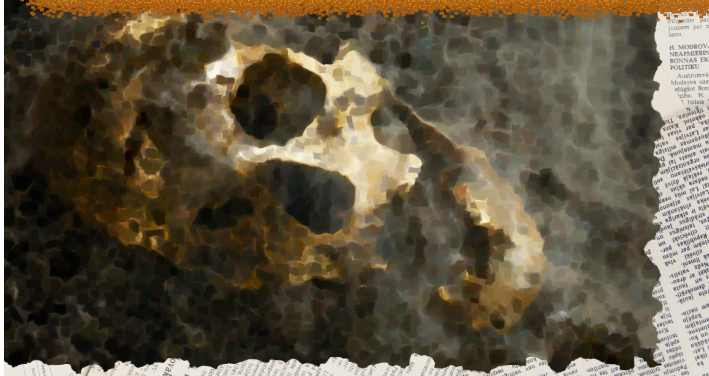


A Brian Wilder Mystery

# BLACK and WHITE and DEAD ALL OVER



Michael Bradley

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A Brian Wilder Mystery

by

Michael Bradley

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

Black and White and Dead All Over

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# ONE

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THE BY-LINE on this story, like most others, would say *Brian Wilder*. There were occasions when a story would appear in the Newark Observer that was written by one of a string of interns from the University of Delaware's Journalism department, but most of the stories were Brian's. After all, he was the only full-time writer on the newspaper staff. Of course, as the owner, editor, and publisher of the Observer, Brian had the right to give himself as many by-lines as he wanted.

If he had to be honest, he liked being primarily a one-man show. It gave him the freedom to write the stories that he wanted, when he wanted, without having to answer to anyone other than his reading public. It was quite different from his life of seven years ago.

Brian was standing along the side of Ogletown Road, watching as two-dozen construction workers swarmed around an old house like bees around a hive. Behind him, cars and trucks flew by, transporting their passengers and cargo to wherever they were headed on that cool Monday morning in September. The grey clouds were threatening to rain on the activity before

him; Brian was hoping it would hold off because he had forgotten to grab an umbrella. His shoes and the pant legs of his tan Dockers were damp from the morning dew, which covered the grass on which he stood. The long sleeves of his turquoise button-down shirt had been rolled up his forearms. A gentle breeze blew through his bronze hair, sending a chill throughout his body; Brian wished that he had remembered to bring his windbreaker too.

Jessica O'Rourke stood next to Brian, her auburn hair pulled back into a ponytail, which shifted back and forth with the breeze. The cheeks on her round face were pink from the cool morning air. Her almond-shaped brown eyes were sharp and focused. She was a good eight inches shorter than Brian's six-foot frame. Her grey cargo pants and hiking boots bobbed as she stomped her feet on the ground, trying to keep warm.

"It's freezing out here," she said.

Brian smiled as he caught a glint of sunlight reflecting off the small diamond stud in her nose. Her blue sleeveless t-shirt was doing little to keep her petite body warm.

"You should have dressed more appropriately," commented Brian, not wanting to admit that he was feeling a bit chilled as well.

Jessica checked the settings on the Sony DSLR camera that hung around her neck. She lifted it to her eye, focused on the activity around the house and pressed the shutter. Glancing at the small LCD screen, she reviewed the photo she had just taken. Satisfied with the results, she turned to Brian and said: "Explain to me again why we're standing out here watching a bunch of men in hard hats move a house."

"It's not every day that an entire house is lifted off its foundation and moved to another location, especially here in Newark. I thought it would make a good story for the next edition."

"Yeah. I can see the headline now. *HOUSE MOVED FROM ONE SIDE OF YARD TO OTHER SIDE*. That has Pulitzer Prize written all over it," retorted Jessica, shuffling her feet again.

"I've told you before. Journalism is not about getting awards," he said, thinking of the Pulitzer Prize that he had won nine years ago for his reporting from the battlefields of Afghanistan. To him, that felt like a long time ago, almost another life all together. Jessica shivered. "Why didn't they just knock the house down? No one has lived there for years." She paused. "Besides, it's not like it's a particularly nice house. It just seems like a lot of effort."

Another smile crossed Brian's face as he listened to Jessica continue to ramble on about the morning's activities. She was almost twenty years younger than him, yet he had a lot of respect for her, and her abilities as a photographer. He had seen photos come from her camera that could have made Jessica highly sought after by all the top magazines and newspapers. Yet, she chose to stay in Delaware, working at building up her photography business, and acting as the part-time photographer for the Observer.

"Jess, don't you have any concept of sentimentality?" Brian gestured toward the house. "That has been in the Chandler family for generations. Just because they sell off part of their property to a commercial developer, doesn't mean that they can't keep the house."

The house in question was an old two-story

home built in the early 1900s; its stucco facade, which had once been white, had faded to a color not dissimilar to oatmeal. The high sloping roof descended past a row of dormers that served as windows for the second floor. The windows and doors were covered with sheets of plywood, just as they had been for the past five years. Surrounding the house, where a paved driveway and well-maintained yard had once been, was now a small fleet of construction vehicles and equipment, ranging from bulldozers to dump trucks to backhoes. Mounds of freshly dug earth, the remnants of earlier preparations for the move, stood in piles around the property.

The area surrounding the house along Ogletown Road had long since gone commercial. With a large home improvement store, a banking call center, car dealers, and other businesses, this lone house had been the single holdout from an era long gone. Now most of the property had been sold to Rimdale Commercial Development, who was planning to put up a small shopping center. The house, which stood in the middle of the otherwise empty lot looked like a solitary sentry waiting for the return of its occupants. Rimdale purchased two-thirds of the Ogletown Road property from the Chandlers. The only stipulation of the sale was that Rimdale had to relocate the house to the adjacent land still owned by the family.

Brian watched as the workers adjusted the unified hydraulic jacking system around the edge of the house's foundation. The planning and preparation for the relocation had been going on for weeks prior to this day. Trenches had been dug around the outside of the old foundation, holes had been cut through the masonry, and steel beams had already been

strategically positioned underneath to provide support during the relocation. A few weeks ago, a new foundation had been constructed a hundred yards away in preparation for the move; it was waiting like an empty shell to take on the weight of the old house. Brian had to admit that Jessica was right in thinking that this was not the most exciting of stories. Even presidential dinners at the White House had been more exciting than this. But, his whole purpose of starting the Newark Observer in the first place was to cover the stories in Newark that the regional newspapers would skip as being too mundane. The Newark Observer was only a weekly newspaper, distributed every Monday morning. Although only a small newspaper, the Newark Observer had a large subscription list and the editions available for purchase in local businesses always sold out in the first few days. Its high rate of sales could be attributed to the quality of each edition. Brian made sure that each edition had the same quality of writing as the larger papers that he had worked on in the past. This story would be no different. Although mundane, Brian planned to make sure that it was a story that his readers found interesting and informative.

Eddie Morrison had been a site foreman for Lehman Home Movers for five years. In his eyes, this job would be a cakewalk. His team was brought in by Rimdale Commercial Development to move an old house a hundred yards. There would be no roads to navigate, no traffic concerns, not even a need for a police escort, as was normally the case when moving a house from one site to another. This house wasn't even leaving the property. This would be a piece of



cake as far as he was concerned.

Eddie, who was standing by the controls of the unified hydraulic jacks, was waiting for his team to finish their final checks before beginning the lifting process. The hydraulic jacks were centrally controlled, allowing the performance of each jack to be monitored from one console. The system would maintain unified lifting, ensuring that all of the jacks rose and lowered at the exact same rate, regardless of how much weight each jack was supporting. No matter how many houses he had moved, Eddie had always thought the system was an ingenious set of checks and balances that would keep the house level during the lifting process.

His portable radio squawked to life as each of his men reported that they were ready. Eddie gave a tap on the hard hat of the worker sitting at the jack controls, signaling to begin.

Jessica was snapping more photos with her camera, when the construction foreman gave the okay to start the lifting process. Brian and Jessica watched as the jacks slowly lifted the house, centimeter by centimeter. The process was slower than Brian had anticipated. His hope that it would be completed before the rain began to fall was looking less likely. Jessica, camera raised, was ready to catch the moment of separation.

Scott Hendricks was watching the progress as the house began to separate from the foundation. He could see the minute gap grow in size. A six-month veteran of LHM, Scott was the least experienced of all of his co-workers. The gap grew to an inch, then an

inch and a half. It wasn't until the gap grew to an inch and three quarters that the first sign of trouble began.

The old foundation, which had been there since the house was built, had seen better days. Even with his limited experience, Scott could tell that, once the house was clear, it would not take much to demolish the dilapidated foundation. When the top edge began to crumble, Scott didn't think much of it. After all, there was always some small amount of shifting that would occur during these jobs. However, when the foundation wall closest to him began to fracture and fall inward into the basement of the house, Scott knew that something had gone wrong. He signaled to Ed Morrison to halt the lifting process.

"What's going on?" Ed said over the radio. Scott fanned the air, trying to clear the cloud of dust kicked up by the collapse. "Just a small collapse of the foundation wall. Give me a minute to check it out."

As the dust settled, Scott could see into the shallow hole opened by the collapsing cinder blocks. At first glance, there didn't appear to be anything to be concerned about. The foundation had fallen in to what was a small crawl space underneath the house. During the initial walk around in the basement, Scott had surveyed this area, noting that, although the rest of the basement was eight foot high, this area was a narrow three feet high with a dirt floor. About to give the thumbs up to continue, Scott's eyes were attracted by something in the dark opening. Not able to quite pierce the darkness, he reached for the flashlight in his back pocket. The beam of light cut through the darkness, bringing the bottom of the darkened pit into vivid view. Scott clicked on his radio and said: "Ed,

you might want to come see this.”

Brian had seen a cloud of dust rise from the left side of the house. The jacks stopped while the dust began to settle. His interested piqued, Brian stared intently towards the foreman, trying to judge the severity of the situation. His interest level rose when the foreman walked from behind the jack controls over to the left side of the house. Another worker was already kneeling over the foundation, shining his flashlight into a narrow gap in the foundation.

Ed Morrison gazed down into the opening. His flashlight shone full into the darkness. He slid his hard hat from his head and scratched his scalp. This wasn't good, not good at all. This would definitely delay things. He yelled across to the jack operator. "Henry, you better call the police."

When Brian heard the foreman's words echo across the construction site, he tapped Jessica on the shoulder. "Come on, Jess. Let's go take a look at what's happening," he said, leading the way across the field towards the house.

The foreman and two other workers were on their knees, gazing into the collapsed foundation when Brian and Jessica reached their side. Only about three feet deep, the hole was cluttered with chunks of crumbling cinder blocks, which had once served as support for the old house. The collapse of the foundation wall had disturbed the dirt floor below. The foreman was shaking his head, complaining to the other two workers about the delay that this would cause to the job. His catwalk had just become far

more complicated. When she saw the source of all the commotion, Jessica started snapping pictures.

"Way wicked!" she exclaimed.

Brian gazed down into the hole, following the beams from the workers' flashlights. A pair of hollow eyes from a partially buried skull stared blankly up out of the hole, as if pleading to be hoisted up from its shallow grave. Jessica stopped shooting photos long enough to say to Brian: "I think your story just got more interesting."

\* \* \*

*The sound of the hair dryer drowned out the music blaring from the portable stereo on her dresser. Flock of Seagulls, her favorite band. The teenage girl twirled a brush through her bangs, curling them up high over her forehead. The upward curl had to be just right. The hair dryer roared loudly as it pumped hot air into the girl's damp hair. She teased her bangs higher until they reached the desired height. Turning off the hair dryer, she reached for the can of Aqua Net sitting by the dresser mirror. A quick spray around her head would hold her hair in place for most of the day. She gave a quick spin before the mirror to check that all looked good. The floral pattern on her pale blue tights was covered below the knees by pink leg warmers. The oversized yellow sweater hung down over her short red skirt. The pink and pale blue trimming along the fringe of the sweater and skirt pulled the ensemble together. She pressed the Stop button on the stereo, the wheels on the cassette tape halting their perpetual circular motion. The girl gazed in the mirror again, puckering her lips into the*

*shape of a kiss for one final check of her lipstick.*

*"Mary, hurry up or you'll be late for school," came a shout up the stairs from the kitchen.*

*"I know. I'm coming." she replied.*

*One final look in the mirror. Perfect. Mary grabbed the backpack from off of her bed, slung it over her shoulder, and dashed out of the room. Her progress down the stairs was marked by loud thumps as she hopped onto each stair tread. In the small kitchen, her mother was standing over the stove, preparing breakfast. Bacon was sizzling in a frying pan atop of the stove. With a spatula, Mary's mother lifted scrambled eggs from another pan, placing them on a plate. The toaster popped as two slices of bread sprang up, toasted to a dark brown. Mary pulled one slice out of the toaster and took a bite. Dry, burnt toaster. Just the way she liked it. She leaned over and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek.*

*"I've got to go. Love you."*

*Her mother gave a concerned glance at her daughter.*

*"What about your breakfast?"*

*"No time. See you tonight," said Mary, and then she was out the door.*

\* \* \*

The phone on David Chandler's desk rang, interrupting his review of new legislation that he would be presenting before the House Committee of Natural Resources the following week. Picking up the phone without taking his eyes away from his documents, David said: "Hello."

"She's been found," said the voice on the line. David shifted his attention from the documents on his

desk to the phone conversation. He inquired: "When?"

"About twenty minutes ago."

"Who knows about it?" asked Chandler.

"Everyone will know. The police have already been called," came the reply.

"What are we going to do?"

"Just sit tight. The investigation will be squashed before it starts."

"It better be. I can't afford a scandal right now. Make sure that investigation doesn't go anywhere," David said.

"I'll take care of it. Don't worry."

David heard a click, followed by a dial tone. He set the receiver back in its cradle and spun his chair around, allowing him to stare out the window behind his desk. When first arriving in Washington D.C. to serve as Delaware's lone representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, David Chandler was lucky to be provided an office in the Rayburn House Office Building with an excellent view of Bartholdi Park across First Street. Still in his first term, he was well aware that freshmen congressmen normally would end up in a small windowless hellhole in a dingy basement. But, the party had high hopes for David's career so they made sure that he received prime real estate for an office.

The Chandler family had always been a political powerhouse in Delaware. David's father had served as governor for two terms; his grandfather had been a senator during the Kennedy administration. It was only a matter of time before he stepped up to follow in their footsteps. David was the splitting image of his father, even down to the Chandler receding hair line, which began to arrive earlier in his life than he would

have liked. If there was one area where he and his father were different, it was probably David's less than domineering leadership qualities. Lionel Chandler had always been the type of politician who dominated with strong opinions and ideals from which he would never waiver. He expected his fellow politicians to simply fall in line, never taking *NO* for an answer. Even as a father, he would tell David what to do, when to do it, and expected it done with no questions asked. David, however, had become known for his compromising manner, his willingness to work with others. David wasn't quite the political leader that his father was. Of course, times were different now from when Lionel Chandler had been in politics. Everything was about working together and compromising for the common good. David's father, if he were still alive, would probably have been ashamed of his son, but it mattered little to David any longer. Lionel Chandler's form of politics was antiquated and wouldn't have been tolerated for very long in this day and age. David's political career had started as a member of the Newark city council; then he gradually worked his way up through the Delaware political ladder.

He gazed down upon the centerpiece of the park, the Bartholdi Fountain. Water flowed from the mural crown, resembling a crenellated city wall, down into the basin, with its twelve lamps evenly spaced around the edge. Over the edge of the basin, the water continued its plummet over the three sea nymphs surrounding the pedestal supporting the basin. David watched as the water reached its ultimate destination in the pool of water at the fountain's base. He remembered watching the workmen in 2011 as they completed the restoration of the fountain. The thirty

foot tall fountain, with its more than fifteen tons of cast-iron, was not easy to move. David could recall watching the workers struggle with moving the massive sculpture back in place. Despite the graceful and fluid forms of the fountain, David Chandler's mind could focus on nothing else but a single moment in time from long ago in his past. It was a moment that had haunted his nightmares for years. He thought: *I knew this would come back to haunt me some day.*

Samuel Jenkins, Newark's chief of police, chewed on a toothpick, his customary behavior when surveying a crime scene. At fifty-one years old, and as a twenty-five year veteran with the Newark police, Jenkins had seen his share of corpses and skeletons. This one was no different than any other that he had encountered throughout his long career. Sam Jenkins was a good cop, always had been. When the corruption scandal of 1995 hit the Newark Police force, Sam was one of the few cops that had come out unscathed. Chief Jenkins was from an old breed of police officer that took great pride in the oath he took when first becoming a cop. He was never satisfied with an open case and never accepted the easy solution. He was known for pushing his officers to look deeper at every piece of evidence to make sure that there wasn't something they were missing. He was also known for his no-holds barred attitude, which frequently rubbed local politicians and influential people the wrong way. Despite that, his stellar record was more than enough to keep him in his job

He slid his hands into his trouser pockets and continued to take in the scene before him. At first glance, Samuel Jenkins looked more like Santa Claus



than a police chief, minus the red suit and white beard. His stomach obscured his belt from the casual observer and his white hair was showing signs of thinning along the forehead. However, his green eyes were sharp as ever, picking up every minute detail of his surroundings. He was always surveying all those around him, noticing details that would be missed by the average person. His officers often called him the Sherlock Holmes of Newark for his uncanny ability to identify details about people's lives from the smallest clues. When meeting Samuel Jenkins for the first time, people would often underestimate him based on his appearance, only to be shown that looks can be truly be deceiving.

Jenkins was also well known for his way of bucking the accepted ideal that a police chief should wear a uniform. It was a rare occasion to ever find him in full uniform. It was a habit that had irritated the mayor and city council for years. It was more likely that he would turn up at a crime scene wearing jeans, polo shirt, and loafers, his badge dangling from his neck by a silver chain and gun in a holster on his belt. This morning was no different.

Watching from a distance as Jenkins performed his initial assessment of the crime scene, Brian waited for the right moment and then stepped forward, acknowledging a glance from Jenkins with a nod of his head.

"So, the newspaper man is here." Glancing behind Brian to see Jessica standing a few feet away, he continued: "And his trusty sidekick. I'll need copies of all your photos, Ms. O'Rourke."

"Yeah, whatever," remarked Jessica.

"Of course, Sam. I'll have them sent over as soon as

I get back to the office," said Brian.

"I guess you want a statement for that little tabloid of yours." Jenkins said.

Despite the visible animosity, Samuel Jenkins and Brian Wilder had a very amicable relationship since the very first edition of the Newark Observer was printed five years ago. Samuel Jenkins was one of the first people to stop by the new Newark Observer office on Main Street to discuss how this new weekly newspaper could help with policing in the city. After spending several hours in discussion, they had simply settled on the publication of a weekly crime log. But, those several hours helped to form a cohesive alliance between the police chief and the newspaper. Although Jenkins had not always been completely forth right with all criminal activity in Newark, there was an unspoken agreement between him and Wilder that he would ensure that the Newark Observer received the same treatment as the larger news agencies. Brian and Sam had become good friends over the last five years, Sam getting just as much benefit from the Observer as Brian got from his relationship with the chief of police.

"Sam, what are you thinking? Looks like it's been here for a long time." Brian said.

"Let's just say that I won't be calling in the archeology department from the university. Completely off the record, I'd say he, or she, was bludgeoned to death."

Brian knelt down at the edge of the opening, peering down at the skull, which was still half buried in the dirt. The dark holes that once held human eyes returned his gaze with emptiness. The Mandible, still buried, wasn't visible, but Brian could clearly see the

Maxilla, Nasal bone and Frontal bone, as well as a portion of the Neurocranium. The skull, which was stained and discolored from years of submersion under the soil, seemed to be taunting him to drag its secrets from this shallow grave. The exposed Neurocranium was where Brian found the answer to Samuel Jenkins' *off the record* statement. The upper portion of the skull appeared to be crushed; small fragments of bones were missing like a jigsaw puzzle without all of its pieces. The point of impact was along the upper left side of the skull. The gap in the skull gave a direct view into the skull cavity, which would have once held the brain.

"Is it possible the damage was just caused by the collapsing foundation?" Brian asked of the police chief.

"I doubt it. I've been informed that nothing has been disturbed since the discovery. There are no chunks of the foundation near the skull. We'll learn more once we've processed the scene," said Jenkins, pausing momentarily before continuing in a lower voice directed only at Brian. "I would appreciate it if you could hold off on reporting this until we can make an identity on the body."

Brian smiled. "There's little chance of that happening. You know I don't go to press until Friday and the next edition won't hit the streets until Monday. After all, we're only a small weekly newspaper."

"Weekly, yes. Small, I might disagree with you on that one." He pointed down the road. "You realize that if this skull was discovered about two hundred yards further down the road, this case would have fallen under New Castle County Police jurisdiction. I don't know if you would call that a blessing or a curse."

It's bad enough that I have to rely on the county's crime lab for the forensics part of this investigation," replied Jenkins.

Although the city of Newark was in New Castle County, the county police force didn't have jurisdiction within the city limits. Jenkins was always thoroughly professional, but Brian knew that there was no love lost between the Newark Police and the New Castle County Police. He didn't know exactly what the issues were between the two police forces, but Brian would often joke that, sometimes, it was like a modern day Hatfields and McCoys.

The New Castle County Police forensics team arrived and began processing the crime scene, while Chief Sam Jenkins was busy explaining to Eddie Morrison that the construction site was off limits to his people until further notice. Brian stood at a distance, watching the activity unfold before him. There was something haunting about that skull. He couldn't shake the image of its dark, hollow eyes glaring up at him. The shattered skull was the first piece in its own puzzle. He found himself pondering what circumstance could have resulted in such a violent death. There were a myriad of explanations, but the one thing that Brian knew for sure; the Chandler family would have some explaining to do.

While the police began the arduous task of careful excavation, Brian and Jessica headed back to the Newark Observer office. Downtown Newark, which had been named a semi-finalist in the 2011 National Trust for Historic Preservation's coveted Great American Main Street Award, was a bustling

commercial area that acted as the centerpiece of the city of Newark. First established in 1758 by King George II of England, the city of Newark's growth was attributed more to the educational institutions present in the city than, as was the case with many of its peers, a more market based economy. Those institutions eventually formed the backbone of what was now called the University of Delaware.

Main Street in Newark was an eclectic blend of modern architecture and structures from decades gone by. From residential houses converted into professional offices to shops and restaurants with twenty-first century designs of brick and steel, Newark's Main Street catered to most tastes in food, shopping, and entertainment. Over sixty restaurants were the prevailing businesses, serving almost any cuisine imaginable, from Mexican, Italian, even Middle Eastern. The one-way street terminated on the campus of University of Delaware with its grand academic halls of learning. During each semester, students would flood onto Main Street between classes, providing the small businesses in the downtown area with an ample source of clientele.

The office for the Newark Observer was located on East Main Street, between Haines and Academy Streets. The tan bricks of the building were speckled with dirt from its fifty years of existence. The pair of double windows on the second floor looked down on Main Street, like two eyes watching as life passed it by. Two plate glass windows, which were off-center to the windows above, flanked the glass door serving as the entrance to the newspaper office at street level. As if added as an after thought, a solitary white door was set into the brick wall to the right of the office

windows; its brass door handle and knocker tarnished with age. Across each plate glass window were large block letters saying *Newark Observer*. Prior to Brian's purchase five years ago, the building had previously been the home of a long since defunct restaurant called Main Street Burgers. The building had stood empty for two years until Brian purchased it. Now, the old building fulfilled two needs in Brian's life, as the office for his newspaper, and the apartment on the second floor acted as his residence.

When they entered the office, an elderly lady greeted them from behind her desk to the left of the door. At sixty-seven, Mildred Smith still clung to youthful looks that made her easily look ten years younger than she was. Her dark hair showed only a few signs of grey, while her cheeks and chin showed little of the sagging that was so common in her peers. Often a topic among her friends was whether or not the lack of grey in Mildred's hair was natural. Widowed for more than five years, Mildred had found her first two years of retirement from the postal service to be far more boring than she had anticipated. When Brian Wilder found that he couldn't keep up with phone calls and correspondence, Mildred was happy to step in as the receptionist for the Newark Observer. She happily worked from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon with an hour for lunch; it was an arrangement that was acceptable to both Mildred and Brian.

"I heard you had some excitement this morning," she said as Brian and Jessica entered the office.

"News travels fast," Jessica replied.

"I heard it on the police radio," came Mildred's reply.

The office was sparsely furnished from Ikea with

five large tabletops, three of which served as desks for Brian, Jessica, and Mildred, and two oversized sofas in brown corduroy. Along the left wall were a row of office cabinets for storage and filing. Hanging from the right wall was a large screen television with bookshelves on the right and a large corkboard on the left. Brian's desk was in the back of the open office, an Apple iMac with its aluminum frame and sleek body style acting as the centerpiece. Jessica's desktop sat near the right wall under the corkboard, another iMac sat on the otherwise empty desk. Mildred's desk, which sat near the door, held a rarely used computer, a phone, and a stack of last week's edition of the Newark Observer. The two additional tables were surrounded by office chairs and acted as extra workspaces and conference tables.

Jessica popped the Secure Digital card out of her camera and inserted it into the small SD card reader on the side of her iMac. She grabbed the remote from her desk, turned on the television, and with a few clicks of her mouse was displaying the photos she had taken earlier that day on the screen. Brian and Mildred gazed upon the screen at the images of the half-buried skull. The images on the television were crisp and sharp in high definition; bringing minute detail to the gruesome scene. Brian found the photos just as hypnotic as the real skull had been that morning. The large screen of the television brought the skull to life in vivid color that he had missed out at the crime scene.

"What do the police think?" asked Mildred. Brian replied: "Sam is fairly sure that it is murder. But, it's certainly an old murder. That skull must have been there for years."

"It's a really wicked skull," commented Jessica as she flipped through photos.

Brian continued to stare intently at the screen as each photo was displayed. He felt as if he was mesmerized; unable to turn away from the images of those hollow eyes and shattered cranium. In his mind, he tried to imagine what the person would have looked like before death, but the skull gave no obvious clue as to age, sex, height, or even weight. The medical examiner would have better luck determining those vital statistics. To Brian, it was a life extinguished in a violent and tragic way and left to be found years later. It was a depressing thought. Brian wondered if there was a family who were, to this day, wondering what had happened to their loved one, never knowing that he or she had been dead all these years under that house. As Jessica flipped to the next photo, a faint glint of gold caught his eye and he said: "Jess, hold it there. Can you zoom in on that?"

Jessica zoomed the photo in on the area that Brian had indicated. Even with the image enhanced, there was not much to see. However, the trio eyed the image intently, hoping to discern some detail of the half-buried object. There was a faint outline of a metallic object, gold in color, which years ago had lost any shine that it might have had. Now, its lackluster hue simply acted as just enough of a contrast to the surrounding dirt to make its shape faintly visible.

"It looks like some kind of locket," said Mildred.

"I can't be sure, but it looks like there might be initials on it," added Jessica.

"Yeah. And judging by its position, I'd say it was around the corpse's neck when it was buried." Brian remarked.