

The Janus Project

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“The eyes of a psychopath will deceive you, they will destroy you. They will take from you, your innocence, your pride and eventually your soul. These eyes do not see what you and I can see. Behind these eyes, one finds only blackness, the absence of light. These are of a psychopath.”

Dr Samuel Loomis (fictional psychologist from the movie series ‘Halloween’)

Chapter 1

Wednesday 31 December 2031

The pouring rain didn't help matters at all. Bad weather always brought with it the risk of losing vital evidence and this was a case where evidence was desperately needed. There had already been two victims found with similar wounds on their bodies but whoever had killed them had been very careful not to leave any trace of their identity behind at the scenes – the bodies of the previous two victims and the locations in which they were found had given up neither fingerprints nor DNA. The inclement weather wouldn't affect how Chief Forensics Officer Elijah Boniface would do his job but, if the same person was behind this latest murder, he didn't hold out much hope of finding anything useful. He'd be able to provide information about when the third victim died, and how she died, but not why she died or who killed her.

He crouched down alongside the naked body of the young woman, making sure his trouser legs didn't accidentally drag on the ground and get muddy – the chinos were freshly cleaned – and cast his expert eye over the victim's skin. The torture she'd endured was plain for all to see. The lacerations on her arms, legs, and abdomen, the burns on her torso, and the bruises from being struck with a blunt instrument bore testament to her suffering. He made a note of her injuries and the estimated time of death. Whilst he dealt directly with the body, he had a small team searching the immediate area for anything that might give a clue to answer those *why* and *who* questions but he wasn't optimistic. Why should the killer suddenly make a mistake now?

Most people looked forward to New Year's Eve, to casting off the old year – which almost invariably had been rubbish – and welcomed a fresh New Year that brought with it new hopes and promises. Perhaps the victim had plans, ambitions, and desires that she had hoped to fulfil in 2032. Now those wishes had been dashed in the cruellest manner possible, by an unknown fiend. There was to be no happy New Year for her, nor her family and friends. To them, the final memory of 2031 and the first memory of 2032 would always be dominated by sadness, a sense of loss, and anger that another human could do such a thing to a daughter, a friend, a lover.

Elijah had attended many such scenes in the course of his thirty-five-year career, but time had done nothing to diminish the horror that he felt at each senseless killing. How one human being could do such a thing to another was beyond him. But, as ever, he was the consummate professional and put these thoughts to one side to concentrate on the job in hand, compartmentalising them until he was back home and could release them in a controlled manner, under the watchful eye of a glass of Jameson Irish Whiskey.

He heard familiar footsteps behind him. He didn't need to look around to see who it was. Without turning Elijah addressed his colleague.

“Do you recognise her, Richard?”

Detective Inspector Richard Crossman squatted down so that he was at the same level as his Chief Forensic Officer, and Elijah's intern adjusted the umbrella he was holding so that it would protect both men from the elements.

Richard Crossman had an eidetic memory – a photographic memory – and needed only to see an image once to be able to recall it on demand at a later time. Where most people would check their emails first thing in the morning, Richard would check new additions to the Police Criminal Database, adding to the already flawless collection of data that nestled within his brain.

“I can't say I do, Elijah. She's not in the PCD though, I can tell you that much. But with no clothing around, there's nothing that can help us. For all we know she could be a princess or a pauper.”

Elijah hoped that the dead woman had been chipped. If she was chipped they'd know who she was within a matter of seconds. There was still some resistance to the chipping of humans but it was becoming more commonplace now. It was a sad fact that it was situations like this where chipping proved a real advantage, allowing what would have been a Jane Doe only a few years earlier to now be identified almost immediately, letting the parallel processes of family grieving and police investigation begin that much sooner.

He felt behind the victim's right ear, hoping that he would feel the slight scarring that would confirm that she had indeed been chipped. He knew that if the woman had been a member of *his* family, he'd prefer to know of her passing sooner rather than later.

And there it was.

We're lucky, Richard. She's chipped.”

He slipped his hand into his pocket and drew out his portable scanner. There would be no need to defile the woman's body any further than it already had been – the scanner would extract the relevant details from the chip and transmit them directly to the National Population Database which would return her identity directly to Elijah's scanner in a matter of seconds. He spoke softly to the lifeless young woman.

“Who are you, my dear?”

He scanned the chip behind the victim's ear. It took just 4.8 seconds for the scanner to send the database query and receive its response from the NPD. Elijah read the result out loud.

“Eloise Hudson, Caucasian, female, twenty-five years old. Daughter of a local politician, James Aloysius Hudson and Evelyn Joy Hudson, a beauty salon owner. The couple are divorced and Eloise still lives at home with her mother.”

Elijah's use of the present tense in this situation was deliberate. Until her parents were informed of their daughter's death, the unfortunate victim was still alive in their minds. It wasn't until her family was aware of Eloise's passing that Elijah considered a line to be drawn under her life. He knew it didn't really make sense – especially in light of his profession – but somehow it helped him deal with the continuous parade of corpses that graced his virtopsy suite.

Richard took a long drag on his e-cigarette, an item that rarely left his person. Today's flavour was apple, easily the most popular choice for the last few years,

although the Detective Inspector did have the occasional yearning for the taste of banana and cinnamon, much to the disgust of his wife. She hated both the habit and the smell of cinnamon. She'd rather her husband smoke nothing at all but it could be worse – he could be hooked on those antiquated nicotine cigarettes that yellowed your fingers and rotted your lungs.

He cast an eye around the crime scene.

“She wasn't killed here, Elijah. This is a dumpsite. No blood. And with those wounds, there would be a lot of blood.”

He knew he was telling his grandmother how to suck eggs – Elijah had been attending crime scenes for thirty-five years, fifteen of them as Chief Forensics Officer – so he wouldn't have missed the lack of blood. Richard was merely speaking his thoughts out loud and Elijah just happened to be there.

The DI frowned.

“Pity. If she'd been killed here there'd have been more evidence to collect. As it is, we're limited to what he's left behind, which, I'm guessing, will be nothing. Just like the other two.”

As the crime scene was secured by Richards's team and the body was wrapped up in a body-bag in preparation for the journey to Elijah's virtopsy suite, the two men walked slowly back towards Richard's car. The DI took another drag on his e-cigarette before switching it off and opening his car door.

“Well, that's it, Elijah. That's three now. We've officially got ourselves a serial killer.”

Chapter 2

Thursday 01 January 2032

Alone in his frugally furnished two-bedroom house in the lower part of the city beyond the river, John Henry Foster pushed his feet against the wall beneath his desk and propelled his tatty executive chair backwards just far enough to allow his legs freedom of movement. He didn't use the main bedroom – which he always kept locked – but preferred to do his divine work from the sparsely furnished second bedroom.

Rising to his feet, he wriggled out of the tight-fitting blue sequined dress that he always wore when updating Anna Claire Johnson's social network page. As the dress tumbled to the floor, he removed the gaudy faux-gold clip-on earrings one at a time and tossed them onto his bedside table. One slid onto the floor. He'd pick it up later. Now dressed only in a black matching bra and pantie set that was at least two sizes too small for him, he didn't feel uncomfortable. He needed to be wearing Anna Claire's clothes to get himself into the zone to allow him to transform into his main female persona, the honeypot that brought him his victims. Although he didn't use Anna Claire's identity to communicate directly with his victims – to rely on one character only would be to provide the police with a commonality that they could use to trace him – it was the intimate knowledge of the female psyche gained from creating *her* character that he channelled when seducing his victims.

Kicking off his blue high-heeled shoes, he unfastened the lacy bra and peeled himself out of the equally lacy panties, before screwing the two pieces of discarded underwear into a ball and tossing them towards the open laundry basket. More often than not he scored a direct hit but this was not one of those days. He was forced to walk over to where the underwear had fallen and pick it off the floor before dropping it inside the basket and putting the basket lid back on. On his way back to his computer desk, he picked up the fallen earring and threw it back onto the bedside table. It stayed there this time.

Now unashamedly naked, he stood by the desk ready to switch off the computer, stopping momentarily to browse a private messenger conversation between him and Linda Black. He'd leave it a few days before contacting her; he'd only recently satiated his lust for killing.

He switched off the machine and strolled over to his single bed, opening the top drawer of the bedside cabinet and removing his well-thumbed copy of *The Creator's Words*. He lay down on his bed and reached across to close the drawer before settling down to read the wisdom within the book. This was how he preferred to unwind, lying on his bed digesting the words of *The Creator*, words that were a personal truth passed on to him directly by *The Creator* himself.

John Henry was content. The day had gone well.

Chapter 3

Thursday 01 January 2032

Elijah stood beside the virtopsy table as he had done hundreds of times before, awaiting the arrival of his next client. He felt sad that Eloise's death had suffered so. Of course, all deaths were to be lamented but at least most that came under his jurisdiction were there as a result of instantaneous or almost immediate demise.

In the past, the strokes of his scalpel and the removal and careful examination of organs would recount the story of how the victim met his or her end but the invasive nature of autopsies had given way to technology and virtopsies were now the norm. The tale that the dead body would tell would be the same – it was just the way it was told that had changed.

The double doors slid open and Eloise made her silent entrance. Elijah's intern, Rory, guided the gurney into position alongside the virtopsy table and unzipped the body-bag.

Eloise was the third such victim that had graced Elijah's table in as many weeks. The first, a teacher named Suzanne Washington, had been found in the playground of a local school, by a group of children playing tag. The second was eighteen-year-old Fiona Carpenter who was found in the parking lot of a shopping mall about five miles from the spot where Suzanne's body had been found. And now Eloise was Elijah's guest, having been abandoned under a large oak tree by the river – a popular locality for romantic walks – and found by a couple giving their dog one last walk before locking it safely inside the house, away from the fireworks and loud bangs.

Before the virtopsy began, Rory took photos of Eloise's body whilst she was still in the body bag. Usually, Elijah would have noted the state and position of a victim's clothing whilst the intern took the photos but, in Eloise's case, this step was pointless as she had been stripped naked by whoever killed her.

The young woman's hands had been sealed in bags at the crime-scene so Elijah unfastened the bags in order to take residue and fingernail samples, although he wasn't very hopeful of finding anything. Once he'd taken the samples he needed, he removed the bags completely, folded them, and put them to one side to be submitted as evidence.

A sterile automated forklift moved forward from its resting place on the other side of the Virtopsy Suite, slid its prongs delicately under Eloise's body and transferred her to the virtopsy table. Built-in measuring equipment recorded the victim's height and weight before the lift returned to its parking bay.

Elijah began his examination with a verbal summary of Eloise's identification.

“For the record – date: Thursday, January 01, 2032: time: 09:47. Examiner in attendance: Elijah Boniface, assisted by intern Rory Truman.”

Elijah didn't mind working New Year's Day when most other people were at home with their families enjoying the holiday and shaking off their hangovers after the previous evening's celebrations. In fact, he preferred it to being at home on his own. He had no family to speak of – he had no parents, he was widowed with no children (at least until a couple of years earlier when he discovered that he did, in fact, have a daughter that he hadn't even known existed), and only had an estranged sister who lived

in the north of the country. His friends were all gathered together with their families and he had no desire to be the spare wheel at their family reunions. If he was invited for a Christmas celebration he would graciously accept, but invitations to celebrate New Year fell on deaf ears.

“Commencing post-mortem examination of Eloise Hudson, Caucasian female, shoulder-length light brown hair, blue eyes, twenty-five years of age. I can see two distinguishing marks – a small tattoo of a hummingbird just above the right hip and a birthmark...”

He took a small medical calliper out of his pocket – sometimes old technology was just more convenient.

“A birthmark 2.4cm by 0.9cm on the upper inner left thigh.”

The first task was to collect evidence from the external surfaces of Eloise’s body. He searched for hair samples, fingernails, gunshot residue, fibres, paint chips, and anything else that shouldn’t be there but found nothing out of the ordinary. He wasn’t surprised. The few blades of grass from where she had been lying on the riverbank and a couple of dead ants were sealed in evidence bags just in case they might yet provide a useful clue.

Once the preliminary human evaluation was completed, it was time for the virtopsy to begin. Virtual autopsy tools – Magnetic Resonance Imagers, Computed Tomography generators, and 3D Scanning equipment had replaced the invasive and antiquated tools of yesteryear – saws, knives, scissors, rib-cutters, skull chisels, and forceps were no longer necessary. Not many years earlier, even the new equipment would have been separate entities but Elijah’s department had taken delivery of a much more manageable integrated MRI, CT, and 3D scanner unit the previous summer which meant that all he was required to do now was set the machine in motion. The analysis of the visual results was where Elijah’s true expertise lay.

A virtibot placed small disks along the exterior of Eloise’s body, in order to align the surface and interior scans. Elijah particularly enjoyed the next part of the process as the 3D scanner robot moved over the body, capturing a 3D colour image and casting a mesh pattern on the figure. He found this part of the process strangely alluring and he never failed to be amazed by its inherent beauty.

The CT scanner acquired 25,000 images, each representing a slice through Eloise’s body. Then followed the MRI and MRS scans. Within a few minutes, high-resolution images of bone and tissue were reconstructed and projected holographically in the centre of the room so that Elijah could walk around the image and study the virtual rendering in detail. With a couple of voice commands, he was able to hone in on anything of interest while Eloise’s body rested undisturbed on the virtopsy table. He had excellent hand-eye coordination and manipulated the images up and down as if he’d performed autopsies in this manner all his life, not just for the last few months. He was a quick learner.

He studied the hologram closely, looking for the slightest hint of something that the murderer may have inadvertently left behind. Whoever the killer was, he was either very clever or very lucky as the virtopsies of both Suzanne and Fiona had yielded nothing of any use. Elijah feared that the same was going to be true in Eloise’s case.

Wait.

He thought he saw something.

It was just a hint, a very slight shadow, but he was certain he wasn't seeing things.

"Rory. Take a look at the image – specifically the right lung. Tell me what you see."

Rory dutifully took a closer look. He wanted to say he saw something, to support his teacher and mentor, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"What am I supposed to be seeing, sir?"

Elijah shook his head.

"If I were to tell you that, lad, it would defeat the purpose of the exercise. Just look closely at the lung and tell me what you see."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't see anything unusual."

Elijah grinned.

"Don't worry, Rory. It's taken many years for my eyes to gain the ability to spot things that others fail to see. With time, your eyes will become as honed as mine are."

He gave the virtopsy unit new instructions.

"Target coordinates X-axis 028 to 033, Y-axis 042 to 057, Z-axis 016 to 019."

The relevant section of the hologram displayed an enlarged image. Elijah turned to Rory.

"Do you see it yet?"

Rory shook his head.

"Sorry."

Elijah gave new commands.

"Computer. Enhance image by a factor of ten."

The image zoomed in. Rory still couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, so Elijah issued more explicit commands.

"Computer. Target coordinates X-axis 029.124, Y-axis 051.378, Z-axis 017.691 and enhance the image by a factor of ten."

The system obediently zoomed in again on the required coordinates.

"And now?"

Rory peered hard at the image.

"I think I can see a short thin line in the secondary lobar bronchus but I have no idea what it is."

This was Elijah's moment of triumph, not just for him but for the case too.

"That, Rory, is a portion of a human eyelash."

"An eyelash?"

"Yes. An eyelash. And it's the first piece of evidence that will help us identify the killer. The murderer has unwittingly given us our first real clue."

He waited for Rory to say something. He wasn't hoping for congratulations or kudos for having good eyesight but for a correct investigative response to what he had just said. Rory obliged.

"Unless the lash belongs to Eloise."

Elijah was satisfied. He had high hopes for the intern.

“Well done. Yes. Eloise could have ingested it at any time and it could just as easily belong to her as to her killer. Or even somebody else entirely. Whoever did this to her took great pains not to leave any evidence behind, but we lose between one and five eyelashes each day. If it’s the killer’s, he or she wouldn’t even know it had gone.”

He paused and issued new commands to the computer.

“Extract the foreign body from coordinates X-axis 029.124, Y-axis 051.378, Z-axis 017.691.”

A micro-fine suction hose snaked from its housing on the autopsy table and burrowed beneath Eloise’s skin. A descendant of the keyhole surgery process that had become common in the late twentieth century, it left barely a trace of its intrusion – not enough for the naked eye to perceive anyway. A couple of seconds later it withdrew from the body with the offending eyelash and deposited the evidence into a sterile container ready for DNA analysis. Elijah picked up the container to take to the DNA Suite. He turned to Rory.

“Finish off here for me, please.”

He knew that his intern was perfectly capable of running the relevant exit programs, returning the MRI/CT/3D equipment to its parking station, and placing Eloise back inside her allotted storage drawer. Rory was a good student but would never learn anything unless allowed to physically participate in virtopsies and, normally, Elijah would have let the intern participate more fully than he had in Eloise’s virtopsy. However, this case was a priority alpha. Eloise was the victim of a serial killer. He spoke to himself rather than anybody else.

“Let’s hope this lash isn’t Eloise’s. Otherwise, we’re back to square one.”