

# **In the Beginning**

**by Lori Handeland**

- an exclusive short story -

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“In the Beginning”

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## IN THE BEGINNING . . .

by

Lori Handeland

“Murphy. Phoenix. What’s your 10-20?”

My partner, Max, slid me a glance. We were ten minutes from end of shift. Not that it mattered. We were cops. We did what we had to do, regardless of the clock.

I reached for the radio, glanced up at a passing street sign, then answered, “24<sup>th</sup> and Juneau.”

Not the best neighborhood in Milwaukee, but not the worst either. The main claim to fame for our beat was that Dahmer had lived here. Lucky for us they’d torn the apartment building down, ending our chances for a spot on the serial killer bus tour.

Regardless, every few months or so some moron came around looking for the place and wound up mugged or worse. People are not only weird but so damn stupid.

I mean, think about it, if Dahmer had lived in say . . . Mequon? Brookfield? Even Brown Deer, someone would have noticed the smell. That they hadn’t until he’d offed seventeen people gave some indication of the neighborhood.

Anyone with a brain should know you didn’t wander around west of I-43 and north of I-94 asking about Jeffrey. People were understandably touchy on the subject. For that matter so were we. The incident hadn’t exactly been the Milwaukee Police Department’s finest hour.

But I’d like to see some of the naysayers work here for more than fifteen minutes. It wasn’t easy or pretty, but I loved my job—I was never bored; I always felt needed—and most days, I was very good at it.

Of course having a little something extra, as I did, didn’t hurt. The toughest part was keeping the fact that I was psychic a secret.

“Got a possible homicide about two blocks from you.” Gloria, one of the second shift dispatchers, sounded as tired as I felt. She’d been around a lot longer than me—at least thirty years, which might explain her exhaustion.

Not that exhaustion mattered. I’d become a cop to help people. Most of us had. We certainly hadn’t signed on for the snazzy uniforms and embarrassingly generous salary.

Gloria rattled off the exact address, and Max hit the lights and the siren, then pulled a tire squealing U-ee so that we could speed in the right direction.

You’d think that when darkness fell people would get off the streets. Not so much. The cracked sidewalks teemed with kids who should be in bed but had no one to put them there and teens who should be at a ball game or a school dance but had dropped out long ago and wandered the night looking for the kind of action they shouldn’t even know about yet.

Max pulled the squad to a sharp stop on a shady corner. The streetlight was out. From the glass sprinkling the area, it had recently been used in a local game of *Bullseye*. Either young kids threw stones and whoever broke the light “won.” Or slightly older kids, and in some cases young adults, used the lights for target practice.

Pretty much everyone had a gun in our district. Some legal, most not. I couldn’t say I blamed them. If I lived here, I’d keep two. But the overabundance of firearms, combined with alcohol, drugs, unemployment and fury created situations like the one we were about to walk into.

In contrast to the usual crowds on the streets, the area in question was deserted.

“Whaddya think, Liz?” Max asked, his voice the calm in every single storm.

Max was five years older than me, though he seemed more than that. Oh, he didn’t look old, not yet, though I’m certain that would come soon enough. This job aged everyone far ahead of their time.

Max was one of those guys who’d known what he wanted to do with his life since he knew there was something to be done with it. He’d married his high school sweetheart, bought a house in a decent section of town—all cops, firemen, teachers were required to live within the city limits—and proceeded to procreate at an admirable rate,

even for an Irish Catholic. They were up to three kids—two boys and a girl—and I had no doubt they'd produce more in short order.

In truth, I envied Max and Megan their picture perfect life. When Max left me, he went home. That word was something I'd always aspired to but never quite found.

I sighed as my gaze swept the overly silent and still area. Situations like this usually called for me to do something “freaky,” as Max referred to my always accurate hunches.

He suspected something, but he was too grounded in this world, too much a guy's guy to actually admit that anything supernatural could be real, let alone that he'd witnessed it. So he'd say, *Whaddya think?*

Translation: Any vibes comin' your way, partner?

I'd done a little research on psychic phenomenon. There was a lot more of it out there than you might think, and they had names for all the sub-classes. I was what they experts called psychometric. I picked up information or images when I touched certain objects or people.

I'd determined, after a near lifetime of flashes, that strong emotions sent out the images, which made my talent quite handy on the job. Robbery, rape, murder, missing persons—all involved strong emotions on the parts of both victim and victimizer.

I got out of the squad. No body lay anywhere visible, such as the street. No one screamed on their scabbly lawn or howled out the window of their duplex.

I purposely dropped a pen on the ground and when I knelt to retrieve it, trailed my fingertips across the sidewalk. Because of the area, I got slapped with so many images I nearly passed out.

I waited, breathing in and out slowly, until one scenario—the most recent and therefore the one with the strongest vibes—separated from all the others.

A dark slice of night gaping between two buildings. The sound of a shot echoed off the brick. Someone fell, someone else ran away. No faces, no names—not yet, perhaps not ever. My “gift,” or as I liked to call it my hell-sent curse, was hit or miss. Sometimes I saw a lot, sometimes a little and sometimes not one damn thing at all.

There were also those instances when I caught flickers of an evil so deep and dark that I had my doubts it could be human. I always shoved those feelings away, wrote

them off as products of a tough week, a long day. I never told anyone about them. I knew such thoughts were crazy, but I couldn't make them go away any more than I could make the glimpses of truth fade just because I wanted them to.

Opening my eyes, I took a few steps down the street and saw in reality what I'd just seen in my head—an alley that connected this street and the one north of it, a path between two brick apartment houses.

“Better check down there.” I lifted my chin in that direction.

Behind me Max cursed. Alleys sucked. Who knew what could be lurking in doorways, behind dumpsters, even in the apartments above, just waiting to swing open a window and rain hellfire—or bullets—down on us both?

But Max didn't question my instincts. He'd seen me in action too many times.

The other guys on the force thought I was spooky. They'd make comments about my freakishly light eyes, which shone eerily from my darker than Caucasian face, call me “Sixth Sense” and other, far less complimentary, nicknames.

You'd think they would be glad my hunches were so right on. Instead they avoided me as if I had bad breath, BO *and* a highly contagious skin rash.

As a result, unless we were talking life and death, my lips were sealed. However, keeping secret what I saw was, in most cases, more criminal than what I'd seen in the first place.

Max shone the beam of a high power flashlight down the alley. The yellow flare glanced off several puddles left from a recent rain. Garbage lay here and there, a single dumpster hugged the wall at the opposite end. Every few seconds, a shadow flickered as someone walked past the distant opening. The streetlights on that side appeared to work just fine. Figured.

About three quarters of the way down lay our body. From here I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. From here I couldn't tell if it was animal, vegetable or mineral.

Max shut off the flashlight and stowed it on his belt, then he cast me a sidelong look as he unsnapped the leather guard across his sidearm. I did the same.

He lifted a brow, and I shook my head. There wasn't anyone down there with a gun. I knew it as certainly as I knew my name hadn't been Elizabeth Phoenix when I was born. That name had been bestowed on me by some social worker in some town I

couldn't remember, or perhaps by the first of the many foster homes I'd inhabited until my strange talent for knowing things I shouldn't had gotten me thrown out of each and every one.

My gaze held his. Max might be married to Megan, the two more in love than anyone I'd ever seen, but Max and I were partners. A bond that went beyond marriage, children, even friendship.

Out here we faced things together that no one else could understand and the facing of it had forged us into a unit. I trusted Max more than anyone. He trusted me the same way.

Without a word or gesture, just that meeting of the eyes, Max and I went in—him high, me low. No one shot us. Yippee.

Max was a big guy—tall and solid—what they'd called a muscle head in school. He could bench press the bench press and not even break a sweat until he'd been at it for half an hour.

At five-ten, I wasn't a small woman, but it was still easier for me to go in low than for Max. Even when he crouched he was one huge target.

The alley was as empty as I'd sensed it was. We hurried to the victim. A woman. African-American. Middle aged. Natural hair. No make up. Very non-threatening. Why would someone want her dead?

Could she be the victim of a drive by? Had she merely come outside to dump her garbage and been hit by a random bullet ricocheting down the brick alleyway?

But if that were true, there'd be more bodies. Namely the ones the gang bangers had been after in the first place.

We hunkered down next to her. Max felt for a pulse, shook his head. Quickly he checked for ID, found nothing at all. Making this a prime candidate for that old standard: Robbery gone bad.

Straightening, Max moved a few feet away to call in what we'd found. Once the team arrived to deal with the body and the crime scene, Max and I would do our best to figure out what had happened.

For the most part, cases like this went unsolved. No one would have seen anything, and if they had, they wouldn't tell us about it. If the murder was gang related,

telling the cops what you knew would be like putting a gun to your own head. Unless the person on the slab was your mother, brother, sister—and sometimes not even then—a case of community blind, deaf and dumb was the norm.

The officers on our beat had a hundred cases just like this. They took up most of our time. In this district, we didn't even show up for minor offenses, such as a stolen car. There were just too damn many of them.

With Max occupied talking to dispatch, I contemplated the body. She reminded me of Ruthie—the woman who'd accepted me when no one else would.

Ruthie Kane was an ancient black woman who ran a group home on the south side of Milwaukee. She took in problem children—like me—and with a combination of tough love and the knowledge that no matter what you did, she wasn't ever going to let you go—Ruthie turned every single life that she touched around. She'd certainly turned mine. Ruthie was the only person in my life who loved me. Or at least the only person who still did.

I'd been in love. Had my heart shattered too. What young woman in her early twenties hasn't?

Though I hated Jimmy Sanducci, I also missed him sometimes with an ache that would probably never go away. I had Max. He was my best friend. But Jimmy had been my first friend. Jimmy had been my first in a lot of things.

I shook my head, ignoring the twist in my stomach that always followed any thought of Sanducci. He was gone; I was here and I had work to do.

Because this victim looked like Ruthie might have twenty or thirty years ago, I reached out to touch her. I'd learned the hard way that I couldn't touch all of them. Solving every single case would be more suspicious than solving as many as we did. Not to mention that a constant bombardment of past, present and future would make me go stark raving nuts in no time at all. I had to pick and choose.

I also had to hurry. If I waited too long whatever emotion this poor woman had felt would have fled with her spirit.

Yeah, I believed in spirits, ghosts—all that jazz. Not that I'd ever seen one, but sometimes I saw shadows at the edge of my vision, felt things in the dark of the night for

which there was no explanation. How could I see the future, the past, know people's minds and hearts just by touching them, and not believe in things others did not?

Taking a breath, I braced myself, and laid two fingers against her neck as if I were checking her pulse too. Not that I hoped to get one. But I wanted to avoid giving the crime scene techs a stroke if they found my fingerprints anywhere on the body that they shouldn't be.

Images slammed into me. Packages filled with what appeared to be flour—both stark white and fading yellow—other, larger bags of what appeared to be oregano but wasn't. Coke, heroine and marijuana. Blow, smack, weed. By any other name, they were all still death on a spoon, needle or pipe.

Following the flares of the drugs, I saw money changing hands—a lot of it. Then the emotions slammed into me. Not an ounce of remorse—no. Instead I felt the greed, the flare of joy at the sight, scent and sound of the money. Contempt for those who gave it to her. The only worry in her head was how she could sell more and more.

She wasn't concerned about dying. Her clients were rich kids from the suburbs. They came to this side of town to buy booze at first. In this area, no one bothered to ask for ID and the cops had better things to do than stake out a liquor store—unless someone came in and blew away the owner then helped himself to whatever was in the register.

The victim—Ladonne—worked in one of those stores, not because she needed the money, but because she wanted the contacts. Once she sold some stupid kid a bottle of Captain Morgan's it was a quick step to a little pot, and then, hey, why not some coke?

Ladonne had big dreams—the old deluxe apartment in the sky. She had definitely been movin' on up. Until tonight. In my opinion, she was at this moment moving on down to a very hot apartment in hell.

This woman was so far different from Ruthie as to be another species. But I'd discovered that a lot of people who claimed to be human weren't. Sometimes I wondered if the legends of demons were true. Many times, on the street, in the night, I knew that they were.

“Liz?” Max hunkered down on the other side of the body again, and I lifted my gaze.

His broad shoulders obscured any light from the distant street or even the miniscule moon. Despite being Irish, Max was a blue-eyed blonde. He wore his hair short—hell so did I.

I'd learned after only a few weeks on the force that long hair on a cop was just begging for gum to be spit into it. After the third time, I'd hacked off my waist length dark tresses myself. I thought my new "do" looked tousled, but most people asked which prison barber hated me. I didn't care. I had no time for nonsense. The world was burning down around our ears, and it was up to me—and Max—to put out the flames as best we could.

Some nights I went home and couldn't sleep, thinking about all I'd seen—both in reality and in my mind. Some nights I wondered if the world we were trying so hard to save was on the verge of self-destruction. Or perhaps on the edge of doomsday, chaos, Apocalypse—definitely of something.

"What's up?" Max pressed.

"I think she's a drug dealer."

His brows lifted. Ladonne didn't fit the profile, which was probably how she'd managed to stay alive so long. So who had killed her?

I closed my eyes but there was nothing left to see. Shaking my head, I removed my hand from the body.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Max glanced toward the street where we'd left the squad. Unlike most cars in the area, ours should still be there. Stealing a cop car was kind of obvious even in this neighborhood. Not that squads didn't occasionally go missing; we just got them back more quickly. Usually after they'd been used in a high-speed chase and smashed into glorious smithereens. One thing about squad cars, they had great engines. Usually V-eights. Hit the gas hard and next thing you knew you were in the back seat. Car thieves loved that shit.

"I'll go." Max handed me the flashlight, and I nodded. I always stayed with the bodies. That's how I figured things out.

With Max gone, silence rained down. My breathing sounded unnaturally loud, probably because Ladonne wasn't breathing at all.

A rustle in the corner enticed me to turn on the flashlight, just in time to see the long, thin tail of a rat disappear into a hole in the wall. I hated rats. A redundancy if ever there was one. Did the words love and rat really belong in the same sentence?

Where there was one rat, there were more, so I traced the beam of light up one side of the alley, then down the other, wincing at the scrabbling sounds little rat paws made when they scrabbled against the pavement as they hurried to get away.

Something sparkled a few feet from the body. Curious, I leaned over, then frowning, knelt.

A gum wrapper resided half in and half out of a puddle of slime. Nothing new there, except this one was twisted, the shiny side reflecting the flare of the flashlight, the paper side revealing numbers and letters bleeding away into wavering lines of nothingness. I could just make out "24." In truth, what the paper said didn't matter. Who it had belonged to probably did.

My index finger sent out tiny concentric circles as I disturbed the pristine surface. Warm and slightly oily, the water kind of smelled, but none of that mattered. As soon as my skin brushed the smooth shiny wrapper, I saw him.

Pale and blonde. Maybe seventeen or eighteen. Rock star skinny. He ran down a dark street lined with mostly boarded up houses. Here and there, a light casted against an unbroken window. A dog barked. From the shape of the moon, the scene was recent past if not present.

The kid gasped, clutched his stomach, then skirted around the back of one of the empty houses. In the deserted alley behind sat a tan Mercedes. He lifted a shaking hand and pushed a button on a set of keys. The taillights flared as the locks disengaged.

Sheesh. A Mercedes? This kid was just asking to die.

I squinted, trying to see the license plate but I couldn't. He got into the vehicle, hit the locks again, then disappeared from view.

The next instant I was inside too. The moon spilled through the windshield, revealing the sweat on his skin. He scratched at his arms so hard he left tracks of red behind.

"Heroin," I murmured.

Smack had made its way to the suburbs and become a real problem. The amount of kids sent to rehab in the ritzy areas of this city was staggering.

The boy had classic symptoms of withdrawal-scratching, sweating, paranoia, stomach cramps. I'm sure it had contributed to the murder of Ladonne. I could hear his high priced lawyer now using the kid's "illness" as an excuse.

The wind picked up, rustling the trees, blowing garbage along the back alley. A tin plate smacked into the side of the Mercedes, and the kid started up, pulling a gun—the gun—from the deep pocket of his too large Khaki shorts.

Looked like a Beretta. Semi automatic. Frequently used for home defense. Kid had probably taken it from his parents' safe, if not their nightstand.

His gaze darted left, right. The gun twitching first one way and then the other before he took a deep breath and lay down again.

Why wasn't he hightailing it back to suburbia before someone found him? He'd be better off if it was me and Max rather than anyone else who might be looking. For instance, Ladonne's family, friends, her business associates. Or just some A-hole strolling along and discovering a moron in a Mercedes.

I heard Max greeting the techs. With a last glance at Ladonne, I hurried back to the street.

"We can start interviewing in the buildings," Max began.

I shook my head, jerked my thumb at the car. Max took one look at my face and got in.

"West two blocks, then north one."

Max didn't comment, he just started the car and pulled away from the curb.

There were people of the opinion that a murder like this should remain unsolved. Who cared if there was one less dealer on the streets? Especially when the perpetrator was some rich kid who'd no doubt get off with a slap on the wrist anyway.

But in my opinion, murder was murder and it wasn't okay. I'd seen enough people on the edge to know that one little thing could push them over. If we let the kid slide on this, no telling what he'd think up next.

"Here." I pointed to the dark street I'd already run down in my mind. Max swung the squad right.

Though a lot of the houses were abandoned several were not. At the sound of a car, a few working girls came onto their porches. As soon as they saw the squad car, they went right back inside. If we'd been anyone other than cops, they'd have come out and made a deal. There were certain side streets around here so full of prostitutes that headlights brought them forth like a swarm of starving locusts descending on a field of luscious wheat.

Max and I avoided those streets unless summoned. We had better things to do than arrest hookers. Myself, I'd prefer to arrest only the johns but no one would let me.

"Stop here," I murmured, and Max slid the squad to the curb, turned off the engine, killed the lights.

Max never asked how I knew the things that I knew. Instead, he just waited patiently for me to tell him what I'd seen.

"Suburban kid. Seventeen or eighteen. Blonde. Super skinny. Khaki shorts, sandals, navy blue button down and a Beretta."

"Which he obviously knows how to use."

"It isn't brain surgery to pull a trigger," I said. More's the pity.

"Any clue where he is?" Max flapped his hand to indicate the dark, shadowed houses. "Or do we get to check them all?"

"I've got a hunch he didn't go inside. Let's take a look around the back."

Max knew my hunches were more like a newsflash, so he called in our location, then we pulled out our weapons, and I led the way.

As soon as we cleared the houses, the Mercedes came into view exactly where I'd "seen" it. Max snorted at the sight. I didn't need to glance over my shoulder or roll my eyes.

I knew what Max was thinking because it was what I was thinking. Idiots came in all sizes, colors, sexes and tax brackets. The only prerequisite we'd found for stupidity was human DNA.

Quietly we crept past the overgrown yards on either side of us. Max stayed back as I moved forward, gun out in a two handed stance.

Adrenaline coursed through me, enough to make me alert but not so much that I became jittery. This wasn't the first time I'd approached a car with Max. In our district

there was always a better than average chance the occupant was not only armed but a felon. For the two of us, this situation was just another day at the office.

Sure, most times when we made a traffic stop, we could see the driver because he'd been driving. Any fast moves and bam! One shot into the nearest window usually scared them enough to end any thoughts of resistance.

Usually. There were always those who thought they were Jesse James.

"You in the car." I kept my voice calm. No need to freak the kid out more than he already was.

The moon shone down just enough so we could see inside. Thankfully the windows weren't tinted as was so common these days. I hated those things.

"Milwaukee PD," I continued in the same non-threatening conversational tone. "I want to see your hands."

Nothing. Not a movement. Not a sound.

I cast Max a quick glance, and he shrugged. So I made a wide berth of the back end, walking sideways down the side of the car, far enough away that I'd be able to react to any sudden movements from inside. If I saw that Beretta, I planned to kiss asphalt at light speed.

More than likely, the kid was unconscious, which meant we needed to get an ambulance here and quick.

"Hey!" I yelled, louder, sharper. "Hands. Now."

Still nothing.

Max jerked his head at the car, and I inched toward it, then peeked inside.

The vehicle was empty.

I stood there blinking through several beats of my slightly elevated heart rate.

"Liz?" Max murmured.

I didn't look at him, just held up one hand. *Hold on.*

This was so strange. I'd seen the kid in this car. He had to be here. I wrapped my fingers around the door handle, and got I another newsflash.

"Max!" I turned, crouching, swiveling toward my partner, but it was too late.

The twitching, sweating, stupid junkie kid shot him.

Sure he wore his vest. Didn't do a damn bit of good. Because when I yelled, when I turned, he knew—in that way we had, that mental telepathy of partners, of pals—that he should turn too.

And just like me, he crouched as he swiveled—the instinct to become smaller, to move rather than just stand still, causing the bullet to miss his vest completely and plunge into his neck instead.

Max crumpled. The kid stood right behind him—exactly as I'd seen in the useless, worthless, too-little-too-late, waste of a brain flash.

I shot him. What choice did I have?

The kid didn't die. I was a much better shot than he was, and I aimed for his leg. He sued the city anyway. I should have aimed higher.

Max Murphy was twenty-seven when he died.

I wished it had been me.

However, I learned in the years to come that my life had a purpose, that I could see things I should not for a very good reason.

Those demons I sensed . . .

They were real.

**~ End ~**