

Friday the 13th

By Ken Stark

The headlines were always the same. Some years they showed up once, other years they came two or three times, but little changed from one to the other. "Friday The 13th Killer Strikes Again", one would say. "Friday The 13th Killer Claims Another Victim", another would declare. "Still No Clue to the Friday the 13th Killer," yet another would shout. Of late, the headlines took to anticipating the next murder days ahead in order to sell more newspapers, but even those were as imaginative as dry toast. "Where Will The Killer Strike Next?" "Who Will Be The Next Victim?" "Can Anyone Stop The Friday The 13th Killer?"

In hardcopy and online, from Key West to Kookamunga, the headlines never varied. Still, the man folded the newspaper with the utmost care and tucked it into his inner pocket where it would be safe. Despite how woefully pedestrian the headline, he would still add it to his collection of clippings. It was just a shame that not a single editor in today's world could show as much imagination as the killer himself. So many bodies over so many years, and not the slightest hint of repetition in the bunch, save for the date. Every Friday the 13th, a new victim, and every one of them a work of art. Unique. Extraordinary. *Perfect*. The authorities would never have even thought to link the bodies together had it not been for the killer's calling card, a single cufflink left at each crime scene, solid gold and emblazoned with a black onyx cat.

He rose from the bench, straightened his suit jacket, adjusted his sleeves to cover his cuffs, and looked out across the park.

It was as it always was. Mothers with their children. Families picnicking. Young people throwing frisbees or riding skateboards. Joggers. Office workers on their breaks. So many potential victims out to catch the last of the summer sun, and all apparently oblivious of today's date.

But no. There were signs after all. Furtive glances at a wristwatch here, or a nervous darting of the eyes there. And all about the park, mothers were keeping their children within arm's reach and friends were staying close to their groups. Even the joggers formed up into tight little packs of threes and fours, whether conscious of it or not.

They knew, alright. Every single one of them knew. Today was the 12th. Thursday. Tomorrow was the big day, and they were all holding their breath.

All except one. A young girl was sitting alone under a tree with her little button-nose stuffed in a book. She was pretty, barely out of her teens. Slim. Tiny. Long, dark hair cascading over milky white shoulders. All but overflowing with the blush of youth.

Oh, the things he could do with a girl like that.....

He gave one last tug on his sleeves, then he slowly began making his way toward her in ever-narrowing circles. At last, he was close enough to block the sun and she looked up, not startled but bemused.

"You cast a rather large shadow," she said with a playfully petulant smirk, "Would you mind casting it elsewhere?"

"Beg pardon," he flashed her his usual disarming smile, "But I couldn't help notice the book you're reading. Emily Dickinson is one of my favorite poets. *Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me....*"

"*The carriage held just ourselves, and Immortality,*" she finished the passage and returned his smile. "My name is Cynthia. Would you care to sit? At least you'll block less of the sun that way."

"Oughtn't you be getting home, Cynthia?" he forced a look of grave concern, "There's a killer about, you know?"

"Oh, killer *shmiller*," she dismissed it with a huff, "He could be anywhere in the world, and anyway, what psychopathic madman would bother with the likes of me? Besides, there's plenty of time left in the day. So will you sit or not?"

The man shrugged and sat, widening his smile.

And that was how easy it was. Victim targeted, connection made, and the rest would be splashed across tomorrow's headline.

They read, they talked, and when evening arrived, they carried their new-found friendship to a quiet restaurant. They talked of poetry and art and shared a bottle of wine, and afterwards, he offered to walk her home. Once there, he asked if he might come in for a nightcap, but she resisted.

"It's not my house, you see. I'm house-sitting for a friend."

It was a quiet street with few lights. No neighbours close enough to hear, and dark enough to get away with.....well, with murder.

"You have generous friends," he said, brushing her hair back from one bare shoulder and letting his hand linger, "I'm sure they wouldn't mind."

"Well, it was a friend of a friend," she admitted sheepishly, and then she relented with a blushing of her cheeks, "Oh, I suppose as long as you promise not to soil the rug...."

"I promise," his smiled a big, toothy grin and stepped through, sparing one last peek up and down the street before easing the door shut behind himself, "Cross my heart and hope to die."

The headlines the next day were more of the same. "Friday the 13th Killer At It Again!" and "Few Clues In Latest Slaying!" And as always, the lurid details followed. The latest victim was found in a small house at the end of a quiet street. No one had seen or heard anything untoward, which was remarkable considering the brutality of the murder. The gorier aspects of the crime were deemed too sensitive to be released, but one unnamed police officer revealed three pertinent facts, off the record. Firstly, the victim appeared to have been tortured for several agonizing hours before being quite literally flayed alive. Secondly, several first responders were so traumatized by the scene that they'd been forced to seek professional counselling. And thirdly, a single cufflink was found perched atop the grisly remains; solid gold and emblazoned with a black onyx cat.

As the bus pulled away from the station, the newspaper was folded carefully on the seat, and one of the bus-lines own schedules took its place. So, where to next, then? North? South? East? West? It didn't matter much, really. People were the same all over, so finding the next gullible fool would be no problem. The important thing was the act itself, but there was plenty of time.

Cynthia tucked the schedule into her purse, and a sly little smile crept across her lips as she dragged a finger through the jumble of cufflinks nearly filling the bag.

Yes, there was plenty of time. Plenty of time to come up with something good.