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Once inside, I was overwhelmed with a sense of defeat and powerlessness. It felt as if I were in a tomb. I had miscalculated. Three additional doors separated me from the final entrance to the main prison. Made of steel and glass containing wire mesh, the doors appeared impenetrable. In the corners of the long, artless hall that led to the ominous doors, surveillance cameras compounded my sense of nihilism. Above the cameras were two internal towers, mirrors of those witnessed outside. Each contained more faceless armed guards. If the rest of the prison was anything like what I had seen so far, it was easy to imagine why no one lived to talk about an attempted escape from this island, an act of Para-suicide more than a flight to freedom.

I followed the guard through the first door and waited for her to unlock the next blockade in line. Turning right, she slipped into a hallway, which I had not previously noticed, equally well enforced but with a moderately more friendly feel. Opening the locked door, I entered into a large room that contained no furniture. The polished concrete floor matched the colorless walls. Shaped in a hexagon, a toy model to its exterior sister, the room contained eight doors, six of which were lettered A through F, each leading to what looked like mini versions of the room where I was standing with the exception that all the rooms had a small table and straight-backed chairs. There was one way in and one way out. No matter what one did to escape, they were lead back into the abyss of the hexagon tomb. Along one wall were the seventh and eighth doors and a glassed-in cage containing more armed guards and an arsenal of electronic equipment. By all appearances, they could just as easily send a missile into space as monitor the soul, the bowels, of the prison.

“You look a little pale, Mr. Pratt,” my escort informed me, enjoying her job a little too much. “Do you need some water?” attempting to make me feel like I was too weak to carry on. “You’ll get used to it. I’ve seen’um come and I’ve seen’um go. Porter’s no different than the rest of them kind. Two people died because of Porter. Now it’s her turn. No love loss here.” The guard seemed to have lost all perspective of the humanity, or lack of it, that was about to take place. For the first time I felt something other than fear. The guard sickened me. She sounded void of the reality over the connection between what was going to take place at midnight and the human being that was about to die.

“She’ll be here in a few minutes. You watch out,” she said again, trying to get a rise out of me.

As much as I thought of myself as someone who existed without any sexual bias, it had never crossed my mind that the person pulling the switch could be a woman. Having never done anything like this before, it was possible that a female executioner was quite by design. It was moments such as these that reminded me how ingrained I was with sexism. Men are doctors and pilots; women are nurses and stewardesses. I thought I was beyond that incredible nonsense. And yet, there seemed to be something almost appropriate and fair about the idea of a woman pulling the switch on a female.

The guard left the room, locking the door behind her. This was the first time I had ever been in a prison and I began to feel how the inmates might feel knowing that they were

not able to come and go as they pleased; freedom was a nonexistent concept. It is so easy to take that right for granted. And once the freedom was removed from me, I began to feel less and less like a human and more like a caged animal. For a fraction of a second, I wondered if I had paid that parking ticket I got last month.

I began to think about the woman who was about to die in the electric chair. The idea of Allison Porter sitting in that hideous throne of destruction suddenly came into view and further sickened me. For some reason, I had blocked it out of my mind. God, how I wished I were anywhere else or doing anything else but what I was doing. I began to recall when I first read the judge's statement on the Porter murder trial. It seemed beyond cold and heartless.

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"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, are you ready to pronounce your verdict?" Judge Thornebeck asked, as if he were asking his children if they had brushed their teeth.

"We are, your honor," sounded a slightly built foreman, a middle-aged woman who no more looked like she wanted to be a part of the process of deciding someone else's destiny than the other members of the jury.

"How do you find the defendant?"

"On the first count of the State of Oregon versus Allison Porter, we find the defendant guilty of first degree murder of Charles Graham. On the second count of the State of Oregon versus Allison Porter, we find the defendant guilty of first degree murder of Ruth Graham."

The sentence was pronounced immediately upon the 55 year old Judge Thornebeck hearing the jury's decision. When Allison Porter's lawyers learned that Thornebeck, a longtime conservative, had been assigned as the judge for the case, the courtroom onlookers could see the lack of hope in the defense lawyer's faces, as day after day, Thornebeck appeared to have already passed sentence on Allison Porter. He was just waiting for permission from the jury to give Porter notice of the date her life would end.

"Allison Porter," the clerk demanded, "Rise and face the judge."

Thornebeck was a big man, easily carrying a hundred pounds more than he should for his less than five-and-a-half-foot high frame. Under any other circumstances, no one would pay respectful attention to a man who looked like him. But in the courtroom wearing his black robe, he was king, and anyone that doubted that need but look at the list of people he had sent out the back doors of the courtroom to a waiting police van that would escort the condemned to various Oregon institutions. If one did not already know this about him, the newspapers gave readers the notion that he was not a forgiving man when they referred to him as "End-of-the-Line Thornebeck."

"Allison Porter, you have been judged by a jury of your peers and found guilty on all charges. Is there anything you want to say before the court pronounces sentence?"

Allison Porter had not uttered one word since the day of the murders. She did not speak to her lawyers, the press or any cellmates. Past interviews with Samantha, who had been close to Allison, revealed that Allison had disfranchised herself and knew no more than

the general public. Allison remained completely distant. Her court-appointed counsel did what they could with what I, along with the rest of the courtroom drama followers, saw as an open-and-shut case. Her speech was the first and last time anyone heard her voice.

Standing erect, her ankles and wrists in chains, she matter-of-factly uttered, “Given the opportunity, I would do it again.” A gasp oozed from the courtroom as Thornebeck refused to react to Porter’s comment.

“I gather, Miss Porter, that your statement is an attempt to gain sympathy from this court,” Thornebeck said sarcastically. A sick, uncomfortable laugh replaced the lingering gasp from Allison’s laconic speech. “I won’t waste the court’s time thinking about passing sentence, Miss Porter. You’re not worth it. The court has more pressing matters. However, let me say personally, in all the years I have spent on this bench, I have never had before me a person with such ruthless abandon as you. You have not shown the slightest sign of regret or remorse. I am not sure how much better off the world will be knowing your fate, but I think we all are just a little more at ease knowing that you are not walking the streets.” Thornebeck barely paused to look at his notes. “Allison Porter, you are hereby remanded to the Oregon State Penitentiary. Upon your arrival, you will be sent to death row where you will await execution by electrocution. For the sake of the people of Oregon, I hope that it is done as quickly as possible. I, for one, will be glad when your life is over.”

The Columbian’s account of the last day of the trial was reported verbatim. I was at my desk doing a write-up on a local artist, called only by his first name, Rafael, when distribution threw the next day’s copy on my desk. In spite of the protests by humanitarian groups and comments by her legal counsel, few people felt any sympathy for Allison Porter. My thoughts were abruptly interrupted. The silence in the courtroom remained until the members of the courtroom shuffled their way into the hall.

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Suddenly, the door to the cocoon where I was hibernating opened, shocking me out of my thoughts, forcing me back to the moment. When I looked toward the opening, my mouth went agape. The guards could not help but notice the shock on my face. Leading a shackled Allison Porter into the room and sitting her across from me, the smaller of the two guards recited, “You’ve got an hour and a half. No more.” Looking at me, he said, “Do not touch the inmate or allow her to touch you. Do not allow her to use any writing implements. You may record the interview if you wish.” The guard then turned to Allison giving her conduct orders. “Keep your feet on the floor and your hands above the table at all times. Do not raise your voice or imply, in any way, a threat.” Stepping on the other side of the doorway, “Should there be any infraction of the rules, the interview will be immediately terminated.”

“I...”

“There will be a guard outside of the room at all times.” Pointing to the top right corner of the room, he explained, “You will be monitored via the camera. You will not be recorded or monitored by audio. I doubt seriously that there will be any conversation going on in here anyway. No matter what we do to try and talk with her, she still won’t say a word. If you ask me, she’s gone mute.”

“I’m not...”

“Mr. Pratt,” he said, looking me straight in the eye. “She’s set to die at midnight. At this point, she can’t be anymore executed for killing one more person. Be careful,” he said. “I’ve got dinner plans tonight; I don’t need any accidents on my shift.” Closing and locking the door behind him, the guard left me with Allison Porter, a convicted murderer sentenced to die in the electric chair.

Watching him leave the room, I was so shaken that I jumped up, knocking the table and pushing my pad and pencil onto the floor near Allison Porter’s feet. I fumbled to get my possessions back to their original position. I had no idea why she was in the room with me, or who sent her for that matter. But there was no denying that I was sitting directly across from Oregon’s only woman to ever be executed in the electric chair. I was sure the guards would burst in any second once they realized their mistake. Where is the damn executioner I was supposed to interview? How the hell did this happen? I’m not prepared for this. I’m out of here.

It took me a moment, but I finally noticed that Allison was sitting calmly, hands clasped on the table top, staring at what must have been crazed, frantic expressions on my face. I sat down across from her and stared directly into her eyes as she smiled and stared back. As I became calmer, I found it hard to believe that these were the eyes of a cold-blooded killer looking me straight in the face. She appeared as a very different Allison Porter than the one who was plastered all over the news. She had been transformed from a manic, frenzied-looking killer to a gentle, peaceful soul. The news reports created an image of a huge, muscle-bound woman who could take a human apart with her bare hands. Surely, this was not the same person. With short cropped hair and a pleasant medium build, the woman who sat before me in no way looked like she would hurt another human being, let alone murder two innocent people. Yet, there was no denying it. She had been found at the scene of the crime covered from head to toe in the blood of the victims, not once having denied her role as the murderer.

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“Lieutenant! Lieutenant!” a rookie yelled. “You better take a look at this.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Lieutenant,” he persisted. “I think you need to take a look at this, now.”

The Portland Police Department had received an anonymous phone call from a woman telling them that something “horrible” had taken place at 112 Russell Street, in a small residential neighborhood of northeast Portland’s Hawthorne district. They arrived to find a young woman sitting on the front steps of a decaying Victorian house. The initial shock confronting the police and onlookers was seeing that Allison was covered with a red substance, which was quickly discerned to be blood and massive amounts of it soaking her clothes. Snipers were at her side as she sat submerged in blood from the aftermath of a maelstrom.

Following the officer, Lieutenant Glisten was taken to the scene’s investigating sergeant. “What have you got, Sergeant?” the lieutenant barked. “I’m about to start questioning that woman out there. Shit, she’s a Goddamn mess. Jason,”

Lieutenant Glisten commanded to one of the officers who were running into the house, “Call an ambulance. Tell them we have two people, a male and a female, DOA.”

Lieutenant Glisten, a 17-year veteran of the Oregon Police Department, knew the routine, chapter and verse. Over the years he had logged more hours dealing with murder trials than he wanted to remember. He became well-known in the Portland area for solving the gruesome Steven’s murders: seven children and a man, later found to be the children’s father, were stuffed into oil drums behind the family garage. Since that time he had become somewhat of a local celebrity appearing on AM Northwest and various other news television and radio talk shows. Listeners had heard him say on more than one occasion that nothing that humans did to one another surprised him anymore.

“In here, Lieutenant,” Sergeant Brownell urged. Making their way through a drab, worn living room, the sergeant led Lieutenant Glisten through a labyrinth of dank and musty hallways, which took them to the entrance door of the basement. “Down here,” the sergeant directed, stepping onto the top step landing and holding the door for Glisten. They traversed the dimly lit stairway down one level to another door. The young Sergeant stopped and faced Lieutenant Glisten.

“Lieutenant, I’ve never seen anything like this before,” the sergeant proclaimed, circumlocutively trying to warn his lieutenant of what lay beyond the closed wooden door.

Smiling, Lieutenant Glisten said, “You get used to it, son. The first few years on these assignments can be pretty rough.”

Entering the brightly lit room, the normally unshakable Lieutenant Glisten was visibly stunned; he stammered and was forced to brace himself against the doorjamb. His eyes unwillingly consumed the sights before him, something that he would later wish he had been more prepared to see.

The small, 10-by-12 foot room contained one bed, one table and a small cracked basement window. Although Glisten was unaware of it, he was standing in a thick marsh of blood. On the wall opposite the bed was the corpse of a man in his mid-60’s. The only thing that supplied the lieutenant with the knowledge that it was a man was the corpse’s body hair. His feet dangled a foot or so off the ground, his body hanging in front of a wall with nails driven through his wrists, shoulders and hips. Covered with blood, his face was raw, exposed under flesh as if someone had filleted him from ear to ear. One side of his jaw hung loose, revealing a cavity stripped clean of its tongue. His teeth had been bashed into his mouth showing stumps that jutted from the corpse’s battered gums. Both hands ended at the first of each knuckle. His missing fingers were not readily visible. The only thing that divided the lower half of his body from the upper half was a mound of pubic hair where a penis and testicles once resided. A cursory look at the man’s horrified eyes, the only remaining part of his original face, informed the lieutenant that whomever this mutilated soul had been, he had felt, heard and saw much of what was being done to him and whatever was happening on the wall opposite him before he expired.

Forcing himself to look at the opposite wall, Glisten viewed a scene similar to the one he had just attempted to comprehend. A woman hung by as many spikes as the stump across from her. She had the same similar horrified look on her face as the man across from her. This time the carving took place below the neck as revealed by her missing



breasts removed from her body from the neck and shoulders down to her abdomen. Each breast was nailed into the side of her head. A bloodied penis hung from her mouth, held in place by testicles wedged inside her mouth forcing the mound of gender to stay in place. At first glance there appeared to be no alterations to her lower body until the lieutenant observed that two fingers had dropped from the back of her, defecating human body parts. Only her red painted toenails remained unscathed.

“God in all mighty heaven,” uttered the lieutenant, clutching his stomach, turning his back on the scene. “How could anyone do... “Looking up at the corner of the room toward the place where he left the static woman. “She did this? Did she do this?” begging himself the question aloud. “That woman sitting on the front steps did all of this?” After a short pause following the question, Glisten asked, “Did you call the..?”

“Coroner’s on the way,” the sergeant said, dutifully having anticipated Glisten’s question. “I called for special cleanup. What do you want me to do about the press?”

Lieutenant Glisten staggered his way out of the battlefield, turned his face into the corner and once again mumbled, “That young woman upstairs did this?” Pausing for a moment, turning around, leaning with the back of his head pressed against an unpainted wall, “No press. Absolutely no press. Get our photographers in here before the cleanup.”

“But, what do I tell the pr...”

“Fuck the press,” he snapped. “Do it!” Just as he finished dictating his orders, one of the police officers entered the hallway.

Looking down at both of them, “Lieutenant we can’t get a word out of her. She hasn’t said one word to anyone.”

“Book her.”

“But...”

“Don’t argue. Book her.”

There was never much of a question with respect to who committed the murders. Although Allison Porter remained silent during all interrogations, forensics identified the knife and snippers as the implements used in the murder. Her prints were on both weapons as well as on various parts of her victim’s bodies. Local newspapers had a field day. Under any other circumstances Allison Porter would have been front-page news. But because of the Simpson, Packwood and Harding incidents, even Nancy Kerrigan and her Olympic tribulations appeared more frequently than the “Russell Street Mutilator,” as the news would later refer to her. The photographs of Allison were always the same. There was the one and only large shot of a bloodstained, lifeless face staring through a police car window and smaller shots that portrayed her at various ages in her childhood and young adult life. No photographs of the physical crime were ever released to the media. The judge ordered them sealed and locked after he hand-selected the photos he would allow the jury to view.

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As I began to superimpose the information about her onto the person sitting four feet from me, I struggled to accept that the murders were committed by this soft-faced young woman. If jail normally hardens and neutralizes the souls of its unwilling tenants, her

incarceration appeared to have the opposite effect. Her features were soft and pleasant to the eye; she in no way emoted the slightest sense of aggression or hostility. The longer I stared, the more my mind strained to see her as the murderer I believed I knew.

“Miss Porter,” I said, with both fear and apology in my voice. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I’m really just a theatrical reporter. I’m not supposed to be here. You see, there’s so much stuff, news stuff that is going on, that I was assigned to interview the... the person that...” I was babbling. No words felt appropriate. No matter what she did, she was hours from having her life taken away from her and I had no desire to add to the pain she must have been experiencing. “I know you don’t talk with people, so I won’t keep you.” Beginning to stand, “I’ll just call for one of the....”

“I loved the article you wrote on the Carly Simon concert. I was at both her shows that night. She was amazing. Her words are inspirational. When she sang some of the old songs from the ‘40’s and ‘50’s like, As Time Goes By, I would feel so much peace and tranquility that I’d just go away in my mind. She’s just wonderful, don’t you think?”

For the second time in as many minutes I was thrown off balance. All reports to date said that she refused to speak to anyone. A few theories about her silence suggested that she was so psychologically traumatized and disturbed by what she had done that she had lost her ability to speak. Of course, doctors came up with some brilliant reason why she was able to say what she said in court.

“I know who you are,” she continued. “You’re Kevin Pratt. You write the entertainment section of the Columbian. Sam and I loved getting up on Sunday morning to read your editorials. I really enjoy the way you write. Since I’ve been here, by the time the newspaper makes its way to me, it’s a shredded mess with more vulgar pictures and words written all over it than the original print.” She paused for a moment. “Are you okay?” she asked, seemingly concerned about my behavior. “Do you want me to have them bring you some water?”

“I... no, I’m fine,” I stuttered. “I just hadn’t expected to be here. With you, that is. I mean talking with you. I didn’t think you could...”

“You didn’t think I could talk? I can carry on a conversation with the best of them,” she said, still maintaining her inviting smile.

“Yes, you can. Talk, I mean. I guess I’m a little surprised you’re talking to me right now. That you’re talking to anybody for that matter.”

“Well, now, I’m pleased to learn you can talk in complete sentences,” she said, laughing while she shifted to find a more comfortable position on her metal chair. “I don’t mind telling you, I’m looking forward to getting rid of these chains. I feel like that character in ‘A Christmas Carol’, the one who came to visit Scrooge. You know, the one who was dragging the chains all over Scrooge’s bedroom?”

“Sounds like a reasonable description. I think I can appreciate how you feel about the chains. It must be difficult.”

“Difficult?” she echoed. “Hell, it makes me feel like I can’t go anywhere.” For a second, I thought she was serious. Suddenly, she laughed aloud and I followed suit. I was so thrown off guard that I couldn’t stop laughing. I looked over at the door to find the

guard peering in to see if everything was okay. I put my hand up to let him know there were no problems.

There was a long silence between us. But for some reason, I felt as if I had known her for years. All of my fears left me as I began to have a conversation with the woman no one knew.

“It must be very difficult for you. Difficult to be locked up in this place?”

“At first,” she said, looking towards the door as if it was the only barrier between her and freedom. “At first, all I could think about was getting out of here, even if it meant leaving in a coffin. But after a few months, it became my new home. From the moment I arrived, I got mail. Lots and lots of mail. There are some really sick people out there. One man wanted to pay me to have his baby. I’ve received I don’t how many letters telling me I was Satan’s messenger and how inspired they had become to go out and do more of Satan’s work. I even got a letter from a rock group telling me they were naming a group after me. They call themselves ‘Allison in Chains.’ Can you believe it? I still have boxes full of letters I haven’t read. Needless to say, they won’t be hearing from me,” motioning towards the caged light bulb.

“Think positively. I understand the ACLU has filed a petition on your behalf with the governor.”

“I have no interest in any such efforts to keep me alive. I agree completely with the jury’s decision. I’ve been looking forward to this day my whole life,” she said, revealing the most serious side I had seen on her face since she entered the room. For just a moment, I considered reaffirming the sense of hope I had for her, but quickly decided to drop the effort. She appeared to be someone who was quite settled with her own destiny. Who was I to change how she felt?

“Please,” I said sheepishly. “If you don’t mind me asking, why did you decide to start speaking? I mean, why me?”

We sat in silence for a few seconds and then she calmly answered my question. “I knew what I was doing, and I knew no one would accept what I had done. What is there to say, if I opened my mouth whatever words I used would have been used against me and the public would have laughed and made a mockery of me. The truth is, I don’t care what anyone thinks. I did it because I had to.”

“Had to? But, why me? Why now?”

“I knew who you were the moment I walked in the door. And I knew they had made a mistake. Of course that’s not unusual for this group. When I got here, I went two days without eating because they forgot to order my food. Not that they were real concerned about me starving to death. I’m sure they figured they would save money on the food and electricity bills. When I saw the look on your face, I was struck with your honesty. Most reporters would have jumped at the opportunity. Every other reporter has. You were willing to leave without an interview. I had to laugh. You looked like a little boy who was caught with his hands in the cookie jar, except you didn’t even want any cookies. So, I thought I would see if I could get a little rise out of you. Besides, these jerks have been placing bets on me that I would die without saying a word. I’m sure most of them just lost

a lot of money.” I followed her gaze as she looked towards the prison sentinel. Three other guards were now looking through something to say. “Anyway, you have the kindest face I’ve seen in a long time. You married?”

For a moment I hesitated and then realized that telling her could not possibly matter. “Yes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Cindi.”

“What a beautiful name. If I ever had a child, a girl, I would name her Cindy or Lindsey. I like Lindsey as a girl’s name. What about you?”

“Lindsey’s a soft, wonderful name.” The pause that took place felt like hours were passing. I simply did not know what to say. After about a minute of silence she began to speak.

Looking at my pencil and pad, “Do you always take notes?”

Thrown slightly off guard Kevin said, “Not usually. But I came prepared to interview the...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve already guessed that you were supposed to talk to the person who’s pulling the switch. Actually, he’s a nice man. He talked at me yesterday and he told me what was going to happen. He wanted to assure me there would be as little pain as possible. Wasn’t that kind of him?”

“Yes,” I replied, feeling a little embarrassed by my lack of courage to communicate the truth. “But even though I’m not going to do an interview, I’m overwhelmed with honor that you’ve chosen me to talk to.” Allison smiled and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I spouted, feeling awkward about my comments.

“You. You’re funny. You’re going to be a man without an agenda to the end, aren’t you?” she grinned, not expecting an answer. “Kevin, put away your paper and pencil, sit back, and I will tell a story. And when I am done, I’m going to leave and die. I only have one request: when I’m finished speaking, don’t ask me any questions. Just leave the room.”

I didn’t utter another word. Taking my pencil and pad off the table, I shifted my weight in the torturous chair and with my eyes, I invited her to begin. A little after an hour I stood, grabbed my belongings and left. It took all the courage I could gather not to turn around and take one more look at this incredible woman. I wanted to say something, anything to let her know I cared, that I would be thinking of her. From that day forward, my life would not be the same.

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