

The Only Constant – preview

The Prologue

The utility pole stood exactly twenty feet, four inches tall and sat eighty-three feet, nine inches from the road. These seemingly unimportant facts would be verified and become a part of the evidence. But that would be later. For now, they waited. Through the dark, the girl and the pole waited to be found. Waited with the patience of death. How many had driven by that night? Never knowing. Unaware of the obscenity daylight would expose. Other evidence left behind became buried in the light snowfall. Peace and serenity became objects of deception and proof was all but lost in the dark.

“What is it, Hon?” The driver asked.

His wife, startled from her near sleep, abruptly sat up in the passenger seat as the family car cruised north. Staring back into the woods behind them, she said not a word.

“Honey!” The driver demanded this time. “What’s wrong?”

A fleeting image had grabbed her attention, but it made no sense to her. Moonlight filtering through the trees touched or perhaps created shapes and mingled with the shadows. Flickering traces that danced past the car’s window. And then were gone.

“Nothing I guess,” she answered slowly, rubbing her blurred eyes. Then, resting her head back on a mini pillow laying against the car’s door she added, “Just thought I saw something out there.”

She quickly drifted off, putting it out of her mind. Even the news of the following day would take time to soak in.

The crime was the worst anyone could recall in the history of Pendleton County. Northern Kentucky was not naïve about crime, even murder, but this was different. The slow paced, rural area had maintained a Currier and Ives atmosphere, especially in the winter. Buildings were sparse and the land was

rolling, but mostly flat. From one family's rooftop you could barely view another home, even on the clearest day. Winter's haze cut the visibility and the snow added a glare. It had been a mild season thus far, but the nights were cold and the powder did fall. Temperatures down into the teens were average and the thermometer's fall started right at dusk.

The snow was abnormally light for this time of year, but it dusted everything and its look added to the serenity, the normal serenity. The only disruptions to the peace were the ribbons of asphalt and vehicles that roared in both directions. Interstate highway I-75 cut north and south through this horse country. Two black channels of pavement kept cleared of snow by the traffic and divided by grass and then concrete median walls as you approached Cincinnati.

It was along the northern bound side of this highway that the body was found. No one saw her until daylight. From the condition of the body, she had hung there for several hours. The pole was some thirty-five miles south of the city, eighty feet from the highway and in an area of quiet isolation.

Crime was infrequent around here. Murder or anything near it was very rare. As unfamiliar with it as the locals were, there was no doubt that this was murder.

Murder can be vindictive or passionate. It could be accidental or well planned and thought out. This was way beyond any of that. This was more than the murder of an individual. This was a message to a community.

The victim was still only a child. A sixteen-year-old girl from a well thought of family. She loved horses and softball. There was a boyfriend, but nothing too serious. The family went to church twice on Sundays and again in the middle of the week. They were known throughout the community and highly regarded.

They lived in Locust Grove on a small farm some fifty miles south of Cincinnati. Her father was a patrolman for the state police. Trooper Wallace Ford was assigned to Post 6 and the troopers from that post were tasked with monitoring traffic along Interstate 75 through their ten county area. The interstate was a main drug corridor to Cincinnati and points north.

The troopers of Post 6 in northern Kentucky had learned how to profile vehicles carrying drugs. Most of their stops were small time, but now and then they would hit on a large haul. The success record for Post 6 was in the eighty-five percent range for “good stops.” They were good at their jobs and proud of their professionalism.

Around five months earlier, Trooper Ford and his partner, Harvey Wingate, were involved in one of the biggest drug stops in the area. On a tip from Georgia State Patrol officials in the Dalton, Georgia area, they stopped a white van loaded with black lacquer tables. The tables were made of nearly pure cocaine powder, ninety percent product with only enough resin to hold the table shape. The manufacturer’s label on the table boxes was that of an import company known only as Argus. The logo on that label was a round smiling face, a sun god with a joker’s smile. Like what you would find on an Inca temple.

That stop along I-75 in northern Kentucky was part of an east coast dragnet that shut down the Argus operation, or so the authorities believed. Their main distribution hub had been discovered and closed down. Last minute deliveries to locations around the eastern region were stopped. For all intents and purposes, the drug cartel appeared mortally wounded.

A short-lived attempt to revise the distribution network had been preempted in Charlotte, North Carolina. That event went mostly unnoticed by the national law enforcement community. The fact that Argus was even there had never been established. The new location had not yet begun distribution, yet it was terminated by the quiet efforts of one man, a man who was out to save his friend. A friend placed in danger by the then leader of this cartel. Argus didn’t know who this man was or how to get to him, but his efforts were responsible for their reorganization plans becoming further delayed and much more expensive.

Trooper Wingate was no longer Ford’s partner. Wingate had been killed three months after the drug bust in a traffic accident while on his way home. While the circumstances were never clear it had been considered just that, a tragic accident, until now.

The body was found on a Sunday morning. Hanging upside down, some twenty feet up a power pole. The discovery of Debbie Ford’s body changed the

perception of Trooper Wingate's death. Her throat had been cut. Her body was scarred. Burned with some implement or poker that left the mark of a smiling sun god, Argus' logo, on her abdomen. Cut into her forehead was the date of the drug bust last fall. Those who found her prayed that death had happened first.

The killers obviously knew who Debbie was. This killing was an acknowledgement of her father's involvement in that drug bust. The message was clear. They could have killed Trooper Ford outright, but they chose to kill the will of the entire community and the State Patrol with their message. The message was "stay out of our business."

