

## The World of Jonathan Stride

My name is Jonathan Stride.

Until recently, I was the lieutenant in charge of the Detective Bureau in the city of Duluth, Minnesota, where I spent my whole life. I never thought I'd leave the city. All my ghosts are buried there – my parents, my first wife – and without my ghosts, I'm not sure who I am. I'm homeless.

Even so, I left Duluth. I moved to Las Vegas in the middle of the summer, which is like volunteering to jump into a forest fire. I moved because of a woman named Serena Dial. More about that later.

To understand me, you have to understand where I grew up. Duluth is a city of extremes. It's on the shore of Lake Superior, where the big lake juts like an arrowhead into the city's heart. To the north, the great wilderness of Canada knocks on our doorstep. Our streets are crazy-steep, like you'd find in San Francisco. Duluth is cold, too. I don't mean just the ice and snow, but the people. When you narrow your eyes against the wind and feel your skin freeze when you step outside, you can become a little closed off. You learn not to show the world your emotions. Sometimes you don't see them at all until they burst out in violence.

You have to be tough and strong to live in Duluth. Don't expect me to wear a suit and tie and sit behind a desk. I'm tall, and my hair is wavy like the lake on a windy day, with streaks of gray. My eyes are dark. Pirate eyes, my wife used to call them. I wear jeans I bought a long time ago and a coat with a bullet hole in the sleeve where a close friend shot me, an instant before he shot himself. That's life where I come from.

Living in Duluth made me believe that every missing person takes a gouge out of your soul that you can't replace. That's why I loved my job. Duluth isn't a big city like L.A. or New York, where people die or disappear and are quickly forgotten. It's a city that thinks it's a small town. When people go missing there, it's still a big deal. I was the one who didn't forget about the bodies in the snow, or the teenagers who didn't come home, or the crimes from long ago. When I solved them, I could bring a little peace to the families. I couldn't replace what was taken away, but I could answer some of their questions. Who. Why.

I've made mistakes along the way. I don't always handle my own emotions well, and sometimes they get the better of me. My first wife, Cindy, told me that women would spin me like I was on a merry-go-round my whole life. She was right. I have a blind spot for any woman who needs me, even if that woman turns out to be as immoral as the killers I've hunted.

I handled a case recently involving a woman like that. It haunted me for years. It started when I had just lost Cindy to cancer and when I was struggling with the disappearance of a teenage girl I couldn't solve. By the time I figured out who killed Rachel Deese, and what kind of girl she really was, I had crossed some lines a police officer never should cross.

That's why I left the job. Left Duluth. Left my home.

It was also because of a woman I met while solving the case. Serena Dial. She's a homicide detective in Las Vegas, tall and sexy, with a past she's trying to run from, a

past that makes her build a wall around her emotions. Sound familiar? I thought so, too. Maybe, just maybe, we're made for each other. Maybe in life you do get second chances.

So that's what brought me to the neon city. To another city of extremes.

The truth is, I'm not sure I'm going to make it here. I love Serena, but I'm a fish out of water in this town. I need the cold, water, and wilderness to make me whole. In the desert, I feel like I'm going to waste away and die. This city is all about sex and power, money and skin. It's not the casino bosses and the rich tourists who get my sympathy here. It's the people on the street, living in shadows. It's the victims. I can't stay away from them.

That's why I'm back on the police force again. The call just came in tonight about a body on the sidewalk outside the glittering Oasis hotel. I can feel the adrenaline of being back on the job.

I'm going to meet my new partner. I'm going to find out who this victim is and who killed him. Because whether I'm in Las Vegas or Duluth, some things don't change. A dead body still takes a gouge out of my soul.