

*Pay attention to the name under the John Prine quote,  
as the chapter is told from this character's perspective.*

*Chapters 2 & 4 are intense and, at times, may seem ridiculous,  
but this is true crime and I felt the reader deserved to  
experience actual events. A recorded assault, an insane criminal  
history, comments you wouldn't expect a victim to make, a murder  
weapon tossed in the Platte River in Royalton... Enjoy!*

*Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction  
is obliged to stick to possibilities; truth isn't.  
-- Mark Twain*

# 1

*Shoot the moon right between the eyes  
I'm screaming  
Take me back to sunny countryside.*

*John Prine, Clocks and Spoons*

## JON FREDERICK

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 2020

9:00 A.M. BIRCHMONDT DRIVE NORTHEAST,  
WEST SIDE OF LAKE BEMIDJI, BEMIDJI

HARPER ROWE REMINDED ME OF AN abandoned fawn. The willowy, baby blue-eyed young woman had long blonde hair, brush-stroked away in waves, reminiscent of impressionist art, like Renoir's *Girls at the Piano*. With her long legs crossed, she sat in front of me in a cushioned wicker lounge chair, on her grandparents' heated porch.

In a soft-spoken tone, Harper revealed, "My mom, Kali Rowe, was a buyer for Macys and was in New York for work. She called one night in March, from her hotel room, sick, and was quarantined in the intensive care unit the next day. They put her into a medically induced coma to ventilate her lungs." Sadly, she shared, "Mom passed away before we could get on a flight to see her. She had the dubious distinction of being one of the first coronavirus deaths in New York."

My heart ached for Harper. She was in the same boat as the loved ones for the victims of homicides I'd investigated, back when I worked for the BCA—no hugging or last memorable kisses goodbye—just gone.

Wiping away tears, she wearily continued, “Mom used to call me every day. And I’d act like taking her calls would be that final prick that would burst my sanity.” She could barely get the words out, “Those conversations are a lost treasure, now.”

I wished my partner, Serena, was here. She would know what to say. Sterile, taciturn data, lacking of any ability to comfort, ran through my brain. If the doctors were right, by December, we’d all know someone who died from COVID.

I tried my best, “I’d bet your mom was exactly the same way with her mom, and your daughters will treat you the same—no matter how great of a parent you are. It’s just growing up.”

“Before she went into the coma, Mom told me, ‘I love you and I want you to know there is nothing—including things you never told me—that I wouldn’t forgive you for. You have been my pride and joy. I’m hoping you will forgive me, too, for things I never told you.’ That’s a hard line to let go of.”

The heartfelt sincerity with which Harper spoke flooded my eyes. “I’m so sorry for your loss. Kali sounds like an amazing person.”

“She was.”

I felt so useless. “I would hug you, but...”

Harper understood, “I appreciate your boundaries. Everything is so weird. It’s my junior year of college. Instead of spending Saturday night with friends, we’re online live streaming. Instead of enjoying a romantic meal with my boyfriend, Greg, we’re SnapChatting. I’m so sick of social distancing, but I don’t want to die. It just sucks!”

The grief of her loss weighed heavy in the room. After wiping away tears and blowing her nose, she regathered her composure. “I want you to find my dad.” She paused momentarily, and then anxiously purged information. “Well, he’s not my dad. Jeremy Goddard has been my

rock but, technically, he's my stepdad. But really, he's just Dad, as far as I'm concerned. He hugs me whenever I need a hug and loves me. People like Jeremy and I love him. I could never have the heart to tell him what I'm doing today. He might think he failed me. After Bemidji State went completely online and my roommates moved home, I moved in with Mom's parents. I want to learn as much as I can about my mom's life. So, when I'm not thinking about her, I'm missing Greg, browsing the internet, or doing schoolwork—in that exact, descending order.”

“These times are crazy-making. There's never a good time to lose a loved one, but I can't imagine losing someone in a pandemic, the way you lost your mother. I imagine this has left you a little lost, especially when you're cut off from your friends.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” Harper straightened out of her melancholy and appeared ready to get to business. “I need to find my biological father.” She handed me her birth certificate. “I needed this for a passport last year. My mom told me where to find it in her file. I didn't bother to mention to her my father's name was on the certificate. I Googled him, but couldn't find anything under the name, William Blaze. All I know from my mom is that she didn't have contact with my biological father after she found out she was pregnant.”

The birth certificate identified Harper's father as Billy Blaze. I could see where she'd assume his full name was William, but Billy might've been his legal name.

I left the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) one year ago; I was finally picking up my first case as a private investigator. I had been doing construction work for a local company, but when our architect came down with COVID, everything came to a halt. My wife, Serena, asked me to take this offer and, since she was handling our finances, I was going to. The family farm on which I was raised fell to bankruptcy. I, for damn sure, wasn't going through it again.

I said, “You were born in St. Cloud.”

She nodded, “And that's all I know.”

“So, how did you manage to become his power of attorney?”

“My mom told me it was granted to me when I turned eighteen, by Billy Blaze. He apparently knew that, someday, I’d come looking for him.”

I immediately presumed her father had a criminal history. Career criminals eventually need someone on the outside, during their incarceration, to take care of their affairs, so it was a pretty common practice to give a sired adult power of attorney. There were also a number of legitimate reasons people wanted another to have a power of attorney, such as career military involvement or poor health.

Harper blew hair out of her eyes. “My mom took the time to help a lot of unsavory characters, but she never let them in my life. I’m assuming my bio-dad fell into that category. Mom wasn’t crazy. I’m sure there’s a reason she made me promise I’d never contact him.”

My obsessive brain took a brief tangent. Savory is salty rather than sweet. It was interesting, then, that an *unsavory* person is a *salty* person. So, a sweet person, like Harper, was the opposite of both savory and unsavory.

I asked, “Who is paying my wages?”

She cleared her throat and said with shaky confidence, “I am.”

“A college junior, taking online courses through Bemidji State University is paying me two thousand dollars a week and covering medical expenses for my family?” I doubted it.

Embarrassed, she admitted, “Okay, it’s not me directly. An anonymous professional is putting the money into an account and I’m paying you.”

I said simply, “Explain.”

Harper scratched one of her long legs by rubbing the other over it. “After my mom’s funeral, a woman contacted me and told me she’d cover the expenses for an investigator to find

out what happened to Billy, if I promised to keep her name out of it. She gave me your name. Do you want the job or not?”

It wasn't a matter of wanting it. My family needed the money.

YESTERDAY WAS THE BIGGEST INCREASE, TO date (+85 new cases), of the coronavirus in Minnesota. By the Governor's order, businesses had been shut down and people were staying home. Serena was taking this Stay at Home order seriously, protecting our children Nora, age five, and Jackson, one. She had confined herself to the home with them.

It didn't help that we were continually hammered with news that the pandemic was worse every day.

After leaving Harper, I called a friend and retired county investigator, Tony Shileto. Tony was paralyzed as a result of being shot on the job, but still occasionally took on laborious work for investigations, such as viewing camera footage or going through files. Tony agreed to see what he could find on Billy Blaze. I then contacted a St. Cloud police officer I knew and asked if he'd ever heard of Billy Blaze. I thought it was good fortune, at the time, that this officer had once interviewed him.

#### 5:15 P.M. WEST ST. GERMAIN STREET, ST. CLOUD

THE ABANDONED DOWNTOWN OF ST. CLOUD was reminiscent of a Twilight Zone episode. Sergeant Jason Nelson's squad car was the lone car parked on the side of the street. Normally, traffic would be backed up, with agitated people honking horns, as they scurried to leave work at the neighboring courthouse and social services buildings.

The stocky officer stood six feet from me, wearing a white mask—a restriction surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. His voice was muffled, as he spoke, “I can't talk about

this, but here's the interview." Jason extended his gloved hand to offer me a disk. "The scratches on his face are from Connie Berg. When I arrived on the scene, Blaze was sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of tequila and Connie was oddly tranquil. No puffy eye or bleeding lip—just a red mark on each wrist. She was so calm it was eerie. I didn't know what to make of it."

I considered, "His legal name is Billy Blaze?"

"Yeah. Honestly, I didn't think she had much of a case. Blaze told me a couple weeks later, he pled guilty, 'just to get it over with.'"

"Do you have an address for Connie?"

Jason huffed behind his mask, "You're not BCA anymore. You helped us with the Kaiko Kane case, so I'm returning the favor. Now, we're done." He pointed to the disk I was holding. "Destroy it when you're done..."

9:45 P.M., PIERZ

SERENA LAID BACK ON THE COUCH with her knees on my lap, as I massaged her feet and legs. Her tender heart, green eyes, long brunette curls—all so lovable. Serena and I had yet to clarify where the investigation ended, and our home life had begun. When I was with the BCA, I practiced strict professional boundaries. Now, in private practice, I was working with my lover. It was easier to assign tasks to someone for whom you didn't have deep feelings. The plus was Serena wanted to work investigations and she was the most insightful person I knew.

With a devil's grin, she said, "I know you, Jon. You've spun yourself into a knot over something."

"I'm hoping that working a case together doesn't make you love me less."

Her eyes scintillated, “Our love can handles this—I promise.” She kissed me, “Before you, my head was full of what-ifs. Now, it’s what’s next for us. You’ve had the key to my heart for—maybe forever. At thirty-five, we’re starting our own investigative agency—together. I’m so excited to solve our first case!”

“I love you, Serena. Don’t hesitate to ask me questions.”

She glanced upward, pursed her lips, and said, “This might be a criminal justice one-oh-one question, but why do most people commit murder?”

“Narcissistic injury. The victim said or did something the killer’s ego can’t handle. It’s the most common reason men kill women and women kill men.”

As I worked the muscles in her legs loose, we watched Officer Nelson’s recorded interview of Billy Blaze. There was a cocky assuredness with which Blaze entered the room. Blaze had a military style, thick black crewcut. Bloodied red scratches scarred his face.

Serena flinched, “Ooh, the poor guy. She must have some nasty nails.”

I thought out loud, “We’ll see.”

Serena commented on his tight black t-shirt, “The man’s a body builder. You don’t get that build just from hard work.”

Officer Nelson, in full uniform, asked Blaze to explain the alleged assault against Connie Berg.

Billy told him, “I had too much to drink—I admit that.” He glanced down, “It’s hard to get over Connie’s cheating. She slept with my best friend.” He picked up the Styrofoam cup of water and took a large swallow.

“How do you explain the red marks on her wrists and strands of duct tape on the floor?”

Billy rubbed his forehead. “You know how it is when you’re angry and jealous, and drunk. I told her I needed to know exactly what she did with that bastard, one more time. She



said, 'We've gone over it enough.' When I told her, 'Not enough for me,' she started hitting and scratching. So, I taped her wrists together to stop her. What's she saying I did?"

"Connie said you hit her in the head, repeatedly, and punched her in the stomach."

Blaze argued, "And you always believe the woman. If that's her story, where are the bruises? No broken nose; no swollen eye."

"She had a red mark on her forehead."

"When we were wrestling back and forth, we butted heads. That wasn't my fault. What did you get from the rape kit?"

The officer paused, "She never said you raped her, so we didn't test."

Blaze considered this before suggesting, "Well maybe you should. The argument was over her cheating. You know how angry people get when you catch them in a lie. Do the kit. I'd like to know who's DNA is in her. Do the swab, or do a polygraph, or whatever you do. You'll see what I'm dealing with. She broke my heart."

Officer Nelson leaned back in his chair and asked, "Why don't you just leave her?"

"I love her. As miserable as she makes me—I still love her..."

Serena's inviting emerald eyes met mine, "Do you believe him?"

I rubbed my chin, "No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. I don't like him. Either he's naïve to the way it works, or he knows it like the back of his hand. I have a feeling it's the latter. He suggested the officer do two things to verify his story that the officer can't do. He can't subject a victim to a lie detector test or a rape kit without an alleged rape. And, right after he said he was angry over the affair, he took a large swallow of water. People get a dry mouth when they lie."

Serena mused, “I wouldn’t have known they wouldn’t test a victim, either. And, as for the water, he was hungover.”

“True.”

She suggested, “My gut feeling is the truth lies somewhere between her statement and his. Honestly, I feel kind of bad for the guy. He’s hurting...”

Unexplainable details lingered in my brain long after they were disclosed. In this case, it was the spontaneous generation of duct tape. How did duct tape magically appear in Blaze’s hands, in her bedroom, if this wasn’t a premeditated assault?

# 2

*“He proved he could run, twice as fast as the sun,  
By losing his shadow at night.”*

*John Prine, Billy the Bum*

## **JON FREDERICK**

10:00 A.M. GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2020  
RIVERSIDE DRIVE SOUTHEAST, ST. CLOUD

TODAY, CHRISTIANS COMMEMORATE THE CRUCIFIXION AND death of Jesus Christ. It’s a day of fasting and penance. Due to COVID, all of the churches were closed on this day. I observed my Good Friday tradition of listening to Jesus Christ Superstar, during my drive to St. Cloud. It put my worries back in perspective. Being requested to quarantine was still a hell of a lot better than getting crucified.

Connie Berg’s stucco, cottage-style home offered a beautiful overlook of the east bank of the Mississippi River. Connie was my first successful face-to-face interview. I had called ahead of time to let her know I was looking for information on Billy Blaze. She asked if I’d been tested for the coronavirus. I assured her I lived in one of the few counties in the state that still had no confirmed cases. Connie agreed to meet, but insisted I stop over when her husband and children weren’t home.

Connie informed me she had been a recluse since the stay-at-home orders came forth and preferred to go without masks. We would social distance, keeping six feet apart, as was the recommendation of the CDC.

Connie’s face was aged with deep lines, reminiscent of some rugged years but, in her forties, she was still pretty. Her natural blonde hair had a reddish tint. Connie looked me over

through the small window in her door, and then on tiptoes, scanned passed me and beyond, to see if I was alone before letting me in.

Once inside, Connie dug out a pack of cigarettes. “I haven’t smoked for a year. All it takes is the *mention* of Billy Blaze and I have to pick it up again.” Connie tapped a cigarette out of a pack and lit it. She took in a long drag and blew it out the side of her mouth. “What do you need to talk to me about?”

“I’m just starting to gather information. I got your name from a domestic assault charge Blaze caught.”

Connie blew out an angry trail of smoke. “Are you here to question if it really happened, like the last investigator?”

“No.” Based on her reaction, there was no doubt in my mind Blaze had assaulted her. “Any idea where I’d find him today?”

She snorted, “Don’t know and don’t care, as long as he stays away from me.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

“I haven’t seen him since the assault, but he’s visited me just the same. After I filed the charge, he broke into my store and trashed it. I know it was him, but I can’t prove it. Nothing was taken. The only items broken were things Billy knew were important to me—an antique clock from my grandpa. A collection of glass roosters from Grandma. The items weren’t as valuable as the memories that went with them. If you pissed Billy off, he would find something that meant a lot to you and destroy it. Another Blaze tactic was to bring up the most shaming thing you ever shared with him and say it over and over. Billy is pure evil.”

“On the night of the assault, what was the fight over?”

Connie uttered sardonically, “Do you mean, what did I do to provoke him?”

It wasn't what I meant, but I didn't respond, as she deserved the opportunity to vent. The prevalence of domestic abuse in an educated country like the United States was disturbing. There were twenty thousand domestic abuse calls every day. More than five hundred women were murdered every year by their lovers. There were ten million victims annually, which worked out to be one in every seventeen women in the U.S.

Connie continued, "I hadn't done a damn thing. Billy was an ass when he drank tequila. I called him at the bar to see when he was coming home. I could tell by his tone it was going to be one of *those nights*. So, I set up a camera to record him. I thought maybe if he saw how obnoxious he gets, he'd get sober. But it ended up worse than I anticipated—real bad." She let out a deep, exhausted breath.

"The investigators never mentioned a recording."

Connie aggressively stubbed out her cigarette. "I didn't tell them I had it. If they would have confronted Billy about the recording, he would have killed me. I was going to hang onto it until he was incarcerated and a court date was set. When he pled guilty, I hid it, thinking I may still need it when he tries to slither out of his consequences."

"Do you still have it?"

Connie waved for me to follow her to the living room. "I kept it as a reminder to make certain I never considered doing anything for Billy, ever again. He can be charming. My husband's never seen it and he never will. The only ones who viewed this recording were me and the attorneys. If you're looking for Billy Blaze, I want you to truly see the piece of shit he is. He charms people and people think he's smart, but he's just a bully."

I silently sat on the end of the couch in her living room.

The video initially began with Connie briefly on-screen, turning the camera on, and then she disappeared.

I asked, "Where are you?"

"Hiding in the closet. Sometimes, if he couldn't find me right away, he'd just give up."

*Billy Blaze came stumbling into the bedroom, holding a roll of duct tape. He sneered in a lecherous, Jack Nicholson tone, "Where are you, Connie? Daddy's looking for you!" He laughed to himself. Blaze tossed the duct tape on the bed and pulled his t-shirt off, revealing a tattoo of the grim reaper carrying a sickle, which covered his back.*

Connie muttered, "If you didn't pick up on the icon, the words Grim Reaper are tattooed across his shoulders."

*Blaze undid his belt and stripped completely, "Here I am, baby, in the raw. Come and get it!" He glanced under the bed and, after a brief scan of the room, left.*

*When Blaze returned, he was agitated. He stepped out of sight for a moment. A door opened and the ruckus of two people wrestling could be heard.*

*I could hear Connie begging, "Please, just go to sleep. Let go. You're hurting me. Let GO!" When they returned in the screen, Blaze was dragging Connie to the bed by her hair. Bent over, she was desperately holding his hand to her head with both of hers, to keep her hair from being ripped out.*

*Blaze barked, "Hide from me, you stupid bitch! Get your ass in bed and give it up."*

*Still bent over, Connie pleaded, "You're drunk. Please, just leave me alone. I promise—maybe tomorrow night."*

*Blaze kned her hard in the head. I winced, as he could have knocked her out. He then hoisted a dazed Connie onto the bed. There was no mention of the infidelity story Blaze gave the officer.*

I turned to Connie, who was now looking away from the screen out the window.

Having no desire to re-traumatize her, I paused the video and asked, "Do you want me to shut this off?"

She shook her head, “No. Billy’s attorney argued that the recording was too traumatic for him to watch, so we shouldn’t be allowed to show it in court. Billy never had to watch it. Can you *believe* that? He terrorizes me, but don’t you dare hold him accountable. It’s too *traumatic* for him,” she said with dripping sarcasm. “I was so angry!”

“Blaze pled guilty.”

“Yeah. His attorney told me I’d be better off if Billy didn’t know about it. He convinced Billy to take a plea and get it over with. If you want to know about Billy—*really* understand him—I’m going to make you watch it.”

I was about to hit play when she reached out to warn me. “Have you ever seen someone raped?”

“Unfortunately, I have. Every once in a while, we get assaults caught on a recording and we have to go through them to clarify the exact charges. Believe me, I get no pleasure from it.”

She nodded, “Play it.”

*Blaze was telling her, “Call me Master.”*

*She pled, “Not so loud. Please, don’t wake up the kids.”*

*He slapped her, “That’s all up to you.”*

*Connie tried twisting her body to escape, but he punched her hard on the side of her head. “I can’t hear you.” He hit her again, “How do you address me?”*

*Voracious for validation, Connie fought back. She scratched at his face and tried pushing him off.*

*Blaze again pounded on her head, just beyond the hairline—no marks.*

*After several terrorizing minutes, Connie realized she was no closer to free. Exhausted, she conceded, “Okay,” and meekly placed her hands in front of her face.*

*He grabbed the duct tape and wrapped her wrists together.*

To be continued...