

DAY OF THE KILLING

Meadowlark was a small town an hour and a half south of Kansas City. The emergency call center was located in a claustrophobic back room of the single-story, all-brick police station which resembled a rest stop bathroom. It was ten at night, and Nick Cooper was alone when he received the call. ‘Nine-one-one, what’s your—’ he said nonchalantly into his headset microphone, while opening a packet of sugar for his coffee. He wasn’t able to finish his question.

A child was shrieking in frantic bursts, and a woman was whispering. ‘Go back upstairs, baby, please.’ Her voice was urgent. ‘Please! Go! Go now!’ And then suddenly she shouted. ‘Oh my God!’

‘What’s your emergency, ma’am?’ he demanded, knocking over his coffee as he lunged for his computer. He told himself to remain calm, but the sound in his ear of a terrified child was incredibly upsetting. His fingers bordered on useless. An address showed up on his computer screen. ‘Please, ma’am, can you—’

‘Hurry!’ she screamed. ‘Please help us! Hurry!’ Eight seconds into the call from the residence at 2240 Lincoln Street, Nick lost contact.

The female caller gasped and said 'No!' in a desperate voice. Then there was the sound of what he assumed was the phone clattering to the floor. The line went dead. He tried to call back. No luck.

Nick sent out the emergency signal over the radio. 'Possible robbery or domestic battery underway at 2240 Lincoln Street,' he said, speaking so fast his words ran together. 'Female and child in the residence. No further information. Call ended. Unable to reestablish connection. Over.'

Officer Diane Varga responded within seconds. 'Dispatch, this is 808. I'm headed over now.'

Nick grabbed his phone and pressed the speed dial for Barry Shipps. Of Meadowlark's two detectives, Barry was the more likely to respond quickly even though he was off duty and probably not near his radio.

'This is Detective Shipps.'

'Detective,' Nick said, 'This is dispatch. Can you stand by for a possible call-out to 2240 Lincoln Street?'

'I can do better than that,' Shipps answered. 'I'm filling up my car at Casey's General just down the road.' A beat later Shipps was back in his car on his radio. 'Dispatch, this is Shipps. I'm en route.'

Diane was in Nick's ear again. 'And I'm turning off Victory on to 223rd. Almost there.'

'Roger 808.' Nick almost said be careful. He stopped himself. Every time he ran into Diane in town, he found himself whistling Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl.' He took a deep breath and folded his trembling hands in his lap.

A mostly white, working-class town, Meadowlark had its fair share of old farm families scattered about the outlying areas. There was

one nice place, a beer garden and brewery called the Crooked Crow, which had just enough rural charm to draw people out from the city on sunny weekends. Other than that, there were just two sit-down restaurants. The Wagon Wheel and Gambino's. Last ditch, there was a Subway inside the Walmart.

The words 'Sweet Water Creek' were etched into a plaque on a decorative stone wall at the intersection. Officer Varga turned into the neighborhood. It was relatively new, ground broken just six years earlier, with only half the plots sold and a number of uninhabited homes. Moderately priced wooden constructs, they were nevertheless sizeable and blandly pleasant, nestled between a couple of small, unimpressive country ponds and some magnificent old elms.

Diane rounded the corner and noticed a red Radio Flyer tricycle overturned on the sidewalk. The silver handlebars gleamed in the cheerful glow from the porch lantern two doors down from her destination.

The house at 2240 Lincoln was one of the larger in the neighborhood, sprawling across a gradually sloping lawn with tasteful landscaping and a terra-cotta stone fountain jutting up from behind a cluster of poorly tended rosebushes. Diane got the feeling that here in Sweet Water Creek, everything was all right. Better than her life, for sure. Her intuition, as she stepped from her car and faced the house, did not say to her, 'crime scene.'

'Dispatch, I'm on location,' she said into the radio mic attached to her uniform chest pocket. Diane walked at a fast clip up the sidewalk toward the front door, framed by two slender evergreen trees on either side. She knocked loudly three times.

'Police!' she called out, but there was no answer. From somewhere close by came the clipped repetition of an upset dog yipping

nonstop. She felt her pulse quicken. This can't be too bad, she thought. It's Meadowlark. And yet, something was telling her to hurry. She punched her finger on the doorbell, ringing it in frantic succession. The hollow bong of the bell echoed inside. No footsteps on the stairs. Nothing.

The door itself was wooden, framed on either side by decorative windows. Diane peeked inside, trying to focus through the textured glass. The first thing she saw was a pair of tall military style combat boots sitting just inside the entry. They seemed somehow at odds with the modern home and its vast, shiny floor of polished blond wood. It appeared to be one great room; open plan, like a city loft. Right by the front door was a curved staircase winding up to the second floor. An electronic device, possibly a home phone, lay in smashed plastic pieces on the floor next to the bottom step. Diane moved slightly to get a better angle. Now she could see more of the interior.

She caught her breath.

The beautiful blond wood was stained. There was a red mess in the middle of the room. Her heart commenced hammering in her chest. It was not going to be nothing, as she had hoped. And Nick had mentioned a child.

'Dispatch, I'm looking through a window at what appears to be a lot of fresh blood,' she said into her mic, more loudly than intended. 'Possible fatality here. I need backup and EMS.' With a barely discernible edge of panic, she fumbled to un-holster her semi-automatic Glock pistol and raised it to a tentative ready position.

She rang the bell once more. 'Police!' she yelled again, this time in a wilder, louder voice. She tried the door and gave it a hard shove with her shoulder. It was locked and solid.

Diane raced toward the shadowy south side of the home looking for another entrance. As she ran, she heard Nick sending out another emergency tone over the radio requesting all units for backup. She slipped in a patch of mud rounding the corner and caught herself with her free hand. She could now tell that the dog barking frantically was in the backyard.

At the end of a row of bushes was a wrought-iron fence with a gate. Broken and tied shut with a bungee cord. Diane became frantic in her attempt to wrestle the rusty thing open.

‘Come on!’ she whispered, frustration mounting. Finally it gave, the hinges making a horrible scraping noise like claws dragging down a chalkboard. As she began crossing the backyard, two other officers responded in succession that they were on their way. Diane said, ‘Shipps? ETA?’

His voice came over her mic. ‘Five minutes.’

‘Roger.’

Diane stepped on something that let out a loud squeak. ‘Shit,’ she whispered and looked down to see a duck-shaped dog toy under her boot. As she progressed farther and her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw several partially eaten, old yellow tennis balls strewn about in the overgrown grass and weeds. At the edge of the patio was a giant green plastic sandbox in the shape of a turtle. Next to it was a toddler’s water table just the right size for a small child to stand and splash and use all the colorful cups to make the water wheel spin. She thought of the red tricycle near the neighbor’s yard and pictured a child’s chubby churning legs. A little three-wheeler hurtling down the sidewalk and then kicked aside without a backwards glance, forgotten in pursuit of some new adventure.

So Nick had been right. Diane was now sure that her first priority at the scene was to save a child.

The light seeped through the shutters of the back windows, and Diane crouched close to the house as she made her way across the patio toward the door. She saw the barking dog. There were actually two of them; small, black and white Boston terriers. Anxious but sweet creatures, they looked baffled at having been closed out of the house. Their eyes were wide and wet, and both were panting and pacing, completely beside themselves.

Diane turned the handle on the door. 'Back door's unlocked,' she said into her mic.

Nick was the first to respond. 'EMS has been notified. They know you're waiting on a second officer to enter the residence. I've told them to stage at 2218 Lincoln and wait for update.'

'Copy,' Diane answered. Nick knew the routine. She was, without question, supposed to wait on a second officer to enter. If she went in, she was going against procedure. She'd get in trouble. Diane glanced over her shoulder at the sandbox. The water table. Then she decided. She'd rather lose her job than lose a child.

Diane pushed the door inward and held out her foot to stop the dogs from following her inside. She closed it softly behind her. As she crept into the house, she glanced back. The front paws of both Boston terriers were against the glass, flexing and pleading, coaxing her to return, to come let them in.

The back door opened into a far corner of the lower level next to a round glass breakfast table and four chairs. An empty wine bottle appeared to have rolled to a rest against the wall. On the table was another bottle of wine, and underneath on the floor was an elegant cylinder of Stolichnitski vodka.

Diane was not much of a food snob, but noted that this was no chips-and-dip poker party. In the center of the table was a thick wooden cutting board covered in a semi-eaten array of olives, salami, crackers, cheese and grapes.

Though she tried to focus on the entirety of the scene, the bloodstain was hard to ignore. If she glanced up and across the great room, there it was again. Mesmerizing. Sickening.

Despite the fact that the room was open concept, it was dotted with chairs and a sofa as well as bookcases, end tables and floor lamps. Hiding places everywhere. She moved stealthily, her pistol ready and her eyes flitting back and forth from one quiet corner to another.

As she inched past the breakfast table she had to watch her step. The shattered remains of several glasses were scattered about, big and little shards everywhere. Of the four yellow upholstered chairs surrounding the breakfast table, one was overturned and one was stained a shade darker where there had been a spill. Next to the fallen chair was a wet photograph.

Diane leaned down to get a better look. It pictured two brunette women. That much Diane could tell from all the windswept hair. They were standing in front of an unusual building. The design was vaguely Middle Eastern, almost like a mosque with no minaret. Whatever had pooled on the floor had seeped through the paper and the women's features now bled into one another. Diane imagined someone sitting at this table holding it shortly before. Reminiscing? Do you remember when we...? Yes, let me just go grab the photo...

Separating the living area from the kitchen was an island in the shape of a crescent. Several tall chairs ran the length. It was not until Diane passed the breakfast table that she could see over the kitchen bar.

The little puddles varied in size and looked like something left on the sidewalk after a big rain. Except they were crimson. The droplets leading away resembled a beaded necklace, almost like a thin strand of bloody pearls.

The slaughter had happened between the refrigerator and the inside of the bar, where the sink and dishwasher were located. The surrounding walls and appliances were splattered. Diane felt a tightening in the back of her throat. The front of the refrigerator was papered in finger paintings now artistically spotted with tiny red flecks; a nightmarish rain slanting over neat box houses, a stick family of three, fluffy clouds and a happy-face sun.

The trail of bead-like blood moved from the kitchen puddles to the big slick in the middle of the room. It was messy, almost as if mopped, and Diane imagined someone crawling on hands and knees before managing to haul up on his or her feet for one more staggering go at life. She had an irrational urge to start running through the house calling out for the child, but she'd already broken one rule just by entering.

On the wall across the room, an oval wooden African mask with holes carved for the eyes and mouth stared at her with an expression of horror.

Diane looked anxiously over her shoulder at the table laid out as if for an indulgent wine-and-cheese feast among friends. Then she looked ahead, at the nightmarish slop of a human spill beckoning her to come see; come see what unspeakable thing has happened here.