



**By Nicholas Conley**

# SLASH

Carl's corpse was lying on the floor in front of me. The flies hadn't discovered him yet. The blood seeping from his throat was still fresh.

Carl Doppeltes was a man in his early thirties. His Caucasian skin was hairy and rough, which was an interesting contrast to his sensitive, artistic face. Carl had always been the life of the party, the center of attention and the one that everyone loved. He had a smile that spoke a thousand words. He was my older brother.

My eyes were too tired for tears. I felt his pulse; dead. I wrapped my weak, wire-like arms around his waist and with a grunt I pulled him in the direction of my apartment room. The shadows of the hallway oozed toward me menacingly.

"Henry!" my sister Laura called from the room, "Get back here before he kills you!"

"Not until I get Carl!" I responded.

The killer had cut off all the lights in the apartment building; I was stuck navigating by flashlight. I heard footsteps in the distance and the goose bumps lined up on my tattooed forearms turned into ice. The killer was coming my way.

"Henry!"

"I'm coming!"

I wanted to run in terror, leaving Carl behind me. I couldn't do it. I gripped Carl's dead shoulders shakily and threw his body into the room. The footsteps came nearer. Then, even nearer. A knife could be heard scratching against the plaster of the wall.

The killer was only a dozen or so feet away, hovering in the darkness just beyond the reach of my flashlight. I somersaulted back to my apartment. I threw the door closed and quickly locked it. As I put my ear to the wood, I could still hear his knife scraping the wall. No one else seemed to notice it but the sound rattled through my head like a siren. My body convulsed, still stricken with fear.

Laura lit a candle in the darkness and walked over. She put her arms around me in a motherly fashion. Her brown hair fell against my shoulder and she buried her face in it. Even though she was the same age as Carl, she had always been like a mother to all three of us.

Well, except for that one time...

“Is he, Carl, is he...” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” I answered.

I looked over at Kim, Carl’s wife. His widow. She walked over to the dead body and whimpered with tears. Her hands shakily traced the cuts on his throat, the equivalent of pinching herself in the middle of a nightmare. She choked out a goodbye whisper into his lifeless ear, one that only she would ever hear. I looked away as she leaned forward to kiss her husband one last time.

It was now just the three of us. It was my sister Laura, Kim and I, which left me as the only male. Not that I, Henry Doppeltes, really felt like much of a “man.” My gangly body might as well have belonged to a child. If it weren’t for the dozens of tattoos decorating my arms and my scruffy face, I would’ve looked like one, too. The tattoos were especially important; they were my only disguise.

“What happened?” Laura said, her increasingly red eyes made it hard to respond.

“Carl and I...when we went out to look for the killer, we split up. I went to check out the stairwell, it was bolted shut. Then I heard a scream in the distance, ran over, and Carl was...”

“Dead?” growled Kim.

“Dead.”

“We’ve got to figure out a plan,” Laura said quietly, “We can’t just wait here. This guy’s cut off the power, the phone lines, the elevator, bolted the stairs. Seriously, why’s he even going after us?”

“We’re the only people still on this floor,” I pushed back anxious tears, “Everyone else is on vacation, conveniently. It’s a small damn apartment. Goddamn, this guy got Carl, he...Carl’s...”

“This is all a little too convenient, if you ask me--” Laura started.

“Some family reunion, eh?” Kim interrupted, “Who the hell is this killer, anyway? One of your ex-girlfriends, Henry?”

“I don’t know,” I responded.

I looked out the window, as if searching for clues. I had been wondering the exact same question as Kim. There were no hints whatsoever of the identity of this killer or what his or her motivation was. Yet, somehow, I felt as if I knew. There was something about the sound of the killer’s footsteps that had seemed familiar.

Kim walked over. Her dark skin glimmered in the moonlight that escaped from the window and her eyes carried a look of regret. She breathed heavily.

“I’m sorry, Henry. I shouldn’t have lashed out at you.”

“It’s okay,” I replied, putting my head down and scratching at the thin stubble on my face.

It wasn't okay. Not for reasons that had anything to do with Kim. What really unsettled me was the creaking sound coming from the apartment hallway. I could've sworn that I heard the killer breathing right outside the door.

"Does anyone else hear that?" I said anxiously.

Neither of the two women had heard it. Apparently, neither of them had heard me, either. Laura was pacing back and forth across the room and Kim was running her fingers through Carl's hair. The clock ticked maddeningly; it was now 10:03 at night.

"What are we going to do, Laura?" Kim asked.

"I don't know..."

"Wait, who put Laura in charge?" I looked up.

"Henry," Laura said in her usual calm voice, "I know I can figure a way out of here. Trust me, we'll get through this."

"It's not about that. You're always in charge of this...you were charge when the car wreck happened, remember? Remember that, huh? I sure as hell do!"

"You weren't a lot better there, kid," glared Kim.

"We all were responsible for what happened there," Laura started.

"I was 11 years old!" I yelled, "There is no way you can claim that I had *anything* to do with it!"

"You went along, just like everybody else."

"I--"

There was a crash in the hallway. We ran over and put our ears to the doorway. The sound was gone as soon as it had started.

"I'm going to check it out," I said breathily.

“Henry--”

Before anyone could tell me otherwise, I had pushed myself out the door. As soon as I turned on the flashlight, my masculinity-charged braveness turned off. A voice breathed out from the darkness. I ran back into the apartment.

I put my back to door, shoulders heaving. I looked at the faces of Laura and Kim; both of them were relieved to see that I was still alive. Regardless, I still cursed myself for being such a coward.

“I almost wish I *had* been responsible for something in the car wreck,” I breathed out, “Then at least I’d have something to blame myself for. Then I wouldn’t have just been the little dork crouched in the corner, watching it all go on. Not doing anything.”

“We can talk about this later,” Laura took hold of my shoulders, “What’s going on now has nothing to do with the car wreck. That was 16 years ago...we can talk about it later, Henry.”

“Yeah, Henry,” Kim joined in, “Later. Right now, we have to get out of here.”

I calmed down for a moment. It was a short moment. Then the hair on the back of my neck tensed up again and my voice raised; “Who’s to say that this has nothing to do with the car wreck?”

“What?”

“Think,” I crossed my arms, “Why would someone want us killed? Maybe this killer is that guy’s son. Remember him? The big guy, the one that nearly ripped Carl’s head off when he found out what had happened to his father?”

“It...it all was an accident,” Laura collapsed backwards into my leather recliner as she stifled back tears, “A mistake. One I’ve wanted to take back all this time.”

“He might have a point,” Kim said with a look of realization, “It could be the wife, too. Or--”

“Well either way, it probably *is* a victim of the crash!” I raised my voice again, “You know what? They’d have a damn good motivation!”

“They would.” Laura said quietly.

She stood up. As I looked at her slumped shoulders, I felt guilty. I walked over and tried to comfort her. In the meantime, Kim’s resolve was weakening. She crawled back over to Carl’s body and pulled him tightly to her chest. She felt his throat again. The blood had dried. His body had gone cold.

“You know what?” Kim clenched her fists, “I’m going after this asshole. Motivation or not, they killed Carl. They killed Carl!”

I tried to restrain Kim by the arms but she was far stronger than me. She threw me aside, ran to the kitchen and grabbed a butcher’s knife from the top cupboard. As she rushed to the door, I tried to stop her again and was thrown flat to the ground.

“KIM!” yelled Laura. It was too late. Her long black hair whipped past the door and into the dark hallway.

Laura and I looked at each other anxiously. Again, I felt the need to prove myself. I creaked open the door and stuck my flashlight into the blackness.

“I’m going to find her. Stay here, be safe.”

I walked out into the darkness, guided only by the sound of running footsteps. This was a problem in and of itself. There was no way to know whether those footsteps were made by Kim or by the killer.

The footsteps became quieter and calmer. Again, there was the sound of a knife scraping up against a plaster wall. Taking out my pocketknife, I responded by running it up against the wall in the way the killer seemed to be doing. The killer's knife stopped. He'd heard me.

I heard footsteps and then a gasp. I ran forward and clumsily tripped on the carpet. I pulled myself up and was greeted by the sound of screaming. Following that was a sudden silence.

“Kim?”

There was no response. Cool night air escaped out of the open window across from me. I stepped forward cautiously, shaking my flashlight.

“K...Kim?”

I tripped again, only this time it was on top of a body, Kim's body. Her stomach was torn open and her neck had been stabbed into. I then realized that she wasn't completely dead.

She looked up, gasping for air.

“It...was a m...mistake Henry...Henry...I s-s-swear it was...”

Kim's eyes darkened and her head dropped to the floor, dead. The sound of blood gargling through her throat made me want to scream. Cold sweat poured down my forehead.

I looked at the open window in the hallway and suddenly a realization dawned upon me; it was a fire escape. It was a way out. I had to get Laura.

I heard the killer laughing in the distance and watched the shadows move towards me. My mind went blank and I ran back to my apartment room. I slammed on the doors until Laura let me in.

“Laura, no time to explain! I found an escape!”

I grabbed Laura by the wrist and we flew into the hallway. By now, the area was contaminated with the stench of blood. I repressed my urge to vomit by running even faster.

“There’s nowhere you can hide from me,” a deep voice called out from the hallway, “Nowhere.” I stopped, frozen in my tracks.

“Henry? Henry?!”

“Did...did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

The voice laughed in a sinister fashion. By now, the window was in plain sight. Laura hooked her fingernails into my arm and dragged me toward it. She seemed completely unfazed by the voice, like a mother protecting a child.

This angered me. She was my sister, not my mother. She didn’t need to protect me. Not that bringing me along on a drunken car ride 16 years ago was “protecting” me...

We jumped onto the fire escape. The killer didn’t even seem to be pursuing us at this point, which made things even more unnerving; for all we could see in this darkness, he might be waiting at the bottom. But we had to keep going.

We rushed down the metal stairs, jumping past entire sets at a time. As soon as we reached the bottom, I pointed toward the nearest subway station. Laura’s death grip on my arm never lessened as we ran into the station. I continually peered through the crowds behind us, trying to catch a glimpse of anyone that looked suspicious. I wanted to see if I recognized anyone, as that would explain my earlier familiarity with the sound of the killer’s footsteps. No one stuck out of the crowd.

Through the entirety of the ride on the subway, Laura and I sat silently. As the subway finally came to a halt, we got off and took a seat on the bench. The crowds disappeared and we

felt content in our distance from the apartment. The killer clearly hadn't come this far, yet, so we had a chance to rest before running to the cops.

Perking my head up, I looked Laura in the eyes. She looked back into mine. We were both too tired to cry anymore; too tired to think. Regardless, there was still something I had to tell her.

"I heard Kim's last words," I whispered, "She said 'it was a mistake.' The killer has to be related to the car wreck. He has to be. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"I know..." Laura sighed, "I know."

"Why did you bring me along in the car?"

"Not right now, Henry."

"No. Tell me."

"You don't remember?" Laura held back tears again, "You wanted to go. You tugged on my shirt."

"You shouldn't have let me go."

"I know, but what can we do about it now? What's done is done, as horrible as it was."

"It was a little more than 'horrible', sis. Carl, you, Kim, all of you drove that car drunk as hell, as if nothing could happen. Bringing your little kid brother along, as he sits in the back seat holding back tears of fright. Yeah, *tears*. Then you had to go and run over that old man."

"It was a mistake, we were drunk..."

"Thomas Gerald. That was his name. You know the irony? We killed him. *Killed* him. Even the few years Carl spent in jail never, *never* made up for it, Laura."

"You didn't kill him," Laura said meaningfully, "It was our fault, not yours."

"I sat and watched it happen. Then I didn't do a damn thing. I...I don't know..."

Laura hugged me. For a moment, it was as if her hug took away all the pain that had been draining me for 16 years. I hugged back, pushing my arms tightly against her. I felt protected again by my older sister in a way I hadn't since childhood.

Laura's body started to spasm; she was crying. I patted her back, trying to be comforting. I heard the sobs coming from her mouth and felt the warm tears falling onto my back. I hugged tighter. Then...she started gargling.

Gargling. Exactly the same way that Kim had been gargling.

I pulled back from her. Laura spat out globs of blood; the red fluid ran down her clean white shirt like chocolate syrup. She reached towards her her back and I turned her around to get a look.

"Laura!"

She had been stabbed in the back with a pocketknife...*my* pocketknife. Laura looked at me, her eyes bulging with horrified shock.

She pulled the knife out of her back and her body slumped to the ground. I cried out furiously and took off in a sprint; I didn't have time to carry her corpse with me. I ran until my legs went sore and my knees numb. Eventually, I reached the nearest park. Hiding in the blackness of the trees and bushes, I looked at my reflection in the pond.

"You might as well stop denying the obvious truth," the killer's voice said deeply.

Was he behind me?

"Where are you?!" I whipped my head around. The killer was nowhere to be seen.

"Well," the voice chuckled, "*You* can see me in the pond."

I looked into the pond confusedly. All I saw was my own reflection. Then, the truth began to dawn on me. I saw my reflection smile at me in a cold, dark manner.

“You were right. The killer was a victim of the car wreck. That victim was you.”

“How...what...”

“Think about it. You know the truth, Henry Doppeltes. I’m you. I, you, we, whatever way you want to put it, but the bottom line is we killed Carl, then Kim and finally Laura. Quite the satisfactory revenge, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t know what you’re--”

“C’mon, Henry! That’s why you invited them all over to your apartment tonight! Remember killing Carl? Watching him sputter out blood from his open throat?”

“Why...why do you exist?”

I saw my reflection grin madly again. I wanted to scream, or run, or even stab myself. Yet, all I felt compelled to do was watch.

“Ever since that car wreck,” the killer inside me said coldly, “You’ve been a little different than before. Nerdy, goody-two shoes Henry, always doing the right thing. Then, he sits there and watches as his siblings kill an innocent man. Traumatic, much? So little Henry tries to be the antithesis of what he was before. He shaves his head, gets all those tattoos, he tries to act like a ‘badass.’ Then, little Henry takes all his frustrations, denials and anguish and locks it all up into a little metal box that he stores away in the darkest, most faraway recesses of his own mind. Little does he know that there’s just one problem; that box was actually a powder keg.

The reflection snapped its fingers.

“Henry, in case it isn’t obvious by now, that keg just burst.”

I stirred my fingers into the water, trying to destroy the reflection. It came right back. I wanted to scream again. I knew that everything was true, yet I couldn't admit it to myself. Was I really a cold-blooded murderer? Was I insane?

I tried not to choke up; "So, you're me."

"Yes, I'm you. Maybe I'm the other side of your split personality, or maybe you're just in denial. The technicalities don't matter. Either way, the important thing is that we killed your brother, his wife, and your sister. That leaves only one question. Who do we kill next?"