

HUGHES INVESTIGATIONS #0

DARE DEVILS



T.K. ELDRIDGE

T.K. Eldridge

Daredevils (Hughes Investigations #0)

First published by Graffridge Publishing 2020

Copyright © 2020 by T.K. Eldridge

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

T.K. Eldridge asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

T.K. Eldridge has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

Cover Design by Lizzie Dunlap of PixieCovers.com

Edited by Donna A. Martz of Martzproofing.com

Previously published as Caela's Case by River Alder

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com



Sign up!

If you didn't get this from signing up for T.K. Eldridge's newsletter, here's the link to do just that.

[T.K. Eldridge Newsletter](#)

You're going to want to make sure you do sign up - it's the best way to be informed of new releases and special promotions.

Chapter One

The coffee shop was packed, but it also sat between Caela's new office and her best friend Ian's place. Ian loved the coffee shop and considered it his office away from home. It worked out since Caela needed about six gallons of coffee a day to function. No, not really, but it seemed like it.

She finally spotted the tousled curls and lean, dark frame as it bent over a laptop.

Caela dropped into the seat next to him, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Tell me you got me a latte and a sandwich?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah," Ian replied and lifted a hand to signal one of the servers. Within moments, a sandwich and latte were set in front of her, and Ian's cup was refilled.

"Bless you," Caela mumbled around a mouthful of food. "Starved. Whatcha working on?"

"A database project. It goes out and pulls articles from newspapers all over the world that are done in English and dumps them into the database categories for murder, theft, suicide, accidents, and so on. The idea is to see the patterns in the data and help stop outbreaks," Ian said.

"Just English, though?" Caela asked.

"For now. The translator program I was using kept spitting out too many false positives. I'll need to work on that for the next phase."

“So, why did you need me to rush down here?” Caela took another bite of her sandwich. She wanted to at least finish the food before she had to leave again. Coffee traveled, sandwiches? Not this big, nope. She’d have it all down the front of her new green silk blouse.

“I found something I wanted you to look at and maybe fact check for me?” Ian asked, his handsome features twisted into a hopeful plea.

“You’re lucky you’re so gorgeous,” Caela teased and leaned in to give him a kiss.

They had been best friends since they were about five, when Ian’s father came to work at Hughes Investigations with her Da. It had been ten years later when his parents were killed in a car wreck, that Ian moved in with Caela and her father. That lasted a year before he got early acceptance to MIT and headed off to school. He’d moved back with his shiny new BS degree and started his grad work at the university Caela attended for her undergrad in the city. He had his own apartment, but he still spent most of his time at Caela’s penthouse, now that she had her own place. Right next door to her father’s penthouse.

Caela was the only family Ian had left. Oh, there were probably distant cousins back in India, on his mother’s side, but his father had been the only son of an only son. It didn’t seem to bother Ian, because he counted Caela and her father as family. Until they’d slept together the first time, Ian and Caela had pranked people by telling them they were brother and sister. His dusky skin, dark curls and melted chocolate eyes next to her pale freckles, honey blond hair and bright green eyes confused the hell out of others.

“Like you’ve got a lot to do. Come on, you know you have time to help, and who knows? It may be a great tool for getting new cases or finding patterns for old ones,” Ian begged.

“Yeah, because while I know Da loves me, and he knows I’ve trained for this my whole life, I still feel like I have to throw that quote about Ginger Rogers at him.”

“Ginger Rogers?”

“Yeah, Fred Astaire’s dance partner? A comic strip wrote something like “Sure Fred was great, but don’t forget that Ginger Rogers did everything he did, backwards...and in high heels.”

“Oh, right. *That* Ginger Rogers.”

“There can be only one,” Caela intoned.

“Nuh uh. No mixing worlds. That’s not fair.”

“How do you know if the Highlander never danced with Ginger? He *was* around then.”

They bantered back and forth for a few minutes while Caela finished her food.

“Okay, come stay at my place tonight? You can help me upload this program on my private network and we’ll see what we find. I’ll get food and beer. Sound good?” Caela asked.

“Sure, sounds great. I’ll see you at six?”

“Six thirty. I have to do a courier drop around five thirty and it’s on the other side of the city, during rush hour.”

“See you then,” Ian replied and bent back over his laptop.

Caela picked up her latte and headed for the door. She’d successfully adulted a whole lunch without food on her blouse. Score!

Chapter Two

Ian snagged the last slice of pizza from the box while Caela tapped away on her keyboard. A sideways glance from Caela had him put the slice down and cut it in half before he took a bite.

“Just because I’m occupied, doesn’t mean I don’t know where the last slice of pizza is,” Caela teased, then jumped as the computer beeped. “Wait, I think it found something.”

A nudge from Ian and Caela slid her chair out of the way – and grabbed her half of the last slice – while Ian worked.

“It did find something. Let me print it out and we’ll take a look.”

Soon they had about a dozen pages spread out on the table as they cross checked the data.

“It looks like this guy has been killing all up and down Route 95. From Maine to Florida, the cases cover about four years. How could no one have put them together before?” Caela asked.

“They’re all in small cities or towns, no two happen in the same jurisdiction, and unless the police have a database to track similarities that these cases land in, they would never know. Jackson, Maine and Jackson, New York, would never think to talk to each other about what seems to be a random murder of a young woman in their town,” Ian replied.

“Well, maybe they’ll get that national database sometime so they can find this stuff on their own. Hey, you should patent this and sell it to law enforcement

agencies and counterterrorism groups to build that connection.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Right after I finish fact checking this,” Ian said.

“You’ve already checked. I’ve already checked. Now we need to dig in and pull the police files. Think you can get them from all of those places?” Caela asked.

“If not all, then most of them. If any of the departments don’t have the files digitized, then I’ll be out of luck.”

It took them nearly two days to collect all of the information and write up a report on the similarities between the cases. Caela felt pretty confident it was a trucker doing this. One that delivered to small town restaurants or did mail service. Not many other jobs would have someone going up and down the highway consistently enough to fit the timeline.

The huge whiteboard had photos, different colored pens noting names and dates, and when Caela put the last piece up on the board, she stepped back to look.

A frown furrowed her brow and she moved closer to read a couple of pieces, nodded to herself, then stepped back again.

Ian came into the study and handed her a fresh cup of coffee, then looked at the board himself.

“Wait a minute,” he said after a moment. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Does it mean that his next target is supposed to be within twenty miles of here? Yes. He’s killed in our city before. Four years ago. It was his second kill. Jennifer Moore. The first one is still a Jane Doe in Florida. The third is six months after his first, the next state north of us, Karen Thompson. Then they’re about three months apart and skip up to Maine, then head back down to New York, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and back up to South Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, and now here.”

“We need to tell someone,” Ian said.

“Like the police? How about I lay it all out for Da and see what he says first? That way, he can make the call to the police and someone will actually listen. If I call, I get the verbal equivalent of a pat on the back and get sent back out to the playground.”

“It’ll get better. You just need to prove to them you know your shit,” Ian replied and slid an arm around Caela’s waist.

Caela sighed. “I know. It just sucks sometimes. Okay, let me get a few photos of the board.” She pulled out of Ian’s embrace and set her coffee down, then pulled out her phone and snapped enough photos to recreate the board for her father.

“Cay?” Ian put a hand on her shoulder. “Let’s go get some food. It’s almost three and you’ve not eaten since the half a breakfast burrito at nine. It’s better to present this to your Da on a full stomach, yes?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Okay, can you order up some food? I’d like lasagna, a salad, and some garlic bread. We can eat while we figure out how to get the equipment we’ll need to do a stake out.”

“Where are we going to do a stake out? For what?”

“The last two cases, in Virginia and New Jersey, both had someone say that the girls had been at a bar near their homes in the working-class part of the town. So, not the high end places and not the dives. There’s only three bars that fit that description in our area, and only one is near residential properties. So, we’ll stake out that place and follow anyone who looks like they’re following a girl they shouldn’t.”

Ian sighed. “I’ll order the food.”

“Relax, Ian. We’ll figure it out. I know we will.”

“Right,” Ian muttered to himself as he walked away. “He’ll have a flashing neon sign over his head saying ‘I’m the serial killer.’ Not.”

“What did you say?” Caela called out.

“Nothing, just trying to decide what I want to eat,” Ian replied.

Later that evening, Ian had settled on her couch with the game controller while Caela got her papers together to go next door and talk to her father. The penthouse her father lived in was where Caela grew up from the time she was about nine years old. A year or so ago he'd started work on a manor house on some land he'd bought. When the old VP, Allan, had retired and moved with his wife to Puerto Vallarta, Caela had had her penthouse done over and moved in. A gift from her father when she graduated high school, he'd hoped she would live at home for college. The first two years, Caela lived on campus. Then she commuted from the penthouse. It could be a bit restrictive with one's father right next door, but Caela loved her Da and liked him nearby. She didn't know how she'd handle it when he finally finished his castle in the countryside.

"Da?" Caela called out as she opened the door a crack.

"Come on in, Caela. I'm in the kitchen," he replied.

Conal Hughes was a man who'd lived and breathed the military life until he retired and started Hughes Investigations. Caela's mother and baby brother had died and left him her only parent. He didn't want her raised by a nanny or governess, so he built a business with his military friends – a business he could run from home. He still looked as fit as he did when he was active duty, and his bright green eyes and dark hair streaked with gray kept the ladies on their toes.

"Whatcha cookin'?" Caela asked.

"My shredded chicken casserole. Sort of. I gave Jojo the recipe and he put it together and sent it up, so I tossed it in the oven about an hour ago. Should be ready. You want to get the salad out of the fridge?"

Soon the two of them were seated at the kitchen island with plates of steaming casserole.

“So, why did you come by?” Conal asked. “Not that I mind you visiting, but you’ve got a folder with you and that usually means you need to run something by me.”

“I don’t *need* to run something by you, Da, but I do want different eyes than mine or Ian’s on this. I know what *I* see, but I’ve also been working on this for a few days now.” Caela slid the folder over to him with print outs of the photos all numbered and her report underneath the images.

The two ate in silence while Conal spread it all out on the island, examined each photo, then read the report.

“This is good work,” he finally said. “But it’s a reach to think the guy is going to hit here next. It could be anywhere from here to here,” he pointed out places on the map. “Your supposition is pretty solid, though. I mean, using the past patterns, anywhere within the stretch along this run is a possibility. The fact that *here* is in the middle of that stretch – well, that should put the police on alert.”

Caela had to keep the smile on her face toned down so as not to seem too eager for his praise.

“Will you call the police and share the information?” Caela asked.

“Sure, I can do that for you. I also want you to give a copy of this to Jeffries. He’s the one that will have to liaise with the police.”

Caela shuddered. “How about you give it to him, Da? That guy gives me the creeps. He’s always staring at my boobs and telling me to button up my shirts or wear longer skirts.”

Conal sighed. “Fine. I’ll take care of it this time, but you’re going to have to learn how to work with the man. He’ll be running this place soon enough.”

“Over my dead body,” Caela muttered into her plate. Franklin Jeffries had been hired on as the VP about a year after Allan left. Her father had realized he couldn’t do both jobs himself and didn’t think Caela was ready for the responsibility. Caela hated Jeffries.

As dinner finished, Caela cleaned up and chatted with her father about everyday things. As she got ready to go, she hugged Conal and kissed his cheek. She turned away, then paused and turned back. “Da, can I borrow a surveillance kit? I want to practice my track and trace work. Ian’s going to help.”

The added bit about Ian was the cherry on top. He loved Ian like a son and believed him to be all that was calm and good in Caela’s life.

“Sure, honey. Just tell Ted I said to give you whatever you need. Be safe, okay?” Conal replied as she headed out the door.

“I will, Da. Always.”

Chapter Three

Ian had bitched and whined so much the first night, Caela had refused to take him with her after that. Instead, he stayed at his place and monitored her audio and video feeds.

“If he doesn’t strike tonight, we’ve been wrong. He has to hit tonight to keep to his timetable,” Caela said as she sat in the SUV across from the bar, her eyes on the front door and the alley that led around to the back. Unless the guy climbed the ten foot fence in back, he could only get in those two ways – and she could see both. So could the cameras she’d set up. One on the fence, one on the light post nearest the bar. A camera was also perched on the dash of the SUV, pointed right at the door and alley.

“If he doesn’t strike here tonight, he could hit somewhere else within an hour of here. This was a crap shoot, Cay, and we both knew it. But it’s good training for your hours needed. How many are left?” Ian said into her earpiece.

“Thirty seven,” Caela replied.

“Hell, you might finish those just sitting around outside this bar,” Ian teased.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.”

They talked about the latest episode of Wynona Earp and about two of their friends from college who were getting married, when Caela whispered, “Hush. Look.”

A young woman with long red hair had just left the bar to walk down the sidewalk. Before the door had closed behind her, an older man in a hoodie, gray

hair and beard, had come out and followed her.

As soon as they'd passed the second house, Caela started up the SUV, went up to the next driveway and turned around to try and follow. By the time she got headed in the right direction, the young woman and the older man were both gone.

"Goddammit, I lost them, Ian," Caela said.

"Well, we got a couple of good shots of him on the video. Let me try and do facial recognition to see if we can figure out who he is. I've got a time-stamped copy of the feed saved to give to the police if they need it. Go home, Cay. The bar is closing in a half hour anyway."

"I'll wait it out. Thanks for being in my ear, Ian."

"Anytime, Cay-bear."

Caela got home by four and asleep by five. She was awakened at eleven by her phone ringing "Count on Me" by Bruno Mars. Ian's ringtone. She fumbled with the phone and answered with a sleepy "Whaaat?"

"Caela, wake up. Another murder happened last night. I think we have the killer on video."

Caela sat up in bed and blinked. "Tell me." The TV remote was in her hand and the local news station splashed across the screen with the volume low.

"I heard it come across the police scanner. A one-eighty-seven at a house four down from the bar. That'd explain why they disappeared so fast."

"Shit, Ian. I gave up too soon. I could've saved her life," Caela whispered as a professional photo of the red-haired woman from last night was suddenly on the screen. "Amber Miller, twenty-eight years old. Jeezus, Ian."

Caela fell back on the bed and closed her eyes.

"We did the best we could, Caela. Let me get this file over to the police. I'll send it through the Hughes Investigations general email so it looks official. I didn't get a

hit on facial rec, but I think it's because of the beard. Makes it hard to get a good read."

"You do that, Ian. I'm gonna get my day started. I'll call you later."

"Hang in there, Cay-bear. Love you."

"Love ya too, Ian."

It was while she swam laps in the pool on the rooftop terrace between her place and her father's that it came to her. She knew where he'd go next. It was just a matter of being there before he was, and doing something about it this time.

Caela showered and dressed, then packed a bag for a week's stay. The clothes bag was the smallest of the three she stacked on the wheeled case and dragged into the elevator. The SUV loaded, she called Ian as she pulled out of the garage. "Keep your recorder running, my friend. I'm going to go find this bastard."

"Caela, let me come with you," Ian begged.

"Nope. I'm going to do this on my own. Don't worry, I'm armed and wired. I'll call you from the motel when I get settled."

"I'm worried. Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"I'll do my best to not do anything stupid. I'm grabbing food, and hitting the highway. Talk to you soon."

Caela disconnected the call and pulled into the drive thru to get some food and the largest coffee she could find. It was a good five hours to her next stop.

Chapter Four

Just outside of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Caela pulled into a truck stop diner. She needed a hot meal and to sit in something that wasn't moving for a little bit. A call to Ian before she pulled off had calmed his nerves and reminded her she wasn't doing this alone. The clear glass lenses in the green plastic frames hid a camera and mic setup that allowed Ian to see what Caela saw, and hear what she heard. She slid them on her face, tucked the cord under her hair and down her shirt, then went inside.

A seat in the corner gave her a good view of the whole restaurant, so once she'd placed her order, she sipped her soft drink and scanned the room.

"I don't see him," Ian said in her ear.

"Me neither," Caela whispered. The waitress brought over her food and gave her a wary look and Caela smiled. "Sorry, going over my lines. Summer stock theater group, y'know."

The waitress relaxed and left her with the check.

"You're gonna eat all of that? Good luck," Ian said when he saw her plate.

"I'll eat some of it, but I need to sit here for a while, so I ordered the lumberjack breakfast."

"Just don't forget to look up now and again, hmm?" Ian teased.

She'd just had her third coffee refill and made a trip to the ladies room – and yes, she took the glasses off while she was in there. As she settled back in her seat, Ian hissed in her ear. "Look up and to the left. I think that's our guy."

Caela slowly let her gaze drift up and over. He was in a plaid shirt instead of the hoodie, but he walked with the same hitch in his gait, and his hair and beard looked the same. He turned around when he slid into his seat and Caela dropped her chin, her own gaze now on her plate. "That's him."

"Okay, pay for your meal and leave. Stay in the SUV with the doors locked and watch which truck he gets into and then you'll have data I can use."

Caela got up and paid for her meal and tipped the waitress a twenty for the time she'd taken up sitting in the booth. She went out to the SUV and got in and locked up, then sipped at a bottle of water to calm her nerves. She left the glasses on, partly so Ian could get his own data, and partly so she didn't feel so alone.

"At least it's still daylight. I don't think I'd have the nerve to do this if it was dark," Caela said.

"Oh, you've got this, Cay. You're one of the toughest women I know. He tries anything, put a bullet in him."

"You make it sound so easy," Caela replied, then sucked in a breath. "Here we go." She started up the SUV and watched as the man got into a dirty white high-top cargo van.

"Oh, good gods, could he be *any more* cliché?" Ian muttered.

"What, you mean a serial killer with a white van? Yeah, that's pretty cheesy," Caela replied as she pulled out and got behind the guy.

Ian spoke in her ear as he wrote down the license plate and the van description. "Don't be up his ass, Cay. He'll make you and then you'll really be in trouble."

"I know how to tail someone, Ian. It's just the access from the rest stop to the road is pretty limited, y'know?"

Once they were on the highway, Caela kept a diagonal to the van so she could watch it without getting too close. A car or two between them was fine until it started to get dark. It hadn't reached full dark yet when the van pulled off an exit ramp near Freeport, Maine. Caela followed until she saw the van pull into a motel.

She kept going past the motel and stopped at a gas station next door. While she filled up the SUV, she watched the man go into the lobby, then come out with a key. He got back into the van and drove down the length of the motel to the room on the end. He parked, got a bag out of the van, and went into the last room on the first floor.

Caela got into the SUV and headed to the motel. She went in and asked for a room on the ground floor. When they had her sign the book, she scribbled her name so it wasn't legible, and read the name above hers. Ray E. Atkins.

Ian stayed quiet until Caela got into her SUV and moved it closer to her room. She backed up into her spot, got out her bags, and locked up. Once inside, she locked the door, then pulled the security bar out of her duffel and slid it under the knob. Another lock went on the sliding window. Only then did she sit down on the bed and let out a breath.

"Ray Elias Atkins, age fifty-two. He's a courier for Mailsafe Consolidated. You were right, Cay. Mail service."

"I need a shower and a meal before I get working, Ian. I'm gonna put the glasses on the table so they face the door. With the locks, I should be fine, but I'll have my cell in the bathroom. If anyone comes in, call me."

"You got it," Ian replied. Shortly after, he heard the shower start and leaned back, cell phone in his hand just in case.

He relaxed when he heard the door open and Caela's voice.

"I'm done in the shower. Just getting dressed."

Caela put the glasses back on and looked in the mirror to brush her hair. "See? I'm fine."

Ian laughed. "I held my phone the whole time you were in the shower, and didn't relax until I heard the door open and you say you were done. What are you going to do about food?"

Caela pointed over to the table where a stack of take-out menus rested. "I'm going to order in. I mean, I do have granola bars and stuff, but I want a hot meal."

"Forget your hair and order now. Better to do it while there's a lot of traffic outside in case you need witnesses."

"Good point," Caela replied. A few minutes later, food was on the way and she was back to brushing her hair.

"Now what do you plan to do, Cay?" Ian asked.

"I'm going to stake him out. I'll stick a camera on the door frame to face his van and eat my dinner. When I'm done, I'll ask you to watch for me while I take a nap and wake up in ninety minutes and go sit in the SUV and watch."

"No, you can put the camera up and eat, then sleep. I'll call you if he moves. Oh, and look in the little silver packet in the front pocket of the gear bag."

Caela went over to the bag and opened it up. She dug around for a bit until she found the packet and pulled it out. "Oh, damn, that's awesome," she told Ian as she dumped the GPS tracker out into her hand.

"Just put the batteries in it and go stick it on his van. That way, if he gets out of sight, you can still find him."

Caela did just that, and stuck the camera on the post to the second floor porch just outside her door. It showed Ray's door beautifully, according to Ian.

Food arrived and Caela ate while she watched the local news, then she set out all of her stuff for a quick exit and put the glasses on the nightstand, her cell phone in her hand as she sank into sleep. It was easy to sleep, knowing Ian was keeping watch.

Chapter Five

Sleep had come around nine, so being awakened at four wasn't bad at all. She answered Ian's call and swung her feet over the side of the bed.

"He's in the van. Left the bag in the room. He hasn't pulled out yet, so you've got a couple of minutes. I've got the tracker live so I can tell you where he goes."

"Thanks, Ian. I'm gonna use the bathroom, then go," Caela replied.

"Don't forget the glasses," he reminded her.

"I won't."

Less than ten minutes later, Caela was out in the SUV as she followed Ray's van. She could barely make out his tail lights, but Ian had fed the GPS tracker to her car's GPS so she could see where he turned or stopped.

"I need coffee. Let's hope he stops for breakfast or something," Caela grumbled.

"He's stopped somewhere," Ian said about five minutes later. "Careful he doesn't make you."

"Duh, Ian. Who was it that won Mr. Lee's ninja challenge last month? Wasn't you, my friend."

Caela turned right where Ray had, and drove past where the blinking light indicated his van was parked. She kept going past it and stopped a little further down the street.

"He's parked behind a bar? Really? It's closed," Caela said.

"Yeah, but it's in a residential area. He can see the street from where he's sitting and can watch to see if any appropriate targets are going to work or jogging or

whatever.”

“I guess. Okay, so he’s probably going to be there a while and I need coffee and food. I’m going to go to the end of the block and cut back to where that fast food place was and get something to eat, then come park nearby and watch.”

“You’ve got time. And if he moves, we’ll find him.”

“Ian, you need to sleep. Go rest. I’m armed, I’m not going to get out of the SUV unless it’s to come back here to use the toilet. I can read the GPS fine on my own, and if I need you, I’ll call you and wake you up, okay?”

A loud yawn popped in Caela’s ear and Ian sighed. “I really do need sleep. Thanks, Cay-bear. Wake me if you need to, okay?”

“Of course,” Caela replied and pulled out of the restaurant. She drove past, from the other direction, to make sure the dot and the van still matched, then found a small lot in front of an insurance office. She pulled into a corner spot and faced the street, cracked the window a little and shut off the SUV. Coffee and food helped her wake up more, and she took turns watching out the window or making notes between bites. Close to four hours passed before she saw the dot move. It made sense, as it was close to nine in the morning and most people would be at work by now.

Caela tucked her bottle of water into the holder and pulled out a couple of cars behind the van. She drove past as he pulled into a fast food place and kept going. They were only about a half mile from the motel, so she went there, backed the SUV into her spot and shut it down. A few minutes later, Ray returned and headed into his room with a bag loaded with food. Caela checked to make sure the camera feed still went to her phone, then got herself into her own room and locked it all up.

First things first, she pulled the little coffee maker out of her bag and set it up with her favorite mug and bottles of water. Next, she pulled out the bag of coffee pods and went about making herself a cup of her favorite blend. One pod of

Colombian, one pod of Hawaiian Blue, and the result was a mix of smooth coffee with a kick that kept her fueled while she worked.

Laptop open, phone in a stand next to her so she could keep an eye on the camera, coffee and a packet of cookies, and Caela was ready to rock and roll. She started to dig into Ray Elias Atkins' life and began to build a profile.

Ray had been born and raised in Lewiston, Maine. The son of Richard Atkins and Doris Elias, he stayed in the Lewiston area until he turned twenty. His father died of a cardiac arrest when Ray was eighteen and his mother disappeared two years later and is presumed dead.

"Bet she was killed by her son," Caela muttered. "Probably buried in the backyard."

He left two days after he was questioned about her absence. Ray told the cops she'd gone to visit family in Canada, but they couldn't find any family in Canada or any trace of Doris at any border crossings.

A few misdemeanor records popped up from when he was a teenager, but it was his name in a blog post from about ten years ago that had Caela's skin all goosebumps.

"I know Rayray killed Missy. He was the last one seen with her, and when they got into that fight outside the bar, I begged her to let me walk her home, but she wanted to cool down, so I left. It bothers me to this day that if I'd stayed with her, maybe Missy would still be alive. Some said that Ray went home and killed his mother that night – that she really wasn't visiting family and was buried in the forest behind their house.

See, here's how it looks from where I sit. Mrs. Atkins and Rayray argued and he killed her and buried her in the forest. It explains why pine needles and forest mulch were found in the front entry of Missy's house, matted in the blood. Missy was raped while she bled out. I bet that's not too well

known. Not many people want to read about how she'd been stabbed eighteen times before he raped her, then stabbed her a dozen more.

He'd carried around one of Missy's hair ribbons since tenth grade when it fell off her ponytail and he picked it up. He showed me his treasure, that pale blue length of silk the same color as Missy's eyes. That's another reason I know it was Rayray that did it. The length of pale blue silk ribbon tied on the outside of the door knob is that same color and size of ribbon he's carried around for five years."

The blog was written by a guy named Patrick Robbins. The post was titled '*The Death of Missy Eames*' and had an email address at the bottom of the blog page. She sent Patrick an email from a dummy account that said she was Caylee Hughes from The Washington Review and wanted to talk to him for a story she was writing. People loved being contacted by the press when they considered themselves amateur journalists already.

Still no movement from Ray's room. The more Caela learned about Ray, the more he creeped her out. He looked so normal, so harmless, and yet they suspected he'd killed at least fourteen people.

Caela pulled up news articles about Missy Eames' still unsolved murder, then scoured every news article and report she could find for the other cases. Not in the news, but in all but two of the reports, were comments about the blue silk ribbon on the door knob.

She made a note of it, and dropped the note and the articles into the shared folder she and Ian were building about this guy. It would be great for any cops to use to further build a case against this nutjob.

Chapter Six

After what seemed like hours of work, Caela decided to get out of the room and go get some lunch. She grabbed her phone and locked up, then headed to the lobby area. A woman, who looked like she'd stepped out of a 1950's housewife advertisement, looked up from her seat at the desk and gave Caela a bright smile.

"How can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm in room 110 and I didn't want housekeeping in today. Can I get some fresh towels dropped by in a bit?"

"Ah, yes, I can have Millie come by with some in about twenty minutes. Anything else?"

"Yes, uh, where's a good place to get lunch that isn't fast food?" Caela asked.

"If you follow the path just behind the motel here, it backs up to Norman's, a diner that serves really good homestyle cooking and fresh salads. I like to get my lunch there most days, myself."

"Oh, that's great to know, thank you. I'll go check it out. Can you hold off on the towels for about an hour so I can grab the food and come back?"

"Not a problem, Ms. Hughes," the receptionist said. "Just call up here and ask for Lily Sue, that's me, if you need anything else."

"Appreciate it, ma'am," Caela replied. The 'ma'am' caught a flash of anger from Lily Sue but Caela kept her smile bright as she headed back out.

Once around the corner of the building, Caela checked that her gun was still in her ankle holster and the knife in her pocket. Her belt holster was in the locked case

in her room, and she didn't think she'd need it for a walk to get lunch, not with what she had on her. She'd be over and back in about fifteen minutes if she was lucky.

The path was fairly clear and only about twenty yards long, and ended in the parking lot for Norman's. She went in and ordered a club sandwich and a large salad to go, and was back at her room in just under twenty minutes. As she juggled the bags and her room key, a voice came from behind her.

"Here, let me help," the man said and lifted the bag where it was about to fall out of her arms.

"Thank you," Caela replied and finally got the key in the door and opened it, only to turn around and find Ray holding her lunch. The look of surprised horror was instinctive and on her face for only a second before she gave him a sunny smile as she reached for the bag.

Ray took a step forward and Caela backed up into the room.

"You've been following me," Ray growled as he shoved the bag at Caela with one hand, the other holding a revolver pointed at her chest.

She grabbed for the bag and stumbled back, then dropped the bag on the floor and threw her drink at him. When Ray ducked, Caela rushed forward to try and get past him, but he swept her up off her feet and threw her back into the room. Two steps and he'd kicked the door shut behind him and stared down at where Caela crawled backwards on the floor, pushing to her feet as fast as she could. She was pinned between the bed and the wall. As Ray approached, Caela went to dart over the bed and she heard the hammer drawn back on the gun.

"Stop where you are or I'll put a bullet in you," Ray said.

Caela froze, hands and knees on the bed. She edged a little further away as she turned herself to look at him. "I haven't been following you, mister. I'm just on my way to my Mom's summer place and stopped here because I was tired."

He moved so fast, Caela didn't see it coming. The hand holding the gun backhanded her across the face and she spilled across the bed, one hand lifted to touch where she'd been struck, fingers bloodied as she pulled them away.

Caela had never been hit before, not like this. She'd taken years of martial arts, and sure, there were blows and accidents in training – but she'd never had someone hit her in anger. Her mind went blank.

“You lying little cunt, I know you've been following me. I saw you outside the bar back in the city, and I saw you at the truck stop diner on the highway, and I saw you this morning when you followed me. What do you think you're doing?”

“It's just a coincidence. Really, mister, I don't know who you are,” Caela whimpered as she curled her legs under her body. She needed to grab that gun in her ankle holster.

Ray looked around the room and spotted the laptop. He went over to it and tapped the mouse pad to wake it up. While he was focused on the screen, Caela slid the gun out of her ankle holster and put her back up against the headboard.

“Hey, this is all about me,” Ray said.

“Oh, Rayray, how about you drop your gun before I put a bullet in *your* head?” Caela said as she used both hands to steady her grip.

He snarled like some wild animal and dove for Caela. Her gun went off before he came up under her hands and slammed them into the wall over her head, the gun going off again before it dropped behind the bed. They fought for a minute before he got a hand around Caela's throat and he squeezed until she passed out.

Ray sat there on the bed as blood dripped from the wound on his head where the bullet had grazed him, and blood oozed from the scratches her nails had made on his face and neck. He'd left his special knife in his van, and the ribbon. She looked like she'd be out for a bit. He had to do it right. If he didn't do it right, it didn't mean anything and then he wasn't an artist, he was just a killer.

“Ray Elias Atkins ain’t no killer. I’m an artist. I gotta do it right,” Ray said to the empty room. He got to his feet and stumbled a bit before he found a towel in the bathroom to press to his head. The gun got shoved into his pocket and he pulled the door open. No one was there, so he made it the few steps to his van and climbed in.

It was hard to think. His head was pounding and that made him angry. The knife wasn’t where he kept it and when he picked up the spool of ribbon, he got blood all over it.

“No, no, no! This isn’t right! It won’t be right. I’ve gotta fix it,” Ray shouted. He was so caught up in what he was doing, he didn’t hear the police cars tear into the lot, or the steps of the two officers that came around the back of the van.

“Hands where we can see them!” the first officer yelled as they drew down on Ray.

“Not yet! I have to do it right!” Ray yelled and threw the ribbon at them. One officer held the gun on Ray while the other grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the van, tossing him to the ground. Before Ray knew it, he was cuffed and seated in the back of a cruiser.

An ambulance pulled up and Caela was loaded up on the stretcher, still unconscious.

The detective that came out with the officers was still on his phone as he spoke to Ian. “Okay, I’m in her room and she’s on her way to the hospital. Looks like she’s just unconscious. Probably a concussion. Now, you said there was a folder on her laptop I should look at?”

Chapter Seven

Ian got ahold of Conal Hughes and Conal flew the two of them up to the Maine Medical Center where Caela was a patient that evening. The perks of being a Hughes were in full display. Caela had a private room and an armed guard outside her door, just in case Ray Atkins had an accomplice. No one thought he did, but they'd rather be safe.

Ian went in to see her while Conal got an update from the doctor. Caela smiled when she saw him, and he sucked in a breath. Her face was bruised, her throat was black and purple - it looked really bad.

"Gods, Cay, did you have to beat him up with your face?" Ian quipped.

"Well, it was either that or vomit on him and this seemed more effective," Caela rasped.

"Your voice," Ian whispered.

"He almost crushed my throat, so my voice is gonna be raspy for a while. Did I hit him or did I imagine that?"

"No, you got him. Grazed the side of his head and made him confused enough for the cops to get him before he could hurt you worse."

"I heard he was still yelling as they drove away. The guard is chatty," she offered as Ian looked surprised.

"Yeah, he's screaming about how he has to finish it and do it right for the art to be pure or some shit. Just rest and heal up, okay? You're gonna be testifying at his

trial. We both are. That file we built has Detective Eames practically crowing. Did you know that he became a cop to solve his sister's murder?"

"Eames...he's Missy's brother?"

"Yeah, Michael Eames. He's older than her by five years. You gave him a gift, Cay-bear."

"And she's a brilliant investigator," Conal said as he entered his daughter's room. "You gave him a gift, and you're my gift," he whispered as he bent over to gently kiss the top of her head.

"Hi, Da. I'm glad it helped him. He got there just in time. Thanks, Ian."

"I got back online while you'd gone out for food. I saw and heard the whole thing from when you opened the door. When I saw it was Atkins, I called the cops right away."

"You saved my life," Caela rasped.

"He sure did. But the way you set things up, you were ready for him. Ian is going to go to the motel and pack up all your gear. The cops have been all over it, but we told them we'd give them a copy of the data if they let us get the company gear back."

"Don't forget my coffee pot. And my gun fell behind the bed. I'm sure the cops found it, but I'll want it back. It's my pink Lady Wesson."

"I'll buy you another," Conal replied as he settled into the chair beside her bed and took her hand.

"How do I get there?" Ian asked Conal.

"Eames had one of the officers drive her SUV over so we could use it. Go get her stuff and come back here. We'll get a room in the Hyatt across the road for tonight."

"Yes, sir. I'll be back shortly."

"Oh, Ian? I'll get us food delivered here, so don't take long. I'd like both of my kids here for dinner."

Ian beamed at that and gave a playful salute before he left the room.

“You scared the fuck outta me, little girl,” Conal rumbled.

“Well, it scared the fuck outta me too, Da. My mind went completely blank. I couldn’t remember a damned thing Mr. Lee taught me. I think I need to get back to training with him and take it up to a different level. I need to know I won’t freeze up again.”

“At least you remembered how to shoot,” Conal teased, but his expression was worried. “We’ll get you back with Lee, you *and* Ian, since you two seem to get into trouble together – but I’ve got another idea too.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll start sending you out on missions where you’re actually at risk. No more ‘all the safe cases’ for you. If you’re going to do this anyway, and you’re going to be so damned good at it, I’m going to make sure you’re equipped. Fuck Jeffries and what he says.”

“What has Jeffries got to do with me not getting other cases?”

“He wanted only safe cases for the women investigators. He’s old school and since it kept *you* safe, I didn’t argue. Even if Tanya nearly quit over it. I’ve been slipping her cases under the table.”

“Tanya is one of your best, Da. Glad you didn’t lose her. Maybe we can work together?”

“I’ll ask her if she’s willing to take you on. Now, rest while I go order food. What do you want to eat?”

“I don’t care as long as it’s not a burger,” Caela replied.

“Mac and cheese, meatloaf, bacon green beans and a chocolate shake?”

“Perfect.”

“I know. It’s what you always wanted to eat when you weren’t feeling good. I’ll take care of it, macushla. Rest. The guard outside the door is one of ours. You’re safe.”

Caela closed her eyes as he stepped out, phone already at his ear. Da was here, everything would be okay.

Chapter Eight

Caela was out of the hospital in three days, and back home in four. Conal hired someone to drive her SUV back to the city and he flew her and Ian home in the helicopter.

Ian stayed with her in the penthouse for almost ten days before she finally tried to throw him out.

“Your plants are probably dead, you’ll have dust in your keyboard and I need my space,” Caela told him.

“I hired someone to water my plants and clean my apartment. You’re in a five thousand square foot penthouse, how much space do you need?” Ian replied.

Caela grabbed the throw pillow beside her and swatted him with it. He wrestled her gently down, then brushed the hair from her face. “You scared me, Cay. I thought I was going to watch you die. Let me hang out for a bit more until I can wake up and not panic that you’re dead?”

Caela lifted a hand to cup his cheek and leaned up to kiss him. “I’m not dead, Ian. I’m fine and you saved me. Even my bruises are fading and my voice is almost normal. Who knows? Maybe I’ll keep the sexy, husky rasp and pretend I’m Mae West.”

Ian pressed his lips to hers and distracted her with some rather delicious kissing. They probably would have ended up in bed, again, if the phone hadn’t started ringing.

“Dammit,” Ian muttered and reached for the phone. “What?”

“Oh, sorry Detective,” Ian said and sat up, then hit the speaker. “Okay, Caela and I are both here.”

“Hi, Ms. Hughes. It’s Detective Eames. The chief would like to give you two an award for bringing down a notorious serial killer. There will be no trial, since Ray hasn’t stopped his rantings and he’s been declared unfit. He’s going to be locked up in a maximum security federal prison’s psych ward for the rest of his life.”

Caela let out a breath. “Oh, thank gods. I didn’t want to face that man across a courtroom anytime soon. I would have, but I really didn’t want to.”

“I get it. I wanted him to see my face and know I was Missy’s brother, but he’s too far gone to even register who I am.”

There was silence on the other end of the call for a long moment, then the detective spoke again, his voice thick with emotion. “I’m sorry, but it just really hit me that it’s done. He’s been caught and Missy’s murderer is being locked up forever. Nothing I can say will express just how much this means to me.”

“You should really thank Patrick Robbins. He wrote about it in his blog and that’s what helped tie it all together. Pun intended. Missy’s ribbons were the signature we needed,” Caela replied.

“Paddy Rob from Lewiston?”

“I think so? I mean, Patrick Robbins was in the same group as Ray and Missy. They all went to school together.”

“Yeah, that’s Paddy. He’s a good man. He lived a couple of houses down from us on the other side of the street when we were growing up. He would walk Missy and Sarah, her friend that lived next door, home from school after practice. He was on the football team and they were cheerleaders. Since practice ended at the same time, he’d wait and make sure they got home okay. I should look him up.”

“I did,” Ian replied. “He’s the owner of Robbins Security, a private security company that does alarm systems and stuff in the area. He tore his knee in college,

playing football, so he couldn't join the force. He did the next best thing, and helps to keep people safe. I'll text you his information."

"That's really good to hear. Thank you, Ian. Okay, I'll leave you two alone, but if you ever need anything, call me. Oh, and the FBI will probably want to talk to you guys. It became their case when the cross-state nature of the murders became known. But there will be no day in court, so you can relax on that."

"Appreciate the call, Detective. Thank you," Caela said and Ian set the phone down when Eames disconnected.

Caela curled up against Ian's shoulder and sighed. "That is one huge relief. And he's locked away forever. I wonder if I'll sleep all night tonight, knowing that now."

"I know I will," Ian replied.

"Let's go out. I want to go dancing and drink until I forget my name, come home and see if my best friend will help me scream his out loud," Caela said.

Ian laughed. "Sure, just remember, we start back up with Mr. Lee tomorrow. If you're hung over, you've got no one to blame but yourself."

"I don't care. We're young and alive, and I want to celebrate that."

"Alrighty then, let's go celebrate."

* * *

At the United States Penitentiary under the control of the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, Ray Elias Atkins sat in his cell. There was a bed, a table, a stool, and a toilet/sink combo, all bolted to the wall or floor. A shelf over the table held a couple of books, and a notepad and thick pencil sat on the table.

Ray was busy with his crayons, though. He colored the picture on the wall and hummed to himself while he did so.

“I’m gonna getcha, yeah, you can betcha. You can bet your bottom dollar; in time you’re gonna be mine. Just like I should – I’ll getcha good. Yeah, I’ve already planned it...” the lyrics to the Shania Twain song, “I’m Gonna Getcha Good!” were not written in the way Ray meant them, but the guard who listened outside the cell, felt the hair stand up on his arms.

“Damn,” he muttered to his fellow guard. “I don’t know who he’s thinking about, but I’m glad he’s in there and we’re out here.”

“The crazy ones are always the worst,” the other guard replied as he lay down his cards. “Gin. That’s two packs of smokes you owe me now.”

The words drifted out of the cell nearby as the cards were shuffled and dealt again.

“Oh, I’m gonna getcha, I’m gonna make it good. You can bet your bottom dollar, in time you’re gonna be mine...”

The End

Want More?

[The Devil Inside - Hughes Investigations #1](#)

Caela wasn’t a ‘nice’ girl.

As a PI for her father’s firm, Caela Hughes had been trained by the best. Now she was the best.

The mystery client wanted to know what Mykos Adamos was up to, and Caela was hired to find out.

A rich playboy, son of a Greek tycoon, Mykos went from the darling of the paparazzi to the man girls were warned to avoid. What tragedy had turned the

playboy into a bad boy? What was he doing, socializing with Saudi princes known for their exotic tastes, or European jet-setters who played in the shadows?

What happens when death stalks Caela and those around her, threatening to bring it all tumbling down?

Also by T.K. Eldridge

The Descendants

[Remembrance](#)

[Revelation](#)

[Revenge](#)

The Sid & Sin Series

[Induction](#)

[Fae MisFortunes](#)

[Shifter Secrets](#)

[Witching Ways](#)

[Mythic Mysteries](#)

The Hybrid Chronicles

[Jericho](#)

[The Originals](#)

[The Next Gen](#)

Hughes Investigations

[Daredevils](#)

[The Devil Inside](#)

[The Devil You Know](#)

[The Devil in the Details](#)

Forge County Mystery Thrillers

[Probable Cause](#)

[Gone on Arrival](#)

[Failure to Appear](#)

Anthologies

[Shifters Gone Wild](#)

[All I Want For Christmas](#)



About the Author

T.K. Eldridge retired from a career in Intelligence for the US Gov't to write. The experiences from then are now being used to feed the muse for paranormal romance, thrillers, supernatural, and urban fantasy stories. When they're not writing, they are enjoying life in the Blue Ridge mountains of western North Carolina. Two dogs, two cats, a garden, a craft hobby and a love of Celtic Traditional music keep them from spending too much time at the computer.

You can connect with me on:

 <https://tkeldridge.com>

 https://twitter.com/eldridge_tk

 <https://www.facebook.com/T.K.E.Eldridge>

Subscribe to my newsletter:

 <https://tkeldridge.com/newsletter>