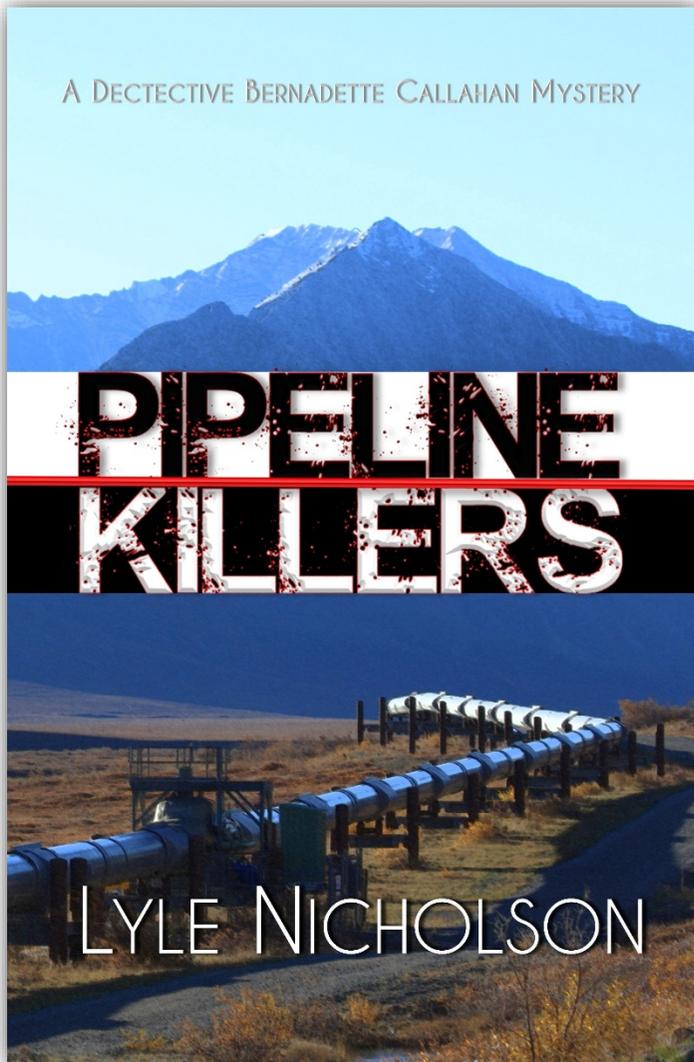


PIPELINE KILLERS
by Lyle Nicholson

Chapters One - Four



CHAPTER ONE

DETECTIVE BERNADETTE CALLAHAN WAS SPEEDING. The single-lane asphalt highway shimmered in the August heat. Cresting a small hill, she felt the Jeep Cherokee's chassis rise. She let off the gas a little. Jeeps were built for rough terrain, not high speeds. She reminded herself of that, and slowed down to 120 kilometers per hour.

The investigation she was speeding toward had not yet been classified as either an accidental death or a homicide. The chief of detectives from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Serious Crimes Division wanted her take on it. There was, "something strange about the body," according to Jerry Durham, RCMP Chief of Detectives. He needed her eyes on the scene.

A body had been found under a pipeline that crossed a stream just outside of Red Deer, Alberta. Bernadette did not think of what caused the death. She never thought of victims until she saw them. Usually the way a victim laid or looked would give a clue as to what happened moments or days before. They always told a story. Either Bernadette would figure it out or the Crime Scene Investigator would. The CSI would painstakingly plod around the scene in hot polyester coveralls, detailing mountains of evidence. Bernadette was glad she was a RCMP Detective and not a CSI. She hated polyester.

Bernadette was mid-thirties, 5-foot-8, with a mildly athletic build that showed constant efforts in the gym mostly nullified by a diet of junk food with a focus on donuts and double cream, double sugar coffee. She had short-cropped brunette hair with highlights of red showing that were not Miss Clairol, but real Irish roots blended with Dene First Nations. Her green eyes were set against her slightly beige complexion, where her Irish roots again battled for dominance, showing up in freckles that fought for space on her arms and face.

The asphalt highway turned west toward the Rocky Mountains, the hot, glaring sun causing Bernadette to don her dark aviator glasses. She took another swig of her now cold coffee, grimaced as the tepid sweet fluid drained down her throat, and reminded herself to bring her coffee thermos cup next time. She would forget the reminder.

A large German shepherd named Sprocket was sitting alert in the back seat, checking the clouds, the trees, and the cows as they shot by. He never barked. He knew better. He was obedient enough for that. Sprocket was a dropout from

RCMP dog training school. Not attentive enough. No spunk, they said. No killer instinct.

Sprocket was the perfect dog for Bernadette. He was a good running companion, a good listener—for a male—and never judgmental when she consumed pizza and boxed red wine. She often wondered if she could find Sprocket's traits in a man.

A large oil service truck appeared in the distance. Bernadette's Jeep came up behind it, overtook and passed it. The road dipped, and then turned a bend. A black mass appeared ahead. Bernadette began to slow, glancing in her rearview mirror to locate the truck she had just passed. It was gaining on her.

The black mass started to fly. A flock of crows feasting on road kill. A sea of black wings took to the air, cawing their displeasure at being chased from their afternoon meal. One bird did not fly; it hopped and then started to flap. Too slow. The Jeep's grill made first contact. The bird bounced from the grill onto the hood, and did a cartwheel past the window.

Bernadette saw the bird was a hawk. "You son of a bitch, that serves you right for feasting with crows . . . you dumb ass." Bernadette fumed as she resumed speed, not wanting the large oil truck to rear-end her. She was shaken by the incident, and mad at the hawk. "Damn thing is supposed to be a hunter, not a scavenger," she muttered over her shoulder to Sprocket. She was pissed at killing the hawk.

Sprocket did not move from his seat. His tongue flicked out, did a long circuitous route around his nose before hanging out. One of his eyebrows twitched. The large bird hitting the windshield was a shock to him as well, but he dared not bark. Bernadette did not like barking in her Jeep. The dog went back to staring out the window.

The turn Bernadette wanted came up on the right. She braked hard, dropped the Jeep into four-wheel drive and followed a gravel road that turned into a dirt track. There were numerous fresh tracks. The other patrol cars would be there. And oil service trucks. Bernadette had been told this victim was in the middle of an oil spill. Oil spills were bad. In cattle and farming country near a river they were especially bad, and that's what Bernadette had been told this was.

The town of Red Deer, where Bernadette's RCMP Detachment was based, was home for hundreds of Canadian oil companies that sent their rigs and men hundreds of miles in all directions to drill and service oil wells. Red Deer was also

rich farming and cattle country. The farmers and ranchers did not always get along with Big Oil, especially when the oilmen were careless.

The dirt track led through a field of tall wheat, their heads full and leaning with the weight of their grain. In a few more weeks, the threshing machines would be mowing these fields. Right now they bathed in the sun.

The road came to a stand of trees that lined a creek. A fleet of oil services trucks parked at different angles circled two RCMP cruisers. The oil trucks flashed yellow lights; the RCMP cruisers flashed red and blue lights. Like the circus dropped just beside the creek, and someone forgot to put out the announcement.

Bernadette parked, stepped out, and opened the back door for Sprocket to go for a run. She gave the dog strict instructions to stay close to the Jeep, and not chase gophers. The dog looked up, cocking one eye and one ear in her direction, and took off into the field. Bernadette shook her head and headed down to the creek bed.

The creek was deep; a winding path led down to the creek bed. Large poplar trees rattled their leaves in the light breeze. With each step downward in the rich dark earth, the temperature lowered from the scorching afternoon heat of the wheat field to the coolness of the creek below. The smell of oil assaulted Bernadette's nostrils and burned the back of her throat. Descending the path, she could see a small army of oil workers laying absorbent booms around the spill and mopping up any oil that escaped. They looked defeated by the large task at hand.

Black oil glistened on the rocks. It oozed down the creek, slowing the water into thick molasses. Low hanging branches dragged their leaves in the thick morass and became black paintbrushes hanging ever lower, sucking the acrid oil into their roots.

The pipeline was elevated on a trestle that carried it from one side of the creek to the other. Bernadette stopped halfway down the path and surveyed where the victim lay. The pipeline on the trestle was cut in two, and one end was bleeding oil through hundreds of porous openings. *Like the whole pipe had developed a bad case of Swiss cheese*, Bernadette thought. She was told the oil in the pipeline had been shut down, but the oil had gushed for hours before being discovered.

Two crime scene investigators wandered around a yellow tarp that lay half submerged in the creek, the legs in blue coveralls rested in the creek and the

boots, with toes pointed upwards, glistening with oil. Bernadette ruled out drowning. She gazed up at the height of the pipe to the creek bed. It was perhaps 4 meters. A height usually good enough for broken bones, unless the person did a header—fell headfirst. She looked up and down the stream and continued her walk down the path.

She recognized the two CSIs as she approached. One was a short, round Filipino named Basilio, whom everyone called Bas. The other was a tall, wiry older guy nicknamed Angus for his habit of eating beef at almost every meal. He was from Hungary, not Scotland, and his real name was Antal, but his friends swore he consumed an Angus cow a month, so the nickname stuck.

Bas and Angus turned to Bernadette as she crunched on the streambed toward them. Angus raised a hand that held a clear bag of evidence he'd been collecting, "Hi, Detective, glad you could make it."

Bernadette walked up to Angus before responding. She didn't want the oil workers listening in on their conversation. "What's so important about this vic that I needed to drop out on this fine day? This kind of has industrial accident pasted all over it, if you know what I mean."

Angus smiled. His somewhat crooked teeth looked like weapons he used to consume his daily beef quota. "I called your chief because this vic looked way strange, as we say in the technical sense, and I wanted you to see it." He flashed another smile at his CSI humor, and motioned for Bernadette to view the body.

Bernadette crouched over, and Angus pulled back the tarp to reveal the victim. A skinny, sandy-haired kid, no more than mid-twenties, lay underneath. He wore blue coveralls, with an oil logo emblazoned on one side of the chest, and the name "Nathan Taylor" on the other.

"So, what do you figure for cause of death and time?" Bernadette asked, as she looked the body over.

"Well, that is the question. There are no outward signs of trauma or injury, other than a small gash on the right arm." Angus held up the victim's skinny arm to point out a small rip to the coveralls. "You see here, a 4-centimeter tear in the fabric, and a 3-centimeter tear in the epidermis. The depth of the cut to the arm is maybe .158 centimeters."

"So, we're talking about a cut maybe a one-sixteenth of an inch deep, that doesn't sound life threatening. What time did our victim die?" Bernadette asked. Bernadette still hated metric, and converted everything to the old school measurements when she could.

“Interesting question, and I could normally nail that for you with body temperature. Only the victim has been lying partially in the creek, and the cold water skews my estimate,” Angus admitted while gazing at the slow-running creek. “Now, my other method would be liver temperature, and I got a problem with that . . .”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“From what I can see of this body, we are light on some organs.”

“Light on organs? What are you saying? How can this body be missing organs? I thought you said there was no external trauma other than the small cut on the arm.” Bernadette knelt down to look more closely at the body.

“There isn’t. Not another mark on him.” Angus opened the victim’s coveralls, and Bernadette saw that his abdomen was shrunken, exposing the telltale contours of the spine. “But see, this is where we should have the stomach, liver, kidneys, and I feel nothing. Gone . . . vacant . . . nada . . . as in not here.”

“Is this kid an alien, or some kind of freak?” Bernadette pulled the tarp further back to examine the body more closely. The kid looked normal, very skinny but normal.

“No, I don’t believe we have an alien, but we do have a strange victim,” Angus said, and covered the body back up. The oil workers were edging closer. He didn’t want them seeing the remains.

“Any idea how long this body was here or who discovered it?” Bernadette asked as she looked around the scene. The oil workers went back to mopping up the oil in the creek. They made like they weren’t trying to eavesdrop on Bernadette’s comments.

“The farmer up there on the ridge said he found the body this morning around 10 a.m., and the kid’s boss standing next to the farmer said he sent him to this location at 8 a.m., so we have maybe a two-hour corpse tops. Bodies don’t lose their organs that fast. Organs may shrivel inside a cadaver over time, but this feels like they’re missing. I have a rush put on this with the coroner’s office, but I wanted you to see this before we sent the vic there.” Angus stood up and stretched, his tall frame blocking the afternoon sun, and throwing a shadow over the yellow tarp.

“What’s in the evidence bag?” Bernadette asked, pointing her boot toward the plastic bag containing a small Plexiglas carrying case with several vials.

Angus pointed toward the top of the bank, “No idea, maybe the oil guy at the top of the bank knows what it is. We found several of these vials around our body; most of them were broken open.”

Bernadette glanced up to the top of the bank. Two RCMP constables were in conversation with oil company personnel, and a very loud farmer. The words of the farmer rolled down to them. He was pissed his creek was defiled with oil. “This shit was never supposed to happen—god damn it—you said you had a shit load of checks and balances—and what I see is a shit load of oil in my water.”

The farmer’s words echoed into the deep creek. The black oil had silenced the rushing creek water, and only the anger of the farmer was giving voice to the disaster that was in the creek bed.

Bernadette walked up the bank and joined the group. Constable Stewart was on the edge of the crowd. Bernadette stood by his side and quietly asked, “So, what do we have here?”

Constable Stewart looked all of 19, blond, short-cropped hair, blue eyes set off by the still-pink hue on his cheeks. His body was that of a brawny weightlifter; his biceps bulged out of his shirtsleeves. No one dared call him youngster.

Stewart nodded at Bernadette. “Hi Detective.” Stewart pulled out his notepad and read his notes quietly to her. “The victim worked for the pipeline company. His boss is the one the farmer is yelling at. What we have ascertained so far is the victim was here to do some routine inspection on the line. How this catastrophic failure in the pipeline began is unknown, nor do we know how the victim met his death.” Constable Stewart snapped his notebook shut and placed it back in his breast pocket.

“Sounds like the usual bizarre case.” Bernadette walked into the group and tapped the farmer on the shoulder. “Excuse me sir, Detective Bernadette Callahan of the RCMP Serious Crimes Division. Might I have a word with this gentleman for a moment?” She motioned to the oil company exec the farmer was berating.

The farmer took a breath, “Hell, I’m not done chewing out his ass yet.”

“I completely understand your anger at the oil spill; however, we also have a death of this person’s colleague to consider. I’ll bring this gentleman back as soon as I’m done.” Bernadette managed a small look of consolation towards the farmer. The man was more concerned about the death of his stream, than the body of the young man. The farmer scowled and backed away reluctantly. There was enough anger in him to fuel at least another hour of shouting at the oilman.

Oil was smelling up his stream, destroying his water supply, his precious wheat in jeopardy. No, he wasn't even close to done venting his anger.

Bernadette walked the pipeline man away from the group. He introduced himself as Steve Sawatsky, Quality Health and Safety Manager for Tamarack Pipelines. "Thanks for getting me away from that guy; even a short reprieve is appreciated. How can I help you, Detective?"

"What exactly was this young man sent here to do?"

"He was doing what we call oil coupon inspection. Oil coupons are small pieces of metal that rest inside the pipeline, and are used to judge the thickness of the pipeline wall. We pull them out and check them for wear. The kid was sent here to do that."

"The vials that were found around his body, are they part of the testing?"

Sawatsky lowered his voice, looked around to see who was in earshot, "Look, I have no idea about the vials. He was here on company business to pull a piece of metal out of a hole, make a record and move on to the next one." He moved closer to Bernadette, "If this kid put anything in the pipeline that caused this mess . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence as if the air had leaked out of his voice. "We were just lucky the pipeline came apart in the creek, and whatever caused this didn't go further. I've never seen a pipe become so perforated like it is here." Sawatsky moved further away from the group, "Look, between you and me, the kid wasn't supposed to be on the trestle over the creek. It looks like he opened a valve and then fell. I'm in all kinds of shit on this. The kid shouldn't have been working on his own today, but I was short staffed . . ."

"Did Nathan Taylor know he'd be on his own today?" Bernadette asked.

"Yeah, sure he did, I told him two days ago I'd be sending him out for testing, and he'd be going solo. He seemed all happy about it. So was the rest of my crew."

Bernadette scribbled in the notebook in her illegible handwriting. She called her scratches on paper handwriting; her detachment chief called them hieroglyphics. Bernadette looked up, "You think this young man was responsible for the pipeline breach?"

Sawatsky hitched up his pants, pursed out his lips and looked up at the sky for a second. "Look, this kid was a smartass university summer student, always mouthing off about how oil was causing all these problems. A real shit disturber with the crew, and a slack-ass son of a bitch who couldn't pull his weight. We put him on monitoring detail to keep him away from the crew, so as he wouldn't get his ass kicked. There was no one within miles of him."

"You can account for every one of your crew?"

"Absolutely, we were running pigs an hour's drive from here, and all my crew was signed in and with me for the whole day. We started at 0730 hours this morning, and like I said, I sent the Taylor kid off by himself to do some testing over this creek. He left on his own in a company truck. I got here when called out by our emergency response spill people at 1000 hours."

"What are pigs?"

"A sensor we use to check the pipes for weakness. We don't have to shut the oil flow down to use them. We've been running these checks all week.

"No one followed him?"

"No, I can swear to that. I had 5 guys on my crew, and they were all there, and I was on my cell phone for most of the morning with my office, so check the GPS on my phone if you want to check my whereabouts." Sawatsky threw out the last statement like a dare.

Bernadette just scribbled, *boys working with pigs*, and looked up, "You have the contact information for the next of kin for the deceased and his last known address in town?"

"I gave it to your young constable there. There was supposedly some girl he was rooming with in town, kept bragging about how tired he was from screwing her all night," Sawatsky smiled at Bernadette to accentuate the word screwing. "Is that everything? Because after that farmer gets done chewing on my ass, corporate in Calgary is fixing to get on it." Sawatsky stopped and put his head down, "Look I'm sorry if I sound like a hard ass about the kid. He was a pain in the ass, but no one wanted to see this tragedy. Deaths and injury are part of our business, but we don't wish it on anyone."

Bernadette smiled at Sawatsky and watched as he walked back over to the farmer, who immediately resumed yelling at him. She shook her head in mild sympathy and found Constable Stewart, "How about if we take a ride into town and visit the address of our deceased?"

"Sure Detective, not much more going on here. The other constable can wrap it up as soon as the body is sent to the morgue," Stewart said as he walked toward the parked vehicles with Bernadette.

They came out of the shade of the trees and back into the heat of the sun. Bernadette put her sunglasses back on. "Did you get what university this kid was from?"

Constable Stewart turned back as he was about to get into his cruiser, "Yeah, they said the University of Victoria, supposedly a chemistry major."

"Shit." Bernadette stopped in her tracks.

"You look like you've seen a ghost. What's up?"

Bernadette composed herself and laughed. "You know it's probably just a coincidence, but the reason I'm in Red Deer is because of someone from the University of Victoria."

"Long story?"

"Hell yeah, really long story, probably a three beers and nachos story. It can wait." Bernadette smiled. She looked round, whistled for Sprocket, and moments later he came loping out of the high wheat covered in burrs. Bernadette cursed mildly, grabbed the pair of gloves she carried for this exact purpose and picked the burrs out. She poured a flask of water into a bowl, and watched Sprocket lap at the water with his large tongue, there seemed to be no apology for his misbehavior, there never was.

Constable Stewart pulled ahead, leaving a cloud of dust in the hot summer air. Bernadette followed in her Jeep. They reached the highway asphalt and sped off into town. Rounding a corner, Bernadette saw crows feasting on the dead hawk. She muttered to herself, "See what happens when you hang with the wrong crowd?"

CHAPTER TWO

NATHAN TAYLOR'S APARTMENT WAS JUST off of downtown in an older section of town, dominated by mostly apartment buildings. The Red Deer River, now running slow in the summer heat, meandered just a few blocks away from the four-plex that was the apartment.

The buildings had seen better days, and probably better landlords than the one that owned it now. The outside was peeling yellow paint, with two brown wooden balconies hanging on for dear life. One enterprising tenant had placed a piece of two by four against the sagging balcony to keep it from dropping off the side of the building. A lone kitchen chair bleached by the sun and cigarette butts sprouting from a coffee can were evidence that someone lived there.

Constable Stewart pulled up ahead of Bernadette, popped his trunk and put on his armored vest that made his massive weightlifter chest even more defined. Bernadette averted her eyes. The constable was way too young for her. But those pecks of his were eye candy, and she couldn't help but take a peek.

Constable Stewart looked up at Bernadette as he closed the trunk, "Not wearing your vest, Detective?"

Bernadette laughed, "Hell no, I intend on standing behind you—you know I always got your back."

Stewart shook his head in mock disapproval, "I think the apartment's the one on the right side." He led the way as they walked across the broken cement walkway that stretched over the parched brown lawn. A dog barked from the lower unit, a face appeared at a window next door and quickly disappeared. "*No one really likes to see the RCMP,*" Bernadette thought.

Constable Stewart pounded on the metal door of Unit 4, disregarding the doorbell that hung from a single wire, dangling in disrepair, but daring someone to use it anyway. His heavy fist made a thumping sound that echoed into the quiet neighborhood. The dog next door stopped barking.

Bernadette rested against the back of the peeling porch rail, hoping it would hold. "What do you think? We go get a search warrant and come back?"

Stewart held up his hand, "Wait, I think I hear some movement inside."

A shuffling sound was followed by a door lock being turned. The door came open a crack, and a sleepy female voice said, "What do you want?"

“RCMP, we need to speak to you about Nathan Taylor, please open up,” Constable Stewart said to the door. He placed one hand on the doorknob.

The door opened fully to reveal a disheveled young blonde clad in tight-fitting t-shirt and panties. She was cheerleader pretty, full bosom, wide hips, and portioned like a beer ad for Coors or Miller Lite. The only blemishes were metal rings on her nose and above her eyes. The young lady shielded her eyes from the bright sun, “What’d you want with Nathan? He’s still at work.”

Bernadette stepped from behind the large frame of Constable Stewart, “Sorry to inform you Miss, but Nathan Taylor was found deceased out on a pipeline this morning.”

The young lady stood back from the door, dropped her hands to her side. “Oh . . . that kinda sucks.”

“Were you and Nathan Taylor not close then, Miss . . . ?” Bernadette asked. The answer to this was obvious but she thought she’d ask the question.

“The name's Chandra Rice . . . no, god no, we were just roomies . . . my girlfriend moved back to Toronto, and I needed help with the rent. Nathan Taylor answered the ad, he looked harmless, and so he took the other room. I work nights at Cowboys' Bar and Grill. I hardly saw him.”

Bernadette took out her notebook. “Oh? I have a note here from his boss where he says you two were quite an item.” She looked back from her notes, staring down the young blue eyes with her own steely green.

“Yeah, he wished,” The young girl flipped her hair; the other hand massaged her tummy.

“So, there was nothing between you?”

Chandra pursed her lips, looked down at the floor while examining a pink toenail, “You know you . . . could say there was something. The little guy was some kind of a perv; he liked to watch me when I had guys over. I’d be doing it with my boyfriend, and the little jerk would be at the bedroom door with a camera.”

“You knew this?” Bernadette asked. She noticed Constable Stewart’s eyes widen.

Chandra bowed her head. Her long hair covered her eyes. “Yeah, I knew it got him off, and I figured what the hell . . .”

“Sounds like it got you off as well,” Bernadette countered.

Chandra flipped up her hair; a knowing smile edged her lips. She forced it back. She shrugged her shoulders. "You can come in if you want . . . I've got nothing to hide."

"Obviously. How about if you put a shirt on Chandra. I need my constable's full attention," Bernadette nodded towards Constable Stewart as they walked into the dark apartment.

Chandra flashed her eyes and smiled at Stewart, and whirled to walk back to her bedroom. Stewart's eyes stayed glued to her ass as she walked out of view.

"Easy, Constable, they say you can go blind from watching that." Bernadette smiled in Stewart's direction.

"Yeah, but if I had that seared into my retinas, it might not be so bad," Stewart laughed.

Chandra returned wearing a shirt, her long legs still catching the constable's eye, and flicked the lights on to the main living room and kitchen. The place was a disaster of empty pizza boxes, beer cans, and fast food cartons. The smell that rose up as they closed the door was stale pizza and beer. Bernadette thought she smelled young hormones as well, but thought better than to comment on it.

"Nathan's room is down this hallway," Chandra motioned to them. "Look, I have to shower and get ready for my shift, so look around, ask me whatever, but I gotta be outta here in an hour . . . okay?"

"Sure," Bernadette said as she followed Constable Stewart down the hallway.

Nathan Taylor's room had the same design as the rest of apartment. Empty pizza boxes and beer cans, half-consumed cans of beans with a spoon stuck at half-mast, with clothes scattered about the room. A laptop computer sat in the center of the room on a small desk with a chair that looked like it had been rescued from a garbage bin. A Sony video camera was plugged in beside it, and one Post-it Note stuck to the side of the laptop. The Post-it Note said, "Today is the Day."

Bernadette turned to Constable Stewart, "How are your computer skills?"

Constable Stewart stood over the laptop, his large fingers hovering over the keyboard. "You know we can't access this unless we have a warrant or permission from his next of kin."

"Uh-huh, sure I know that, I'm up on my law. Did you by any chance reach the deceased's next of kin?"

Stewart shrugged, "Ah, no, I placed a call to the number I got from the pipeline company, but I got no answer . . . I left a message."

Bernadette squared her shoulders, as if about to make a speech, and turned to face Constable Stewart. "Constable, I believe that on this computer we will find evidence that will lead us to who killed one Nathan Taylor, therefore no warrant or permission is required."

Stewart lowered his large frame onto the desk chair, as he powered up the laptop, "Okay, that's a bit on the fringes of the law, but that works for me, Detective."

The laptop was still powered up, with no password protection required. Stewart got onto the videos and documents site, and the first thing that came on was Chandra. Chandra in low lighting straddling atop a male with his hands on her thighs . . . the volume was on high, and the loud sounds of Chandra's enjoyment were obvious. And then . . . Chandra turned her head toward the camera and winked.

Constable Stewart's head lurched back. "Damn, these two had one hell of a kinky relationship."

A voice behind them said, "Am I in trouble?"

Bernadette turned to see Chandra standing at the door, "No, videotaping sexual acts between consenting adults is not a crime . . . It would seem from your actions . . . the wink you gave to Nathan that you were aware of the taping. Whether this makes you as perverted as Nathan, well I leave that up to you."

Chandra looked away and left the doorway. Bernadette looked back at the computer. "Constable, can we look over another file, as I am quite sure our victim did not die of this . . . though he may have turned himself partially to stone . . ."

Stewart's face turned visibly red, "Sure, sure . . . I'll access some of his recent places on the Internet."

They viewed a few more sites, and then came to the PLK website. The site was populated with a graphic from Star Trek, and various planets bounced around. Then four young men came into view. "This looks like a video conference our victim saved," Bernadette said.

A tall blonde kid sitting at a table spoke first. "Nathan Taylor, your mission, should you accept it, is to strike a blow for all Humanity. To avenge the wrongs done to our former leader, Professor Alistair McAllen, and show the world that we . . . these gentle nerds here, and I . . . have more power than anyone in the world. By tomorrow, they will no longer fear Al Qaeda; they will fear us, the Pipeline Killers. I, your commander, Paul Goodman, command you to go forth and do battle. Our fellow warriors, Bill Hirschman, Martin Popowich, and Jason Campbell, will monitor your feats, and will go forth to do battle once your attack is successful. Live long and prosper."

The video ended with a Star Trek Voyager space vehicle streaking across the sky, and music playing in the background. Bernadette stood back from the laptop “Damn it, this is as bad as it gets.”

“What’s as bad as it gets?” Stewart looked up from the computer, “This looks like a bunch of university kids doing a spoof on Star Trek.”

“Yeah, it would be if they hadn’t mentioned Professor McAllen . . . look, grab the laptop, and meet me back at detachment headquarters. I need to meet with our chief and make a call to a guy I know at the Canadian Security and Intelligence Agency.”

Bernadette headed outside. The strong light of the late afternoon hit her as she walked down the steps and got into her Jeep. Her mind was flashing through all the possibilities of what was about to hit the oil industry this time. The first time McAllen surfaced he almost put Alaskan Oil and Fort McMurray Oil Sands into mothballs. His lab creation called polywater could have suspended production for years if she hadn’t figured it out. But what the hell was he up to this time?

CHAPTER THREE

BERNADETTE WAS ABOUT TO DRIVE directly to the RCMP detachment, until she looked at Sprocket. In order to keep the dog cool, she'd left him in the Jeep with the a/c on and the windows rolled up. Someone had once tried to steal her Jeep with the big dog in it once, and found themselves on the pavement and looking at a set of snarling teeth. But she would never leave the big dog in the Jeep for any longer than she had to.

She was 10 minutes from her home and another 10 minutes back to the detachment. She could spare the time and drop off the dog. Her chief was a fan of dogs, but RCMP trained dogs, not untrained like Sprocket.

Traffic was light, and she drove up to her duplex a few minutes later. The dog bolted from the Jeep toward the house as soon as she opened the door.

"So that's the thanks I get for taking you on a road trip," Bernadette yelled to Sprocket. Sprocket raised one ear in response and scratched at the door.

The door opened in the adjoining duplex, and Harvey Mawer poked his head out, "Hey Bernie, you back already? I heard there was a big oil spill, and a dead body out west of here."

"Damn, news travel fast in this town," Bernadette said as she waved at Harvey.

"Hey, I'm still hooked in to the Oil Patch, you know old wives and oilmen, and we're about the same for good gossip. You got time for a coffee?" Harvey walked toward her door, standing there, waiting for her reply.

Harvey was a great next-door neighbor. Retired for the third time from different careers in what was called the "Oil Patch," which meant the oil business. Harvey was crowding his 70s with bad arthritis that kept him from a fourth run at the oil business. He looked out for Bernadette, watered her lawn and mowed it, shoveled her snow in the winter, and looked after Sprocket when she worked late, which was often.

"Sorry Harvey looks like I'm the one investigating the dead body, and I have to get back to work. You mind watching Sprocket a bit, maybe walk him a little?"

Harvey walked over, scratched Sprocket behind the ears, and let him lick his hand, "You know I never mind. I got some new dog treats he'll like. What time you expect you'll be back?"

Bernadette shrugged and blew out her breath. "Who knows? This latest one's got all kinds of things piled into it. I'm hoping by early evening. You can leave Sprocket inside my place after."

"Oh, heck no, I got the whole series of World War II CDs, and I'm making some firehouse chili. Sprocket and I can watch those till you get back."

Bernadette hugged Harvey, "Thanks Harvey. God, I'm glad you're too old for me, because I'd be hitting on you all the time."

Harvey stood back from Bernadette, "Hey, easy young lady, you'll make my new girl friend jealous."

Bernadette let Sprocket into the house, got him some water, and then headed back to the Jeep. She really would love to hang out with Harvey and Sprocket on the back porch, it was Friday night, but there was something there, something in the recent video from the so-called Pipeline Killers she needed to deal with. All of it made her feel unsettled, queasy inside, like right after she'd eaten a large Monte Cristo sandwich.

The RCMP Detachment was the usual beehive on Friday night. The late night bars in Red Deer would be busy as young people with too much money from the oil fields were ready for a good time. Their ability to have fun would be fueled by massive quantities of alcohol and drugs, and from midnight to 2 a.m. the officers would be busy sorting out the mess.

Bernadette found her Chief of Detectives, Jerry Durham, in his office. She liked Jerry. He was a fair guy who worked hard at his job, and hard at his relationship with his family. A straight up guy in his mid-40s with 20 years of marriage and two teenage kids and enough ambition to keep the higher-ups in Ottawa happy. Jerry tried to keep in shape, but the job showed the strain, a small paunch showed on his mid-weight frame, and his hairline was receding far beyond his ability to deal with it. He wasn't about to do the close shave or baldhead, not his style, not yet.

"Hey Detective Callahan, I got this laptop that Constable Stewart dropped off, which I made him fill out an evidence report for." Jerry called out. He added a small frown in Bernadette's direction. "Now I assume that you've cleared the viewing of this computer with the deceased's next of kin?"

"Yeah . . . about that, Chief," Bernadette dropped into the chair in front of him. "I was in pursuit of the possible suspect or suspects who may have been involved in the murder of our victim." She threw a weak smile with the words, and then watched to see if they worked.

The chief dropped his head in his hands. "You know Detective; I wonder why I have any hair left at all with some of your procedures."

"Chief, did you look over the video that Constable Stewart and I viewed today?"

"Yes, I did, and I saw what looks like a Star Trek spoof, just like the constable mentioned. How can this be something that could have put our victim in harm's way?"

"Because they mentioned Professor Alistair McAllen," Bernadette leaned forward placing her hands on the desk.

"Detective, I know you had some past history with this guy, but I doubt if he can cause more mayhem from wherever he's hiding. You think that maybe you're just a little paranoid where he's concerned?" the chief asked as he reached for his ringing phone.

"No, I don't think I'm paranoid at all, I'd like to be ready for him this time . . ." Bernadette's words trailed off as the chief raised his hand and put his ear to the phone.

Bernadette sat there in an uneasy silence. She could hear the chief talking with the coroner. The coroner had a loud Scot's Brogue. He'd been in Canada for 45 years and still sounded like he'd walked out of the Scottish Moors yesterday.

The chief dropped the phone in the cradle, his face looking a slightly whiter color. "The coroner says we've got to get to the morgue right away, there's something he wants to show us."

The morgue was quiet. At 6 p.m., most of the staff was gone. The security guard let them in. Their shoes squeaked on the linoleum tile as they walked down the long hallway. The smell of formaldehyde hung in the air. Someone once told Bernadette they thought it was the cologne of the dead. It was all always there. It would linger in your clothes after you left the place. It enveloped you like a glove when you walked in, assailing your nostrils first, then the back of your tongue, and then the stuff would slip down your throat until you were forced to swallow it. Gagging was optional.

They walked down the long hallway in silence, pushed through a set of double doors that sighed softly as air pressure was released, and found Dr. Keith Andrew. The Doctor was a mass of long grey hair, bushy eyebrows and four days of five o'clock shadow on his face.

Bernadette could never get over not seeing pants under his white smock. Dr. Andrew wore a kilt both summer and winter. If you asked, and if you knew him

well, he would take you aside, and confide that it was, "So the boys could breathe." Bernadette realized he meant his balls.

"You made good time," Dr. Andrew yelled to them in his rich brogue. He drew the words out like a poem from Robert Burns. The cadence was there, it sounded the same to Bernadette. Dr. Andrew was an abnormality for a coroner who was actually a Doctor, and his fame for dropping his medical opinions into his reports was legendary in the small city.

"Doctor, what are you in such a hurry to show us?" Chief Durham asked.

"Oh, aye, the most recent body is quite the sight. I don't believe in my many years I've had the opportunity to view something as amazing as this." Dr. Andrew's eyebrows rose as if a conductor was motioning for the orchestra to begin.

Andrew motioned them towards the body, and drew back the sheet, "You'll notice there are no contusions on the body that suggest bruising or blunt force trauma."

Bernadette scanned the naked Nathan Taylor from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. She had to agree, there was not a mark on the kid. "So what killed him?"

Andrew's eyebrows rose in unison, "Ah, now that is the fascinating question. Here we have a corpse that we think is missing organs, but its not."

"The CSI told me he felt no organs in the abdominal cavity," Bernadette said, leaning closer to the body.

"Yes, it would appear that way, but look," Andrew said as he removed a small cover that was covering the intestines in a tray beside the body. "You can see they are here, but flattened and perforated. It looks like something ate into them."

Bernadette's head shot back at the sight. "What does that?"

"Interesting question," Andrew said. "Now, in my travels in South America, I came upon this in the Amazon. Corpses literally eaten alive from the inside, by something the Portuguese called the Candiru or vampire fish, which is a tiny parasitic fish. It had the locals so scared men would tie a string around their penises before they went swimming, they believed it protected them from the fish crawling up their . . . you know what I mean . . ." Dr. Andrew examined the faces of both Bernadette and Chief Durham to see if they were getting his explanation.

Chief Durham touched his crotch, as if warding away the evil of the vampire fish. He looked up, realized where his hand was and quickly moved it, "Really, you think this kid was eaten inside by a vampire fish?"

"Absolutely not, just pulling your leg, telling you bit of lore. No, Canada is far too cold for these fish; the streams freeze in winter. The things would die. Now then . . . I reasoned that something must have entered our victim's blood stream and this is where I found our culprit," Andrew said, his smile widening at his captive audience, and loving the joke he'd played.

Chief Durham relaxed visibly. The vision of a tiny vampire fish swimming up a man's penis was slowly vanishing from his brain, "So, what thing have you found?"

"Things, my good man. Things," Andrew said. "I realized that something attacked this man through his blood stream from the tear in his arm, and I needed to examine his blood. There was very little in him. The human body should have about 5 liters of blood. This body had a tenth of that."

"Now, what little blood he did have I had analyzed, and found something very significant." Andrew paused. Only the sound of the air conditioning could be heard in the room. "Our victim had an extreme case of Hemochromatosis."

"Hemo . . . what? Bernadette asked.

Dr. Andrew's eyes widened. "This essentially is a buildup of iron in the body. I won't bore you with the entire prognosis of this disease, but from my analysis, this victim had quite the advanced stages of the disease, which is exactly why he was attacked."

"Attacked by what?" Bernadette asked with exasperation in her voice. The merry-go-round of vampire fish to an iron disease in the blood was getting tiring. She wanted answers.

"That, I must show you," Dr. Andrew motioned for them to come over to his counter where a microscope was set up. "Look in here and tell me what you see."

Bernadette adjusted the powerful microscope to her eyes. The viewer came into focus and a mass of small moving shapes came into view. They were white in color and looked like little sausages. "What am I looking at?"

"From my tests, we are looking at a microbe that consumes iron. Industry has been working on this technology for years. I recently read a study from a company that wanted to engineer a process called *bioheap leaching* with microbes that would live on sulphur and iron the way we live on protein and

carbohydrates,” Dr. Andrew said. He swayed side to side as he spoke. His kilt made a gentle swishing sound.

Chief Durham looked into the microscope. “You think this is what killed our victim then?”

“Aye, I do, and from what I heard of your pipeline spill out west of here, I believe this young man, now a victim of his own means, tried to inject these microbes into the Pipeline, and they attacked him as well when he cut his arm. Let me show you my other experiment.” Dr. Andrew motioned for them to follow him to another counter. The counter had a glass case with a small pipe inside.

“Now watch this,” Dr. Andrew said as he drew a small eyedropper from the microscope glass, and dropped a bit of liquid on the metal pipe. He snapped the case shut, smiled and looked down in anticipation.

At first, there was nothing, just the pipe as Bernadette watched, her eyes staring hard, waiting for a change, something, or anything to prove the Doctor’s hypothesis. Then, there it was, parts of the pipe became lighter. Then holes appeared. “That is exactly what happened to the pipeline west of here.” Bernadette turned to Chief Durham. “Now do you believe me when I tell you we need to be worried about the video on the laptop?”

Chief Durham’s face changed color. His normal off-beige had morphed into a pasty white. “I think we need to get Canadian Security and Intelligence Service involved in this. This reaches beyond Red Deer.”

Bernadette pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. “Chief, I know an agent with CSIS in Edmonton, whom I worked with on something like this before. He’ll want to be in on this, and he knows just the people to call.” Bernadette had Anton De Luca on speed dial. He picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, Detective Callahan, long time since I’ve heard from you, what is up in your little city,” Anton asked.

Bernadette loved Anton like a younger brother. He was 26, a well-educated, good-looking Italian Canadian. They had worked hard together to try and capture Professor Alistair McAllen a year earlier when he’d invented a threat called polywater that made water too heavy to force oil to the surface in oil fields. His invention had threatened both Alaskan and Canadian oilfields. They stopped the threat of polywater, but never captured McAllen.

“Anton, great to talk to you, and I need to get to the point. We found a microbe that attacks pipelines; we think Professor McAllen is behind it. I’m going

back to the detachment and send you a video of some University of Victoria students we think are involved.”

“Bernadette . . . you said McAllen?” Anton asked after a pause.

“Yes I did, if what I just saw in this lab is real on a large scale, then someone has developed a microbe that can attack pipelines.” Bernadette looked over at Dr. Andrew, who was nodding in agreement.

“Send me the file. I’ll talk to you soon,” Anton said.

Soon did not come until just before midnight. Bernadette returned to the detachment, sent the file, completed her reports and returned home. She rounded up Sprocket. Harvey’s door was open. Both Harvey and the dog were snoring on the couch while the Allies stormed Normandy yet again, but this time in color on Harvey’s big screen TV.

Bernadette walked the dog back to her place, and he lay on his dog bed and was back to sleep in seconds. She rummaged for food, found some recognizable leftovers in the fridge and some red wine, and curled up on the sofa for her usual Friday night . . . alone.

The cell phone rang. It was Anton, “Hi, Bernadette, sorry it took so long, but the guys in Ottawa can move slowly.”

“How unusual,” Bernadette said in her sarcastic tone.

“So, here it is . . . once they understood the threat, all kinds of higher ups and government officials got excited by this case. The defense of oil is one of their main agendas. We’ve already called CSIS in British Columbia. They contacted City of Victoria Police and three of the young men on the video tape have already been taken into custody.”

“My god, that was quick,” Bernadette said as she took a gulp of her red wine.

“Well, here’s the other part. I need you in on this case. And we need to be in Victoria tomorrow morning for the interrogation.”

“You want me in on this?” Bernadette almost inhaled her wine.

“Yes, I’ll fly down to Calgary, and we’ll catch the 11:25 direct to Victoria. I can brief you on what we have in the morning. Sleep fast, Detective. I’ll buy breakfast tomorrow.”

Bernadette looked at her watch; it was midnight. She needed to send an email to her chief telling him she was going to Victoria, pack a quick bag for who knew how long, and get up early for the hour and a half hour drive to Calgary to be there by 10:25 a.m. She drained the last bit of wine in her glass, washed it in the sink, and started on her preparation.

CHAPTER FOUR

BERNADETTE BACKED OUT OF HER driveway at 6:30 a.m. and made it to the highway going south in 15 minutes. Saturday morning traffic was light. A few transport trucks were her company. The sun, already high in the eastern sky, threw a long golden light on the wheat fields. The Rocky Mountains to the west provided a border, a definition point that the prairie ran up to and stopped.

The morning air held onto the cool crispness of night. The day would be hot by afternoon. Bernadette left the window open a crack, and let the cool air hit her face. She picked up her large double cream, double sugar coffee at the Tim Horton's drive through on the south end of town. As she waited in line she sent a text message to Harvey Mawer. She asked him to pick up Sprocket and take care of him for a few days.

She knew Harvey wouldn't mind. Matter of fact, he'd spoil Sprocket rotten by the time Bernadette returned. They'd watch more war movies together, and Harvey would encourage the dog to bark at the Nazis while they feasted on Bratwurst and Hamburgers. Sprocket would pass nasty farts for days.

It took Bernadette at least two days to bring Sprocket back into acceptable canine behavior after his "boys" weekend with Harvey. She smiled as that thought of Harvey and Sprocket came to her. She hit the accelerator, and joined the highway on the road south.

The airport was crowded. Passengers on business, on pleasure, on whatever, were flying somewhere on an August weekend. Bernadette had checked in online before she left home, and made her way through security with her one carry-on bag.

She saw Anton De Luca waiting for her on the other side of Security. He was holding a large coffee and a small bag that would be her breakfast sandwich, to which he added his charming Italian smile. People who walked by could not help but notice him. Curly black hair, dark brown eyes, and dark skin complemented by a tall athletic body would stop traffic anywhere. Bernadette loved the looks she got just being near him.

"Hey Bernadette, I got your usual," Anton laughed as she approached. He gave her a welcoming hug, a kiss on the cheek, and coffee. "Hey, this is almost like old times."

“Let’s hope not. Last time we failed to catch McAllen, and had numerous politicians trying to fashion us a new rear end. I could do without those old times.” Bernadette took a sip of her coffee, savored the caffeine, cream and sugar mixture to see if it was just right. It was perfect; Anton knew her mix.

Anton smiled, “Let’s walk to our gate, and I’ll fill you in on our progress so far.”

Bernadette fell into step beside Anton, “Progress, what kind of progress could there be from midnight to 9:30 a.m.?”

“The fast-moving wheels of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service. I thought you knew we were a razor-sharp, fast-acting agency.” Anton threw a wink in with the words.

“Please . . . what did you stumble on is more like it.”

“Ha, Bernadette, you actually nailed it again, I am always amazed at how quick you pick up on things. We picked up three of the university students on the videotape you sent us. They have been in interrogation since 1 a.m. this morning, and quite frankly, they could not get their stories out fast enough.”

“How good is their story and does it implicate Professor McAllen?”

They reached the gate and found two seats away from the other passengers. Anton turned to Bernadette, “They claim this Pipeline Killer Bug they invented was a class project from Professor McAllen. He challenged them to reinvent the nanites that were in some Star Trek episode.”

“Nanites? What the hell are nanites?” Bernadette took a long swig of her coffee.

“I see you were never a Star Trek fan?”

“Nope, just didn’t take. I’m more of a Matrix kind of girl, but only because Keanu Reeves is so cute,” Bernadette blushed as she admitted it.

Anton winced in mock embarrassment for her. “Okay, the short version of nanites and Star Trek is the nanites were a fictitious life form of submicroscopic robots that went rogue from their intended use and began cannibalizing the starship Enterprise.”

Bernadette said, “Okay, fictitious, cannibalizing . . . got that part.”

Anton looked around to ensure no other passengers could hear him, and then lowered his voice, “Well, okay, so they didn’t invent robots, but they invented a cannibalizing organism, or Bio Bug, as they like to call it, that has an appetite for iron. They claim they thought their little invention would be just a minor annoyance to pipelines; you know make a hole or two and get some notice. I don’t think they knew it would kill Nathan Taylor.”

Their flight was announced. Bernadette drank the last of her coffee, and realized she did not have enough time to pick up another. She frowned at the information from Anton, and the empty cup. "Did the students say if they are still in contact with Professor McAllen, and what they, or he intended to do with their Pipeline Killer, the Bio Bug they created?"

Anton picked up his carry-on bag and computer case. They joined the back of the line shuffling its way onto the plane. "Well, there our investigators ran into a dead end. Seems the three students we picked up were not in contact with McAllen. The one that was, Paul Goodman, was supposedly pretty tight with the Professor, but he is missing at present."

Bernadette's head jerked around, "Missing? What do you mean by missing?"

"Let's say just not located. His friends have not seen him since they made the video for Nathan Taylor a few days ago. He was not in his room, and looks like he hasn't been there for a day or two. The local Victoria Police Force is trying to track down his girlfriend, some Russian exchange student they said he was hanging with."

Bernadette hung back as the last passengers boarded, "Wait a minute, did you get a picture of this girlfriend of Goodman's?"

Anton grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket, and scrolled down to a picture, "Yeah, right here, the other students had a group picture of her . . . quite the good-looking girl."

"That's not good," Bernadette said looking at the photo.

"What's wrong?" Anton looked over at Bernadette. The airline attendant looked at Bernadette with concern as well. They were stopped just before the entry of the plane.

"You don't see it, do you?"

"See what?" Anton's puzzled look turned to a grin of amusement.

"This girl is drop-dead gorgeous. A total 10 and Paul Goodman is two and a half tops. I got a bad feeling about this. We better find this guy soon." Bernadette gave the phone back to Anton as they entered the plane and found their seats.

Bernadette reclined her seat as they leveled in flight and watched the expanse of the Rocky Mountains glide by underneath. A pattern was forming. The death of Nathan Taylor was linked to an invention by students at the University of Victoria. They were linked to Professor McAllen. The next few hours would determine were the next links would lead. Bernadette did not like the feeling it gave her. Bile rose in her stomach. It wasn't from the bad airline coffee. It was the fear of what Professor McAllen was up to.