

*Chapter 1*

Staring at the lines on the yellow legal pad in front of her for what seemed like an hour, Gray Turner had no idea what to write. The surly detective sitting on the opposite side of the cold, steel table in the Sun Haven Police Department interrogation room wanted her to craft a tale of torture, mutilation, and murder.

She fixed her eyes on the cheap black pen with an anxiety-chewed end lying perpendicular to the lines of the legal sheet. Letting her eyes water and her focus blur as if gazing at a Magic Eye poster in the mall, she waited for the image to morph into a sailboat or a trumpeting elephant. Instead, her eyes glazed over until the pen and lines formed a deep slice with sutures. Her brain tried to recreate the vision she witnessed in her basement less than twenty-four hours before. The tiny, mousy brunette who clenched her mouth so tightly her lips disappeared, saw the macabre scene over and over everywhere her eyes traveled. When her dark, almond-shaped eyes met the detective's pale blue hungry ones, she pictured glass eyes peering out from beneath pickled skin held in place with pins hidden in unblinking lashes. As the cop's mouth moved with suppositions and accusations, she imagined his mouth frozen in a dried, painted grimace.

Gray used her fists to wipe from her eyes flashes of stiffened limbs, frozen expressions, and stitched skin. After blinking to clear her vision again, Gray saw Detective Mike Vogel, twenty-two year veteran of the small department, throw a paperback novel onto the table. His toss slid the book perfectly into her line of vision. Even in her periphery, the artwork was unmistakable. Her first and most popular horror novel's cover seeped with blood and venom as its titular character, "The Taxidermist," stuffed and sewed together a fresh victim. Rather than kill for revenge, her villain/protagonist Henry Grayson wished to keep anyone he loved with him forever. To do so, he murdered them, sewed them back together, and put them on display.

"If you don't write a confession, I suppose we can use your psycho pervert novel there to present your own 'how to' version of the crimes to the jury." The crusty detective, licking his thumb and index finger and smoothing his thick eyebrows with them, leaned forward in

his chair with his freshly coifed brow and squinted his eyes as if trying to see inside of his suspect.

“What kinda fucked up evil you got inside of you, lady, that you could skin someone alive? You get off on that? Does it make you wet?” In front of him, Gray appeared an empty void as his words made no impact on her. Twisting the corner of his thick moustache, he decided to up his game, “Do you rub their dead flesh on your pussy?”

Fed up with being ignored, Vogel growled a command to her. “Write! Start writing unless you want to wind up on a cold slab with a needle in your arm on death row, little lady. I suggest you do what you do best, write me a tale of horror. Write me a story about how you butchered those people and stuffed ‘em and put ‘em on display in your basement.”

Having matched wits with the keenest of small town criminals, Detective Vogel fancied himself clever enough to best any suspect. In his mind, this timid novelist stood no chance against his adept interrogation tactics. Little did he know that, across the table from him, sat a woman who was once a girl who protected herself by digging a hole underneath a barn and waiting there without a sound for two days, licking rainwater from a pipe of corrugated tin and lying in her own filth. His suspect was not just stubborn; she was a survivor. Words bounced off of her without leaving a mark.

Bursting out of his seat and slamming a fist on the table so hard that the gnawed pen leapt spasmodically from the legal pad and rolled onto the grimy beige tile below, Detective Vogel heaved his final command, “Do it, or I swear to the good Lord above, I will not stop until I see you put to death for your crimes!”

The detective’s violent action woke Gray from her hypnotic state and stirred a primal defense mechanism inside of her. After hours of the seasoned veteran cop using every psychological trick in his book to push a button and get his suspect to crack, his final aggressive strategy elicited a reaction from the previously catatonic woman. Once a statue, Gray finally moved. Slowly, she leaned down to the floor, slid the pen into her hand, sat upright, and started to write.

Satisfied with himself, the detective leaned back, tipping the front legs of steel stackable chair off the ground. Pretending to smooth his moustache, he pushed hard at the sides of his mouth to stop his smile from becoming visible. Then, he ran his hand along the buttons of his shirt to distract himself as she wrote. His joy, however, was short-lived. After a brief moment, Gray put down the pen and shoved the pad of paper towards Vogel, who awkwardly clunked his chair legs back to the ground and reached for the pad.

His mouth dropped open beneath his thick moustache speckled with evidence of his stereotypical cop appetite for donuts still clinging to its brown and white wiry hairs. Vogel lifted the page towards his bifocals as he read the chicken-scratched words, "If I get the death penalty, I'll see you in Hell, Detective. I want my attorney."

Now, Gray pushed at the corners of her mouth to hide her grin from the cuckolded dick with a belly full of donuts and a heart full of defeat.

Standing so forcefully that his heavy chair crashed against the nicotine-yellowed wall behind him, Vogel rushed to the intercom on the wall, pressed the button, and ordered, "Take this sick bitch to her cell. The corpse-fucker lawyered up." Then, he turned to his murder suspect and informed, "Deputy'll be here in 'bout an hour to pick your twisted ass up and take it to County."

On the surface, Gray appeared calm, almost at peace. Inside, she screamed in terror from her very core. Long ago she developed a serious poker face. To her, sharing feelings rather than keeping them to herself meant opening herself up to an attack. Emotional displays provided maps into her soul the enemy could use to infiltrate and wage war against her. Today, Gray remained unwilling to give the detective any road signs that lead to the answers he desired. As a patrolman wrenched her hands behind her, cuffed her roughly, and pulled her towards the door, Gray appeared a porcelain doll with an unreadable expression.

Generally speaking, the calmer Gray appeared on the outside, the faster the wheels of her mind turned. She once surmised that her body hibernated to conserve energy for her vigorous imagination. From the time she was little, Gray Turner learned to live inside of her head and block out anything happening to her flesh and bone. The shock of the discovery in her basement forced her into a mental cocoon in which she wanted to forever disappear. As safe as her mental retreat made her feel for the moment, she knew she must emerge in order to discover what events led to the horror that dwelled in her home just feet below the office where she banged out her latest slasher novel, under the family room where she watched TLC and the SyFy channel endlessly, and beneath the bedroom where she rested her bones and battled the demons in her recurring nightmares.

Sleepwalking to her cell, Gray never felt the cuffs come off of her wrists or heard the clanking of the cell door. Consciously, she could not even recall lying on the inch-thick rubber pad that provided little protection from the harsh steel grate of the cot below. Seamlessly, she slipped into a semi-conscious dream state where her mind flashed images of the gruesome discovery over and over: faces, all of them, appeared

familiar despite their petrified condition. Lips receding from teeth that now appeared oversized and grotesque; eyes of glass fixated beneath mummified lids; some poorly positioned ears hung askew, pulling noses to the side like a three dimensional Picasso; a freezer full of trash bags filled with organs, tongues, and bones, as if whoever taxidermied those sixteen people could not stand to discard even the unusable parts.

Someone unpacked their portfolio of sordid secrets and hid them away in her basement. Mental disease and savagery posed and put on display like a diorama of “who’s who” in her life. The question she needed to answer was “Who?” Detective Vogel showed her evidence, all of which pointed directly to her. She told herself she could never be capable of such a diabolical feat because whoever sliced and skinned those poor souls clearly had lost his or her mind. Then she wondered that if she had truly lost her mind, would she know it?

Sitting in the urine-soaked cell of the Sun Haven Police Department waiting for a Deputy to cart her off to dangers unknown, Gray Turner wondered if she could be the one, the butcher, the doer of evil deed. Was her fictional serial killing taxidermist in her debut novel a product of her imagination or her subconscious? If her personality had split, would she be aware of housing a slice-‘em-and-stuff-‘em beast inside of her? Maybe when she hid inside of her head to protect her real self, one of her other personalities took the reigns and steered her body without her ever knowing? Lately, she had lost moments of time, found objects misplaced, and puzzled others by not remembering phone conversations and emails.

Sweat seeped onto her upper lip and brow as her teeth clenched so tightly her jaw ached. In her mind, she pictured being in a padded cell, strapped into straightjacket, screaming maniacally and beating her head with dull thuds against the bloodstained padded wall as guards passed in industrial hallways and rolled their eyes. Already, she imagined the press, families of the victims, and Detective Vogel watching an unfortunate orderly put a needle in her arm. Their eyes glistened with hatred and loss as the cold liquid death flowed from a plastic tube into her body.

Try as she might to conjure images of draining the life from even one of the numerous victims, Gray Turner could not pull one flash of an instant of her alleged misdeeds from her mind. If anyone knew the recipe for a serial killer, she did. For the last sixteen years, she studied them, created them in her mind, and put them on the pages of twelve best sellers. She knew all too well that her past made her fit the profile. Although her upbringing misshaped her psyche, she possessed two attributes that precluded her from falling directly into the mold: she had a

heart and a conscience. Nothing inside of her made her capable of the acts for which she was being blamed. In her case, she knew nature certainly outweighed nurture.

She closed her eyes to shut out the image of the bars in front of her, to dull the pain of the fluorescent light overhead, and to wipe away the declaration of the carved graffiti on the wall that “Moose was here.” She sealed her eyes tightly together and tried to imagine herself committing the acts, as if thinking it might make it so. Every slice, every stitch felt like plot points in her latest novel and not glimpses of reality. She opened her eyes and saw the Deputy, cuffs in hand, waiting for her.

Her alleged acts being so heinous, the Deputy added leg shackles to the new suspect’s attire before he led her down the dank, scuffed halls of the tiny police department. Gray tried to keep her eyes focused on the sullied floor tiles of the hall, but something danced in her periphery that made her raise her head. On the other side of a two-way mirror in the same sad interrogation room she had haunted hours before, sat Charlie. Gray stopped dead in her tracks, nearly toppling the hulking Deputy over her tiny frame.

Charlie’s eyes appeared to lock on hers. She knew he merely looked at his own reflection in mirror, but she hoped he felt her presence. Maybe subconsciously he looked up when she spoke to him inside of her head, calling his name in desperation. Too many times, he had anticipated her emotions or finished her thoughts for her to not believe she had an unspoken connection with the thin, handsome, almost pretty man sitting in the same chair where she sat for Vogel’s brow-beating.

Before she could try to will him to speak to her through the glass, the Deputy gently tugged her back down the hallway that lead to the prisoner door and his squad car. As she shuffled along in her shackles, Gray wrote her own dialogue to the conversation taking place behind the two-way mirror. In her scene, Charles Willard Rankin III, a thin, meticulously neat strawberry blonde with long yellow eyelashes blinking over his gentle meadow green eyes, refused to yield to the crotchety detective’s methods of interrogation. Over and over, he defended the honor of his ladylove, author Gray Turner. He brilliantly leapt over every pitfall set by the detective and sidestepped every snare. “Never,” he attested, “never in a million years could Gray do anything like that. She was framed.” On the pages of her mind’s book, her Charlie acted the part of a knight in shining armor, slaying the dragons of suspicion to set her free. Ignorance being bliss, Gray smiled as the deputy pulled her back to the reality of the squad car.

Inside of the interrogation room, revelations and betrayal echoed off the yellowed walls. Charlie Rankin, supposed love of Gray Turner’s

life, spewed misgiving, curiosities, and outright accusations about the woman whose body he had shared for the past two years. He fed the hungry detective morsels of evidence against the prime suspect. On the menu, he served up tales of misplaced objects, forgotten conversations, unaccounted for time, and disarming, if not violent, behavior. Detective Vogel fed him a length of rope earmarked with Gray's name on it, and Charlie tied the noose. After Gray's lover and betrayer purged his soul and tears, the satisfied detective sent him on his way with a feigned consolatory pat on his back.

As Charlie headed to the parking lot, needing to find a place to stay the night, Gray had already been booked, searched, and scrubbed. In her orange Peoria County Jail scrubs and flip-flops, Gray shuffled along side of her female jailer down the fresh white and charcoal hall that lead to a steel door.

Keeping her eyes on their familiar place, the ground, Gray could not see the angular face of the correctional officer, nor did she notice the heavy scar above her right eye. The jailer earned her battle wound in the county clink when a crazed prisoner tried to use her head as a battering ram. The wound gave the heavily-muscled woman an extra edge she wished she never had. Too often and too abruptly, her fight instinct kicked in against prisoners. Since Gray complied and ambled like the embodiment of the walking dead, the jailer praised God for another moment she did not have to fight.

After the jailer punched a code into a panel next to the heavy door, she pulled it open and pushed Gray towards the doorway. Lifting her eyes, Gray saw a staircase ahead of her. The stairs did not lead upward, they spanned downward, below the surface. Under her breath, Gray muttered, "No," as she stopped in the doorway and pulled against the jailer's touch, a mule refusing to take her handler down into the canyon.

"Come on, Turner, let's go," the jailer urged as she tugged at her unmoving prisoner. "I'm not going to tell you again."

"No," Gray announced forcefully, "Not the basement. Don't you have any cells upstairs?"

"Listen, princess, this ain't the Ritz, it's County. You go where I take you." The jailer tried to look Gray in the eye, but the tiny woman decked out in orange kept her gaze glued to the darkness at the turn on the staircase.

"I have this, this phobia about basements. I, I, I can't go down there. I just can't." Gray shook her head rapidly as she protested.

"Sucks to be you, psycho." The jailer growled as she pulled out her PR-24 nightstick, "You're goin' down to the basement, whether you

like it or not.” In one swift motion, the jailer had her nightstick out and jammed it between Gray’s cuffed hands. Behind the prisoner, the towering jailer twisted the stick, pulling the tendons and ligaments of Gray’s hands and wrists so tightly she feared they might break.

Gray screamed with pain and with terror at the idea of passing through the doorway that led to the stairs and the danger below. Hands on the PR-24, the jailer easily lifted Gray to her feet as if holding the key of a wind-up doll. Once in the air, Gray firmly planted one foot on each side of the doorway. Catching the action on their closed circuit security cameras, a swarm of deputies and jailers swiftly swooped in and carried the writhing, gasping prisoner through the door and down the stairs to a place of shadows, childhood monsters, and death.

