

BODY TRACE

by

Jonathan McGoran

Donna LaMott raised her hand to knock a little bit harder on the door to room six of the Alpha Alpha Gamma sorority house. Just as her knuckles were about to make contact, the door to room five opened instead.

Valerie Chirelli's head poked out. "For Christ's sake," she said coldly, leaning against the door jamb, "if it's that important, just go on inside."

Chirelli looked rough, with big bags under her eyes like she'd been partying all night. Nothing unusual there, Donna thought.

"But if you knock on that door one more time," Chirelli continued, "you'll be spending the fall semester in a wheelchair."

Donna tried to think of something smart to say, but her brain didn't work like that. She made a face instead and opened up the door.

The first thing that hit her was the smell, then the heat. The windows were open, but even so, mixed with the smell of Beth's paints was something else, a sickly sour stench, hanging there in the stifling heat.

Ashley Munroe was slumped over her desk, wearing a typically indecent, short, pink robe. There was vomit on the desk next to her and she

didn't look right at all. Donna stepped closer and saw that Ashley's robe was soiled, a dark, mustard-brown stain seeping out from underneath her.

Donna made a face. "Oh," she said, distastefully.

A puddle of something that might have been urine collected on the wood floor under Ashley's chair, some of it soaking into the rug.

She stepped closer, trying to see if Ashley was breathing. But before she could get close enough, she noticed Beth's easel and canvas toppled onto the floor. The palette had rolled across the floor, leaving a trail of yellow and orange paint.

She took another step, and then she saw Beth, wearing black pajamas, kneeling awkwardly on the floor in front of her sculpture project. Donna had seen her working on that project and never quite understood what Beth was getting at.

The installation consisted of a dozen or so ceramic pylons, most about a foot high, the tallest maybe two feet. They were three-sided, undulating and slightly twisted, each one tapered to a point. When Donna had seen them before, the figurines had been a dark, greenish black, but now half of them were redone in oranges and reds, not unlike the canvas on the floor.

The way she was kneeling there in front of her little statues, Beth looked like she was praying. The figures seemed to be gathered around her, like they were listening.

With an unnerving feeling that she was disturbing something between them, Donna cleared her throat once, then again, louder.

That was when she noticed a small, dark red object on the back of Beth's neck. It looked like she was wearing a red spiked collar, but it only had one spike. She shook her head with disdain.

"Beth," she said out loud, reaching out and giving her shoulder a little push. But there was no response.

“*Beth*,” she said again, annoyed.

Still standing behind her, she looked around and saw that Beth’s eyes were closed intently. She seemed to be sucking on the top of one of the figurines.

“Come on, Beth, stop it.” She gave her another shake, and with a soft, wet, sucking sound, Beth’s head sank lower, three or four inches, like she was devouring the figurine. Then Donna saw that the bauble on the back of Beth’s neck had grown into a four-inch spike, glistening with blood, protruding obscenely from the back of her neck.

Donna’s mouth quivered noiselessly and her body froze as it clicked in her mind what she was looking at.

The new colors on the pylons weren’t paint at all, but a garish mixture of blood and vomit. Pieces of yesterday’s corn were plainly visible on the carpet between the figurines, where the splattered vomit mixed with the blood that had soaked down the front of Beth’s shirt and pooled around her knees.

As Donna stood there staring, a fly came in through one of the torn screens in the windows and landed on one of the mess-covered sculptures. Almost instantly, it was joined by three or four others. Donna felt faint, then nauseous, but still unable to move or make a sound. Her breaths were shallow, short, and rapid, and it occurred to her that she was going into shock.

The sound of the flies was loud in the otherwise quiet room, but there was another sound, as well. It was that same wet, sucking sound as before, but quieter now, and sustained. Donna bent closer, watching with horror and fascination as Beth’s head slowly, almost imperceptibly, slid lower, and the blood-covered spike emerged just as slowly, growing out of the back of her neck.

Unable to stop staring, Donna was only inches away when she was startled by a sickening, cracking, tearing noise, like a drumstick torn from a

turkey. Beth's jaw seemed to unhinge and blood suddenly flowed freely from her nose and mouth as the skin on her neck tore open and she finally sank to the floor.

Donna watched her descent in silent horror until her eyes focused on the floor. That's when she noticed that the puddle of Beth's blood had grown, that she was now standing in it. That's when Donna LaMott began to scream.

Chapter 1.

Heat shimmered on the tarmac through the airplane's windows, but as she stepped out onto the top of the steps, the feel of it still took Madison Cross by surprise. It was a force that resisted her, almost physically pushing back, as if telling her to get back on and go wherever the plane was headed next. She paused, actually considering it, wondering for the thousandth times what she was doing back in Philadelphia. But the grumbling surge of weary travelers waiting to get off propelled her forward and down the steps.

It was a short walk across the tarmac and into the terminal, but by the time she reentered the air conditioning, her clothes were damp with perspiration. The pilot had warned them about the heat, but Madison couldn't help wondering how much of it was because she was no longer accustomed to the Philadelphia summer.

She collected her bags as if in a trance, then kept going, through the terminal and back outside. The taxi stand wasn't quite as hot, but the exhaust fumes from the buses and cars seemed to hang right in front of her.

As she settled into the back of a cab, the driver turned and asked, "Where to?"

She realized she didn't know. She had planned on checking out her apartment first, but the plane had sat on the runway for over an hour in Chicago and now she was running late. As the cabbie waited for an answer, Madison stared at her watch and tried to figure out whether or not she had time to drop off her bags and freshen up.

She was subletting a condo she had never seen from a second cousin she had never met. All she had was an address in Old City, a key and an alarm code. She closed her eyes and tried to calculate how long it would take to get there, get inside, get cleaned up and get to work, but there were too many variables.

When she opened her eyes, the cabbie was still looking at her, but his expression had changed.

“Center City,” she said with resignation. “Police Headquarters.”

He stared at her, uncomprehendingly.

“The Roundhouse. Seventh and Race.”

The driver nodded in understanding and hit the meter. “Accident on the Expressway. Gotta take I-95.”

“Whatever.” She closed her eyes and sank into the seat, wondering how she had gotten into this situation.

Just a few weeks earlier, Madison Cross had it all figured out: graduating first in her class from University of Washington Medical School, nice but unremarkable boyfriend, great residency lined up at Stanford, and all of it far, far away from Philadelphia.

Now she was back. Alone. And instead of a residency at Stanford, she was about to start a job she knew nothing about in the crime lab of the Philadelphia Police Department.

What the hell was she thinking?

Philadelphia’s crime lab was located in Police Headquarters. The building was officially called the Police Administration Building, but everyone called it the Roundhouse. While not actually round, The Roundhouse was rounded, a sinuous, concrete form built in the optimism of the early sixties, when architects were allowed to have some fun.

To Madison, the building represented a golden time before she was born, before the turbulence and trouble that hit the city in the late sixties and persisted for the next twenty-five years. It was something of an architectural landmark, but it had come to be taken for granted by the city’s inhabitants.

The cab pulled over on the Race Street side of the building, a common mistake. A broad courtyard stretched in front of an open and

welcoming main entrance on Race Street, but, in what probably should have been taken as a bad omen, the front entrance had never actually been used. Before the building was even finished, the powers that be decided Race Street had become too much of a highway to have an entrance there. Instead, they barricaded the front entrance and put up a couple of small signs redirecting visitors to the back entrance.

As the cab drove away, Madison stood on the sidewalk for a moment, appreciating the building's dramatic curves, feeling a little better about her decision to come here. Then she sighed and walked around the block, through the small parking lot and past the half a dozen smokers in front of the entrance.

Inside, she signed in at the desk. She'd been here many times as a guest when she was a kid, but this was the first time as an employee, or as an adult.

Studying the directory on the wall, she felt suddenly enveloped by a nebulous cloud of foreboding, but she quickly realized it was actually cheap cologne. And lots of it, too.

She turned her head slowly, and was greeted with the cocky grin of a self-assured redneck.

Philadelphia had a side that was cosmopolitan and international, open-minded and tolerant, but it had another side, too. And that was where this guy seemed to be from.

"How 'bout I help you find what you're looking for?" he asked, in a twang that sounded more Alabama Trooper than Philly P.D. He was not bad looking, but the twinkle in his eye looked like he practiced it in the mirror and he seemed to think he was a few pounds lighter and a few years younger than he actually was. Definitely not her type.

"No thank you," she said, followed by the smile that said 'don't take this personally, but I have absolutely no interest in you whatsoever.' It had taken years to perfect that smile, but by the end of her freshman year at

University of Michigan, she could deter the drunkest, horniest frat boy with that smile. And usually with no hard feelings.

But not this guy. He took a step closer, and Madison instinctively made a mental note of where his instep was in relation to her heel.

“Don’t be like that,” he cooed. “I know this place like the back of my hand. Let me help you.”

She was getting annoyed, but more at herself for not finding Detective Cross on the directory than at him for being... him. After all, the damn thing was in alphabetical order. But his persistence had her a bit flustered.

The seconds were drawing out and she could feel him staring at the side of her head, sense him opening his mouth for whatever the third stanza was in his standard repartee. Then she found it: Detective D. Cross, room 302. Third floor.

“No thanks.” She gave him the same smile, thinking maybe repetition would help drive home the message. “I’ve got it.”

“Well, maybe-” he started anyway.

“I don’t think so,” she said, cutting him off.

As she turned and walked to the elevator, she could feel his eyes on her and it annoyed her, making her want to hold her briefcase over her rear end just to keep his eyes away from it. She could feel those eyes as she waited for the elevator, as she got in it and turned around. She fought the urge to look over, but peripherally she could see him still staring, slowly shaking his head appreciatively. As the doors closed, she reminded herself that Seattle had its own special breeds of dog as well.

The elevator let her off in front of a small desk in front of a small woman in a uniform and sergeant’s stripes.

Madison stepped up and said, “Detective Cross, please.”

The woman looked her up and down, blatantly appraising her. “Down the hall and to the right,” she said, keeping the results of the appraisal to

herself. Madison thought about asking her, but told herself she didn't want to make any more enemies on her first day.

As she neared the end of the hallway, she could hear David Cross's voice — a booming, business-like baritone that seemed to be taking issue with someone or something.

"...and I don't expect things to be half done," he was saying. "We start the job, we do the job, we finish the job. That's how we solve cases. And that's how we keep our heads above water. Come on, Elena, you know that."

The hallway opened onto a large room tightly crammed with desks, filing cabinets and lab tables covered with microscopes and other equipment. On the far wall, a row of doors led to other rooms with more specialized equipment

Detective David Cross was standing and talking to a small, Hispanic woman sitting behind a desk. Her face was striking in a hard kind of way, and her dark eyes burned but didn't look away from his. She didn't seem to like what he was saying, but she was listening.

Also listening nearby was another woman, reddish blond hair and a sprinkling of freckles. She seemed like she'd heard this all before, and she was waiting almost patiently for the tirade to finish. As her eyes started to roll, they caught Madison's, and she gave her a little smile.

Madison smiled back, somehow surprised to see any women here, much less two of them. She was also surprised there were no men, but then she noticed one, huddled over a microscope, quietly studying whatever it was magnifying and ignoring the tirade on the other side of the room.

He was tall, with dark, curly hair and glasses. His fingers were long and nimble but they looked strong. When he adjusted the microscope, Madison noticed they were unadorned.

For a second, Cross looked right at her, but he didn't react. He seemed to be winding down, and he sat on the desk next to the woman he'd been talking to.

“So you’ll get it done today, right?” he asked quietly.

The woman named Elena nodded and looked down.

Cross clapped a large hand on her shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze as he stood.

The others looked over at him, ready to get to work. There didn’t seem to be any awkwardness over what had just happened, and Madison wondered if it was a common occurrence.

Cross motioned for Madison to step forward, and she did. He patted an empty desk and whispered, “Here’s your desk,” still showing no sign of recognition. He handed her an ID.

“Okay, everyone, I’d like you to welcome a new member of the team, Madison Cross, who will be joining us as a technician.”

Madison scanned the faces of her new coworkers, feeling suddenly very vulnerable. The woman who had smiled at her looked more guarded now, and the one Cross had just been admonishing, Elena, was practically glaring.

The guy at the microscope turned around and looked over at her with the faintest of smiles. He was extremely handsome, in a bookish kind of way. His glasses had very thin wire rims, and Madison briefly wondered what he’d look like without them.

“Ms. Cross just graduated first in her class from University of Washington Medical School,” Cross continued, thankfully rescuing her from that daydream. “...She’s certified in DNA analysis, she’s interned at the CDC, and she’s studied forensics and pathology. We’re lucky to have her. I know you’ll make her feel very welcome, and help her in any way.”

Turning to Madison with a professional-looking smile, he said, “Okay, Ms. Cross, I’d like you to meet our team.”

He started with the woman with the freckles and worked his way around the room. “Melissa Rourke, crime scene investigator,” polite wave. “Elena Sanchez, chemical analyst,” polite wave.

He turned to the other side of the room. “Aidan Veste, chemical analyst,” polite wave and a small, sympathetic smile, like he knew how much she felt like a goober, standing up there like the new kid in school. She felt herself smiling a little more than she needed to. Aidan looked down and Cross continued. “...And Tommy Parker, crime scene investigator.”

Madison did a quick headcount, wondering if she’d missed somebody. Then she realized Cross was indicating someone standing behind her. She turned around and saw that the good ol’ boy from the lobby was standing there behind her, wearing lots of denim and that same arrogant smile.

Cross looked back and forth between Parker and Madison. “What...?”

Parker’s smile widened. “We already met.”

Cross looked down and muttered, “Oh, shit.”

With his head still down, he looked up at Madison with the first hint of familiarity. “That’s seldom a good thing,” he mumbled out of the side of his mouth, then he raised his head and clapped his hands. “Great,” he continued. “Well, I guess we’re all ready to get to work, then.”