Salamander Secrets

The rain splashed heavily onto the window, meandering down the glass. Dark clouds hung ominously close the ground, obscuring the tops of distant skyscrapers. It was 7am, and another damp, gloomy Monday morning. I was in a train on my way to work in downtown. The miserable weather matched the weary looks of me and the other commuters.

The train pulled into Union Station and I stepped onto the platform. I began my short walk to the police headquarters. I was a detective of the Toronto Police Services Homicide Squad. Everyone always seemed to be impressed that I was a police officer. Four years ago, when I first began the job, I was also proud to bear the badge, but, as with any job, the relentless monotony takes its toll. Most days, my job simply entails sitting at a desk, looking over cold cases or waiting for a new case to crop up.

Today, however, I didn’t have to do much waiting. It was a little past 10am when I had arrived at the crime scene, the parking lot of an Etobicoke plaza. This plaza was simply a long row of small stores which all shared a common parking lot. The parking lot was large enough to accommodate more than a hundred cars, but it was nearly completely empty. That was not unusual; being the middle of the morning, it was well before the lunch hour and everyone would be working. In front of the stores was Inspector Norman, my superior, speaking with other officers.

“Good morning, Inspector,” I said, surprised to see him here.

“Hello Detective!” replied the Inspector turning around to speak with me. “I just wanted to let you know that you’ll be in charge of this investigation.” Heading the investigation? For someone of my rank and experience, it was an unparalleled opportunity.

“I won’t let you down, Inspector.”

“I knew I could count on you. I’ll be leaving soon before this rain becomes any worse. I know it’s your first time, so if you have any issues, you let me know.”

Surely enough, all morning the rain had been coming down heavily. Even now, it was rushing down. I directed my attention back to the crime. The victim lay sprawling face-down in the middle of the lot. A male, maybe in his late-twenties, wearing formal business attire, from suit to shoes. Real executive material. Not a robbery, with a gold Rolex still on his wrist. A fancy pen lay beside him, probably his. His stiff hands clutched a strip of paper, but the rain and blood had smudged the ink and made the words illegible. Gunshot by the looks of it, and less than an hour ago. I was a medical officer for the army before I was a detective, so I saw plenty of gunshots.

“Constable Davidson, what information do we have so far?” I asked the officer beside me. I often worked with Constable Davidson on cases, and he was one of my best friends in the police force.

The victim was a 28 year old John Williams, vice-president of marketing at Salamander Inc. It was a bit unusual for such a young person to be a company executive. His phone and his wallet provided nothing out of the ordinary. However, as it was mid-morning I was suspicious of why an executive would be alone in such an obscure location.

“Victim was killed by gunshot, I presume.”

“Three gunshots, detective. Two hit the victim in the middle of the back, with a third hitting his leg from the front. We found casings and gunpowder residue fifty metres away, by the road at the opposite corner of the parking lot.” The murderer appears to have been quite the marksman, to be so accurate at such a distance, and was probably in a car. The victim was hit from the front in the leg, meaning he was probably facing his murderer. After he was shot, he reacted and turned away, running, before being shot twice more in the lower back.

“Who first found the victim?” I asked.

“The owner of a bar, George Rupert, called police around a quarter hour ago. He said when he went to his car, he saw the body lying on the ground. Other store owners reported the shots, but nothing else,” said the constable.

I decided to speak with George Rupert. His bar was in the middle of the row of stores. When I pushed open the door, I was greeted by a cramped and rather dull room.

“Welcome! I’m George Rupert,” said the joyful bartender, a large, middle-aged man, looking up from his newspaper. Upon seeing my badge, his attitude immediately soured.

“Oh, a cop. How may I help you, officer,” he said, dragging out the last word, almost as if in a sneer. I decided to chat with him for a while.

“And now, with this murder, business will probably halt to a complete stop. Or,” said Donald, pointing out the window, “maybe the news reporters will fancy a drink or two.”

Sure enough, the reporters were beginning to trickle in. I groaned; the media are always a pain when police are working on a case, constantly demanding updates and with their cameras capturing your every move. I needed to solve this case, and fast.

“Did you happen to notice who killed the victim, or did you notice anything unusual about the victim?” I asked Norman.

He said, “All I heard were the gunshots. Three loud cracks. With this storm, I assumed it was thunder. It was when I walked to my car to get a book that I realized there was a body. Dressed up all fancy. Blood everywhere. I called 911. I noticed a crumpled strip of paper in his hand. Couldn’t quite make it out, with the blood and rain and ink everywhere, but I think he had written ‘NCLE KILLED ME’. Don’t know what that means. Anyways, at that point, you cops arrived, so I came back here to my bar.”

I thanked him and decided to drive to the Salamander Inc. offices. When someone is killed, they try to identify their killer, and I believed that’s what John Williams did. But who or what was ‘NCLE’?

Salamander Inc. was a Toronto-based software company founded in 2015 by Tony Douglas, a rich businessman. In the seven years since, it has grown huge, with its cloud technology rivalling that of Google and Dropbox. I stepped into their head offices, hoping to find more clues.

“John was definitely not a pleasant one,” chuckled Tony. I was speaking with the founder and CEO of the company in his office on the top floor, the nineteenth. I noticed military decorations hung on the wall.

“You’re ex-military? So was I; served in Afghanistan as a medical officer,” I told him.

“Is that so? I was a major in Afghanistan myself. It’s nice to see a fellow military officer.”

“Anyways,” I continued, “I’m a detective with the police, and I’m here to inform you that Mr. Williams was murdered this morning. Do you have any ideas on possible suspects, motives, stuff like that?”

He was silent for a moment. “So, John’s dead, eh? Well, I’m sorry that there’s not too much I can tell you. As I said, the other staff disliked him. I found him rather annoying myself. However, I don’t think it would have been so bad as to constitute murder. You might want to talk with a few of the managers, though, like Gerald and Ronald. John really made their lives difficult.”

“I have another question. How did someone so young achieve the title of vice-president? He’s only been at the company for 4 years? 5?”

“7 years,” said Tony. “His contribution to Salamander was invaluable.”

“One last question, Mr. Douglas. Why do you call him by his first name, John? The other employees address each other by their last name.”

“John and I, we had a closer relationship than most,” replied Tony.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Douglas.”

I decided to speak to some other employees, particularly the Gerald and Ronald Tony had mentioned. They apparently had offices on the same floor as Tony and John.

“That’s a shame. We’ll all be devastated by this tragedy,” said Gerald after I described the situation to him.

“I thought everyone detested him, especially you,” I said.

“Did Mr. Douglas tell you that? Well, he was annoying. And with him in that position, I could never get promoted. But no one deserves to be murdered. Actually, when I think back to when he just joined the company, he was a hard worker. Nothing like now. Then one day, around four years ago, he just completely changed.”

I went to talk to Ronald, who reacted differently.

“Serves him right,” said Ronald. “He was always on my case. I experienced more peace today than I had in the past three years. I didn’t kill him, but I wouldn’t be entirely surprised if one of my colleagues did. He was horrible.”

“Well, if you suspect your colleagues, were any of them out of office this morning?”

“Well, I doubt anyone hated him so much that they wanted to murder him. Anyways, no one was out for more than 10 minutes at a time. Only Mr. Douglas stepped out at around 9:30am, shortly after Mr. Williams left,” said Ronald.

“And why did they leave?” I asked.

“See, we’re releasing a new product soon. Mr. Douglas said he had important matters to attend to; probably some meeting or other business regarding this release. It’s not the first time. He’s been going in and out these past few days. In fact, he was talking with Mr. Williams about the new product shortly before they left. Where Mr. Williams went, I couldn’t care less. I don’t envy getting yelled at.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate your cooperation.”

I returned to the police headquarters to mull over this puzzling case. The trip to the office had been overwhelming. John Williams probably supervised hundreds of the employees in that building, and all hated him. The murderer might not even be from his workplace.

I sat down in my desk when I arrived at headquarters. “Constable Davidson,” I called out when I saw him, “any update on the crime scene this morning?”

“Well,” said the constable, walking over to my desk, “the rain ruined some of the evidence. Only thing of interest is that ballistics indicate that the shots were fired from a car with a Browning Hi-Power handgun. I’ll get to you if anything else crops up.”

“Thanks constable,” I said, continuing with my thoughts. There was lots of evidence for me to work with. My mind kept on drifting towards the letters scrawled onto the paper. N-C-L-E. An anagram? Code? I decided to drop that train of thought. The murder weapon was important. I’ve heard lots about gun violence from police in the US, but not in Canada. Where could the murderer have acquired the gun? I brooded over this. I knew many police officers, my colleagues, use Hi-Power. Military personnel do too. In fact, being ex-military, I still had mine at home, though I never used it. Things began coming together. Military. That would also explain the accuracy of the shots. Tony Douglas was ex-military. Ronald mentioned Tony followed the victim out of the building. But lots was still unexplained. That message, for instance, that John wrote before he died. And what’s the motive? All I knew about the victim’s relationship with Tony was that Tony was his boss and that they had a “closer relationship than most”.

At that moment, everything clicked into place.

“Constable Davidson, get me everything you can on Tony Douglas, especially his relations with the victim.”

When the information arrived five minutes later, I just needed one quick glance.

“Constable, grab some officers and your equipment. We are heading to the Salamander Inc. offices to arrest Tony Douglas for the murder of John Williams.”

Everything afterwards went smoothly and within hours, the murderer was in jail. The inspector came over to congratulate me on and asked what happened.

“John Williams was one of the youngest employees to join Salamander Inc, and by far the youngest vice-president. I figured someone pulled some strings. Mr. Douglas’ casual demeanour when referring to Mr. Williams was a big indicator too. Police records confirmed my suspicions; Tony Douglas was the uncle of the victim. Mr. Williams was a hard worker, but his working attitude changed dramatically one day. Why? He found something. Earlier today, I had some officers search the home of the victim. They uncovered massive amounts of encrypted files, all bearing the company’s mark. Mr. Williams was blackmailing Mr. Douglas with company secrets. This morning, Mr. Williams made a threat that Mr. Douglas could not tolerate. Being ex-military, Mr. Douglas grabbed his gun. He followed and murdered Mr. Williams. He left the scene, but the victim was not yet dead. In his final moments, he wrote ‘UNCLE KILLED ME’.”

I stayed behind at the headquarters finishing up paperwork, greeted by many congratulations.

It was late when I finally arrived home. Exhausted, yes, but satisfied as well. I sank into an armchair by the fireplace and picked up the newspaper. My case was plastered over the front page, and I smirked when I saw a picture of me that morning, just arriving at the scene and looking perplexed. I dozed off to the sounds of the rain petering off.

It’s 7am the following morning. I step off the GO train, smelling the damp air from yesterday’s rain. I see the hundreds of commuters around me and think of our motto, to serve and protect. It’ll be another day on the job. I’ll probably be sitting at a desk all day, doing paperwork, but who knows. Perhaps I’ll solve another murder.

2317 words