruiser. He stared out at the damp mist, lost in his own thoughts, as the vehicle took him to the waiting crime scene. He had been searching down empty leads and making notes for a week. It seemed like an impossible case but, now, he had the real thing. Iain knew he should be less happy that another child had died, but he also knew that he was getting nowhere with the three case files.

Intermittent flashing of red and blue lights called his attention back to the real world. He had arrived.

Iain stepped out of the vehicle and took a moment to survey the familiar scene. As much as he didn't want to see what was waiting for him, it was like coming home again. He thought about lighting a cigarette but pushed the thought aside as he saw Detective Roberts already heading in his direction.

"You made good time." Roberts said as he led the way towards the crime scene.

"I didn't think dawdling would be a benefit." Iain said as his eyes scanned the small crowd that had gathered already – an ingrained habit. Sometimes a killer would come back to watch with the crowd, but none of them stood out to him. He started to turn his attention back to Detective Roberts when her red hair caught his eye.

She stood apart from the crowd, leaning against the wall. Her isolation from the crowd was a matter of choice – just not her choice. He could see people in the crowd glance in her direction, some with unease others with outright fear. She didn't look at them, but she did acknowledge his attention with the slightest nod of her head. Seeing her here, Ruby Champagne, was enough to tell him what he had already suspected after reading the files – there was something beyond the normal levels of La Port strangeness going on here.

Iain ducked under the police tape and followed Roberts further down the alleyway. He could see the bright lights that forensics had brought in shining from around a corner. Detective Roberts stopped just short of the corner and took a deep breath.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked.

Iain nodded and walked ahead of Detective Roberts around the corner. His pace slowed as his eyes took in the scene that lay before him until he came to a full stop. Iain wasn't too sure where to look first with every horrid detail brightly lit by the halogen lamps.

"Jesus, Jack..." He whispered.

"I warned you."

"How old?" Iain asked as his eyes finally settled on the centerpiece of the ghastly tableau.

"We're thinking about seven years-old; we don't have an ID yet and I don't think we'll get one either." Roberts said grimly.

“Timeline is speeding up.” Iain pointed out. It had only been seven days since the last murder.

“I know.”

Iain forced his eyes away from the body. “Shit, how has this been kept out of the papers?”

“No ID, no missing person’s report. Makes it easier to keep quiet, but I don’t know how much longer we’ll be able to keep it that way. Things like this have a way of leaking.” Detective Roberts sighed.

“And all the rest were like this? The blood, the symbols, placement of the body and such?” Iain asked as he took the scene in anew. It looked similar enough to the photos that he almost had a sense of déjà vu.

“Symbols seem to change and different ends of the city, but yeah, they’re all pretty much identical.” Detective Roberts said. “Tell me what you make of it because you always seem to have a way to make sense of these things.”

“And I’m your desperate measure.” Iain smirked not sure if he should be insulted.

“Your early retirement wasn’t exactly on the best of terms, now was it?” Detective Roberts huffed. “If I had my way, we’d have brought you in before the killer called you out.”

“I’m touched.” Iain said. “Who reported it?”

“Busboy,” Detective Roberts nodded to a nearly hidden door on one side of the alley. “Came out the back door to dump the trash at the end of his shift and found this. Kid’s traumatized by it, not that I can blame him. They sedated him and took him to the hospital.”

“Hmm,” was Iain’s only response as he gave the crime scene another good look, trying to decide exactly where he would start. “Okay.”

“Have a look around then. You know what to do and I’d rather not play babysitter. I’ll be here if you need anything.”

Iain made his way carefully through the scene, looking over everything in detail. He started on the edges and worked his way inwards. Although he dreaded it, he had reached the young boy who was the centrepiece of it all. Iain forced himself to look at the face and saw black thread stitching the eyes and mouth closed.

Iain crouched down beside the body and gave it a closer look. Nails were clean, skin looked scrubbed, hair was clean. Not a speck of dirt or drop of blood showed anywhere on the kid. He stood up and slowly drifted his gaze to the symbols that surrounded them. From here, they seemed familiar like he had seen them somewhere before, but he couldn’t quite remember where or when.

Iain crouched back down to look at the symbols written closest to him. He traced over them in the air with his fingers. He wondered if they reminded him of a previous case or if it was just the photos from the last few scenes that were stuck in his mind. Neither answer seemed quite right. He decided to put a pin in that thought, confident that the answer would come to him soon enough.

“Hey, you,” Iain shouted at nearest CSI person to him. Iain winced the moment he realized who it was. “Shaw, there’s something in the blood over here.”

Shaw walked over and crouched down beside Iain. He glanced at where Iain was pointing. “I don’t see anything. Sure, you’re not imagining it?”

Iain bit his lip to keep what he wanted to say from leaving his mouth. “Right there, where I’m pointing, there is something under the blood.”

Shaw sighed and gave the area more than a brief glance. Iain knew, as soon as Shaw frowned, that he wasn’t going to have to push the issue further. Shaw took a few pictures before carefully removing the item and placing it in an evidence bag.

“Can I please see that?” Iain asked through gritted teeth as Shaw went to put it away in his bag.

“You can see it when you look at the rest of the evidence. I’m not authorized to show anything to you Ryan.” Shaw stood up to walk away.

“Don’t make me go over your head.” Iain growled as he stood as well.

“As far as I’m concerned, you shouldn’t even have been allowed in here.” Shaw spat back at him. “There is a good reason you retired early, and you should have kept it that way.”

Iain considered following through on his threat immediately but decided that it was a bad idea to make the tech hate him more than he already did. There was no need for him to make more waves than necessary. He couldn’t even argue with what Shaw had said. If their rolls were reversed, he might feel the same way as the tech did. He walked back to where Detective Roberts was waiting for him.

“Well?” He asked when Iain finally made it close enough to be heard.

“I’m dreading the moment they move the body.” He said thinking about the photos from the last crime scene.

“You and me both.” Roberts said with a little chuckle as they waited for the CSI’s to finish their careful documentation.

“Are you rushing the autopsy and forensics?” Iain asked. Detective Roberts nodded. “Then I’ll be by in the morning to see what there is to see. I think you were right to rouse me from retirement for this. It’s by far the most disturbing and strange thing I’ve seen in this city and that’s saying an awful lot.”

“It really is, and I believe it.” Detective Roberts said. “I just hope we catch the person responsible sooner rather than later. Coroner is here.”

Iain walked up with Roberts to watch the removal of the body. Iain winced the moment he saw it. Once again, a message waited for him, carved into cement and filled with blood. Iain stiffened as he read the two words. He had no idea who had left this message or how they knew, but it sent shivers down his spine.

Save me.

“That’s an odd message.” Roberts said as he stood back for the techs to get the photos. “Any clue what it means?”

“Not yet.” Iain turned to leave. He’d had enough of this crime scene and the reminders of his nightmares. There was nothing more he could do here anyway. It was just a matter of waiting on forensics and the autopsy, but he didn’t think there would be any surprises with either of those. It was a clean crime scene for the most part. Whoever was responsible knew what they were doing.

Detective Roberts hurried to catch up to Iain. “Got any prelim feelings about this one?”

“Nothing more than what you have already, but I haven’t had time to process everything yet.” Iain said. “Obviously ritualistic murders with young victims usually mean they’re looking for a pure sacrifice for the ritual. What the perp is trying to accomplish in his twisted mind, I don’t know yet, but some of those symbols look familiar to me. I’m hoping that if I figure out where I’ve seen them before I might just be able to narrow down a list.”

“It all looks like gibberish to me, but that’s why I wanted you in on this earlier. You’ve been dealing with the crazies in this city longer than most of us. I’ll take a good old fashion murder-suicide any day.” Detective Roberts said and clapped Iain on the back. “Glad to have you on board.”

“You’re probably the only one.” Iain said.

“You have more friends on the force still than you seem to think.” Detective Roberts assured Iain.

“Sure,” Iain said as he ducked under the tape. He glanced over to the wall where Ruby had been standing earlier but she had already vanished. He hadn’t really expected her to still be there and he was glad she wasn’t. That was one person he didn’t miss dealing with. She gave him the creeps, but she knew a lot about what went on in the city and her input was useful. He had a feeling that he’d have to deal with her on this case eventually which was a thought that almost made him regret agreeing to help.

“I’d argue with you, but I know you’re too stubborn to believe a word I say.” Detective Roberts said with a shake of his head. “I’ll get one of the officers to call you a taxi and I’ll see you sometime in the afternoon?”

“If I sleep, yes.” Iain said.

“Still having the nightmares?”

“Yeah.” Iain admitted, not looking at Jack. “If I don’t sleep I’ll probably be in earlier than that.”

“For the coffee?” Detective Roberts laughed, happy for the change in subject, and Iain joined him. Coffee in the station was brutal at best and deadly at its worst, but it had kept Iain awake and going for many nights in the past. “I won’t be back in till close to 2pm so you may just have to cool your heels till then.”

Iain nodded his understanding and started making his way back out through the growing crowd. He turned back at the sound of Detective Roberts shouting at him.

“Hey, Iain!” Detective Roberts said. “Thanks for coming out.”

Iain nodded. Once he was out on the street he finally lit the cigarette that he had been thinking about since the phone had woken him up. He leaned against a wall and enjoyed the first puff. He was less than halfway through when the taxi pulled up. Iain flicked the cig into a nearby puddle and got into the cab.

A hint of light was starting to show in the eastern sky by the time Iain was back in his apartment. He grabbed an empty notebook off the shelf, poured himself a glass of whiskey and sat down at the table. He stared out at the still sleeping city and gathered his thoughts before starting to write down his impressions of the crime scene in the little book. It was something he had been doing for years; a new notebook for every case he worked on.

Iain poured himself another drink as he closed the book and pushed it aside. Save me. Those words taunted him as he watched the sun rise. There was no way anyone could have known about his dream. He hadn’t spoken of it at all and, yet, the words were there. Mocking him. Iain didn’t think it was a coincidence that those words had been there. He just wanted to know why and how.

And, of course, who put them there.

He could feel his eyes growing heavy. He wanted to fight it, to avoid the inevitable nightmares. His subconscious had no shortage of horrific material to pull from. Stumbling to bed, Iain fell on top of the covers fully clothed. Already he could see the young boy’s face taunting him as he drifted off. Save me. Even as unconsciousness claimed him, those words repeated in his mind, following him down into the darkness.