



# LET ME IN

ADAM NICHOLLS

LET ME IN

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MORGAN YOUNG (BOOK 1)

ADAM NICHOLLS



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*For Charlotte, who has been there since the beginning. This, as with everything I  
do, is for you.*

LET ME IN

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## CHAPTER ONE

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The killer pressed his shaking finger against the doorbell, licking his lips as he anticipated tonight's big kill. Shadows moved behind the door's blurred pane, making his blood rush through him like a flood. This was it, he realized: another brutal murder.

It was a man who answered the door. He was tall, handsome in an obvious kind of way, but the killer couldn't understand what the fuss was about. There was nothing special about him—no particular feature that made him a good catch. But he supposed that didn't matter.

After all, he had less than a minute to live.

"Pizza time," the killer said with the biggest grin he could muster. That cheesy smile would take him a long way, especially when coupled with the uniform he'd so easily acquired. He reached into the delivery bag, feeding his arm deep inside to reach the empty box.

"We didn't order any pizza," the man said, hidden behind his door.

We. That was the word he'd been looking for. That was all the proof he needed that Mr. Handsome wasn't the only one in the house that night. Another flood of excitement coursed through him like fuel hurled into a fire. He fought to control himself.

"Are you sure?" the killer asked. He froze with his hand inside the bag for dramatic effect.

"Yes, I'm sure. Now if you don't mind, I have—"

"I'm so sorry," the killer said, removing his hand and clipping the bag shut.

“I didn’t mean to bother you. It’s just that we get a lot of crank calls. You know, kids ordering to other places as a sort of stupid game. We’ve all been there.”

“Right.” The man nodded, stepping back to close the door.

The killer reached out and stopped it. “Actually...”

“What now?”

“Could I maybe use your bathroom? I have a long night of rounds, and I can’t hold my water too well.”

Mr. Handsome studied him with the too-stern eyes of a school principal. Maybe he was—the killer hadn’t done any research on this man outside of social media, which could only tell so much. All the same, his eyes bulged with the same arrogance as in his pictures.

Finally, he sighed and opened the door. “Fine. But be quick. Second door on the left.”

The killer forced out another smile and hurried inside, dumping his delivery bag on the polished hallway unit. Assaulted by the powerful scent of potpourri, he hurried into the bathroom and locked the door, his adrenaline taking over. He could barely believe he was actually in their home—after all this time watching the man’s wife and feeling like a filthy dog who wasn’t allowed in, it came down to something as easy as stealing a uniform and asking to use the bathroom. It seemed too good to be true.

Catching his breath, he stood over the sink and gawked at himself in the mirror. He looked as ridiculous as he felt, and he quickly grabbed the stupid cap from his head, tearing it off and tossing it to one side. His sweaty hair was matted to his head, but that was okay; he was still recognizable, and that was all he wanted. The look on her face would be priceless, and he couldn’t wait to see it.

The next thing he did was final. He pulled the kitchen knife from his pocket, knowing there was no coming back from it now. He was too far invested, and giving up when he was so close was both stupid and cowardly. There was no way he could live with himself if he didn’t finish what he’d set out to do, and with that, he reached for the bathroom doorknob, gave it a twist, and received an unsettling shock.

The husband—the son-of-a-bitch do-gooder—stood right beside the door. The empty pizza box in his hand must have told him a lot, but it undoubtedly left a lot of questions. His piercing eyes turned fierce, and those principal vibes returned to his red face. “What the hell’s going on here? Who are you?”

There was no time for questions. The killer didn’t hesitate. The knife came up in a flash, and he thrust it into the man’s stomach. The squelching noise was satisfying, but nowhere near as electrifying as the adrenaline that flooded through the killer’s veins. He watched the man buckle, sinking forward and reaching for the knife with all the strength of a gnat. His mouth opened, and he mouthed a word that looked like “Carrie.”

A foolish choice of last words, if you asked the killer.

The twitching body showed only a little sign of life as it slumped to his feet, falling off the knife like warm butter. The thud echoed down the hallway. The killer stood over his fallen victim, his skin growing hot while a new shadow grew across the rug in front of the open doorway.

“Richard?”

The killer smiled for real this time, his lips parting as he sucked in a large breath. He gripped the knife tighter and stormed forward, his heavy footfalls padding on the thick rug. This was the one he’d come for—the one he’d spent years thinking about. This was the one he fantasized about when he lay in bed late at night, dreaming of taking yet another human life.

This was the one that would start it all.

After that, there would be others.

## CHAPTER TWO

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“**Y**ou should answer it.”

Morgan’s ears popped like a balloon at the sound of her voice. It was a soft, gentle voice, but when it broke his exhausted stare from the passing city of Washington outside the car window, it made him start. He craned his neck toward her, examining her pale cheeks as the passing lights brightened them. She was still as beautiful as the day they’d met. Now, at the mutual age of thirty-four, he felt as though he was aging far worse than she was.

“Honey?” she prompted, gesturing to the cradle by the vents where his phone sat.

It wasn’t until then that he noticed it: his cell phone lit up like Times Square, his best friend’s name plastered across the long screen. It was always great to hear from Gary, but after putting so much effort into finding the perfect restaurant for his wife’s birthday dinner, he didn’t want to tear away from the perfect evening for whatever morbid crime Gary had stumbled upon. Besides, Gary worked for Washington’s homicide department, whereas Morgan was a breed of his own—a private investigator. It sounded sophisticated, but the bottom line was that he was a cop who chose his own hours, and eight o’clock on his wife’s birthday was hardly the time to be working.

“Let it go to voicemail,” he said, returning his gaze to the outside world, where the black sky was lit up by illuminated signs and the orange glow of streetlights. “Have you enjoyed your birthday? Was the meal okay? I know you like the restaurant, so I thought—”

“It’s been the best. But don’t let me keep you from your friend.”

“You think I want to work tonight?”

Rachel giggled. “When do you *not* want to work?”

“I guess you got a point.”

There was rarely any point in trying to hide his work obsession from her. Hell, she was just as bad; there was no limit to her efforts over at HUCINS, a children’s charity founded by herself and two others who were no longer in the picture for their own reasons (it stood for: *Help for Underprivileged Children in Need of Saving*). The difference was that Morgan was paid reasonably well for his work, while Rachel considered the knowledge she’d changed a kid’s life payment enough, taking only a small paycheck as CEO. To take more would feel like she was taking advantage, she’d said, and Morgan had always admired her altruism—it was one of the many reasons he loved her, and he often believed his understanding of that was one of the reasons she loved him back. It was, as he always put it, a match made in Heaven.

The phone went dark only for a moment before it lit up again. Gary’s name stretched across the screen once more, causing Morgan’s heartbeat to speed up. Gary wasn’t exactly the kind of person to call a second time unless it was important, and in their line of work, “important” meant some kind of tragedy had taken place. Morgan knew, however, that picking up that phone would be the start of a new job, which in turn would mean the end of Rachel’s birthday. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—do that to her.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Rachel said. “Please get the damn phone.”

Morgan felt a smile tug at his lips. “Why, do you want to get rid of me?”

“Always,” she teased.

“You won’t feel bad?”

“Why should I?”

Morgan shrugged, his eyes still on the phone. “Because it’s the one night of the year you’re absolutely guaranteed to have my undivided attention.”

“Just one? Is that all?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

Rachel sighed, leaned forward, and pushed the green icon.

Before Morgan could protest, Gary's firm voice echoed through the speaker. But there was something different about it tonight; his confidence had vanished, the authority drained, leaving only a worried quiver in his pronunciations. "Are you there? Morgan?"

"I'm here," Morgan said, staring at Rachel. She was focused on the road with a thin smile edging onto the corner of her mouth. He would get his revenge for that sneaky move, and it was quite likely to come in the form of a savage tickle.

"Thank God. I could really use your help."

Morgan's heart continued to race as he silently prayed there wouldn't be work tonight. He'd really been looking forward to settling down with the woman of his dreams, curling up on the couch and watching a trashy romance movie before heading to bed. He needed that, sure, but Rachel had been working so hard lately, and he desperately wanted to reward her with that much. "Let me guess. Homicide?"

"And then some. Where are you?"

"Nearly home. Why?"

"Because I'm on your doorstep."

The call ended there, leaving them in silence as Rachel turned the wheel onto their street. As promised, Gary's car was at the end of their driveway, and his athletic silhouette lurched in front of the light on the front porch. As they pulled over and Rachel killed the engine, Morgan and Rachel paused, staying in the dark for a moment longer.

"I'm sorry," Morgan said, loosening his tie and unhooking his top button. There was no way he would forgive himself for how tonight would end, and although he knew she'd understand—even encourage him—he couldn't help but feel awful.

"Listen, I've had the best birthday in years. I'm going to head inside and draw a bath, throw on some Aretha Franklin, and relax. If you're home in time you can join me, and if I'm still awake we can celebrate properly, but until then you have a very important job to do." Rachel leaned over, offering a sweet sample of the same perfume she'd worn for years. It was as enticing now as it had been when they'd met all those years ago. "Now go."

Morgan kissed her hard on the lips, swiftly tucking stray strands of hair over her ear. He watched her eyes—kind, loving eyes that glowed in the moonlight—and then reached for the door handle at the same time as Rachel reached for hers.

That was the end of her birthday, and they both knew it.

The moment he shut the door, he traipsed around the car and leaned against the driver's side, watching her bound up the porch steps. From afar, he heard Rachel mumble and laugh, accepting a birthday kiss on the cheek from Gary before disappearing inside.

Gary took his chance to approach. His solemn expression spoke volumes.

"Good night?" he asked.

"It was."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be." Morgan patted him on the shoulder. He could barely *get* mad at this best friend and work acquaintance, much less *stay* mad. They'd known each other far too long for something like work to stand between them. All those sweltering Washington summers they'd spent together as kids—all the teenage dramas and fights over girls—were simply trials for their unbreakable bond. Even now, as grown men who had the poor fortune of seeing the sicker side of human nature for a living, they were yet to find their true test of friendship. "I'm guessing there's a good reason you're showing up like this?"

Gary stood up straight, exhaling in a long, slow breeze as he looked up and down the street. It was a rarity to see him like this; the renowned detective often maintained a cool exterior that everyone on the force envied. But something was different tonight. He shivered in spite of how warm the breeze was, and he avoided eye contact as much as possible. "There's been a homicide across town. I need your help."

"Yeah, you said that. Care to elaborate?"

"Can't I just show you?"

"This sounds bad."

"It is."

Morgan watched him, taking in every detail of his body language. He knew Gary better than he knew himself, and if it didn't turn out that something had

struck him on a personal level he'd be surprised. Gary had always been one of the good guys—as kids, the amount of beatings he took for being a white guy hanging out with a black guy were countless, but it didn't stop him for even a second. Morgan always appreciated how easy it'd made his school years, and he supposed he owed him at least something.

“Well?” Gary pressed. “Are you with me?”

Morgan stood up straighter and made his way toward Gary's car. “We'll see.”



## CHAPTER THREE

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The murder site was a buzz of reporters, police officers, and onlookers from the local community. Camera flashes lit up the bustling crowd as people pushed and shoved to get a better view of nothing; the police had the scene wrapped up so tight nobody could get in.

Nobody except Morgan.

He kept close to Gary, squeezing through the civilians with his heart in his throat. There was no telling what he would find inside. There was a double homicide—he knew that much—but the details had remained a mystery. Gary probably thought it would be more impactful this way, and Morgan had to admit it worked.

Gary flashed his badge to an officer and said something Morgan couldn't hear with all the ambient noise. Waiting on his own for only a second, Morgan scanned the crowd out of curiosity but found nothing. Still, that kind of inquisition was never wasted; the clues were often in the small things, and it never hurt to be aware of your surroundings.

A minute later, Gary waved him in. Morgan trailed behind him with his hands stuffed into his coat pockets, careful not to touch anything. They entered the house, where forensics took more photographs and officers hurried between the rooms. Morgan had never been a police officer, but he'd been let onto enough crime scenes to understand the anarchy that surrounded him. Everyone in a position of authority liked things a certain way, and that made it a nightmare for those on the ground. Morgan didn't envy them.

“This is where the husband was stabbed,” Gary said, gesturing to the stained rug outside an open bathroom door. “Careful where you stand.”

Morgan noted the bloodstain and took a deep breath to steady himself. If this was only a sideline feature, he was scared to imagine what the main event looked like. “Where’s the body? With the coroner?”

“It will be soon. Follow me.” Gary held out an arm to make his way through a gathered group of officers, everyone huddled close together in the narrow hallway. “The killer dragged the body into this room, but we don’t know why. The other victim... Well, see for yourself.”

Morgan’s eyes took control then, leading him to view one of the worst things he’d ever seen. If he’d been more prepared, he would’ve taken a few seconds to collect himself before looking, but the heat of the moment had consumed his senses and put him on edge.

What he looked down at was beyond disgusting.

The husband lay at the feet of a seated woman—presumably his wife—whose legs were laced with thick trails of blood. A thick patch of scarlet covered her stomach, likely a result of multiple puncture wounds. Probably what killed her, Morgan thought, but he could only pray that’d happened *before* her face had been torn to shreds; flaps of skin and chunks of flesh hung from her bloodied face, obscuring her identity. The wide circle of horror on her mouth, however, promised little in the way of a swift, painless murder.

The image knotted his stomach.

“There’s an official ID on the body,” Gary said, turning his back to the gruesome scene as he ran a shaking hand through his thick, messy hair. “I’d ask if you recognize her, but you can see as well as I can.”

Morgan turned away too, his stomach unsettled and a vile watery taste filling his dry mouth. It was beginning to make sense now—the way Gary had been acting about this particular murder, why he’d been so unusually demanding that Morgan attend the crime scene. All the pieces fell into place too easily, and the identity of the female victim became clear in a heartbeat. “This is her, isn’t it? Carrie?”

Carrie Whittle had been Gary’s first love. They were high school sweethearts

and went on to live together for two of the nine years they'd been an item. Whatever happened after that had been kept a secret, and Gary later went on to start a new life with Hannah, a woman perfectly suited to him, as far as Morgan could see. Everything had turned out for the best, but although Gary would never admit it, it was obvious he'd never truly gotten over Carrie.

"The bastard hurt her," Gary said, his voice weak again. He spun around, locking his moist eyes with Morgan's while he scratched his moustache—a thing he often did as a kind of reset before he took action. Some people blew out a breath or simply said, "Right," but not Gary. A ruffle of his facial hair seemed to be all he needed. "Here's the thing: the captain knows I have a past with the victim and doesn't want me on the case. I've tried telling him I want to be the one investigating, but he thinks a desire for revenge might cloud my judgment."

Morgan nodded. He had an idea where this was going. "What do *you* think?"

"Maybe he's right." Gary began to pace the room, folding his arms and lowering his head. "But I could live without the pressure. Can you imagine if I investigated but never got the answers I wanted? I'd have to go the rest of my life knowing I failed to avenge Carrie."

"I get it," Morgan said, now folding his arms too. "Don't forget about Hannah either. I know she'll understand what you're going through, but she probably won't like being a sounding board to your feelings about a past love."

"Right."

Morgan sighed, glancing over his shoulder at the nearby officers. The room was growing quiet now, and the coroner was probably due any minute. Whatever they had to discuss, that curtain would need closing fast. "I'm guessing the reason you summoned me here was to put me on the case. Is that it?"

"How would you feel about that?"

Morgan wasn't sure, and that probably showed in his hesitation. As always, he wanted to help his best friend, and it just so happened that homicide investigation was his specialty, but what if he suffered the same problems as Gary? Morgan had only met the victim on a handful of occasions, but what if his loyalty to Gary stood in the way? Not only that, but if he failed to get answers, would it drive a wedge into their friendship? "I don't know. I mean, there are

other detectives in the department. Can't they just—"

"It has to be you, Morgan."

"Don't first-name me, pal. You're above that."

Gary grunted, wiped his eye, and gave a semi-genuine half smile. He stopped in front of the window, his lanky frame hunched over his folded arms as his chest rose and fell in heaves. "Look, you're a damn good investigator, and I know you get things done. The captain doesn't always agree with me on that, but even he can't deny the results."

Morgan nodded. "I'm flattered. What does he have to say about me taking this case?"

"He doesn't know."

"Jesus, Gary."

"But he will."

"When?"

"Soon. The point is, I have a personal attachment to this case, and I want it solved. If it's left in the hands of a second-rate detective and these morons, it'll just end up another unsolved investigation." Gary hiked a thumb over his shoulder at the officers. "We have some evidence to get you started on, and I'll even pay you for your services."

Morgan rubbed his eyes and checked his watch—one hour had passed since he'd left Rachel. That bath of hers was sure to be cold by now, so it wasn't like he was getting home in time anyway. "What kind of evidence?"

Gary looked up, excitement flashing in his eyes. "A baseball cap was found in the bathroom. From a pizza place. Tell me you'll look into it. Please, Morgan. If ever I needed help from you, this is the time."

The pressure was already becoming too much, but Morgan was hardly the type of guy to let down a friend when he was in need. With that in mind, however, the problem remained that this case wasn't necessarily solvable.

But should that keep him from trying?

"Okay," he finally said, ignoring Gary's hopeful grin. "I'll give it my best shot, but I'm not making promises, and I won't take your money. If that much is clear, then I'll start right away, but you have to remember I can only do my best."

Do we understand each other?"

"Definitely. Thank you, Morgan."

Morgan sighed. "Let's take a look at that evidence."

## CHAPTER FOUR

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The killer stood among the crowd, reveling in the glory of his kill. There were so many people around, and it was all because of him—all because of the work he'd done on Carrie Whittle. The police would have no clue either, as he'd been so careful at the scene.

Although there was that one thing...

Leaving the pizza hat at the crime scene was hardly his crowning moment, but everybody made mistakes. This was one that could cost him dearly, he knew, but at least he could learn from it and move on. Sure, the police now had his fingerprints, and probably hair from the hat, but at least they weren't in the system. As far as he knew, that was.

The people around him shuffled, making way for newcomers on the scene. From where he stood, beginning to perspire among the ever-shifting collection of spectators, the killer saw a familiar face approach the tape. There was no telling quite how he knew him, but the killer had one of those feelings—a knowing that'd been buried in his past. Maybe they'd crossed paths once or twice in their younger years, or maybe he'd just seen the guy on the news before, but he definitely recognized him somehow. And if the man recognized him too?

The killer shrunk back between the civilians.

After showing his detective badge to the officer, the man went into the house, ushering a tall, well-built black man through the doorway. This face was new to him. He couldn't have been a cop—the way he followed the leader made him appear far too detached for that—so maybe he was a hired hand. Or worse:

an apprentice.

Whoever they were wasn't important. What *was* important was the work he'd just done. After stabbing the husband and discovering he was still alive, he'd moved on to the wife, who'd stumbled into the hallway and had all of three seconds to understand what she was seeing. The man she'd married was bleeding out all over their hideous rug, and she wouldn't be far behind. From there, he'd chased her into the dining room and grabbed her hair, yanking her onto the floor. The killer had mounted her, taking his knife to her face and making some adjustments. Even if she'd lived through that, she probably wouldn't have wanted to; he'd taken away her beauty, which was the only thing to redeem her foul attitude. The killer had enjoyed every second of taking that away from her, laughing at her howls and screams as he sliced those perfect cheeks right off her horrified face.

"Move it, people."

The strong, authoritative voice of a police officer broke his trance. The people around him—the sheep—shuffled and pushed, stepping back only when two officers and a wooden barricade forced them to. The killer moved with them, enjoying the excitement of the murder scene, grinning at the flashing red and blue that lit up everyone's faces. It was the blue of something pleasant, like the ocean, but the red was deep like blood, and it took him back to the moment he'd completed his surgery.

He had stabbed Carrie in the stomach. Multiple times, in fact, but not before dragging the husband in to watch. Mr. Handsome had scowled, wheezed, and cried as his wife was killed in front of him, and then his time had come. Only minutes later had the killer abandoned the uniform and returned to see his work incognito.

It was a beautiful memory he would hold dear, but he couldn't linger on it too long. There was more work to do, after all, and if he focused too much attention on this one, he was sure to make a mistake with his next victim, and she wasn't too far away.

Not far at all.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Morgan supposed it was time to get to work. It'd been months since his last case, and perhaps that had contributed to his stagnation. Unemployment—at least, not having a current case to focus on—could be torture on the mind. On the other hand, it gave him time to spend with Rachel. When she wasn't running a charity event anyway.

Gary had given him all he needed to start: a look at a baseball cap from Pizza Palace. The officers who found the victims' bodies had found it in the bathroom, and it matched the bag and empty box found in the hallway. The presumption was that the killer had either dressed as a pizza delivery guy to gain entry to their home, or he was an incredible dumbass who happened to leave some easy evidence lying around.

Morgan doubted it was the latter.

While Gary held a temporary suspension on the evidence, Morgan had time to reach Pizza Palace before the police did. The building was only a few blocks away, sitting on the corner with a wide double door and plenty of room to sit and eat. The inside gave a rich aroma of hot cheese and bread, making Morgan's stomach growl like a feral dog. His watering mouth made him forget that he'd already eaten tonight, but he wasn't here to eat so much as he was to work. That much was easy to remember.

Customers brushed past him as he approached the counter and asked to see the manager. The black-haired, crow-faced man behind the counter paused before responding, as if a poor choice of words could put him behind bars.



“Who’s asking?” he finally said.

“Morgan Young. I’m a PI.”

“Well, he’s not here.”

“He’s not?”

“Did I stutter?”

Morgan checked over his shoulder to ensure he wasn’t holding up a line, but he also knew there was only a certain amount of time before the police arrived, and if they didn’t cause difficulties for him, he didn’t know what would. “Look, nobody wants to talk to the cops if they can help it—I get it—but a married couple was murdered tonight, and one of your worker’s hats was found at the crime scene. Do you realize how bad that looks?”

The man’s face grew deep red. He rested his hands on the counter, squeezing his fingers—all the traits of a guilty man, or could it simply be that he was anxious of police involvement? A storm of officers would be bad for business, and they both knew it.

“I’m the manager,” he confessed.

“Pleased to meet you.” Morgan stood up straight. “Do you know of any reason why the hat might be at the crime scene?”

“Not a clue.”

“How many employees do you have, Mr....?”

“Morales. And I have six employees.”

“Where are they tonight?”

“Here. Why?”

“Every one of them?”

“What is this, Twenty Questions?” Mr. Morales snapped.

Morgan took a deep breath. People could be difficult, that was no secret, but fatigue was coming for him, blurring his vision and making him weak. The enticing smell wasn’t doing much to help either. “I just need to get the facts straight.”

Two customers shuffled in, and Mr. Morales gave a short wave as if he knew them. It was like a signal that he wouldn’t be long. He sighed. “My nephew, Rico, recently requested a new uniform. He said it was stolen, but I guessed he

just left it at home and didn't want to take the blame, you know?"

"Is he here now?"

"In the corner."

"Mind if I talk to him?"

Mr. Morales shrugged. "Don't take too long. It gets busy soon."

"Thank you."

Morgan left the counter and glanced around the tables. As promised, a young man who looked just like his uncle sat in the corner booth. He wore a crisp, new Pizza Palace uniform that was yet to be ironed, and he stared at Morgan with the same black-ringed eyes as Mr. Morales. "Are you Rico?"

"Who's asking?"

The bluntness of his reply told Morgan he'd found the right guy. Without asking or waiting for an invite, he slid into the booth opposite the boy, keeping his hands clasped in front of him. It was an easy technique he'd learned from a reputable detective many years ago—when suspects are being questioned, they like to see your hands. It relaxes them, lets them know you're not about to pull out a gun or a pair of handcuffs.

"Your uncle tells me you had a uniform vanish on you. What can you tell me about that?"

Rico stared over Morgan's shoulder at his uncle, then returned his attention to the subject at hand. "Just that. I came in to pick up my paycheck, and my uniform was on the hanger. My uncle asked me to start work early, so I went for my uniform, but by then it'd gone missing."

Morgan kept his voice low and soft. "When was this?"

"What does it matter?"

"Two people were murdered tonight, and the killer was wearing your uniform. Trust me, it matters."

Rico's eyes widened. He shook his head from side to side. "What? I—I didn't do it."

"I know you didn't," Morgan said. "Your uncle already told me you were here all night. But let me give you a piece of advice: if you're this uncooperative when the police come asking questions, they won't be looking in your favor."

“What am I supposed to do, then?”

“Start by answering the question.”

“What was it again?”

Morgan shifted in his seat. “When was the uniform stolen?”

“Uh... Yesterday.”

“What time?”

“Late afternoon. Why?”

Morgan craned his neck and studied the walls, scanning around for a security camera. To his relief, he found two. One was by the front door looking down at the entrance, while the other kept a watchful eye on the counter. “Do those work?” he asked, pointing.

“Not the one above the door. That’s just to scare thieves.”

“It didn’t help, did it?” Morgan said, smiling.

Rico smiled back, displaying a plethora of black and yellow teeth. It wasn’t a pretty sight, but the joke seemed to settle him, even if only a little. He pointed back at the camera with one hand that shook like a leaf in the fall wind. “That one works. My uncle was getting fed up of staff taking money from the cash register, so he keeps it on.”

“Can’t say I blame him. Where do you hang your coats?”

“Over there.” Rico adjusted his pointed fingers to a wall opposite the camera.

Given the circumstances, Morgan didn’t have much faith in his abilities to track the killer, and his typical luck meant it’d probably turn up nothing, but he couldn’t help smiling at the glimmer of hope this had given him. “Kid, go and get your uncle.”

Rico crooked an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because I need to see that footage.”

## CHAPTER SIX

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Mr. Morales—a skeptical-looking man who held his cards too close to his broad chest—led him into the storage room where an old fifteen-inch TV hummed in the far corner. He flicked on the light and gestured for Morgan to come in, shoving aside stacks of empty boxes and kicking lunchtime debris to one side. “I don’t know what you hope to find.”

“Just find me yesterday’s tape. I’ll do the rest.”

“The tape should still be in the VCR. You just have to hit ‘Play’.”

“Thanks,” Morgan said.

“Hey, uh... listen.” Mr. Morales sniffed and shifted his weight to the other foot. His eyes swept to the door before they returned to Morgan’s feet. It seemed this man would look anywhere to avoid eye contact. “My nephew—he’s not in trouble, is he?”

“Does he have any reason to be?”

“No. He’s a good kid. But what if the cops pin this on him?”

Morgan understood. As a black kid in the neighborhood he grew up in, he’d been blamed for more than his fair share of local crimes: breaking and entering, pickpocketing, and even one very brief accusation of assault. He was innocent, of course, and had gone out of his way to prove that. Morgan often wondered if that was what had started him on his course for private investigations. It sure seemed like it.

“Does your camera have a time stamp?” he asked.

Morales nodded. “Sure. Why?”

“Then he’ll be fine. I’ll leave the tape when I’m done. Show it to the police.”

“Gotcha.”

Morgan stepped past the man and knelt in front of the waist-high TV. Morales took the hint and left soon enough, without saying another word. Morgan, meanwhile, rewound the tape to the appropriate time, going ten minutes too far and deciding to let it catch up naturally.

The first thing he saw was Rico coming in through the staff entrance just like he’d said. He had a spring in his step that day and had no problem showing his face to the camera. A more suspicious detective might read too much into that, but Morgan knew better. He continued watching as Rico headed into the back. It felt like an eternity for another person to enter the picture, but when he did, it was a relief and a disappointment at the same time.

Morgan gnawed on his knuckles, leaning in close as if it would fix the poor screen quality. He watched, his heart pounding while a hooded figure entered the establishment and approached the counter. For a moment it looked as though he were going for the unattended cash register, but instead, he stepped around the counter and reached straight for the uniform hanging from the dry-cleaning rail—cap included. Who’d have known at the time that something as trivial as a uniform theft would have such dire consequences? Did the killer know all along? He must have—otherwise he would’ve stolen more than just some clothes.

But that left another big question.

Why here?

Morgan huffed, a cramp seizing in his legs as the man on the screen ran back outside. The hooded man—or woman, but more likely a man judging by his build—crossed the street and headed into an alleyway that was barely visible through the footage. It wasn’t much to go on, but there was a chance he might find something. If not, he’d have no choice but to let Gary down gently. That wasn’t what he truly wanted, but at least he could still catch the tail end of Rachel’s birthday... maybe.

With nothing left to see, Morgan hurried back down the narrow staircase and arrived back on the shop floor. The place had livened up during his short time upstairs, just as Morales had said it would. Morgan found him at the counter,

serving four customers at once while barking orders at Rico. Morgan caught his attention and gave him a thumbs-up, then made a swift exit before the temptation to grab a slice seized control.

The fresh night air hit him like a brick. He sucked in a large breath and crossed the street, looking back at Pizza Palace to confirm the angle was right. While a police cruiser turned onto the street and headed toward the pizzeria, Morgan found the correct alleyway and ducked inside, using the flashlight on his phone to brighten the area.

“What the hell are you hoping to find?” he asked himself, sweeping the beam from left to right as he navigated the alley. His voice echoed through the darkness, bouncing back at him from three different angles. He hated the sound of it.

Heading farther in, Morgan found there was nothing to see down here, save for a dumpster and a couple of black trash bags torn to shreds by cats. Food waste littered the ground, trailing to the far back where the alley opened onto the adjacent street. Morgan was no fool; he understood too quickly that this meant he was out of luck. Guilt and grief overtook him then, the realization that he couldn’t help Gary causing him to feel like a disappointment. He hadn’t promised he would find anything—in fact he’d said he probably wouldn’t—but that still didn’t make it any easier. The killer had taken the uniform and run through here, but there was no picking up the trail after that, so what was he expected to do? Morgan had no idea where to go next, but he was certain he couldn’t make something of nothing.

He just hoped Gary saw it that way too.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Less than ten minutes had passed before Morgan found himself at the bus stop. He was too impatient to sit and too stressed to stand still, so he kept to pacing back and forth while running the events through his head. It was a lot of information to process.

Even before the case came into play, it was hard to stifle the guilt of leaving Rachel on her birthday. She'd encouraged him to go with Gary, but she probably had no idea it would turn into a night-long work event. As usual, she'd be more than happy that Morgan was finding work again—despite that it was pro bono—as his home office had long ago become nothing more than a dusty old room. But cases like this got the brain ticking, and that was what kept him happy. Perhaps those feelings showed, or even contributed, to their relationship.

Then there was the case itself. Flashes of Gary's heartbroken expression—the bloodshot eyes, his solemn tone of voice—intruded on Morgan's memory. He wanted to be there for his best friend, but how could he? There was nothing to go on. At least not at this stage.

Shivering in the cold fall night, Morgan buttoned up his jacket and squeezed his elbows to his sides. He stared toward the end of the road, hoping the bus would hurry the hell up so he could get home to his wife. But there was no bus, only a pair of headlights creeping toward him like the eyes of a curious monster stalking its prey.

Morgan squinted into the distance, raising a hand to shield out the bright light. As the car drew nearer, a wave of relief washed over him, and he knew

there would be no more waiting for a bus that may or may not come. "Gary?"

Gary stopped the car beside him, leaning toward the open window. "Get in."

He didn't have to be told twice; Morgan was in the car as fast as his numbing legs would allow, the car moving again before he could even fasten his seat belt. "I have to say, I'm pretty glad to see you out and about. It's colder than it looks out there."

"I was in the neighborhood," Gary said, his eyes fixed on the road.

"Of course you were."

"What about you?"

"Me?" Morgan said.

"Did you check out Pizza Palace?"

"I did."

"And?"

Morgan wasn't quite sure how to tell him without just blurting it out, so that was exactly what he did. "A guy over there had his uniform stolen. I spoke to him and watched the footage. His story checks out. As for the thief, I think he's our killer, but that's all we'll ever know about him. Unfortunately, there's nothing more to add."

An uncomfortable silence filled the car.

Morgan waited for a response that never came.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Gary waved a dismissive hand, then slid it back onto the wheel. "You're too good an investigator to quit so soon. I'm sure you'll find something to put us back on track. What about the victim's neighbors? Planning to do the rounds?"

"Doing the rounds" was more of a police procedure. It entailed knocking on every door on the crime scene's street to ask if anyone saw anything. It was a mind-numbing waste of time according to Morgan, and he only ever did it as a last resort. Even then, it rarely turned up any results. "I'm sure the MPD will take care of that."

"Right, and then put the case down as unsolvable."

"It's not going to be an easy one."

Gary grunted. "You'll manage."



“That’s what I’m trying to tell you; I don’t think I can help.” There was another silence until Morgan added, “I’m sorry. But with only the address of a pizzeria to go on, what more can I do? If there was more evidence—”

“But there isn’t,” Gary snapped.

“Hey now.”

“I just can’t believe you’re quitting so easily. What about being my friend? What happened to applying your skills to this? I’ve told you I’ll feed you any information from the police with or without the captain’s permission, so you have a strong advantage.”

Heat rose to Morgan’s face, though he was unsure if it was from the car’s heater or simple frustration. “You can’t play the friend card on this one. I’m always here for you—always—but you can’t expect me to perform miracles.”

“Not miracles,” Gary said. “Just more than an hour’s effort.”

“Oh yeah? Then what do you suggest?”

Gary quieted.

“That’s what I thought. Just... take me home.”

Neither of them said anything for the rest of the journey. Morgan sat quietly the whole time, awkwardly shifting his eyes to Gary now and then. When they were kids, such a thing would make them both smile and the argument would end as fast as it’d started, but something told him that wouldn’t happen tonight. Something had struck his friend on an emotional level—he was hurt and wasn’t thinking straight. Only vigilante justice made for a good cure.

They arrived outside Morgan’s home, where one of the bedside lamps offered an orange glow to the only lit window. The rest of the house was sleeping, and there was a strong chance Rachel was too. Morgan climbed out of the car, thanked Gary for the ride, then stomped up his path toward the front door.

Only the voice stopped him.

“Wait,” Gary said, exiting the car. He hurried around the vehicle and jogged toward Morgan, his graying hair swishing from side to side. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be a dick. It’s just that I can’t get the image of Carrie out of my head, you know?”

“I know,” Morgan said. “Nobody should have to see that, much less somebody who loved her. And I’m sorry I can’t help. Tonight was more about exploring whether I could make any contribution to the case—kind of like a consultation but less formal. Only I can’t. At least not unless there’s a development.”

“Something tells me there won’t be.”

Morgan nodded. “Like I said, I’m sorry.”

Gary glanced up at the house and then back to his car.

“Go home,” Morgan told him. “Be with your wife.”

“Yeah, right. What am I supposed to tell her? I’m moping because an old flame finally snuffed out?”

“She’s a good woman. She’ll understand.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Good night, Gary.”

“Good night. Thanks for trying.”

Morgan watched him return to his still-running car, catching a glimpse of that morose expression before he turned. It crushed him to see his childhood friend this way, and Morgan stuck around to watch him drive back up the road until he was left in silence. Too much had happened tonight, and it would take a lot of effort to decompress. Still, at least he had a wife to talk to about his problems, and she was upstairs waiting for him.

He just hoped he hadn’t ruined her birthday.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Cold-blooded murder was hard work. The killer had thought it would repulse him, putting him off his food for at least a week. The truth was, it created an appetite he wasn't sure he could satisfy. But that wouldn't stop him from trying.

It was midnight by the time he got home, forcing his key into the rusted lock and kicking open the door. The TV blared from the back room, its screen flooding light into the dark hallway. The killer slipped inside and closed the door, hurrying through to the kitchen before she could see him. Before she could make him feel even less comfortable with himself.

Opening the refrigerator with care, the killer bent over and peered inside, examining what ingredients he had to work with. The problem was—and he hadn't seen this coming—every item reminded him of tonight's disgusting activity. The way he saw it, the chicken was human flesh. The spaghetti sauce was blood, and it would drip onto his chin the way it'd dripped from Carrie Whittle's stomach. It stirred something up inside him, and although he couldn't decipher it as either satisfaction or regret, he knew he would do it all over again if he could.

With any kind of food off the menu, the killer sighed and shut the fridge, returning to the dusty hallway. If he couldn't eat then he could at least keep himself busy, maybe find an activity to keep his mind off what'd happened. He sneaked through to the door under the stairs, reached for the knob, and then heard the voice; it was *her* voice.

“Moonpie?” she called from the living room. “Moonpie, is that you?”

“For Christ’s sake,” the killer mumbled.

“Moonpie? Honey?”

“Yes, Mom. It’s me.”

“Come in here and give your mother a kiss.”

It took every ounce of strength to remove his hand from the doorknob, but he succeeded. Scuffing his feet across the already worn carpet, he made his way into the living room, where the only light came from the TV. A musty smell filled the air: molding food and body odor. In the one tattered armchair that’d lived in this room for nearly two decades was his horrendously overweight mother, who’d, ironically, lived in this room for nearly two decades. The killer stopped and looked at her, realizing his upper lip was twisting into a look of disgust. He always made an effort to be kind to his mom, but that didn’t mean he found her anything other than repugnant. She hadn’t washed in months, after all, and only climbed out of the dip in the armchair when she wanted to eat, piss, or shit. What kind of life was that?

“Well, don’t just stand there,” she said, her cheeks wobbling as she spoke.

The killer stepped forward, closed his eyes to imagine someone else—a princess, perhaps—and planted his lips on her ragged, frayed hair. He then patted her on the shoulder, as he knew the kiss wouldn’t be enough, before taking a step back.

“Where’ve you been tonight?” she asked.

“Just out.”

“Not up to any trouble, I hope?”

“I’m thirty, Mom. Not thirteen.”

“Grown men can still get into trouble, you know. Just look at your father. I was only a teenager when we first met, but he was a grown man. He thought he couldn’t get into trouble, but I was pregnant before I even...”

The killer backed out of the room, having heard all the stories before. Yes, his father was an asshole who’d knocked her up and skipped town. Yes, he was replaced by a man of questionable morals who “accidentally” showed parts of his naked body to her only child. And yes, the killer had taken his first life,

pushing him just a little too hard into oncoming traffic.

Accidents happened, the killer supposed, and that one had definitely benefited him.

But that was years ago, he reminded himself as he returned to the door under the stairs, and that son of a bitch deserved it. He padded down the steps into his basement office, wondering if that had really counted as a kill. He didn't have to go out of his way or cut anybody up, did he? His life had been a countless string of knuckles to the chin and one too many sightings of his stepfather's private parts, and he'd solved that problem with just a little push.

No harm, no foul.

Also, no more child abuse.

As ever, it was hard to shake that from his mind. The killer pulled on the cord, and the basement light flickered on. Surrounded by a pinball machine, a threadbare couch, and a vacant area in the corner he didn't know how to utilize, he stalked around the perimeter of the large basement chewing on his thumbnail. Why did she have to remind him all the time? Wasn't it enough that she'd stood to one side and let it all happen? She'd known it was happening, although she'd argue otherwise, so why did she have to keep bringing it up?

The killer squeezed his hands, grinding his teeth as he pictured that asshole's face. He compared it to his expression when he'd died, and he realized how much easier things could be if he simply punished those who'd wronged him. He remembered Carrie and how she'd screamed, cried, even begged as he'd cut up her darling face. It was justified, it was acceptable, and it was everything she deserved.

That was why he'd do it again.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Three days had passed, during which Morgan hadn't seen Gary, though not for lack of trying. He'd left multiple voicemails and text messages just to check up on him, and although his wife, Hannah, had reached out to let him know he was okay, Morgan didn't much like how it was being handled. His friend's misery was bleeding into their relationship, so now Morgan had a duty to be there without actually being able to be there. Nothing was more frustrating.

As if feeling useless wasn't enough, there was plenty of spare time to think about it. Rachel's upcoming charity event was sucking up a lot of her time, and she refused to let him help until he felt a bit happier. Morgan hated the idea that his emotions might instill some kind of negativity to her work, so he kept far away. The only way he knew how was to bury his face in a good novel, so he'd chosen the one his wife had insisted he read; it was a trashy romance novel, and although that wasn't his taste, he could imagine liking it if circumstances were different. There was just the problem of concentration, and from the armchair across the room, Rachel must have read that in his frown.

"You don't like it, do you?" she asked, wrapping her gown around her and yawning.

"Like what?" Morgan glanced down at the book he'd been staring into for a long while, realizing now that he hadn't read a single word in minutes. "Oh, it's okay."

"Something on your mind?"

"Is it that obvious?"

“A little. Care to share?”

Morgan let out a long breath and closed the book, resting it on the arm of the couch. He didn't really want to get into this, but maybe there was a way he could get it off his chest without bringing her down with him. The least he could do was try. “It's all this stuff with Gary. I've not seen him like this before. I think he's angry too.”

“Because you didn't take the case?”

“Because I *couldn't* take the case.”

“You think he blames you?”

Morgan shrugged. “It's not like him to point the finger, but I could tell he was disappointed. And now that he's avoiding my calls? It's not a good sign.” He felt in his pocket for the cell phone, the mention of it making him wonder where it was. It hadn't moved.

“Maybe it's just his grieving process.”

“I've seen him grieve; this isn't it.”

Rachel huffed and stared at him, her copper-colored hair dangling in front of her usually prominent cheekbones. Her blue eyes met his, full of love and care but not sympathy—he'd told her too many times how much he hated sympathy, and now she refused to give it. When the time came to break eye contact, she pulled herself up from the chair and took his hand, hauling him onto his feet with surprising strength. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the kitchen. I'm making you blueberry pancakes.”

“We don't have any blueberries.”

“Then I'll improvise.” Keeping her warm hand around his, she led him into the kitchen and dragged out a stool at the island, then set about the preparations, zipping from left to right. She'd mastered the art of cooking long ago, and Morgan thought she looked right at home. It suited him just fine—he loved her cooking as much as he loved her.

Taking the stool and leaning onto the counter, Morgan clasped his hands together, watching her with respect and admiration. How had he gotten so lucky? How had someone like him managed to marry someone like her? They were two

different people, yet somehow the same; she'd come from money but refused to inherit it, whereas he had come from nothing and stayed there. The sentiment they shared was that money was a good thing to have but not nearly as important as the love they shared... although Morgan sometimes wished they could have both. He just didn't want to take it from her folks.

"Are you going to talk to me or not?" Rachel said, lighting up the stove.

"What do you want me to say?"

"How about your plans for the week?"

"I have no plans," Morgan said.

"Exactly. So why not investigate a little further?"

"I told you, there's nothing to find."

"Bullshit, honey. Do you know how many times I've heard you say you're at a loss, only moments before you solved the whole damn thing? Here." She spun and tossed a strawberry into the air.

Morgan opened wide and caught it in his mouth, almost choking as he swallowed it whole. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until now, and he remembered he'd been like that a lot lately. He put it down to stress. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"So." Morgan shifted on the stool. "What do you propose I do?"

"Just go over there and talk to him."

"Hannah said he's never there at this time of night. Not anymore, that is."

Rachel glanced at the clock, then returned to the stove. "Then you know where he is."

"Larry's?"

"Larry's."

Morgan smiled. Larry's was a diner across town that claimed to serve the city's most amazing bacon and the country's thickest milkshake. It failed to deliver on both counts, but the prices were reasonable and the staff didn't mind you sitting there when you had stuff to think about. It stood to reason Gary would be there now. "I guess I should head over there, see what he has to say. Even if I don't pick up the case, I can lend a shoulder to cry on."

"Exactly."



“I’ll need to take the car.”

“Of course,” Rachel said. “But you can’t go yet.”

“Why?”

She pointed her spatula into the pan.

“Ah.” Morgan gave his kindest, most grateful smile as he watched her finish cooking. She’d always done this for him in his weaker moments, and it all started around five years ago, when he’d revealed that his mother used to make pancakes for him when he was going through a rough patch. “Keep the stomach happy, and the mind follows suit,” she used to say. Boy, he missed her, but although she was long gone, Morgan could see many of her traits in Rachel. He hoped—or rather he thought—that she was watching from up above, nodding her head with approval at the woman he’d married.

She had every reason to be.

## CHAPTER TEN

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Larry's was nothing if not quiet, the last customers of the night leaving arm in arm while they laughed among themselves. It reminded Morgan of the 1950s—not that he was alive in the '50s—but he'd seen enough movies where couples went out for a milkshake together. It lent a certain nostalgia to the place, promising warmth and joy.

Somehow, he just didn't expect to find that here.

He waved to Liz, his favorite waitress, as she cleaned up behind the counter. She waved back and pointed to the corner table, where Gary sat nursing a beer with a range of paperwork spread out before him. His hair was a disheveled mess, his moustache hiding within the surrounding facial hair that was starting to catch up. There was no question this case was taking its toll on him, and who could blame him? He'd loved Carrie Whittle, and nobody should have to see someone they cared about looking how she did.

"Need company?" Morgan asked, approaching the table.

Gary hesitated before looking up, as though there was a delay between Morgan speaking and Gary hearing. When those red, half-closed eyes revealed themselves, he looked worse than before. As if that was possible. "You're always welcome at my table."

Morgan smiled and sat, unbuttoning his coat to get comfortable. He glanced down at the paperwork in front of him, reading the file names upside down. It came as no surprise that he wasn't investigating Carrie's murder; he wasn't allowed to even if he wanted to. "What are you working on?"

“Some woman shot her husband. Just tidying up the details.”

“Need any help?”

“It’s pretty open/shut.”

“Right.”

Gary dropped his pen and slumped back, running his fingers through his thick, graying hair. “It’s good to see you, but what are you doing here?”

“Your phone was off.”

“There’s a reason for that.”

“Hannah said you’d be here.”

“Did she say I wanted to be alone?”

“No.” Morgan grinned. “Should she have?”

Gary stared at him like he had a grudge, until a knowing smile finally bested him and broke through. “It’s been a little rough, you know? I’m trying to knuckle down and keep myself busy with other cases, but every time I close my eyes I see Carrie’s face all... how it was. It just makes me so sick. She was a good person. She didn’t deserve that.”

Morgan remembered—on the few occasions he’d spoken to her she’d had nothing but kindness and respect in her voice. There’d been something welcoming in her green eyes, as if she were reaching into your soul just to understand you a little better. “Yes, she was nice.”

“She was more than nice. I just... Man, I’d love to get this sicko.”

“You and me both.”

“But you tried your best, right?”

“Yes.” Morgan locked eyes with him. “We’re okay?”

“You and me? We’re fine.”

“Even though I proved kind of useless back there?”

Gary uttered a short grunt of a laugh. “You were a little useless.”

“Think you could do better?”

“Not legally.”

Morgan couldn’t help but grin. It warmed him to see his friend acting human again. Grief was too aggressive in how it disabled people, especially when someone else was involved—losing somebody you loved was one thing, but

having them brutally murdered and knowing there was nothing you could do about it? That kind of stuff changed you.

Liz, the waitress, made an appearance at the table and severed the moment. Maybe it was for the best, as Morgan had no idea where to take it from here. It felt like something had been left unspoken, and he didn't want to address it in case Gary expected more. Instead, he took the save and ordered a coffee to go, thanking her as she left.

"Do you remember when we were kids?" Gary asked when they were alone.

"Only the parts I *want* to remember. Why?"

"I have fond memories of those times; wanting to grow up to be a cop."

"One too many viewings of *Hawaii Five-O*."

Gary half smirked, his eyes still red and raw. "I remember thinking how much I wanted to do some good in the world. Everything seemed a bit more black and white back then, you know? The bad guys were easy to identify. The good guys always won."

"Uh-huh." Morgan's sense of comfort shifted. "Where are you going with this?"

"Well, things got darker. You know what I'm talking about. The bad guys are nearly impossible to track down, unlike on those TV shows, and when you see the things you see in this line of work, you start wishing bad things on the killers."

"So now you feel like a bad guy?"

"Aren't we all bad guys?"

Morgan considered this. His own conscience had been tainted by a great number of things in the past—hell, even his inability to help Gary had made him question his own efforts—but had he ever truly felt like the bad guy? He'd made mistakes like most people had, but Rachel had always been there to nod her head with approval whenever he did something right. That'd always made morals easy to understand. "Do you feel like a bad guy, Gary?"

"Sometimes."

"And right now?"

"I don't feel bad. Just useless."

That was something Morgan could relate to. But seeing his friend like this, maybe there was something more he could do. There were no clues to follow the killer, but there was nothing to stop him from running a simple profile. As long as the police didn't stand in his way. "Look, I want to help find the guy who did this."

Gary's eyes lit up like a kid's on Christmas Day.

"Don't get too excited," Morgan said, putting his palm out to calm him. "I'm just going to talk to a few people and see what I can dig up. But I'm going to need your help on this; if the MPD stumble upon some information, you're going to have to share."

"No problem. No problem at all. Oh, man, you won't regret this."

"I probably will," Morgan said. "But just answer me one thing, will you?"

"What's that?"

"You called the police morons, but you know they're good guys. They'll do everything they can to find the guy who did this. So why me? Why not just leave it up to them?"

Gary nodded, scratching his moustache as he turned to gaze out the window. "I believe they'll get it eventually, but I want you to be there first."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Call it a vendetta. I'd never be able to do it by myself, but if you do it, at least it'll feel like I contributed. I feel like I owe it to Carrie to find the guy."

"And if the cops get there first?"

"Then we miss out on a big dose of justice. Besides, you need the work."

"I'm not taking payment."

"Take my gratitude, at least."

"That's worth more than money." Morgan nodded as Liz placed the coffee in front of him. He thanked her, scooted out of the seat, and grabbed the Styrofoam cup. "I'll get to work first thing in the morning, but the coffee is on you. Cheers."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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“D oing the rounds” was as arduous a task as it sounded. Those who didn’t slam the door in his face refused to answer entirely, and anyone who stuck around long enough to discover he wasn’t with the police quickly grew tired of his presence. For Morgan, there was no task more demoralizing or tedious, but it was necessary.

He’d started on the street Carrie Whittle had lived on. From there, he’d worked his way around the block, stopping only to cross the street and return on the opposite side. As if this wasn’t already an exhausting chore, the morning offered only chilling air with a threat of rain. If he was going to be dry when he finished this, he’d have to finish fast.

There were only four doors left to go. Morgan stalked up the drive of a bungalow with perfectly kept grass that was probably fake and a white patio that surrounded the front and sides. Half-wilted flowers hung on either side of the door, and Morgan got a strong whiff as he pressed his finger to the doorbell. He waited in the cold, his hands fed into his pockets.

But there was no answer.

Now there were only three left to go. Fearing he’d have to disappoint Gary for a second time, Morgan stepped off the porch and started to make his way to the next house when a voice called out from behind.

“Are you with the police?”

Morgan put on his best smile before he turned around. He’d been complimented on that smile more than once, not to mention being compared to

Denzel Washington more times than he could count. Though he couldn't see it himself; Denzel harbored far more masculinity than Morgan could ever dream of. "In a way, yes."

He was looking into the eyes of an elderly lady with white hair and shining, inquisitive eyes. Cowering behind her front door, only her head was visible, but it was low enough to tell how tall she was, which wasn't very.

"What, then?" she asked.

"I'm a private investigator." Morgan cleared his throat and returned to the patio, shivering as he spoke. "I take it you've heard about what happened?"

"At the Whittle residence? I saw the news on TV."

"Is it worth me asking if you know anything?"

The old lady smiled. Her teeth were too perfect to be her own, but the kindness in her humored expression was enough to compensate for that. Even her crow's feet were perfectly symmetrical. "You're quite bright. But actually, the police never did get as far as me."

"Why's that?"

"I was with my nephew for a couple of days after the incident. The ladies in my bingo group said they were all visited by the police and asked questions. Getting agitated, they were, being pressed as if they knew something."

"That explains why nobody wants to talk to me." Morgan craned his neck to see the view of the Whittle residence from where he stood. It was visible, but only barely. "And you? Do you feel like you might know something about what happened?"

"Ah." The lady licked her finger and held it up to the air as if she were to reveal a huge secret. "As a matter of fact, I might know *something*, but I can't promise it'll be of much use to you. Wait here a moment."

While the lady disappeared behind her door, Morgan felt a twinge of excitement. She'd said it might not be helpful, but at this stage anything at all would serve him. Civilians never knew just how useful they were until they'd donated some information. Although that wasn't always the case; most of the time they were just creating drama.

It felt like forever before the woman returned, delicately handing over a cell

phone as she shuffled toward him, revealing her grotesque green sweater. She passed it into his hands like she was scared to break it. Maybe she was. “My nephew took this for me.”

“What is it?”

“Look.”

Morgan squinted to view the image on the screen. What he saw made his pulse quicken, his mouth turning dry at the prospect of finding something new. “You say your nephew took this?”

The lady nodded. “It was a few days before those awful murders happened. I was seeing the same car parked outside my house every day for a week. At first I thought it was just somebody taking a break before work, but one day I saw him taking photographs.”

Breathless, Morgan continued to stare at the photo, using his thumbs to zoom in on the image. The car was parked at such an angle that the driver could easily watch Carrie’s house, and although it might have meant nothing, there was the slimmest chance it might’ve meant everything. “Please tell me he was taking photos of the house.”

“Oh, no. Not at all. He was photographing Carrie Whittle.”

That was enough. Morgan’s heart pounded. A smile crept onto his lips, and he leaned into the phone like he was about to fall into it. The license plate was unreadable, as was his typical luck, but there was something else about this car that stood out, and it couldn’t be ignored.

Morgan zoomed in further and scrolled across, reading the sticker on the rear window.

## **RICO’S CAR HIRE**

“Like I said,” the lady continued, “it might be nothing.”

“It’s definitely something.” Morgan handed back the phone, placing it into her wrinkled palm as softly as she’d put it in his. He reached into his pocket and produced his own phone, his shaking thumbs ready to google the address of Rico’s Car Hire. “Thank you so much for your time. Could you call the police



and tell them what you told me?”

“And endure hours of interrogation?” She screwed up her face. “No.”

Morgan could only laugh, but there was no time to let her see it. He was down the driveway and headed back to his car before he knew it, his thumbs dancing across the screen to follow up on the clue he’d lucked into finding.

If only everything was that easy.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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The killer just had one of those faces, he supposed. It never took much to change his appearance: usually something as simple as a wig or a bit of eyeliner or, in this case, a pair of glasses stolen from the café table of an old gentleman who wasn't paying attention. Those things came cheap, he knew, but the thrill was in the theft, so why not try his chances?

The next thing he needed was a quick ruffle of the hair, and he was off. There wasn't much of it really—mostly just a clump of brown fluff he didn't much care for—but a dab of hair gel made all the difference. Now, he looked like an entirely different person, perhaps an accountant or a number puncher from some random office cubicle. The point was that he looked like a nobody, and that made it easier to gain access to her home.

Just like before, he stepped up to her front door, shocked by the similarities to the last house he'd entered, and pressed the doorbell. It wasn't long before there was a click, and the door swung open. This was it, the killer thought; it was time for another.

But someone else opened the door.

It wasn't *her*.

"Can I help you?" the young woman asked. She had mousy-brown hair and small hazel eyes that swung up and down the street. She seemed to have immediately noticed the sweat he'd worked up on his way over, dripping from his clammy face.

"I know this is really weird, but could I come in for two minutes?"

“What’s going—”

“Please, it’s an emergency. Someone was chasing me. H-He had a knife, and he just kept swinging it at me. I started to run, but he just k-kept coming.” It was all he could do not to smile; making it this far without being told to leave was more than he’d expected. Not that he didn’t have a more brutal backup plan.

The young woman opened the door wider and waved him inside. “Quick.”

It couldn’t have been easier to get inside her home—unless he’d chosen to break in instead, that was—but where was the other woman? Where was the one he wanted? The one in front of him was beautiful enough, and he might’ve even argued she was *too* beautiful, but she wasn’t the reason he was here.

There was no choice but to improvise.

The door had barely closed before the killer pulled out the knife. Grabbing the hilt with the blade held outward, he stood smiling as he waited for her to turn around and then enjoyed the shock in her eyes as they registered the danger.

“What the—”

“Shut your mouth, right now,” he spat. “Where’s Danielle?”

The woman froze, tears already streaming from her eyes. This was too easy.

“Where is she?” he demanded again, jerking the knife.

“She’s at work. Please, don’t hurt me.”

“Jesus,” the killer said, forcing back a grin. If he’d known it would only take the flash of a blade, he would’ve done this years ago. “How about this: you give her a call and tell her she has to come home, and I might not hurt you.”

Blubbering now, the woman buried her face in her hands. “You *might* not?”

“Believe me,” the killer said, the grin revealing itself like that of a hungry lion, “your chances are far greater than if you don’t. Now, go get your phone and we’ll make this quick. Do it within a minute, and I won’t make you watch as I cut up your friend.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Morgan found the car rental place across town with no problems. It was a modest, independent establishment with only three cars outside and a colorful sign that could be seen from a mile down the road, but he had to park too far away for this to be a convenient location. Then again, he supposed most customers didn't need to park, since they obviously didn't have cars.

There was a short wait inside the dusty seating area where Morgan could barely keep still. His leg bounced up and down as the excitement of revealing the killer's name came closer. That was presuming, of course, that the man who'd been watching the house was in fact the killer, though Morgan had little reason to doubt it.

After a short wait, two customers left with a new set of keys and big smiles on their faces. A small, skinny man with a shit-eating grin shook their hands one by one, then stood and waved as they left the building. When the door's bell rang, he turned his attention to the seating area and introduced himself, maintaining the same false smile.

"Josiah Bentley," he said, reaching out a hand.

Morgan stood, took his hand, and shook. "Morgan Young. Is that your real name?"

"Oh, I had it legally changed to suit business. Smart, huh?"

"Very," Morgan said, doing his best to not sound sarcastic.

Josiah escorted him into his office, which was four times bigger than the waiting room but just as dirty. The high-back chair had a tear streaking down it,

the ashtray at his desk collected stinking butts, and the air was stuffy. He gestured to the other chair, and Morgan took it without protest. After all, he was here on business.

“So, what can I do you for?” Josiah asked.

“I’m an investigator working with the MPD,” Morgan said, watching Josiah’s smile fade like the time lapse of a sunset. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble unless you’ve done something wrong. I need to identify a driver from one of your vehicles.”

Josiah made a *tsk* sound. “I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose that information.”

“Would you rather the police asked instead?”

“Is that a threat?”

“Let’s just say you’d do well to help me.” Morgan hated the idea of making threats—he liked even the worst people at the worst of times—but this was more than necessary. “I don’t want to cause you any trouble, Mr. Bentley, but it’s important I get that name.”

With an exaggerated frown and a sigh, Josiah adjusted his tie and pulled in his chair. Clearing his throat, he typed something into his stained, old laptop, which had sticker residue across the back. “What was the license plate?”

“I don’t actually know,” Morgan said.

“You don’t know? How am I supposed to help you, then?”

“It was a Ford Fiesta, silver in color.”

“That’s better.” Josiah hit some keys. “Right, of course.”

Morgan watched the man fall back into his chair, exasperated.

It wasn’t a good sign.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Mr. Young, but that car was stolen.”

The walls toppled down around him, trapping him in the debris of disappointment. Hope was a bad foundation when it came to homicide investigation. “What do you mean, stolen?”

“I mean somebody hired the car, and somebody else stole it from them.”

“Did they report it?”

“Certainly. There’s an open investigation, as I understand it.”

That made things even worse for Morgan. If there was an active case surrounding the stolen car and it hadn't yet been solved, there was no chance he was getting that name. All he could do was fill Gary in on the news and realign his focus point.

As if his ears had been burning, Morgan's cell phone jerked in his pocket. The screen read *Gary Lee*, and he stood to excuse himself. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Bentley. I might be back at some point, but here's my number in case you find out anything." He slid his business card across the desk with a pointed finger and hurried out of the room, failing to hear what the man mumbled under his breath behind him.

Once outside, he took the call. "What's up?"

"You're not going to believe this," Gary said, panting.

Morgan's heart filled with dread. He knew the score; rarely did "unbelievable" news come through as something positive. In fact, he was expecting nothing short of a new twist to kick him while he was down. "Please tell me you have something I can work with. I can't deal with another nightmare."

"It's worse than that." Gary's voice lowered to morose. "There's been another murder."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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The light of day had gone from its full afternoon brightness to near-black night without Morgan noticing. It was that time of year when leaves clung to your shoes and night came sooner than you'd expected. It suited his mood too—like something was coming to an end. He had no idea what that was, but it was clear it wasn't the case he was working on.

When he arrived, parking at the far end of the street to avoid the crowd, Morgan found Gary beside the crime scene, his arms crossed and pressed firmly to his chest while his chin moved like he was grinding his teeth. Morgan squeezed through the growing crowd, careful not to hurt anyone as they carelessly bumped into his broad chest, and finally stopped beside Gary. "Sorry I took so long. What's happening?"

Gary stood still, barely flinching at the sound of his voice. "Against the captain's orders, a friend on the case gave me the tip. The call came in from a concerned cousin who was due a night out with one of the victims."

"One of? There were multiple?"

"Two." Gary held up a matching number of fingers.

A sickening feeling twisted in Morgan's stomach. He turned toward the house, where forensics were swooping in and out with evidence bags, and the coroner scribbled something onto his clipboard. "Anything to go on?"

"I can't even get inside."

"Right. But you can get more information from your contact?"

"Not until they're wrapped up here." Gary sighed. "Sorry."

Morgan offered a thin smile. He knew how overwhelming these things could be, and that was before you factored in a relationship with one of the victims. “Something keeps going round and round in my mind. You called me here because it’s related to what I’m investigating, but you haven’t said anything to suggest these are the same killer. What aren’t you telling me?”

Twisting up the corner of his mouth into a half smile, Gary finally craned his neck and locked eyes with Morgan. There was a familiar humor there that only Morgan could recognize. “Nothing gets by you, does it?”

“I try to be observant.”

“That you are.” Gary looked down at his feet, unfolding his arms and beginning to pick at his frayed nails. “This friend of mine who gave me the call, he said one of the victims was repeatedly stabbed, and the other...”

Morgan put a hand on his friend’s shoulder to steady him. “The other?”

“The other had her face sliced off.” Gary gagged into his closed fist.

“Jesus.” As if one murder wasn’t enough, now they had a serial killer to contend with? Morgan hadn’t thought it was possible, but things had just gone from bad to worse. “I need to look at the crime scene. You know that, don’t you?”

Gary sucked in a deep breath, steadying himself. “I know.”

“Then how do we get in?”

Gary said nothing but pointed at the house, where Police Captain Bray was storming out of the building and snapping off a pair of rubber gloves. He tossed them into a nearby biohazard bag and then climbed into his own car, leaving the scene. “I was waiting for that. Come on.”

There was no time to prepare for what he was about to see, so Morgan simply followed him past the tape as Gary proffered a glimpse of his badge to the guarding officer. They were in the house within a minute, and although Morgan was expecting some time to settle his stomach, horror stole over him the moment he walked through the door. The bloody scene was laid out in front of him like something from a Wes Craven movie. The taste of bile filled his mouth, any remains of hunger leaving him until further notice.

“That sick son of a bitch,” Gary mumbled.



Morgan said nothing, staring down. The bodies in front of him were both pale, their faces twisted in horror like they were frozen at the time of their deaths. They'd been stripped down, had suffered multiple lacerations to their naked chests, and were thrown together like a pair of rag dolls. Nobody deserved an end like this, Morgan thought, but if he had to suffer like any of these women, he knew which one he'd choose: the one who'd been stabbed repeatedly and left to die. The other had endured a fate even worse, her face torn open by the violent swipes of a blade. Her wide eyes expressed horror and desperation, but that was the only thing readable within the bloody mess. There was no flesh to deepen her story.

But there was something else.

It wouldn't be an easy thing to tell Gary, so he kept it to himself for now, stepping farther onto the scene and bumping into a forensics operative, who apologized profusely with a young voice muffled by his mask. Morgan raised a hand as if to say, "it's okay," and kept his eyes fixed on the bodies at his feet. "Does anything stand out to you?"

Gary appeared at his side, his hand clapped over his mouth. "The way they were killed? I think it's safe to say this is the same asshole who killed Carrie Whittle. Notice he has a primary victim, where the other seems to be killed by consequence. It's like one of them is personal, while the other was killed just for being there."

"True." But Morgan knew there was more than that. "Anything else?"

Gary stared harder, his eyebrow crooked. "No. What?"

Morgan took a deep breath, his chest rising and falling as he got ready to address what ultimately had to be addressed. There was no getting around it, and although this would complicate the investigation in a thousand different ways, there was at least a chance that it might offer some kind of clue. The bad news was that it'd shake Gary even further, and Morgan didn't want to be the one to do it. If he had a choice, that was. "Look at her face."

"I can't—"

"Do it. Does she look familiar?"

Gary's face contorted as he strained to look, his head bobbing forward like

the extra inch would help. He held still for a few moments, his eyes rolling over the scene in front of him before landing back on the face of the first victim.

That was when his mouth dropped open.

“You see it, don’t you?” Morgan said, watching the realization take him as if he himself was discovering it all over again. He could feel his friend’s agony—read the confusion in his eyes. “She was Carrie’s friend in high school, which can mean only one thing: there’s a personal grudge here, and that makes this killer even more dangerous.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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**B**umping shoulders with the black detective did something to the killer, but whatever it was couldn't be identified. It was like a new rivalry began, transferring the moment they came into contact. The exchange wasn't too different from one dog passing fleas onto the other, only this version came with its own aggression—whoever this man was, he was intriguing.

When he'd apologized and moved on, the killer continued his pass under the guise of a forensics expert, pulling the waterproofs tighter over his thin chest. The ID tag swung from side to side, announcing his name as Walter Stephens. That wasn't his real name, of course, and the real Walter Stephens would soon report his ID as missing, which meant the killer had to wrap up his egotistical bask of glory and get out of there.

But that detective...

There was something about him. He wasn't a cop—that much he'd overheard from the police officers who had mixed feelings about him—so what was he? A private investigator? Something more? Whatever it was, the killer would have a hard time forgetting him. Whether the man became a problem or not, there was no denying he could be an interesting test of his own skills, given how easily he'd gotten away with... well, murder.

Snapping out of his overactive imagination, the killer waited until the last of the police officers passed him, and then he slid out the back door. The second he was clear, he hopped the fence and ran down the alley, taking occasional glances over his shoulder to ensure he wasn't followed. The gloves came off, and he

hurled them over a wall into someone else's yard. The waterproofs were next, sliding down his body as he stepped out of them while laughing at how easy this whole affair had been. It was almost *too* easy, which left the killer thinking one thing, and one thing only.

It was time to step up his game.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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The following day had passed with no progress, which Morgan had expected from the moment a second victim was announced. While the press continued to glorify the killer—dubbing him “The DC Carver”—Gary retreated back into his slump. Not that Morgan could blame him; it must have been tough knowing your first love was killed, but now that there was a connection to the second victim, a brand-new can of worms had been opened.

Since then it'd been all work and no play. For the second day in a row, Morgan had set up camp in the local library, using his laptop and the wide array of books available to search for a link related to the crime rather than the victims. Having wasted another day and turning up nothing, Morgan thought he might soon have to pay a visit to the school the victims—not to mention he and Gary—had attended. He stole a quick glance at his watch, realized it was getting late, and then packed up to head home... the long way.

Buried deep inside his own thoughts, he drove past the house of Danielle Phillips and parked farther along the street to study the place from afar. How had the killer looked at this stretch of road? The police had reportedly found nothing from the neighbors, and they had no leads to go on, so what was next? Were they all expected to sit on their thumbs until there was a third victim? A fourth? There was no telling where the killer would go next.

When the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the sky turned black, Morgan fired up the car's engine and returned home, where the living room window glowed in the darkness. Smiling to himself and eager to fall into the

loving embrace of his wife, he killed the engine and headed inside, finding some—though only a little—relief that the day was over.

“Is that you?” Rachel called from the next room.

“It’s me.” Morgan kicked off his shoes, dumped his laptop bag, and went through to the living room where Rachel sat on the couch with a book in her lap. The lamp beside her lit up her beautiful auburn hair, giving it an additional shimmer. “Good day?”

“Busy. You?”

“Same.” Morgan crossed the room, leaned over to plant a kiss on her soft cheek, then dropped onto the seat beside her. There was just something right about returning home to this remarkable woman, which was why he’d married her in the first place, but he still couldn’t pinpoint exactly why it felt so perfect. Perhaps it was that she didn’t dote on him but was always pleased to see him. But tonight... No, she was avoiding eye contact. “What’s wrong?”

Rachel said nothing, only picking her book up and turning the page.

Then he remembered.

It was like an alarm went off in his head, only hours too late. How had he allowed work to seize control of him like that? His priorities were usually so aligned, so how had this happened? Later he would cuss himself for it, but for now he had some explaining to do. “It was your speech today, wasn’t it? At the HUCINS Center?”

Rachel nodded and continued reading.

“I’m so, so sorry.” Misery and regret stole over him then. It wasn’t because he was in trouble or “in the dog house,” but he’d upset the one person he cared about the most. There was no coming back from that. “I won’t make excuses—you deserve better than that. I just got caught up in work and I forgot. I’m sorry.”

Taking him by surprise, Rachel smiled and closed the book. “That’s very sweet of you to say, but you’re going to have to make it up to me.”

Morgan smiled too. “Sexual favors?”

“Keep dreaming.”

“What, then?”

“Dishes.” She hiked a thumb over her shoulder.

“It’s the least I deserve. Can we catch up while I do them?”

Rachel climbed out of the sofa immediately, dragging Morgan into the kitchen by his hand. She ran over the events of the evening while he scrubbed at yesterday’s dishes with the rough side of a sponge, detailing the grandeur of the event and how nervous she’d been. More than anything, she talked about how happy the kids were as she stood on stage and made all these promises about how their lives were going to change. All they needed was funding, and the kids were excited to help in any way they could.

By the time he was done, Morgan kissed her softly on the lips, and it was as if nothing had ever happened. They worked together to tidy up as usual, brushed their teeth together as usual, and then curled up in bed like they always did, with Rachel’s head resting on his chest while his heart hammered like it was their first time. It was probably ranking fifth or sixth in their list of disagreements, which the average couple would no doubt become very jealous of. Morgan knew, however, that although they were out of the storm, some repair work could still be done on the ship they’d come in on.

“Rachel?” he said in a whisper.

“Mm-hmm?” she muttered, half-asleep.

“You have another event, right?”

Clearing her throat, Rachel rolled back and reached for her bedside lamp. The soft cotton made a light scratching noise as she moved, and then the dim light brightened. “In two days. Why?”

“Because I feel like I’ve taken us back a step.” Morgan paused, choosing his words carefully. He was out of the woods, that much was clear, but he still felt awful for missing her big speech. “I want to volunteer.”

“*You* want to volunteer?”

Morgan shrugged. “Is that all right?”

Rachel’s confused frown unraveled into a smile, and it was like Heaven was open again. Surprise and happiness mixed in the bright pools of her eyes as her perfect teeth revealed themselves. “Of course, that’s... Yes. That’d be great.”

“Good. I look forward to it.”

“Me too. And Morgan?”

“Yeah?”

“I forgive you.”

With that, she clicked the lamp’s switch and let darkness consume them once more. The next thing Morgan felt was her hot cheek against his chest and her arm wrapping around his waist as she pulled him in close. Five minutes later, she was asleep, and just a couple of minutes after that, so was Morgan.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Morgan had his plan for the day, and it was the strangest feeling returning to his high school. As he roamed the corridors, which he remembered being a lot wider, he stopped every few feet to examine the cabinets where artifacts of yesteryear were kept on display. Each cabinet skipped forward a few years to when the new national football tournaments were held. Morgan had been the quarterback—something his father had made him pursue—and his mouth turned dry as he got closer to his year. He remembered wanting to leave school and throw in the towel, climbing out of all that padding and chasing the life he wanted. Sports had always come naturally to him, but academia was his true path, and he'd known that from a very early age.

His year's cabinet was close to the end, and although he wondered where later years would be held, his fullest attention was on the cup they'd won in that game. Below the cup was a faded photograph of their prom night, which Morgan leaned in to study. Even the best detective in the world would've had trouble finding him; he'd sported an afro, and Rachel's braces were the focal point of her appearance. Gary was easy to find though; the only thing that'd changed there was that he now had a moustache and his hair was grayer.

Morgan smiled at the memory of those years, his heart aching with the nostalgia, but he was here to do a job, and he'd be damned if he wouldn't do it. Sighing to shake off the sad realization of what life was truly like, he found his way to the office, which he was glad to see hadn't moved. The young receptionist took his name and offered him a seat, telling him the principal

would be with him shortly.

It felt like forever before Mr. Weir arrived. Morgan was shocked to see he was still working here after all these years, and he'd changed beyond belief. Maybe he was remembering it wrong, but the man who'd run the school all that time ago was no longer tall and well built; he was buckled over like a sagging doll, his thin hair now receding over his liver-spotted scalp. Those stern eyes searched the entire room before they found Morgan, and he waved him into the office. As Morgan followed him in and took the offered seat, he found it heartbreaking to see the transformation from strong superior to a victim of time.

Mr. Weir took a seat at his desk, lowering himself gently into it. "Mr. Young, I'm ashamed to say I don't remember you. My assistant tells me you were the quarterback, and some old photographs didn't help ring any bells."

Morgan gave a kind smile. "I wouldn't remember me either."

"You remember me, son?"

"Very much, sir." Morgan scanned the room, surprised to see everything more or less in the same place. The technology on his desk had changed a bit though; what used to be a typewriter was now a shiny new laptop. "I was in here a lot, especially at lunchtimes."

Mr. Weir mouthed his name, scratching his temple. "Morgan Young. Morgan... Oh, yes, I think I remember you now." His expression turned to one of delighted surprise. "You used to sit in here and discuss literature with that girlfriend of yours."

There was something sweet about being remembered, and Morgan couldn't help but grin at the mention of Rachel. He could hardly imagine what it must look like from the other side of the desk—there was probably a lot of sadness in the job, watching people start their lives and watching what they became. Morgan wondered if he had it better or worse. "That girlfriend is now my wife."

"Oh, splendid. Any kids?"

"No kids." Morgan shook his head, swiftly changing the subject. "Sir, as much as I'd love to sit here and discuss the Life and Times of Morgan Young, I'm here in a more official capacity. See, you may have read about the DC Carver in the news?"

Mr. Weir nodded, sighing. "I'm afraid so."

"I've been hired by the police to investigate the murders," he lied, staying as close to the truth as possible. "Carrie Whittle and Danielle Phillips were students here a long, long time ago. During your reign, in fact."

"Those I remember." Mr. Weir held up his finger like an exclamation point. "Although they had different names back then, the newspapers say."

"What can you tell me about them?"

"You didn't know them?"

"Not that well. They were a couple grades above me." Morgan had in fact missed most of the drama surrounding Gary's relationship with Carrie. The age difference meant everything at the time, and although they later rekindled, the exciting new relationship had stolen Gary's attention from their friendship. "Gary Lee dated Carrie—he sends his regards, by the way—but Danielle was more or less a stranger to both of us."

Mr. Weir opened his mouth to say something, then appeared to change his mind. He rose from his chair and approached the window on shaky legs, placing his hands on his hips and staring out to the noisy football field. "My memory is a little foggy, but there was something of an altercation between those girls."

"There was?" This was the first Morgan had heard of it.

"In the months leading up to their graduation, I gave them both detention almost every day. You know how young girls can be. Almost as bad as young boys. Anyway, the last thing I remember about those particular students was that they were fighting."

"You mean like an argument?"

"I mean like a vicious attack. They were clawing at each other and screaming bloody murder down the halls during inspection week. I had them both in the office, as you would imagine, to investigate what exactly was going on."

Morgan shifted in his seat and said nothing.

"It was... a boy. Can you believe it?"

"Actually, I can." Although Morgan had been lucky and found Rachel at such a young age, he had very strong memories of what high school relationships were like for others. Everything was dramatic, probably thanks to

the influence of TV shows, but nothing ever truly amounted to anything. All their woes were soon forgotten, and they went on to live their lives. The seriousness of earlier life was so easily left behind. “What about this boy?”

“They fell in love with the same young lad, or so they said. They sat beside each other, insisting that the boy belonged to them. Neither of them could be bargained with. I really do wish I’d understood girls more at the time. It gave me an awful hard time.”

Morgan grunted, looking down at his hands and realizing he’d been squeezing his knuckles white. He released his grip and returned his attention to the principal, wondering if this drama was related to the murders. He doubted it.

“I wish I could tell you the boy’s name.”

“Anything on record?”

Mr. Weir shook his head. “Nothing helpful. I had him in detention once or twice, but we shred detention slips every six years.”

“Could you identify him from a photograph?” Morgan was thinking of the yearbook.

“I’m afraid it’s not like it used to be up here.” Mr. Weir tapped his head and turned around. “I’m terribly sorry I haven’t been much use, but my recollection of those girls is vague at best. Probably a good thing too, since now I don’t have to mourn them as others would.”

Morgan agreed but couldn’t help feeling disappointed. This trip down Memory Lane had been a strange form of pleasant torture. It had all the effects of a car wreck; it was ugly, sure, but you had to look... didn’t you? “Thank you for your time, sir.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure. Do come back again someday.”

“Will do.” Morgan shook his hand and left with no intention of returning. After poisoning his mind with all the painful memories of his youth, he had no desire to stay a moment longer than necessary. And to go through all that without any progress on the case? Well, that was just another kick while he was down. So far, he’d had nothing but bad luck, and something told him that wasn’t going to change.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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The very next night, Morgan found himself at the charity hall. He was not only redeeming himself for missing the previous speech, but it was exhilarating to see everything Rachel had done. People were filling up the hall with great speed, making new friends at the snack bar, sharing information, and introducing foster kids to potential parents. Some even made an effort to say hello to Morgan himself, shaking his hand with wild enthusiasm and complimenting his wife to the highest regard. But they didn't need to tell him how wonderful she was—he already knew, and the scene before him elevated his pride to new heights.

After putting out another couple of chairs and refilling the water jugs, Morgan spotted Gary and Hannah across the hall. Hannah was laughing at something their company had said, her blonde hair swishing around as her head jerked, but Gary stared at the floor in hard contemplation. It wasn't difficult to see he was suffering the worst days of his life. Morgan just wished he could do something about it and vowed to catch him when he was less busy.

Minutes later, more people joined the hall. The air grew hot very fast, but Morgan made an effort to stand near the door and welcome the latecomers, some attending as couples or families, while others came alone to see what the fuss was all about. It made no difference to Morgan how they came, as long as his wife's hard efforts were being respected. They clearly were, as evidenced by another new arrival declaring how much they liked her.

It was as if she'd heard her own name mentioned. Rachel came squeezing

through the crowd in her black pantsuit, looking both stunning and respectable. But Morgan barely had time to appreciate her appearance before he noticed the woman she dragged by her hand. It would've looked suspicious, like they were engaged in a romantic relationship or something, had they not both been smiling from ear to ear.

"Morgan, honey, you'll want to hear this." Rachel yanked the hand with surprising strength, and a tired-eyed brunette with a little too much makeup stumbled to her side. "Tell me you recognize this woman."

"Uh..." Morgan stuttered and laughed, his eyes dashing from one to the other. "You make it sound like we've been having an affair. Am I in trouble?"

The stranger laughed.

Rachel didn't.

"Go on," Morgan encouraged her.

"This is Emma Cole!"

There wasn't a word to describe what happened to Morgan's heart at that moment, but if there was it would probably be something along the lines of "glitched." The name rang too many bells too fast, and blanks from his school years filled in automatically. It was a strong, familiar feeling that didn't come without hope—the kind of hope that made you realize you'd been missing something all along. If only he could figure out what it was.

"I have another speech in five, so I'll leave you to it," Rachel said, leaning in to kiss him on the cheek and then rubbing off the print left by her lip gloss. She raised a gentle hand to Emma's elbow and grinned before fleeing into the distance, leaving him with the familiar face.

Now it was just the two of them, and all Morgan could think was how awkward it was.

"You know, I apologize," Morgan said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I know your name, and I know your face. I even have a very vague memory of us kissing in kindergarten. But I can't figure out much else. We were friends once?"

Emma laughed. It was a pleasant sound that didn't match her harsh features. "No."

"Sweethearts?"

That laugh again. “We shared some classes, but that’s it. I was talking to your wife—who’s lovely, by the way—about what’d happened since school. I guess she remembers me a little better than you do. Anyway, it came up that you’re an investigator of some kind?”

Morgan nodded, wondering where this was going. “A private investigator.”

“Right, and you’re investigating the DC Carver case?”

Now his curiosity was piqued. It wasn’t every day you were reunited with a classmate from over two decades ago, but when their first words fell in line with your current homicide investigation, you had to stop and ask questions. “Do you know something I don’t, Miss Cole?”

“Maybe. And it’s *Mrs.*”

“Oh. You weren’t always a Cole?”

“I was. I just didn’t change my name when I married.” Emma grinned—an excitable grin of somebody on the cusp of solving one of life’s big mysteries. “Anyway, I was remarking to my husband about the two victims and how sad it was that somebody would do that to them. They could be bitches, sure, but does anyone really deserve to die? I don’t think so, and certainly not like that.”

There it was again—that glitching of his heart. It was like it stopped and raced at the same time, cutting off his blood flow while racing it through his body. It made Morgan dizzy, his knees weak. “You knew them? Both of them?”

“Sure. We were best friends.”

Morgan’s mouth hung open in shock at the wealth of information he could salvage from this woman. It was perfect, like she’d come from nowhere to save the day—Supergirl in all her glory. “So then, I’m guessing we should—”

The lights dimmed, and everyone’s voices fell to whispers. The only light that remained was on the stage where Rachel walked to the center. Each click of her heels silenced another viewer until the room was in complete tranquility. It was a confusing time for Morgan, having to bury his excitement and replace it with pride. At least temporarily.

“We should talk,” Emma finished for him. “After this?”

“Definitely,” Morgan whispered without removing his loving stare from Rachel. “I’d really love to pick your brains about this. Maybe meet me out front

when this is over?”

Emma patted him on the shoulder as she passed. “I’ll be there.”

Now that his luck was changing for the better, Morgan stepped back and closed the door, shutting out the cold air. He then rested against one of the tall marble pillars and watched his wife give the most engaging speech he’d ever heard. Every word she spoke felt like she truly believed she could make a difference. And maybe she could—he sure had faith in her.

But it wasn’t just the event that made him smile.

Morgan had found some common ground between the victims. A stranger from the past, stopping by as if from nowhere to offer some insight as to why these murders were linked. Between that and watching Rachel on stage, knowing that everyone in the room adored her, how could he have been any luckier? It felt too good to be true.

And it was.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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The killer couldn't have been more surprised to find the black detective at the charity event. At least not until the redhead kissed him on the cheek after introducing him to his next victim. It was then that he noticed their wedding bands: plain, but very telling.

When Rachel Young—the hostess of tonight's overly glamorous event—took to the stage and all fell quiet, the killer watched from across the room as Mr. Young leaned against the pillar, his arms folded and an oh-so-smug grin on his face. What was the smile for, the killer wondered; was it pride? Self-satisfaction? Whatever it was, it stirred something inside the killer that made his temples itch, causing grave irritation.

The young woman, however, took a nearby seat and adjusted her dress. Her eyes swept from left to right as if she wondered who was watching her. It was typical, really; everyone was here for a children's charity event, and this bitch was only thinking about herself.

Scoffing, the killer turned his attention to the stage.

Rachel Young traipsed toward the center, the room hushing around her. The microphone rang as the first words fell from her mouth, and then it settled to suit her soothing voice. "First of all," she said, a flutter of nervousness creeping through her tone, "I want to thank you all for being here tonight. Everybody here has played a huge part in making this happen, and I'm so incredibly grateful for your contributions. They'll go a long way toward changing lives."

While the audience applauded, the killer turned his head back to Emma Cole.

There weren't enough words to describe how much he wanted to hurt her—to do to her what he'd done to the others. But the truth of it was that he found it boring. Too soon. Twisted expressions and suppressed screams were one thing, but those moments fled way too fast. For Emma Cole, he'd need some extra time in a quiet place. His home, perhaps? Sure, but first he'd have to get her past that bitch he called a mother. Pathetic excuse that she was.

Again, the audience applauded, bringing the killer to realize that Rachel Young had been talking again. He checked his watch: ten minutes past. His appetite for murder had taken over him, turning twenty minutes into what felt like twenty seconds. It was lucky he'd zoned in at just the right moment to get a name...

"And once again, you've all been fantastic. I want to thank you all, and especially my husband, Morgan Young, who's been at my side since the very beginning. I love you." Rachel gestured toward the back, turning heads and gaining a final applause as the detective lowered his head and grinned with embarrassment.

Chairs soon scraped against the wooden floor, people shuffling out of their seats. Across the hall, Emma Cole stood and swooshed her hair to one side—a mannerism that riled the killer to no end—and headed for the exit. Wasting no time, the killer shot out of his seat, pulled the hat farther down on his head, and followed her to claim his next victim.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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The event had been long but not tedious, with people cheering and clapping, kids laughing and making new friends. It was everything Rachel had been working for, and although she insisted on giving Morgan some of the credit, he declined it. She'd made it on her own, and for that he was incredibly proud of her.

Over the course of the presentation and the multiple short breaks between, he'd lost sight of Emma Cole. His attention had been held captive by his beautiful red-haired wife and her accomplishments, and taking his eye off the woman had probably been a mistake. It wasn't much of a problem though—he knew where to find her.

Stepping out into the cold Washington night, Morgan descended the stone steps and looked up and down the street. There was no sign of her out here, so he simply waited in the cold while Rachel was inside being congratulated on her success. A couple of early leavers sneaked out and said goodbye to Morgan, to which he smiled and thanked them for coming.

Meanwhile, something felt wrong.

It wasn't as simple as Emma saying she'd be there and then disappearing, but it was exactly that word—disappearing—that sent a cold shiver streaking down his tensed spine. With all that'd happened lately, Morgan found it hard to believe this was unrelated to the fact she had some information to share. Then again, could it be that he was paranoid? Was she simply using the bathroom, causing him to overreact?

It wasn't long before Gary stepped outside with Hannah on his arm. It was good to see him smile, but when he caught Morgan's worried stare, the smile fell from his face, his eyebrows arching with concern. "What is it?"

Morgan licked his dry lips, stomping toward him. "Have you seen Emma Cole?"

"Who's that?"

"The girl I was talking to before the show."

"Sorry, but no. Did you check—"

His heart pounding now, Morgan stormed inside, inching between the people who were lined up to leave. He placed his hand gently on each person's shoulder, saying Emma's name and hoping for a reaction that wasn't befuddlement. Only with each person looking as lost as he felt, he moved on to the next.

Until one man spoke up.

"You mean that pretty blonde thing?"

"You've seen her?" Morgan asked. "Where?"

The man, who looked like a beetle wrapped up in his thick jacket, nodded toward the fire exit beside the stage. "She went out that way a few minutes ago. Don't ask me why, but she was crying pretty hard. Did you do something to upset her?"

Morgan fell silent, taking in the words. "Crying?"

"Yeah. Well, if it wasn't you it must've been the other guy."

"What other guy?"

"The... I don't know. The *other* guy."

Panic and anger blended together, spiking Morgan's blood pressure through the roof. Growing impatient, sweat beading on his temple, he spun on his heel and rushed toward the fire exit, cold air assaulting his cheeks as he burst out into the alley. His instincts drove him, making him run to one end where it split into two separate directions.

Both of them were empty.

Heading back, his sweat growing into thick droplets and dampening his back, he passed the open fire exit and sprinted to the far end, hoping to catch at least a glimpse of Emma Cole and the mysterious man she'd left with.

But she was gone.

Feeling the true magnitude of his loss, Morgan traipsed back to the fire exit, went inside, and closed the door. Rachel was waiting for him there. She approached with a sympathetic frown.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

It definitely wasn’t, Morgan thought, but that didn’t mean he had to ruin her perfect evening, as if he hadn’t done enough to bring her down lately. Instead, he nodded, pecked her on the cheek, and told her she’d done a great job. After that, he crossed the room and caught the attention of Will, official cameraman of HUCINS fundraisers.

“I need a favor.”

Will pushed his thick black glasses farther up his nose and continued to wrap a cable into a tight fold. He snapped his head, flinging a knot of greasy hair out of his face. “Sure, man. I’m just packing up my gear, and I’ll be right with you.”

Morgan shook his head, his heart still beating like crazy. “Can I look at your camera?”

“No, but... I can show you it.”

“Good enough.” Morgan leaned over his shoulder and studied the digital recorder on the tripod. He watched the small screen as close as he could, asking Will to go back further, noticing he’d gone too far, and then scanning forward again until Emma Cole came into view. “There. Pause that.”

Will hit a button and the picture froze.

“Who’s that?” Morgan asked, pointing at a thin man in a dark hoodie. There was something too familiar about that hoodie, and the realization weakened his knees. Starting to piece it together, he fought to convince himself it couldn’t be true, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t argue with what was right in front of him.

Will shrugged, his thin shoulders leaping up for only a second. “No clue.”

“Play it from there.” Morgan noticed Gary appear at his side, but neither of them said anything. It was one of those unspoken exchanges, communicating with a single glance. Morgan read understanding in his eyes, and he was sure Gary could read panic in his. He returned his focused stare to the camera where

the hooded figure slipped a dull blade out of his pocket, pointing it close toward Emma's spine as he whispered something in her ear. Emma nodded, and together they went offscreen, heading in the direction of the fire exit.

"That doesn't look good," Will offered.

But it was worse than it looked.

The hoodie made sense now, paired with the identical one from the Pizza Palace security footage. The killer had been here tonight, right under their noses, and nobody had known a damn thing about it. Somehow, he'd avoided detection and taken a victim right out from under them, and all they had was a useless recording of his back. The fact struck Morgan like a bolt of lightning, knocking the strength from his body.

"Gary," he said, gnawing on shaking knuckles. "I think we're in trouble."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Getting his latest victim into the house wasn't that hard—a short walk with a few whispered threats saw to that—but with his mom locking the place down like Fort Knox, it'd been tough to sneak Emma Cole inside. Tough, but not impossible.

Posing her as a potential colleague, the killer demanded privacy and escorted her into the basement, passing through the dark corridor and refraining from shouting at his mother. How he hated her could only be compared to his distaste for his victims, but he didn't have time to worry about that now. The more pressing matter was getting Emma down the stairs and restraining her, the latter of which had been a battle in itself. She'd wriggled and squirmed, crying as she screamed at him in high-pitched wails until he was forced to reach for the nearest object—which happened to be a very sturdy glass ashtray—and swing it at her skull.

The crunching sound was like heaven.

Chuckling like a young boy as he pushed her onto the carpenter's bench, the killer fastened the preprepared straps and silenced her by stuffing her wide mouth with a filthy rag. Eventually she stopped fighting, and only then could the killer relax.

“Moonpie?” The voice came from up the stairs, needy and questioning.

“What?” the killer yelled.

“Come up here.”

“Why?”

“We need to talk.”

The killer hesitated, gawking down into the wet, clenched eyes of his dazed victim. Whatever his mother wanted, his fun with Emma would have to wait. Hell, it was lucky she was even alive at this point. The only reason she was even breathing was because he wanted to try something new with his victims: prolonged torture. If he’d found her on another day, she’d already be a hideous mess rotting in her own home. And where was the fun in that?

Double-checking that her straps were secured, he bounded up the steps and burst into the living room where his mother—surprise of all surprises—lounged in the armchair and stuffed her face with sugary snacks. The TV blared in front of her, but the food held most of her attention, her arms wobbling with putrid fat as she tried to steadily carry it into her mouth.

The killer stood in the doorway, disgusted.

“What do you want?” he said.

Cramming what looked to be a donut into her trap, his mother chewed like she could win a prize and swallowed hard, the loud gulp signaling she had finished. At least for now. She licked her fingers one by one, then patted the arm of the chair. “Come. Sit.”

“I’m not going to sit. I’m working.”

“Oh, please. You’ve been living off savings most of your life.”

“So? My work is important.”

“Not to me, it isn’t.”

Rage filled his chest. He steadied his breathing and folded his arms, mostly to bury his clenched fists into the pits of his elbows. There was nothing worse than when she knocked down his efforts, already deciding his soon-to-be-established carpentry business would fail. What an asshole this woman really was. “Listen, I’m really busy. What do you want?”

His mother turned her head, staring daggers at him. “The girl.”

“What about her?”

“Who is she?”

“I don’t see how that concerns you.”

“Remember whose house this is?”



“Ah.” The killer waved a dismissive hand and turned on the spot.

“Don’t you turn your back on me!” his mother spat. “I raised you, fed you, and clothed you. I’m still looking after you now, and this is the thanks I get?”

The killer saw red, his cheeks burning as anger flushed through his body. His hands shook as he clenched them into fists, spinning back around and storming toward her until he towered over her. “*You’re looking after me?* Do you think food magically appears in the refrigerator? What about the cleaning; do the cleaning cloth and vacuum dance around the room whenever you get off your fat ass and leave the room?”

“Hey—”

“You’re always condescending to me, Mom. I work really hard.”

Her head snapped back, aimed toward the smoke-stained ceiling as she let out a harsh cackle. “You call your basement activities work? I don’t see an income from it, do you?”

“It doesn’t mean it isn’t strenuous.”

“What, having your fun with some girl? Give me a break.”

The killer felt his heart pumping, his blood flowing like lava through his weak body. Gritting his teeth, he clenched a fist and held it out, not as a threat but as a channel for his uncontrollable anger. “You’re pushing your luck.”

Saying nothing more, his mom shifted in her chair and turned back to the TV, her hand diving into the big bag of treats open on her lap. This was what she’d been getting too good at; the way she’d block him out in an instant was so immediate it really did appear as if she didn’t give a damn about him. And did she? Probably not.

Although she did keep his secrets.

Before his anger could boil into rage, the killer marched back to the basement and hurried down the stairs, slamming the door behind him. The old house shook as his feet pounded into each step, the wood creaking and groaning in protest. When he reached the bottom and Emma Cole caught his eye once more, he was shocked to find that same anger simmer into something else. He tried to recognize it as excitement, but that often got confused with anxiety.

Whatever it was, it was different.

Keeping his gaze fixed on her wide, terrified eyes, he approached the workbench and grabbed the first sharp object he could find—it was a cable cutter left over from his brief time as an electrician, and it would be perfect for what the present moment was telling him to do.

“She really pushes me sometimes,” he said through his teeth, snapping the blades together in rapid succession. Adrenaline poured through him, catching his nerves alight with each snip that he hovered above her squirming body. “She really. Fucking. Pushes me.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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The charity hall was cleared of everyone except for the police, who buzzed around the scene to interrogate everyone. Morgan had stuck by Rachel's side, insisting they not harass her on her big day and taking the hit of every question they fired at her. It was a long process that added nothing to his investigation, but it was necessary—Washington's finest also had a job to do, and although they were slowing things down, he didn't want to get in their way. Police work, at least as far as he understood it, was hard enough without that.

By the time they were done and asked to leave, Morgan found Gary and Hannah outside. He stopped a few feet from the car where they waited, turning to Rachel and staring into her beautiful blue eyes. They were too moist tonight. It didn't feel right. "I hate to say it—"

"But you have to get back to work?" she finished, adding a thin smile.

Morgan nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Why? It's your job."

It was his turn to smile now, though it was interrupted by an abrupt shove from a passing officer who was too wrapped up in work to stop and apologize. Morgan shook it off, ignoring it as best he could while all his nerves pricked like pins. "Gary's going to take you home. Are you all right with that?"

"Sure. What will you do?"

"No idea. I need to talk with Gary before you go. And hey, I'll help with the next one too."

Rachel leaned in, kissed him on the lips, and held his cheek in one cold, open

hand. “Whatever you do, just be careful. That creep was here all night, which meant we were all in danger without even knowing it. That makes me uncomfortable.”

She left before he could reply, climbing into the back seat of Gary’s car while Gary hurried over to take her place. His worried eyes shone under the bright light of the streetlights, his brow furrowed in disbelief.

“What?” Morgan said. “You want a kiss too?”

“Maybe when this is all over.” Gary heaved a sigh. “What’s the plan?”

“That depends. What do you know about Emma Cole?”

“Not much more than you do. Although I know she was married.”

Morgan nodded. “I’ll need to have a few words with the husband.”

“Way ahead of you. I already texted you the address.”

“Thanks.”

A rush of civilians roared behind him. It reminded Morgan of the press, who’d already been escorted far from the site. It was starting to disgust him just how keen people were to get the latest in a long line of grim news, but he had to knuckle down and focus on the important details: Why was Emma taken? Why wasn’t she killed like the other two? And most importantly, where the hell was she?

Morgan sighed. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay.” Gary shrugged, raising his hand to scratch his beard but apparently thinking better of it. “Captain Bray is giving me a hard time. He thinks I’m still a little too close to the case. I could argue that I’m working on something else entirely, but I guess he’s right. I mean, I got that address for you, didn’t I?”

Morgan pressed a hand against his pocket, feeling for the cell phone. He nodded.

“I hear he’s getting pissed off with you too.”

“Well, that can’t be helped. Do I have anything to worry about?”

“Nah. He’s probably just worried you’ll solve this thing before he does, whereas I’m worried you won’t. Now that there’s a third victim, he’s starting to lock things down pretty tight. You know what that means, right?”

“Let me guess; I’m not allowed to talk to Emma’s husband?”

“Bingo.”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to wait until the police leave.”

Gary let out a thin smirk. “That’s the spirit.”

Realizing the new complication, Morgan turned his head to look back at the building. So much had changed in the past couple hours—what had once been a charity event and one of Rachel’s finest moments felt like such a long time ago. Now? It was just a hive for policemen and forensic experts desperately looking for an anomaly in a sea of fingerprints. But it still hurt to know that her big night had been ruined, and as he turned to stare back at the car where Rachel sat in the back seat laughing at something Hannah had said, he felt like the luckiest guy in the world all over again. How could she remain so positive, even after tonight?

It was a skill he could’ve used.

“I need you to do something for me,” Morgan said, stepping in close to his friend.

“Anything,” Gary said, frowning.

“Make sure Rachel gets home safe, will you? I mean, I know you’re taking her there, but could you not leave until she gets in the door? If she invites you guys in for coffee, go ahead and accept. Tonight was a big deal for her, and I don’t want her to be alone.”

“Sure. No problem. But you know she understands your need to work?”

“Sometimes it feels like she understands *too* much, you know?” Morgan inhaled, noticing the cold struggle in his lungs, then released it through his nose in twin streams, the air clouding into the night. “She keeps telling me it’s okay and that I should go ahead and continue investigating, but it feels like I’m leaving her behind.”

“You’re not,” Gary told him. “She understands. Trust me.”

Morgan squeezed his hands into balls, releasing some stress. It sure didn’t feel like she was okay with it, but he didn’t believe he had a choice. Not one that involved letting Gary down and risked seeing more victims on the news, anyway. “If you say so. Look, just take care of her for me, will you? Make sure she’s all right.”

Smiling, Gary patted him on the shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. “With my life.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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While the Metropolitan Police Department were keeping Mr. Cole occupied with a barrage of questions about his wife, Morgan used that time to swing by Pizza Palace and request some printed images of the surveillance footage. There hadn't been much to go on other than a jagged outline of the killer's jaw, but at this point anything would help.

After he'd obtained the pictures—not without a small service charge from Mr. Morales, of course—he'd climbed back into his car and taken the long route to Emma Cole's house, hoping to burn enough time for the police to leave. Unfortunately, by the time he arrived and parked across the street, he was still surrounded by the vehicles of officers and investigating detectives. It made Morgan realize just how awful it would be for Mr. Cole, not only having to deal with all the questions—spouses were always looked at first in these scenarios—but then putting up with some additional inquisition from himself.

But it had to be done.

It was another thirty long, tedious minutes before the police left the Cole house, which was a grand colonial sitting at the back of a long driveway that had a stone water feature in the middle. Morgan thought this looked a little tacky, but who was he to judge? Rachel was in charge of their home designs, and for good reason; he couldn't tell the difference between a patio and a porch, even now, as he watched six officers and a detective stepping off one before heading back to their cars.

Morgan waited in the dark, keeping low to avoid detection, but when the

detective reached his car and held open the door, he looked around at the scenery, catching the dark outline of Morgan's face. Morgan seized it, knowing it would change nothing, and gave a sarcastic wave with a big, fake smile.

The detective looked away and then left the scene.

When the coast was clear, Morgan grabbed the file of pictures and made his way up the long driveway, admiring the grandeur of the house. It screamed money, which didn't really feel like Emma's background, though he'd only had the honor of talking to her for a couple of minutes. He tried his best to remember how polite she was and hoped the man she'd married was even half as helpful as she'd been.

Knocking on the door, he waited in silence.

It was soon opened by a man in his thirties with slicked-back hair and a goatee. Morgan pictured him as some kind of stockbroker or investment banker, though most of that impression came from the quality of his home. The man stood quietly with his mouth agape.

"Mr. Cole?" Morgan proceeded.

"Yes?"

"My name's Morgan Young. I spoke to your wife only minutes before... you know. Maybe I could have a few minutes of your time?"

The man eyed him with fierce skepticism, leaving the door open only slightly. "You're not with the police, are you?"

"No, sir. Well, not officially. I was hired by a homicide detective to track down this..." He had to stop himself from saying killer, not wanting to alarm the poor guy, but no other word came to mind. "I know this must be hard for you, and you've probably answered a thousand questions already, but five minutes of your time could help me in ways you'd never believe."

The man paused, watching Morgan like he was about to do something wrong. It seemed as though he was going to slam the door, which made it all the more surprising when he opened it up and waved him inside. When Morgan entered, the man pushed the door closed and folded his arms, leaning against the wall in the hallway.

It was obvious they'd go no further into the house.



“You spoke to my wife?”

Morgan nodded, shuffling the file into his other hand. “As I said, I’m investigating the DC Carver, and she said she had some information on the victims.”

“Yeah, she went to high school with them. The police think he took her.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Morgan said. And he did—there was no reason to believe the man who’d taken her was anyone other than the DC Carver, especially since these women had all attended the same school. “Mr. Cole—”

“You can call me Matthew,” he said, moisture glistening in his eyes.

“Matthew, then.” Morgan glanced away to give him a chance to dry his eyes, and he pulled the pictures out of the file, handing them over. “I’d just like to confirm something with you about the man who took her. These were taken from a pizza place, and this man had been linked to the previous murders. I know it’s hard to identify a hooded man, but is there anything about his size or shape that might ring a bell?”

Sniffing, Matthew took the pictures and studied them, bringing them too close to his face. It was probably an attempt to hide his tears, but if any man had a reason to cry it was him. “The police already asked me this, but it’s hard to say. This is a different angle though, and I don’t think... Hmm. Maybe.”

Morgan’s ears pricked. “Maybe what?”

“Maybe I do know him.”

That was all it took to set Morgan’s heart racing like a prize-winning horse. He adjusted his stance and stepped closer. “Are you sure? Please understand that this man has murdered four people, and it’s highly likely he’s the one who kidnapped your wife. If you know anything about him, it’s in your best interest to say.”

Squinting, Matthew studied harder. “I’m pretty sure I hit this guy once.”

Morgan felt a surge of electricity. “Recently?”

“No, no. In high school.”

“He went to your high school?” This was too good to be true.

“I never saw him except for the one time, but it’s a big school. He was following Emma around once. Wouldn’t leave her alone, you know?” Matthew

lowered the picture and raised his knuckle, showing off a scar in the shape of a white dent. “See that? I swung for him and he ducked, so I caught the wall. Will never forget that. But if this bastard has hurt her...”

“She might be okay,” Morgan said, as much as he doubted it.

Matthew returned to studying the photo, his expression turning from one of hopeful remembrance to disappointed submission. Huffing, he swung the file back into Morgan’s chest, turning his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t do this. It feels too much like false hope.”

“It could help.”

“Sure, it could, but I don’t know his name.”

“You know his face though?”

Matthew threw up his hands. “I recognize it at best.”

It was easy to understand his pain, and Morgan didn’t want to press. This poor guy was already going through enough, and pushing him further wasn’t likely to help anyone. Giving in, he reached into his pocket and grabbed a business card, handing it over. “Okay, Matthew, I’m going to leave you alone. My number is on there. Please call if you need anything. *Anything*. Even if it’s just a shoulder to cry on.”

Sniffling again, this time wiping his eyes with his sleeve without trying to be discreet, Matthew took the card and opened the door. “Thank you, Mr. Young. I’ll be sure to let you know if I think of anything important. I just want my wife back.”

Morgan stepped outside, a pang of sympathy striking him like a dart. It wouldn’t help to make false promises, but he had to say something, even if it wasn’t much. “I know you do.” He finally settled for, “I’m doing everything I can to make that happen.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Over the next two days, the press had kicked up a stink about how far the killer would go. The friends and family of Emma Cole had been constantly hounded, whereas Morgan had left his phone untouched. But that wasn't to say he didn't sit staring at it, waiting for it to ring with a certain twitch making him less comfortable by the second.

"Why don't you just let it go?" Rachel asked, passing by the living room with a laundry basket in her arms. "Not the case, obviously, but I don't think that Matthew guy is going to call. If he was going to, he probably would have already."

Morgan mulled this as he shot up and opened the door for his wife, following her into the yard and pulling out the basket of clothes pins they kept under the back porch. Together, they began to hang shirts, Rachel remaining silent to let him think, as usual.

"You're right," Morgan said, bending down to pick another item out of the basket. He bit his lip as he stood upright, squinting against the sun and keeping his fingers moving to avoid numbing in the cold fall air. "He's probably being kept busy by the police anyway."

"Yep. What does Gary have to say on the matter?"

"I haven't heard from him since the HUCINS event." Morgan paused, glancing at her and catching a fleeting frown. It was like the memory haunted her—a good, positive event being turned into something sinister and traumatic. And had she complained about it? Not one bit. Another accolade to add to her

ongoing list of admirable traits. “Listen, I feel awful about that night. The whole thing was supposed to be something good.”

Rachel crooked an eyebrow and pinned a pair of socks to the clothes line. Her already pale skin grew whiter in the cold, and Morgan thought she only looked more like an angel, if angels were even half that beautiful. “Why? It’s not your fault that guy did what he did.”

“Still, you deserve better than that.”

“I don’t mind.” She shook her head. “I just hope that Emma girl is okay.”

Morgan lowered his head, almost forgetting he was in the middle of a household chore before he picked up where he left off, leaning over to grab another garment. His hopes and prayers went out to Emma Cole too, but he also felt helpless. After all, it’d been his responsibility to keep an eye on her, hadn’t it? After agreeing to meet her outside, how hard should it have really been to ensure she didn’t go missing in this hall full of people? It left a nagging sense of guilt nibbling at his conscience, but he couldn’t let it bring him down. Not while he still intended to find her, at any rate.

“There is something that bothers me though,” Rachel went on, picking up the empty basket and heading inside with Morgan close behind. “The two murdered girls went to school together, right?”

Morgan cleared his throat—all the agreement he had to offer.

“And Emma Cole went to the same school. Our school. Stop me if I’m wrong.”

“Go ahead.”

Rachel set down the basket and shut the door, a final gust of cold wind blowing in before it was banished to the outside. “Well, then you spoke to Matthew, who was yet another student at the same high school, only this guy recognizes the man in the photographs.”

“Barely. It’s optimistic to think he noticed more than a familiar jawline.”

“But isn’t that enough?”

It made Morgan stop, leaning back against the kitchen counter with his crossed arms brought high into his chest, squeezing out the cold. “I don’t follow.”

“What I mean is, don’t you think it’s too much of a coincidence that they all went to the same school? Think about it: Matthew threw a punch at some guy who *knew* those other girls. Sure, it’s possible he knew them some other way, but doesn’t it strongly suggest the killer went to that school as a student?”

“Oh, I completely agree, but I’ve already checked out the school.”

“Yes, but has Matthew?”

Morgan let out a short breath that was half laughter and half a sigh. He lowered his head and resumed breathing before he returned his gaze to Rachel, who was setting up the coffee machine to brew a fresh batch. “Still not following.”

Turning to reveal her own smile, Rachel went on. “Okay, Detective, let me spell it out for you. Matthew may not fully recognize the man from Pizza Palace, but surely he’d know the guy if he saw him again. With me so far?”

“Kind of.”

“Good. So then, let’s assume the killer *did* attend that school. What would be the one surefire way to identify him?”

Morgan knew it before she even finished the sentence. All the pieces fell into place in the blink of an eye, each puzzling clue falling into its rightful slot. It was like the end of a sudoku puzzle, when the hard work was done and the rest could be completed on autopilot. Only the sense of sheer excitement went far deeper, enabling him to possibly find his killer. And if he was lucky—*very* lucky—he might be able to find Emma Cole in one piece.

At least now he knew what to do.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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While the cold whispers of late fall crept up and down his collar, Morgan sat nursing the item in his lap. The bench he sat on was situated on the outskirts of the nearest park, a spot chosen for its convenient positioning between both their houses. Now, as the sun slipped behind the horizon and the streetlights flickered on, all he had to do was wait.

It wasn't long before he appeared, but it felt like forever.

Matthew trudged up the dirt-covered path, hands hidden in the deep pockets of his trench coat. It was obvious he hadn't shaved since they'd last met, and Morgan remembered reading that most men put their grooming on hold during times of distress, though he'd never endured it himself. "It's good to see you, Mr. Young, but I hope there's a good reason you called me out here on the coldest evening in recent months."

Oh, there was, but Morgan kept his words to himself and handed over the item. Excitement riddled through him, but it could've been for nothing, so he only watched his companion's expression while he studied the item.

"What's this?" Matthew asked, finally glancing up but looking no less dazed.

"That," Morgan said, standing up as Matthew sat down like ships passing in the night, "is a school yearbook from a place you'll recognize. I managed to snag an old copy from the principal, who said you're welcome to keep it as a gift for when you get Emma back."

Matthew, who'd been hunched over the yearbook sitting in his lap, looked up with bleak yet grateful eyes. It was no secret he appreciated the optimism, for all

the good it would do. “That’s great, but why go to all the trouble?”

“You said you’d know the man if you saw him.”

Without another moment of confusion, Matthew seemed to understand. He tore open the book and held it up to the overhanging streetlight. He used one finger to scan the many faces, flicking each page as his search failed to turn up results.

Meanwhile, Morgan paced. What else could he do, really? The case was about to either blow wide open or collapse on itself like a poorly erected tent, and while his nerves felt like scorching rocks rolling around under his skin, his teeth chattered in the cold. It was the most hopeful he’d been in days, but that little bit of doubt kept him on edge.

“Not much luck,” Matthew said with his head still buried in the book. He stood now, closing the distance between the book and the light, holding it at the only angle that would serve. His face contorted, screwing up as he turned to one of the middle pages. “Wait.”

Morgan, who’d been thinking of the moment they’d rescue Emma as a means of distraction, unfolded his arms and rushed to Matthew’s side, leaning over him and only now realizing how much taller he was than the man. “What do you have?”

“This.” Matthew pointed to a picture. “This is him!”

Snapping the yearbook out of his hands, Morgan studied the photo himself, taking in the sight of a young man with small ears and bright lips. He looked sort of feminine, enough to make it difficult for him to fit in with alpha males. Morgan tried to think of all the social groups from when he was in school, but he couldn’t picture this kid belonging to any one of them. “Are you certain this is the kid you tried to punch?”

“Yes.” Matthew bounced his head in urgent nods.

“And you’d bet he’s the same man in the Pizza Palace photographs?”

“I can’t be certain, but I’m pretty sure.”

Morgan closed the book with a heavy thump, keeping it held close to his chest like a nerdy teenager. A smile tugged at his lips, but he didn’t even want to try holding this one back—this could be the moment he found his killer. At least,

the name of him. “Thank you so much for your time. Now I want you to return home, and do whatever the police tell you.”

Matthew lunged out and grabbed his arm. “Wait. Shouldn’t I tell them about this?”

“I’ll do it,” Morgan said, gently loosening the viselike grip. “I promise.”

Seconds later, he was out of the park and rushing to his car, digging into his pocket for the phone so he could make a call. It rang for an eternity before Gary picked up, answering with a flat, croaky voice that Morgan knew for certain was about to gain a little more enthusiasm. “We have him,” he said, opening the car door and fumbling the keys. “The killer’s name is Nick Hansen, and he went to our school. Send in the troops—I’m on my way.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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**I**t'd been nearly ten minutes since Nick Hansen removed the gag from her mouth and retreated to the stairs, where he dropped onto one of the lower steps and watched. He wasn't sure what he'd expected—some screaming, maybe some bargaining—but so far she hadn't said a damn word. All he'd seen was a thin teardrop. All he'd heard was a silenced snuffle.

He got up and stormed toward her, raising his hand high and hoping to provoke some kind of reaction. But there wasn't so much as a flinch. Emma Cole only stared up at him with inquisitive eyes that were laced with fear but were still narrow slits.

Resigning, he lowered his hand.

"Why aren't you scared?" he said, pulling at the threads on his sweater.

Emma turned away from him, raising her head to look down at her body, which was strapped hard to the table. When she saw this, her head fell back. Her eyes rolled up toward the ceiling. "*I am* scared. I'm frickin' terrified."

Nick thought she sounded sincere too. There was no waver in her voice to suggest otherwise, but then why wasn't she screaming? Why hadn't she tried to break free and run upstairs? Probably because the first thing she'd run into was his mother, that's why. "It makes no sense. I could cut you up at any moment, and you don't even care."

His victim said nothing.

"I could tear your face apart like I did to your friends."

*That* created a reaction, her eyes finally widening into shock-filled blanks

that gawked at him with both disgust and disbelief. But there was something else in them too: recognition.

“Holy shit, I know you. You’re Nick Hansen.”

He couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t just that she might have a reason to fear him now, but all those times she’d rejected his advances—all those times she’d convinced herself she was too damn pretty to be seen with the likes of him—were returning as nothing more than regret. Nick had longed for this day since he was twelve years old, being used as nothing but a stepping stone to the next guy. But how had that worked out for them? Remembering the way he’d made a mess of their faces, he figured not well.

Now that she’d identified him, she started to thrash against her constraints.

“Yeah, you’re right to be scared.” Nick stomped forward and stuffed the filthy rag back in her mouth. He hoisted himself onto the bench, his hip nudging into her side as he seated himself and leaned over her. “Because now, after all these years that you’ve been laughing at me from behind your social media wall, I finally have a voice.”

Emma’s subtle tears became big sobs as she choked on the rag, wincing with every inch closer he came. She rolled her head to one side, her cheeks turning red as tears glistened on her skin before dripping onto the table.

There was no escaping him.

“Remember that time I dated Carrie Whittle?” Nick said, recalling only the negative moments and the humiliation that came with them. “She was mine. *Mine*. All those bad things she said about me? About how I stalked her and became possessive? Yeah, that was all bullshit. But you didn’t want to hear that at the time, did you?”

Emma cried into her rag.

“From where you were standing, I became a problem and your friend dumped me before getting lucky and finding some good-looking, smooth-talking new guy who offered a shoulder to cry on. And then what? They go on to live happily ever after, while I get branded a psycho by the entire school. It’s not fair, is it?”

The sobbing stopped. Emma stared toward the ceiling.

Nick shook his head, thrusting his fists into the table. “It’s not fair! What if I told you everything you knew was a lie? What if that whore was sleeping with him the whole time, and the only way she could justify her ‘transition’ was to label me a creep? All you girls, you’re the same. Blame the guy, right? There’s a blatant disregard for what it does to a man.”

The awful memories of those years engulfed him, spiking his rage to new heights. He launched himself off the table and crossed the room, if only to keep himself from punching a thousand holes into her face. It was like those old emotions—the ones he thought he’d left in high school—were coming back for him. Could he not just live a normal life?

No. Not after what she’d done.

Not after what they’d *all* done.

“I tried to give them all a chance,” Nick said, turning back toward the table while grinding his teeth into dust, “but things haven’t changed a bit after all these years. You’d think those girls would’ve at least acknowledged me after passing me in the street, but they didn’t. *You* didn’t. It’s like the past never happened. Speaking of which, did you ever tell your husband we had a fling behind his back?”

There was nothing but muffled protest from Emma now. For all the good it’d do her.

“Of course you didn’t. I bet that’s why he swung for me all those years ago, huh? Let me guess; I was following you? Stalking you? And you didn’t have the heart to tell him that you were fucking me the whole time? See, history just repeats itself. The others were killed immediately for the same thing, but you... you’re lucky to have lived for so long.”

But that was the end of it. His trip down memory lane fell into the background as his old emotions were stirred up and blind anger took the spotlight. Lunging forward, he swiped a pair of scissors off the side and stormed toward her, pure hatred surging through every inch of his body as he seized his opportunity for vengeance.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Morgan stopped the car on the side of the street and killed the engine. His heart jackhammered in his chest while he climbed out and rushed toward Gary, who was hurrying down his driveway. They almost collided when they met.

“What do you have?” Gary asked, breathing heavily.

Being careful not to leave out a single detail, Morgan did his best to tell the whole story so far. As he recounted each part, awful memories spewed into his imagination, bringing him images of the victims like pictures in a grim pop-up book. He spoke without stopping, save for those times he licked his dry lips, while Gary listened carefully without uttering a single word. The information flowed so smoothly he could’ve sworn his lips didn’t so much as pause.

When he was all caught up, Gary exhaled and raked his fingers through his hair. He leaned back against Morgan’s car, crossing his arms and staring down at his feet. When he looked back up, a grin covered his face. “We have him, then.”

Morgan wanted to agree, but he couldn’t. Instead, he nodded and joined his friend against the cool glass of his driver’s-side window. The tails of his coat flapped in the wind. “If only it were that easy. But is it ever?”

The smile vanished from Gary’s face. “I guess not.”

“What can you do?”

“I can run the name, for sure. If he’s been caught for anything so much as petty theft, he’ll be in the system. There’s no guarantee his information will be up-to-date and accurate, but it’s a start. We might get an address even if he’s

unlisted.”

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself.”

“Why?”

“Doesn’t it just seem too good to be true?”

Gary shrugged, cleared his throat, and stayed quiet.

“Look, I don’t want to put a negative spin on this, but even if we have a name, it’s all we have. Emma Cole’s husband is happy to identify the guy if needed, but don’t take your eye off the ball here. Emma is still missing.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Gary stood up straight, nodding at the house. “Hannah has been trying to pick up the pieces while I wallow in self-pity. I’ve been aware of that and started making an effort to smile more around her, but it’s tough. The thing is, I need that faith. If Emma comes home and this bastard is locked up, I can rest knowing Carrie has been...”

Morgan watched him lower his head. “You want to say ‘avenged,’ don’t you?”

“Is that wrong?”

“A little corny, but not wrong.”

“I still mean it.” Gary stretched as he yawned, his mouth a wide O. “Right, I need to head down to the precinct and see what I can dig up. Keep your phone on, because I’m going to keep you up-to-date on whatever I find.”

It made Morgan hesitate, half reaching for his phone before letting his hand slip down to his side. “How long will it take?”

“A couple hours. Maybe three or four. Why?”

“Because you might need to be alone on this one.”

Gary stepped forward, his face a picture of shock. “What?”

“You heard me. I have somewhere to be tonight.” And he wasn’t lying—he’d been an awful excuse for a husband lately, and if there was one thing he had to take care of, it was his responsibility to his marriage. Gary was a good friend—his very best friend, without a doubt—but Morgan knew his place. “Besides, the MPD probably don’t want me snooping around. Don’t you think I’ve been in their way long enough?”

“Probably.”

Silence descended upon them, only the sounds of a fall gust brushing leaves around them.

“So,” Gary said, “should I call you?”

“Definitely.” Morgan laughed, checking his watch. “But only if you think it’ll be worth my time. Until then, I have to be at the HUCINS Center. Give my love to Hannah, will you?”

“Sure.”

Morgan opened the door and slumped back into the driver’s seat, feeding the key into the ignition with a big grin on his face. The wheels had all been set in motion now—there was a strong chance the DC Carver would be found, hopefully with Emma Cole unharmed, and then Morgan could go back to living his life in the best way he could.

But that was only one of the possible outcomes, he knew.

It was also the least likely.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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If he could fall any deeper into his own mind he would surely drown. Morgan made trips from the far wall, taking fold-out chairs with him, and carried them into the center of the hall before collapsing them into uncomfortable seats. He did this on autopilot, his mind working away like a great machine while the only present part of him was the pain in his lower back. It was caused partly by age, partly by a tree-climbing mishap when he was a kid. Whatever the main cause, the fact remained: it was aggressively uncomfortable.

The last time he'd been in this room, a serial killer had been in here with him, hidden among the audience, Gary and his wife, and even Rachel. The fact he'd gotten so close caused a whole load of concern for Morgan. Knowing one of them could be attacked at any given minute was anything but comforting. Morgan had learned enough to know that pretty—no, *beautiful*—women were more likely to become targets. He was no psychological analyst, but the fact their faces had been sliced open suggested a more personal aggression. Pairing that with what Matthew had said, the murders looked like a twisted case of jealousy. That was the short version anyway, but the same sickening feeling turned in Morgan's stomach nonetheless.

“Something on your mind?”

Starting at the soft voice, Morgan turned from his bent-over position to see Rachel grab two chairs from the far wall. She returned with a large smile on her face, her pale cheeks rising into little bumps where her cheekbones were. She started to unfold the chairs.

“I’m fine,” Morgan said, though he was anything but. He checked his watch again—two hours since he’d last spoken with Gary, but he had yet to hear anything. He went on to check his cell phone, which had the same disappointing result. All he could do was settle into the moment and try to clear his head while he waited. “All ready for your event?”

Rachel nodded, snapped open a wooden chair, and lined it up with the others, completing the sixth long row. Until now she’d been in the back, preparing her latest speech and directing the volunteers. Keeping herself busy, as always. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“You’ll be fine.”

She hesitated, and Morgan caught the last second of a nervous exhale.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Rachel paused, then smiled a perfect white smile. “Nothing.”

It didn’t fool him. Morgan had been married to her for too long to let that go unnoticed. Finishing off the chair, he placed it to one side and approached her. He took her hand and sat down, encouraging her to do the same on the seat beside him. “Something’s up, and if you can’t tell me, then who can you tell?”

Placing one warm hand on top of his, she reset her breath, and then looked him dead in the eye. The stare wasn’t cold—in fact it was warm and sympathetic—but it posed as a kind of curtain that flew open to reveal a hidden truth. “It’s your job.”

Morgan had an idea of where this was going, but he kept a lid on it.

“This whole DC Carver thing is making me nervous. It was okay for a little while, and I even pushed you into pursuing it, but when we found out he was in here with us...” She looked around the hall, her large, stunning eyes roaming the vacant space, the walls, the ceiling. “It was a big night for me, and it all came crashing down because he wanted to take Emma. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and the more I do, the more I realize how selfish I am.”

Morgan firmed his grip on her hand, caressing her skin with his thumb. “You’re not selfish, honey. Far from it. I mean, look around you. You think all those kids would be better off without all of this? You’ve given most of them a second chance. You’ve spread awareness of their struggles. They need you, and



you're always there for them."

Rachel shook her head. "It's not that."

"It's not?"

"Emma Cole gets swiped out from under our noses, and all I can think about is how it ruined my big night. I feel like a monster. Now here we are, the second in a big series of charity events, and I'm anxious about something similar happening. The worst part? It's not even worry for the other victim—it's that selfish kind of worry."

Tipping his head forward, Morgan kissed her hand. "What can I do?"

Rachel paused, biting her lip like she had something to say. When she finally spoke, it felt as though she'd discarded the idea and elected to say something else. "You love your job, and I'm always here for you. I can't expect you to control where the killer goes, and that's what makes me so nervous. The thing is, I don't want anything to change."

"With us?"

She shrugged, her cheeks turning red as she fanned her eyes to keep her makeup from running. "With us. With you. I guess I just wanted to express my feelings without you thinking you had to stop chasing that guy. You have a big heart, that's no secret, but you have to persevere. If not for Emma's sake, then for your own."

Morgan didn't entirely understand what she was trying to tell him. Women were often a mystery to him, and although Rachel was less so, he could only barely grasp the message she was putting across: she felt like a bad person. It wasn't really about his work, and it wasn't even really about hers. The tears she was fighting against were a product of her guilt, and the guilt came from her own feelings that the spotlight had been removed from her.

At least, that was what he thought.

But it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She'd been working hard to help others for as long as he'd known her, and she'd never asked for a thing in return. Not even acknowledgement. Fast-forward a few years and she was still determined as ever, only now she finally got to give a grand speech about how far HUCINS had come, and what had happened? Some lunatic kidnapped an innocent woman

and ruined the whole damn thing.

It was crazy, but he got it.

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” Morgan told her as he leaned in to wipe a stray tear from her cheek, vaguely aware of a familiar shape looming in the doorway. “Everyone knows how incredibly well you’re doing, and you don’t need a speech to fix that. I’m so, so proud of you, and everyone here is too.”

Rachel laughed through a fresh tear. “There’s nobody here, Morgan.”

“True, but you know what I mean.”

They chuckled together, her momentary misery washing from the atmosphere like a wave had taken it from the shore and carried it out to sea, far away from them. Rachel rested her head on his shoulder, sniffled, and sighed. “Thank you.”

Morgan brushed wisps of hair over her ear, enjoying the last few moments of warmth while the breeze crept in from outside. And the figure in the doorway? He was still there, probably waiting for the right time to interrupt. Morgan knew it had to come, and while he cherished this moment with the woman he loved, the compulsion to speak to Gary was so fierce it made him uncomfortable.

After all, there was only one reason he’d be here.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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**I**t was a matter of minutes before Morgan stepped into the cold, joining Gary on the front steps of the charity hall. He immediately noticed the way his friend stepped from one foot to the other like he had something exciting to share. That little trait of impatience had never gotten by him, and today was no different.

“You have something,” Morgan said, more of a statement than a question.

“More than that. Follow me.” Gary rushed back to his car, hitting a button on the fob to unlock it and leaving Morgan to let himself in. When they settled, he switched on the dome light and heaved a large file from the footwell, dumping it onto Morgan’s lap.

Morgan took the weight, excitement flowing through him as he ran his finger along the rim of the pages. There were a lot of them. “This is everything?”

“Everything so far.” Gary grinned and gestured toward it. “Take a look.”

He didn’t need persuading. In less than a second, he unhooked the rubber band and spread open the papers, using the dashboard and the handbrake to rest the introductory pages on. He’d read a lot of police files over the years—he had Gary to thank for that—and had quickly learned how to skim through a file neglecting the useless information.

The first thing to note was the absence of a photograph, a square outline lying vacant on the left side of the page. Morgan’s heart sank at the sight of this, realizing this wasn’t such a great start, but then something else caught his eye. A name: “Lyonette Hansen?”

Gary nodded, the smile showing not just on his mouth but in his eyes.

“Mother of...” Morgan finally understood why Gary was so excited, and now he could join him in that. Rifling through, he found a wealth of information on their killer—birth certificate, education and work history. There was even a note on his questioning in a previous police investigation. “Who’s Bradley Tier?”

“A nobody,” Gary said.

“But in this context?”

“Stepfather used to come home drunk, whaling on a young Nick Hansen. Eventually he reported it, and the department opened up an investigation, but it didn’t come to anything. Looks like Tier got pissed and skipped town. Nobody’s heard from him since.”

Morgan brushed the paper aside and delved deeper into Nick’s life, finding everything he needed except for one very important detail. His hands shook as he read, tearing aside sheet after sheet of information until he reached the end. “There’s no address.”

“No, but there is for Lyonette.”

“You want to question her?”

“Possibly. Or something else.” Gary’s lips moved as he read to himself, sifting through the paperwork and making the mess even bigger. Frown lines appeared on his forehead, giving him the look of a basset hound until he found what he was looking for. He snatched up a handful of pages and handed them over. “Here.”

Morgan took them and squinted to read the small print. There was a lot to offer in the way of mortgage details, utility bills, and other upkeep, but something was missing, and he couldn’t quite put his finger on what. He nearly gave up, but there must have been a reason Gary had pointed it out to him, so he searched harder.

Then he saw it.

It was a revelation that brought a lot to light. It could’ve meant everything was about to change, and Morgan felt the shift in hope change his pulse to something fierce. His hands shook harder as his cheeks rose to produce a smug

grin. “She’s unemployed.”

Gary nodded. “Which means—”

“Someone else must be paying her bills. But nobody is listed?”

“She could be subletting.”

Morgan had his suspicions. “To her son?”

“Could be.”

As excited as he wanted to become, something didn’t feel right about this. It all felt too easy, like a piece was missing. Maybe it was because he hadn’t taken into account his jurisdiction—or lack thereof—and the MPD would make a mess of him if he wanted to get involved. But would that be the end of the world? Gary wouldn’t get to execute his vengeance, but that would be okay... wouldn’t it? The point was that Emma Cole could be inside that house, and a simple knock on the door might change her fate. Morgan understood then; they needed help from someone bigger than themselves.

“Have you notified Homicide?”

“Not yet. I was waiting for your go-ahead.”

Morgan shuffled the papers back into an organized pile and replaced the rubber band. He handed it over. “Then go ahead. All of this doesn’t mean a thing if we can’t get an arrest on it. Just be aware that if they can’t get a warrant, then we’ll be up shit creek.”

“You’re telling me.” Gary dropped the file back into the footwell. “Do you think Lyonette is involved in these murders?”

“I’m not even sure Nick is involved, but there’s only one way to find out.”

“But you know they’ll never let you near this?”

Morgan faked a smile. “Doesn’t mean I’m not coming.”

“Typical. What about Rachel?”

Exactly, Morgan thought, craning his head back toward the charity hall. She would still need a hand setting up for tonight’s event, but after their recent discussion, he had a feeling she’d understand why he had to leave tonight. This could be the end of the investigation, which meant she would get her husband back, and wasn’t that what she wanted? Of course, it depended on whether or not this search came to anything. There was always a chance it wouldn’t, and even if

they had the right guy, there was no guarantee Emma was still alive.

Morgan clutched his stomach, bile churning inside. “All right, let’s go.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Morgan sat in the reception area of the MPD precinct, wondering what it'd be like to join the team. It wasn't something he'd ever considered, and he probably never would, but it did make him question whether he'd be good at the job. He decided he wouldn't.

Gary had left him an hour ago, heading inside to present his findings to the Homicide department and keep them up to speed, where the working detective would most likely accept all recognition for the legwork. Morgan was okay with that—he only wanted to bring the killer to justice—but they were taking their damn time getting that warrant.

Yawning into his palm, Morgan checked his watch. It was just after ten, which meant Rachel's presentation was nearly at an end. Looking around at the rush of officers and men in flashy suits storming around the place, he figured they were too busy to get this over with any time soon, and so he convinced himself he wouldn't make it back in time to catch the end.

He was right.

A swarm of men—some in uniform, some not—burst from a nearby door and headed to the exit with Detective Gary Lee struggling to catch up. Stopping beside Morgan and puffing like he'd run a marathon, he put his hands on his knees and doubled over. "They're heading in now," he said. "They have a warrant to search the premises."

This alerted Morgan in more ways than he'd have imagined. "And Nick Hansen?"

“Let’s just say they’re going in armed.”

Not good, Morgan thought as he headed outside with Gary. They rushed toward his car, climbed in, and followed the swarm of police vehicles, the lights flashing blood red and sky blue as they swerved between civilian cars. Morgan held on tight while Gary drove, the adrenaline setting his skin alight. He controlled his breathing, his stomach uneasy in the fast pursuit. At this rate they wouldn’t get there in one piece, and even if they did, there would be the matter of the detective’s boundaries to contend with. Not that Morgan had any intention of crossing them—the last thing he wanted was to go in unarmed.

They stopped outside an uncared-for house where only one light shone through the night. The men scrambled from their cars toward the front door, a couple heading around the back. Gary stopped the car behind them all, turning off the engine and leaving them both in silence.

Morgan stirred, watching from afar.

“Better we keep our distance,” Gary said.

“No doubt. What did you tell them?”

“Everything I told you. Why?”

“Just wondered.” Morgan climbed out of the car, if only to breathe or pace, or anything. Whatever it was, he couldn’t just sit there wondering what was going to happen. He watched the men kick down the door and storm into the house with their guns raised, and all the while he could only imagine Emma Cole getting caught in the crossfire. The very thought of it stirred up anger he didn’t know he’d had; until now Gary had been the one most emotionally affected by this case, but Morgan was starting to lose control. He’d seen enough to turn him white.

There was a clunk as Gary exited the car, joining him at his side. They both stood in silence, leaning against the car doors as flashlight beams flooded through the dark windows of the house. Morgan’s skin crawled, like millions of bugs were nibbling through his skin and crawling over his flesh. He noticed how tense he was, his back stiffened and his shoulders hunched as he anxiously awaited a result.

And then it came.



Two gunshots from behind the house.

Morgan shot up straight.

Gary did the same. “Shit,” he spat.

Before he could question what’d happened, Morgan found his legs moving without command. He heard his name being called behind him as he sprinted toward the door, where one man remained with an outheld hand, forbidding his entry. Morgan’s instincts took over, sending him darting around the side of the house and bursting through the backyard gate. Fear blended with the cool air, shooting up his aching spine. Cold sweat dampened his forehead. His fists trembled as he ran.

When he came around the back there was a third gunshot.

Morgan froze in his tracks, grounded like a victim of stone petrification. But even looking into Medusa’s eyes couldn’t compare to the terror he experienced as an armed man—no uniform—dashed onto the back porch, searching left and right for an exit.

Until he saw Morgan.

The gun came up then, the dull metal glowing in the moonlight.

Morgan held still, not threatening a single movement. He closed his eyes and bit down on the inside of his cheeks, fear tearing through him like an icy blade. He looked away, all weight seeming to leave his body. All he saw on the backs of his eyelids was Rachel.

There were footsteps.

They were the steps of the killer as he ran into the darkness at the far end of the yard. Morgan saw this through the narrow slit of one eye. He then opened the other, confirming he was totally alone as he felt around his body for a bullet hole. There was none.

Not in him, anyway.

“We need a medic!” came a voice from inside.

No longer caring if he was allowed or not, Morgan ran inside the building with his hand feeding into his jacket for the cell phone he kept there. His mind absent, he took it out and called for an ambulance, observing the room of horrors that only vaguely resembled a kitchen.

A woman, easily in her late fifties and in terrible shape, was bleeding out by his feet. It was Lyonette Hansen, and a pool of blood oozed out of her, reaching across the stained tile floor like it was threatening to paint over the years of neglect. Morgan's stomach turned, the voice on the phone asking which service he required, and he heard himself say "ambulance." Although he was sure the police had already made the call.

But that wasn't all.

Three men cleared the hallway attached to the kitchen. They fussed around each other, making way for a small blonde lady who couldn't walk without help. They held her upright, escorting her into the back while one of the men asked Morgan to leave.

He had no choice.

Coming to, Morgan obeyed the direct command and stepped out into the cold night air. He gave the woman on the phone an address, craning his neck to scan the yard in case the killer came back to finish his work. Not that he hadn't done enough—the woman inside was dead, and the only hope of finding Hansen was with the one woman who'd survived his wrath.

Emma Cole was alive.

For how long, he didn't know.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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Nick—or the DC Carver, as he was now being called—kept running until his feet were on fire. The rough ground stabbed at his bare soles as he sprinted down back alleys, crossing onto new paths while sirens wailed somewhere behind him. He thought he'd gotten away, but there was no way to tell for certain. Not without revealing himself from the darkness in which he now stood, panting like his lungs were about to burst.

What a night it'd truly been, he kept thinking while he stuffed the gun into the waistline of his pants. It wobbled and clunked to the ground, so he scooped it up and shoved it deep into the pocket of his sweater, pissing him off even more for not having had the chance to get dressed.

And then there was the matter of his mother.

Nick couldn't necessarily say it'd been easy to shoot her. The shock that came with it had made his mind foggy and his legs weak, like he was five seconds from fainting. But he hadn't fainted, had he? Quite the opposite, in fact: he'd made it out of there without a scratch on him. Save for the cuts on the soles of his feet, that was.

But she'd encouraged him.

Not just in her final moments, when she'd held her ground in front of the back door and insisted he awaited consequences for what he'd done, but in the years leading up to it. Had she protested when her boyfriend had smacked him around all those years? Had she since tried to make amends, even starting with something as simple as an apology?

The answer to both of those questions was a firm “no.”

Which was why she’d had to die.

Back there, when he’d squeezed the trigger and the room lit up for a much shorter time than it seemed, he’d almost enjoyed the way her mouth hung open in shock. She’d stood there frozen like a mannequin, assessing him with eyes that questioned if he’d really done it, and when she’d looked down and saw the small blotch of scarlet growing across her shirt, she knew.

But by then it was too late.

She’d hit the floor with a thud that both satisfied and pained him. It was the pain of guilt, though only a brief fleck. The rest was drowned out by the sound of sirens and the rush of blood in his ears as the adrenaline took over. After that, he’d had no choice but to run, leaving all he knew in a house he’d probably never see again.

He’d also had to leave *her*.

Emma Cole had belonged to him for a short period of time. It was something he’d fantasized about in his adolescence, spending long nights alone in bed, staring up at the ceiling while his imagination allowed him to slip off her bra. But there was more than that—that same flexible imagination showed him what it would be like for *him* to turn *her* down. Only then was there a foundation for him to claim his vengeance after humiliating him all those years ago, back when he was just a kid.

Just. A. Kid.

Nobody deserved that torment.

Especially him.

The bustle of interested citizens made a roar in the street, filling in the gaps between the commands of policemen who were still searching for him. Nick peered around the corner, flakes of wood from the fence scratching his cheek. He didn’t care—all he wanted was a peek.

It didn’t disappoint.

A crowd was forming between the police vehicles, the public demanding the latest news from the authorities. There were cries, screams, and even murmurs as Emma Cole was taken into the back of an ambulance. Nick swept his gaze

across the scene as an unidentifiable emotion settled in his chest. Was it fear? Anger? The rapid tick of his heart told him it was both, but it wasn't until he saw *him* that Nick truly realized.

It was anger.

Raw, uncontrollable anger.

The black investigator from the charity hall left the scene, retreating to his car with one of the detectives. He must've been the one to lead the police his way, Nick figured, and that only made his blood boil. Just who the hell did he think he was? This was Nick's life work—his vengeance for years of shitty treatment and neglect. And just when he'd started to get his own back, this goddamn hero came swooping in out of nowhere to save the stupid day.

But he would learn.

Oh, yes. Rachel's husband, whatever his name was, would have the attention turned toward him, and he would suffer. Knowing this, Nick felt a sense of relief, as if not all was lost. There was a new challenge for him now: a pleasant distraction from his troublesome youth. Already formulating a new plan, he turned and disappeared into the night, eager to make those inventive nightmares a reality.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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Morgan sat in a quarantined wing of the hospital, where nobody was allowed in or out except for him and Gary, who'd been able to sneak him in under his own authority. Morgan appreciated this more than anyone could know—until now he'd been sitting at home wishing the days away and waiting for some news while Rachel stayed with him for support. When Gary had finally come knocking on their door to tell him Emma Cole requested his presence, it finally felt as though his luck had changed for the better.

Tapping his heel repeatedly on the floor, Morgan made a constant flick of his head at every sound from each end of the corridor. Now that he was here, he had no idea what he'd say to Emma. He'd never been very comfortable talking with trauma victims, so this should be no different. The thing was, she wanted him in there, and there was a reason for that.

He just had to figure out what it was.

The minutes slogged by. Morgan was only seconds away from heading downstairs for a coffee when there was a click. Emma's door inched open, and Gary stepped out with his face creased into a frown. "She's ready. Go ahead."

Morgan shot to his feet and headed inside before his nerves could talk him out of it. He thanked Gary and closed the door behind him, preparing himself to not make a fuss of the way she looked. He hadn't yet seen her since she'd been rescued and cleaned up, but he didn't want to cringe or hiss through his teeth when he saw her, so he kept the thought at the front of his mind as he ventured deeper into the large dark room where the blinds were closed and only a small

bedside lamp beckoned him to her side.

“Hello again,” Emma said. Her voice was stifled, as if talking through swollen lips.

“Hi, Emma.” Morgan crossed the room and lowered himself into the seat beside her bed, letting his will slip and staring right at her. It wasn’t so bad—a couple of bruises here, a swelling there, and one perfectly neat line of stitches. All in all, she didn’t look like she’d been hurt too badly. Not in comparison to the other victims, anyway. “How are you doing?”

“Meh. I can’t feel my face, but that’s probably a good thing. At least my body is okay, I guess. They have me doing some sort of press release later on, so I’m a bit nervous about that. Otherwise...” She stared across the room like something held her attention, then shook her head. “How are you?”

Morgan let a smile part his lips. It was funny—after all she’d been through she was still concerned about his well-being. If that wasn’t the trait of a good person, he didn’t know what was. “I’m just fine, thank you for asking. But we’re not here to talk about me, are we? Why did you want to see me, Emma?”

Emma made a *tsk* sound into her lips, wincing as if it hurt. “I already told the police what happened, but there was one thing I couldn’t bring myself to confess. You’re a nice guy, and you seem to care a great deal about your investigation, so I wanted to open up.”

“I’m all ears.”

“But you can’t tell anyone.”

Morgan sighed. “Unfortunately I can’t promise that. If it directly relates to the case, I have a duty to—”

“Forget your duty,” she said, groaning as she sat up. “Do you want to hear it or not?”

“You seem eager to tell.”

“Call it a guilty conscience.”

Morgan hated the idea of withholding information from the police, but what could he do? If he didn’t promise to keep it a secret, then it’d all go to waste, and for what? His pride? *Forget that*, he thought, and gave a little nod, signaling her to continue.

“The killer—I mean, Nick Hansen—and I had a relationship in high school.”

Taken aback, Morgan crooked an eyebrow. “You said he harassed you.”

“Yes.” Emma rolled her head back onto her pillow, staring up at the ceiling. “Back then, I made a mistake and slept with Nick. A few times, actually. Eventually, it turned into something of a romance, but I had to call it a day, you know?”

“So you ended it.”

“Exactly. Nick spent the next few nights knocking on my door, kicking up a fuss. My dad had to go out there with his shotgun one night, and that was the last time Nick gave us any trouble. At home, at least.” She laughed, but it was one of nostalgic reminiscence rather than humor. “I found a note in my locker the next day. It was from Nick, of course, saying that if I didn’t tell my boyfriend the truth, then he would.”

“Your boyfriend at the time was...?”

“Matthew.”

Morgan was crushed under the weight of this information. Finally, some loose ends were coming together, but they came with their own baggage. As difficult as it was to be the sounding board for Emma’s regret, he had no choice but to continue. “Go on.”

Emma coughed, reaching up to touch her face before dropping her hand onto her lap. It was obvious this was a hard story for her to tell—her constant fidgeting accompanied her guilt-ridden expression. “I was a kid, and I did what most kids would’ve done. I told Matthew that Nick was stalking me, in case he ever heard the truth. At least my side of the story was already established, right?”

“Matthew confronted him.”

“How did you know?”

“He told me.”

Emma nodded understanding. “There was kind of a fight, but it didn’t last long. Nick pretty much left me alone after that. I saw him a few times over the years, but we never spoke. To tell the truth, I felt bad about what I’d done, but it was too late to go back. I ended up marrying Matthew, and if I ever confessed,



he'd never forgive me."

"That's why you didn't tell the police?"

"Yes."

Morgan understood. He didn't like it, but he understood. It gave him a motive for Nick to take Emma in the first place, but there was something missing. "The other girls?"

"Similar situations," Emma said. "Nick told me all about what happened with them. When I saw one of them on the news, I thought nothing of it, but then I saw the second victim. It made me wonder if I was being paranoid, but when I got talking to your wife at the charity hall and learned you were investigating, I saw my chance to say something without officially reporting it."

Morgan licked his lips, which had become bone-dry somewhere over the past few minutes. He could barely believe what he was hearing. If Carrie and Danielle had dated the killer and both had ended badly, that could be considered a direct motive for the homicides. Not to mention what he'd done to their faces. If Nick couldn't have them, nobody should, Morgan guessed, tasting the threat of bile on his tongue as the words filtered through his mind. "I just wonder why he took you. As insensitive as it sounds, why not just kill you like he did the others?"

"I don't know everything," Emma said, sitting up. "But he did say I was his last."

"Can we really trust his word on that?"

"Not exactly."

Morgan tilted his head as if to say, "That's it, then," and stood. He thought about leaning over to kiss her on the head, confirming the connection he'd established with her over as many unspoken words as spoken ones. But she'd just endured a kidnapping from a deranged psychopath, and touching her would likely start an aggressive reaction. He settled for a smile and turned for the door, with no idea of what to do with this information.

But something stopped him.

"Wait." Emma's bed creaked as she leaned into it.

Morgan turned.

“This press release... I’m pretty nervous.”

“You’ll be fine. You have the power to stop it whenever you want.”

Emma pulled a face that was somewhere between mock terror and genuine fear, tucking her sweat-greased blonde hair behind her ear. A new bruise revealed itself on her temple. This was the worst of the bunch. “Would you go with me?”

“You mean as an escort?”

“I mean by my side.”

Morgan shifted his weight to the other foot, watching her. “What about Matthew?”

“I’m not ready to face him yet. Please.”

It wasn’t the most comfortable situation for him, but it wasn’t about him and he knew it. Morgan had been through a number of press releases—speaking on only a couple of those occasions—and they always felt like less of a big deal than they really were. It was just a case of looking over people’s heads and pretending you were talking to the wall. It was pretty easy, but he’d never done it from the position of a kidnapping victim. He thought of Rachel, and if she’d been in the same situation he’d want to be there for her.

This gave him little choice.

“Sure,” he finally said.

A tear appeared at Emma’s eyes, rolling down her cheek and soundlessly hitting her hospital gown where it grew into a perfect dark circle. “Thank you, Mr. Young. For being there for me, and for keeping my secret.”

It isn’t kept yet, he thought. But instead he offered his warmest smile and headed for the exit a second time with all this new information filling his head like water in the hull of a sinking ship. And just like that ship, he couldn’t shake the sensation of sinking.

But at least Emma was alive.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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The press room at the Metropolitan Police precinct was a sea of journalists in neat rows that reminded Morgan of his wife's HUCINS events. Only this crowd was a more hungry, selfish one that would probably sacrifice their own mothers if it meant getting to ask the first question.

Emma, who sat beside him on a panel up front, had been instructed by the police to keep her answers brief and to the point. Certain details about Nick Hansen were yet to be revealed, and Morgan saw hilarious irony in that; the same people keeping cards close to their chests didn't even have the whole scoop.

But Morgan did.

He knew everything the police did, and then some. The responsibility was monstrous—keeping information like Emma and Nick's relationship a secret was an obstruction of police justice, but as Gary kept pointing out, there was still value in vigilante justice. After all, it was him who'd hired Morgan, and he'd done so only to be a part of this so-called justice.

Where was this justice, anyway?

Morgan hadn't seen any.

Not yet.

While Emma Cole responded to a barrage of questions from young and insensitive journalists, Morgan scanned the crowd. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he did stop to wonder if the killer was out there. After the way he'd somehow gained unforced entry to the homes of his victims, and not to

mention that even Emma hadn't recognized him on that ill-fated night at HUCINS, Nick Hansen was sure to be a master of disguise. Although the cliché of it made him uncomfortable, Morgan knew it was true.

Any one of these people could be Nick Hansen.

Any of them could be the DC Carver.

When the timer reached thirty minutes, the police captain announced the end and dismissed the journalists, shuffling them out of the room while they complained as always. While they made their exit, Morgan helped Emma out of her seat and escorted her to the hallway behind the panel, where he was due to take his exit.

It already felt like goodbye.

"When will I see you again?" Emma asked, gazing up at him.

"It's hard to say. I'll catch you at HUCINS?"

Emma sneered. "Maybe when this is all over."

"Right. I'm on it," Morgan said, doubting it himself. The truth was, he had no idea where to go from here. All he could do was keep his ear to the ground and pray Gary would be there to fill in any details he missed. "What will you do?"

"Try to adjust, I guess." Emma wrung her hands and glanced toward the far end of the corridor, where Matthew stood waiting with her coat slung over one arm. "Perhaps I'll consider telling him the truth. He deserves to know, right?"

As much as Morgan wanted to stay out of their relationship, he couldn't help but nod. That was seconds before Emma Cole threw her arms over his shoulders and hugged him, holding her body close to his as her chest heaved with the threat of tears.

"Take care, Mr. Young," she said, sliding off him. "And please, find Nick Hansen."

"I will," he promised, watching her leave. But would he? It was tough to say. The investigation had come to a standstill, and as if he didn't already have his doubts, Emma was barely out the door before Captain Bray stormed toward him, his gray hair flapping with the speed of his strut.

"Hey, you," he said, pointing his finger in Morgan's face.

Morgan stepped back.

“You’ve done your part here, but now it’s time to call it a day.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you’ve been talking with Detective Lee about the case, and I’m sick to death of seeing you whenever I turn around. It may have escaped your notice, but police work is for the police.”

“I’m trying to help.”

“I don’t give a shit.” Bray stomped forward, knocking shoulders with Morgan before heading toward the exit Emma had used only moments ago. He walked as if the black suit he wore empowered him, making him more than a grumpy, cliché police captain. “That’s your last warning. Don’t waste it.”

Morgan opened his mouth to complain, but by then the captain was gone. Now, he was left all alone in the corridor with nothing but a head full of seemingly useless information, the sweet memory of Emma Cole’s bravery through her ordeal, and the sour recollection of the captain’s threat. No matter how much he tried to forget the latter, however, he knew it would only grow to be a larger inconvenience.

After all, he had enough problems without making the MPD his enemy.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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On that same night, when the wind picked up and Morgan held Rachel close to him under the sheets, all he could think about was the police captain. How was he supposed to pursue this thing now? He'd told Rachel all about it, and as always she'd remained optimistic.

*Too optimistic.*

"Are you awake?" he whispered, hoping not to disturb her if he was wrong.

But Rachel cleared her throat and twisted her head to gawk up at him, one beautiful blue eye opening slowly before the other. She blinked like rapid fire until she saw him and smiled. "I am now. What's up?"

"Sorry. I just keep thinking about what you said."

"Which was?"

"The vacation." It was all he could get out. Not long after presenting her with the news about Emma, she'd tossed a travel magazine toward him and insisted he check out page seven. Confused, he'd obeyed her command and spotted the brilliant white sands of a Maldivian beach, with jetties and private huts and crystal clear water. It was certainly more attractive than the price, which was—to say the least—out of their budget. "The break would do us some good."

"I thought we couldn't afford it."

"Maybe we can."

Rachel huffed and sat up, shoving the sheets aside and squinting at Morgan's bedside lamp. Raking her fingers through her fire-colored hair and pulling a slipped gown strap back over her bare shoulder, she adjusted herself to sit in

front of him on her knees. “What’s really going on in that head of yours?”

Morgan felt his lips purse as he cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“A couple hours ago we didn’t—what were your words—have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of? Now you’re suggesting we run away on this luxurious vacation. Not that I’m complaining. We can take out a loan. But what about you?”

“What *about* me?”

“Are you going to solve this case?”

Morgan’s heart dropped at the sound of the word. The “case,” as she’d put it, was slipping out from under him, and he was basically sitting on his thumbs until the killer struck again. “I’m thinking about leaving it.”

“Leaving it? Are you crazy?” She grabbed a pillow and hurled it at him.

Morgan caught it before the threaded corner could strike his eye. “You’ve heard the latest. I’ll be lucky to get anywhere near a crime scene if this happens again. And even if it doesn’t happen again—which is obviously the better of the two evils—I’ll never find the guy. If the police can’t do it, then how could I?”

“The police don’t know what you know.”

“But what I know is useless. All I can do is wait.”

Rachel sighed, flopped forward, and rested her cheek on his naked chest. “Then I’ll wait with you. When you hear something—and believe me, you will—I’ll be right here with you to kick you up the ass until you’re motivated.”

“Jesus.” Morgan kissed her on the head and reached for the light, swamping the room in darkness. “You really do have faith in me, don’t you? Keeping me motivated has always come as second nature to you.”

“It’s my job as your loving wife,” she said. “Now get some sleep. We can vacation when Nick Hansen is behind bars. We’ll afford it somehow. You deserve it.”

“*You* deserve it.”

“Also true. Now please, get some sleep.”

Again, Morgan obeyed.

As best he could, at any rate.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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With Maldives on the mind even two days later, Morgan stopped the car on the far end of the street and climbed out, immediately assaulted by a cold gust of wind. It knocked him back a step, but he recovered, locked his car, and ventured on. It was a short walk to the house, but it gave him just enough time to clear his head, separating himself from the case.

When he reached the house—a modest four-bedroom place with a boring but presentable lawn that looked like every other one in the neighborhood—Morgan stepped up to the porch and rapped upon the door.

Within minutes, Gary had let him in, but they didn't get as far as the living room.

Gary leaned into the wall of the hallway. "Sorry, Hannah has some friends over. Unless you're here on a matter that isn't business related, we'll just have to talk here." He paused, looking Morgan up and down. "But something tells me you're here to work."

Morgan grinned. "You know me too well."

"You're not that hard to read. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, I'm here to see what I can do for you. Have there been any developments?"

"No such luck. There's an APB out on Nick Hansen, but there's very little to go by outside of a police sketch, and judging by his recent activities he might be a little hard to recognize, don't you think?"

Morgan winced and folded his arms, leaning back toward the wall. His



backside hit a radiator, so he stood back up and closed his eyes, trying to focus through the loud screeching noises coming from the women in the other room. "I just want to stop him."

"We all do, friend. Especially me. You know that much."

That was an understatement; Gary had made it more than clear how much he needed Morgan, and in spite of the fact that Gary had more resources at hand, he was less equipped to deal with an investigation like this. Even more so when he was working on something else. It'd taken a lot for Morgan to persuade himself to take the case, but now that he had? He couldn't let it go. Not even if he wanted to.

"Are you feeling okay?" Gary asked, leaning in for a closer look.

Morgan's dismay must have been showing on his face. "I'm just gravy. Look, I've been over and over this in my head, desperately trying to figure out Hansen's next move. No matter what I do, I always seem to end up going round in circles. First I think of Carrie Whittle, then I pair up those facts with the other victims, but none of it makes sense."

"Actually, it all makes sense."

"How's that?"

"Hansen dated the girls, right?"

Morgan nodded.

"So, he had an altercation with them, and now the sick bastard is coming back to hurt them. It's a revenge story, just on a smaller scale to what it'd be if I got hold of him. The only real question is why the victims' husbands never spoke up."

"Because they don't know," Morgan reminded him. "And I told you that in confidence, just as Emma told me. Don't go running your mouth about it, or you'll open up a can of worms for her and her husband. Besides, it doesn't really contribute to the investigation."

"Yeah, no shit."

"So, where do we go from here?"

"We could go for a beer?"

"That's not what I meant."

“I know that’s not what you meant.” Gary blew out a long breath and placed his hands on his hips, the gun holster dangling under his arm like a snake hanging from a tree. “There just isn’t anything to tell. But you’ll be the first person to know when there is. I promise.”

Morgan knew this, and he trusted him, but it didn’t make it any easier to deal with. The stagnation he faced was pulling him further into misery, not unlike a demon dragging him back to Hell. It was torture. “All right. Well, let me know.”

“No problem. Sure you don’t want that beer?”

“Not today.”

Morgan thanked him and left, shivering in the air by the time he reached the bottom porch step. He hugged his chest and stalked down the sidewalk, the streetlights already beginning to brighten against the early dark. Memories of the killer’s victims flashed in front of his eyes like an old projector reel coming back to haunt him, and all he could do was try to think about something—anything—else.

Halfway back to his car, hurried footsteps rushed up behind him. Morgan ignored them at first, but as they drew nearer he spun on his heel and clenched his fist, ready to attack. What he saw, however, was a completely different kind of concern.

Gary was in his trench coat, wheezing and out of breath.

“What’s wrong?” Morgan asked, already sensing the negative vibes radiating off him.

“MPD just had a call come in.” Gary tried to stand up straight, a smile forcing its way onto his lips. He held a hand against his stomach as he caught his breath. He really did need to exercise more. “You’re not going to believe this.”

Morgan’s heart thudded against his chest. “Try me.”

“Our killer has been spotted across town. Police are on their way there now.”

Excitement tore through him. Everything he’d wanted to happen was finally coming through for him. Before he knew it, the car keys were in his hand as he turned around, rushing back to his car. “Then come on. We need to be less than one step behind.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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Only seconds after calling in his own sighting report, Nick Hansen crossed the street and peered through the stained-glass window. He saw the small recess on the side of the great hall, yellowed by the tinted glass. There were no chairs like last time, but a small table on the side of the room was covered with lit candles and a two small stacks of paperwork. Nick began to panic, wondering where the woman was, but then she passed by the window and addressed the table, looming over it as she scribbled on a pad.

It looked like she was alone.

*Perfect*, Nick thought as he made his way to the door. Here he was, only a few feet away from Rachel Young, while her husband was, with any luck, halfway across town checking out his last-known location. It was a false report, of course. How else was he supposed to get her alone? The way he saw it, this was the easy solution.

Heading inside, where the temperature rose so much that his neck sweated under the wig of long, braided hair, Nick announced his entry by scuffing his feet on the doormat.

Rachel turned around with a jolt, her hand on her heart.

“Sorry,” he said, stepping closer to her. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“That’s all right.” Rachel smiled. It was a pleasant smile, and Nick could see in an instant why she was adored by so many people. If the situation were different, he might even feel guilty about what he was about to do. “What can I do for you?”

Nick shook a braid over his shoulder, assuming the role he'd adopted. "Nothing really. I was just passing, and I thought this looked like a nice place. What do you do here?"

"Oh, we raise money for children." She leaned back and slid a pamphlet out from the paper stack, then handed it to him with a bony hand. "We're called HUCINS. If there's a way to make money or raise awareness, we're over it like fleas on a cat. There's always room for more volunteers if you're interested."

Studying the colorful pamphlet, Nick flicked the page and held it up to his eyes. It was more of a performance than anything, but he couldn't help being impressed by the wide variety of activities they held here. "Looks interesting. Anything for the kids, right?"

"Exactly."

Nick handed the pamphlet back, fidgeting with his wig once again. It was so hot in here he felt like he was going to faint. Maybe he would, and that would be the end of him. He pictured himself falling, the wig toppling off his scalp and leaving this woman to recognize his unconscious face. How long would he last then? Not long, he'd wager. "But I don't have too much time. The real reason I'm here is—"

"Rachel?"

They both turned at the sound of the new voice in the room. Nick even flinched, terror leading him to believe this was it—he was going to be caught. But the man in the doorway paid him no mind, crossing the room and taking Rachel into his arms.

She hugged him back.

"Just thought we'd stop by for a gossip."

"You're always welcome," Rachel said, separating herself from him. "No Patricia?"

"She's just fixing her makeup in the car. She'll be in."

Nick said nothing, only stood awkwardly watching the door and trying to time his escape. He hadn't planned on anyone else arriving, and it was—to say the least—really frickin' inconvenient. But there would be other opportunities. Hopefully not far from now.

“I have to go,” he said, edging his way out.

Rachel’s expression dropped into a frown. “Don’t you want to—”

“I can’t.” Nick hurried for the door without looking back. It was already risky enough that he’d be recognized when he thought it’d just be the two of them. But when a third person, Patricia someone, was on her way in, he wouldn’t stand a chance at remaining undetected. He was good—he’d had plenty of practice with this—but he wasn’t a miracle worker.

Finally out in the free world again, he ran across the street, made sure he hadn’t been followed, and entered the van he’d stolen from across the city. The thing was old and rusted. Loud and noticeable, but less likely to be missed, which meant it probably wouldn’t be reported as stolen. He only needed it for a short period of time, anyway.

Just long enough to take Rachel.

Sitting in the dark, shaded area of the driver’s seat, where a strong stench of sour liquor filled his nostrils, Nick watched the HUCINS Center. To pass the time, he drew the blade from the glove compartment and scratched patterns into the dashboard, glancing up only when he heard noises or something moved in the corner of his vision. It was boring as sin, but this was his mission now; the husband—Morgan, he suddenly remembered—had led the police right to his doorstep, and for that he had to be punished.

And what better way to punish a man than to take the one thing he loved?

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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**A**cross town, Morgan Young was also sitting in his vehicle with Detective Gary Lee at his side. They watched from afar as the police did their work, staying out of the way to avoid the captain's wrath. The last thing they needed was additional pressure from that guy.

"They're doing an okay job," Morgan noted, watching the apartment building.

"You mean the police?" Gary said.

"Yes."

"Not bad, yeah. Still, I'd rather have you solve it."

Morgan laughed. "Because that's nice and easy."

"Hey, Carrie meant a lot to me, and I want to see Nick Hansen suffer for what he did to her. I know the MPD are more than capable of finding him, but they won't let me in a room alone with him when they're done. Besides, I feel more involved this way."

His logic was weak, but Morgan understood. When the heart was involved, it was impossible to keep your head on straight. Many times over the years, Morgan had let his emotions get ahead of him. He remembered his own exam papers as he and Rachel were still exploring their feelings for one another. This was around the same time they were coming of a more sexual age, and there were plenty of distractions for a young man. Later, he caught up and managed to scrape in a good GPA, but just barely. As his teachers had put it, he had the gift, but he was giving it to someone else.

There was finally some movement across the street. The front door swung open and two officers strutted down the path with a detective in a nice suit trailing behind. Morgan waited until they were in their cars and out of sight before he reached for the handle. “Time to move.”

It appeared Gary didn’t need to be told twice—he was out of the car and taking over before Morgan even had a chance to lock the door. Morgan shook his head with disapproval, thinking that overeagerness would get him into trouble someday, then locked up and joined him in his ascension of the old, dusty staircase until they found the correct floor.

“This is it,” Gary said. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” Morgan pounded on the door.

A tall man answered. He wore a stained white tank top and baggy pants. A long, wiry gray beard trailed down to his chest where it tangled with hairs of the same color. His eyes were muddy brown through thin slits. “What the hell do you want? I already spoke to the cops, and I got nothing more to say.”

“We *are* the cops,” Gary said, flashing his badge.

Morgan stayed silent. He didn’t want to be asked for his ID.

“Then I’ll tell you what I told them,” the old man said, turning his head only to spit onto the floor of his own hallway. He stood up straight and fed his thumbs into his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “I don’t know nothin’. He comes here, he pays cash. I didn’t ask no questions, and he didn’t tell no lies. Far as I’m concerned, his business is his business.”

Morgan exchanged a confused look with Gary and took over. “Who?”

The old man—who was presumably the landlord of this building, if his previous comments were anything to go by—looked from one to the other, his mouth agape with confusion. “The young guy who made the call.”

“You didn’t make it?” Morgan asked.

“The call came from this address,” Gary chimed in.

“Well, it wasn’t me.” The landlord leaned out of his door, hanging from his grip on the doorframe. A foul vinegary stench leaned with him, and he pointed to a phone at the end of the hallway. “That there’s a shared phone. The bill’s included in the price. Whatever your man did, he did it without my knowing.”

Everything fell together for Morgan then, like the remaining pieces of a complicated jigsaw puzzle. It wasn't this man who'd made the call at all; somebody else had called, which meant they'd pounded on the wrong door. Worse, they were wasting time.

"Sir," Morgan cleared his throat, "can we talk to the man who called?"

"Could if he was here."

"Where is he?" Gary asked.

"What do I look like, a fucking Google map?" The landlord leapt back into his doorway, slipping his frail, pale hand to his side with a little slap. "Look, the other cops can't go in there without a warrant, which means you can't go in either. 'Til then, leave me the hell alone to live my life in peace, goddammit."

The walls shook with the force of the slammed door, leaving Morgan alone with Gary. He was starting to figure that the officers, and the detective who was with them, had left without finding their answers, which meant they still had a chance of catching up.

"What do you suppose we do?" Gary asked.

Morgan turned with him and studied the door that'd been at their backs. "Did you notice he kept looking at this apartment? I'm willing to bet the one who made the call lives here. What's the harm in giving it a little knock?"

"I was thinking more of a kick."

Morgan frowned at him. "You and illegalities don't mix."

"But you do."

"No." He shook his head in violent swipes. "I'm in enough trouble with your boss. Anyway, what do we even know about this guy? That he made a phone call to report a false location? That tells us absolutely nothing. Hell, it might not even be a he."

"Landlord said it was a he."

"Right, and what was it about that guy that told you to trust him?"

Gary sneered. "Okay, well, I'm not waiting."

Before Morgan could stop him, he stomped toward the door and raised his foot, slamming his heel into the side of it. The lock buckled but didn't bust. A quick second kick destroyed it completely, and the door swung open with a bang



as it hit the wall, then groaned shut.

“What the hell?” Morgan said, grabbing him by the arm. As if they didn’t have enough trouble to contend with, renegade behavior wasn’t going to do them any favors. It got worse too; Morgan was angry at him for the first time in years.

“You can’t do that.”

“I just did.”

“Well, congratulations, you just committed a crime.”

“It’s all right. If the captain says anything, I’ll just pin it all on you.” Gary straightened out his suit and gestured toward the door, his wry smile igniting Morgan’s anger further. “Are you coming in or not?”

What choice did he have?

The damage was done.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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The apartment was little more than a dusty collection of rooms bathed in darkness. Morgan treaded carefully, hugging the wall and peering into each alcove. He expected somebody to be there, ready to surprise him with a pistol or some kind of melee weapon. There was no logic to this suspicion, however. It was simply based on intuition.

But the apartment was empty.

Although “empty” only went so far as describing its lack of people; the place was cluttered with junk food wrappers, empty shopping bags, and used food cans. A mouse darted from its unsafe hideaway of a drink’s carton, scrambling across the creaking wooden floor and into a hole where it met the wall. Morgan shivered as though it’d scaled his leg. He’d be careful where he stepped from now on.

“Jesus.” Gary swept some trash to the side with his foot. “The guy’s a slob.”

Morgan agreed. Basic hygiene went a long way, and it was clear the tenant of this room had little or no interest in self-care. At least, assuming this was his one and only home, which the large pile of dirty clothes suggested.

It reminded him of a time shortly after high school when he’d moved into his own place, and Rachel’s father hadn’t given his permission for her to leave. He’d lived in a shabby, one-bed apartment in the slums. It was disgusting, dark, loud, and unsafe, but it was only a short bike ride to his workplace at the gas station. Better yet, it was cheap. That moment, and every moment thereafter, was spent building a better future for his family. It was the one thing he’d never stop

working on, no matter how tough things got.

Venturing farther in, Morgan pinched his nose and tore back the drapes. A cloud of dust exploded in front of his face, making them both cough and gag. Dust motes danced in a chunky beam of light that targeted the floor but not much else. There wasn't even anything here worthy of illumination: a rusty metal bed with a stained mattress, the pile of laundry, and a few trash bags in the corner. Morgan approached them and ripped open a small hole. Cloth protruded through the fresh gape.

"More clothes," he said.

"Mmhm." Gary cocked his head and examined the smoke-stained ceiling, following it through to the next room. "Got a bathroom in here. I think I'll leave that for you."

"Yeah, right." Morgan's attention was fixed on something else—the only other thing in this room that wasn't a necessity in the modern age. Not for a lonely squatter or the next best thing, anyway. It was a thin, wooden desk with no drawers. A fold-up chair leaned against the wall, disregarded and disused. Atop the desk was a mess of paperwork and a lamp with no bulb, which seemed to match everything else in the room.

"Find anything?" Gary asked, calling from the kitchen.

"No." He moved toward the desk and began shuffling through the papers. "You?"

Gary made a fake puking sound, but the repulsion was real. It was like he'd just smelled something rotten. "There's a refrigerator, but it doesn't work. The cupboards are full of bean and chili cans. Rodents too. Not much else."

Taking in the information—or lack thereof—Morgan dropped the last loose sheet of paper and swiped a notepad off the desk. Gary joined him at his side, but by then he'd already read the words that would change everything.

Morgan froze, the notepad shaking like a leaf in his hand. He read them over and over, each time becoming harder to focus as the letters jumbled around like they were dancing, teasing and tormenting him. But despite his inability to take it in, he knew what it said. There was no denying it, any more than he was able to deny the cold sweat seeping onto his temples or clinging his shirt to his back.

It read:

*Rachel Young  
HUCINS Center  
Tuesday night*

Morgan dropped the pad onto the desk. The discovery led to a realization as his eyes scanned the room. The trash, the cheap, dirty clothes, and even the low supply of food in the cupboards—it all meant something that was so obvious it was impossible to unsee.

Nick Hansen had been here.

“He made the call.” The words fell from Morgan’s mouth in a weak breeze.

Gary cocked his head. “What?”

“The...” He looked again at the notepad on the desk. His eyes shot to the doorway where a singular telephone hung on the wall outside. It made perfect sense. How had he not understood it until now? Nick Hansen had fled his own home and taken up residence at a crummy old apartment in Nowhereville. He’d paid cash. Somehow, he’d derived a problem with Morgan, and then he’d written down Rachel’s name.

“Are you all right?” Gary leaned past him and looked at the pad. “Whoa.”

Morgan’s stomach knotted. His head felt woozy and his hands shook. It occurred to him that Hansen had made the call for a reason, and going by the fact he wasn’t yet in cuffs, Morgan was willing to bet this whole thing was nothing more than a distraction.

The nagging question was, a distraction from what?

Rachel was alone, and that fact stuck out to Morgan like a sore thumb. He felt the blood drain from his face, swirling down into his gut like a whirlpool and unsettling the contents. He imagined the worst—losing Rachel wasn’t an option, and although he had no clue why anyone would want to hurt her, he did know that she was alone.

Not just alone, but vulnerable.

“We need to go,” Morgan said, bursting into a sprint through the doorway.

He took the stairs two at a time, with Gary shouting questions behind him. But he had no time to stop and answer. Time was a precious factor now, and he had to reach Rachel before anyone else did.

Unless it was already too late.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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**B**efore the engine had even stopped, Morgan dove out of the car and toward the charity hall. He didn't bother shutting the door—there were far worse things at stake than losing a door—and darted up the steps as fast as his legs could carry him.

Bursting through the doors of the hall, Morgan yelled her name. The lights were on, and a table was set out. There were two people at the far end whom he recognized, but they only watched with blank, horrified stares while Morgan stormed backstage. From there, he ripped back curtains and kicked open doors, calling for his wife.

There was no reply.

His heart in tatters, he rushed back to the main hall where the two men sat with plastic cups in their hands, cradling them like they were some great artifacts. They wore thick coats and frightened expressions, their lips wobbling like fat, pink worms.

“Have any of you seen Rachel?” Morgan asked.

“R-Rachel?”

“My wife. The...” How best would they know her? “She runs this place.”

“Oh.” One of them sat forward on the rickety wooden chair. “She was here earlier.”

Morgan crouched down to meet his eye level. “Where did she go?”

“No clue. Home, maybe?”

“She didn't say where she was going?”

“Nope, and I didn’t ask. What if you call her and—”

Panic stole over him, shooting him up and back out the door before he could hear the last of that suggestion. By now, Gary was at the top of the steps, keeping watch outside. When he spotted Morgan, he reached the same height of urgency and ran back with him to the car, asking no questions.

Morgan slumped back into the car and fired up the engine. The drive back to his home felt like a torturous journey, and suddenly it seemed far longer than he remembered. Had he really let his wife walk home at night? On streets like these, at a time like this? Self-disgust brewed in his gut, making him sick. All he could think about was the killer, the empty apartment, and how deadly Rachel’s name looked in Hansen’s script on the page.

When they reached his house, Morgan shot out and repeated his previous actions like the world’s worst *déjà vu*. Gary was at his side this time, drawing his sidearm and taking the lead. Morgan hung back, tossed the keys toward him, and waited at the end of his porch.

That was when he noticed it; the keys were unnecessary.

The door had been bashed open.

Horror seized him, grounding him in ice-cold fear. It took all his strength to move, and his darkest nightmares drove him to override caution. Without another thought, he ran inside on jelly-like legs, screaming her name again.

“Rachel!”

“Hey, Rachel?” Gary joined in behind him, entering the living room.

While Gary was downstairs with a gun, Morgan knew there was no escape. If the killer was in his home, he wouldn’t be getting out without either handcuffs or a hole in him. Morgan prayed it wouldn’t come to that—only extreme circumstances would call for that kind of action, and extreme circumstances meant Rachel had been harmed.

The thought sickened him.

Leaping up the stairs, he clenched his fist and knocked open the doors one by one, peering inside every room to check for her. Each time he didn’t find her, a space inside him hollowed, carving out his insides and replacing them with close, foul air. When he reached the last room—their own bedroom—he steadied

his ragged breath and reached out for the knob with a trembling hand. The tight grip he put on it felt like a child's squeeze under the slippery sweat of his palm.

He turned the knob.

Inch by inch, the door creaked open to reveal a dark room. The dresser revealed itself, then the wardrobe and a corner of the bed. Shoving the door open wider, the rest of the room appeared, showing a smashed lamp, a ruffled duvet, and a bedside table that'd been tossed aside. Signs of a struggle.

All hope fled from him. Morgan stood winded, wounded, and hurt. His imagination delved into the worst scenarios, all entirely possible. All he could think about was Hansen's previous victims, and if he hurt Rachel like that he'd... he'd...

"It's clear downstairs," Gary said, rushing up behind him. He took one look at Morgan's face and then passed him to glance inside the bedroom. When he saw the mess, he holstered his gun and turned toward Morgan, lowering his voice. "I don't understand. What—"

The hallway phone rang, shrieking through the house.

Morgan burst into a sprint, glided down the stairs, and snatched up the receiver. He fumbled it, caught it in his sweaty hands, and held it to his equally wet face. He noticed a sudden rise in temperature, like he stood among flames. "This is Morgan."

"Just who I was hoping for." The voice was thin and weak. Dangerous.

"Who is this?"

"You know exactly who this is," the man said.

Morgan didn't have to guess twice. "What do you want?"

Nick Hansen chuckled. It was an awful sound, like Velcro being peeled open little by little. "You know, for a while there I was a little impressed by how resourceful you were. One step ahead of the cops, but still one step behind me. I watched you sometimes, and I kept wondering who you were. Imagine my surprise when I passed you at the HUCINS Center."

Morgan's hand was shaking now. Every word this man spoke drove daggers under his skin—hot, merciless daggers. "I don't care about your opinion. Cut the crap and tell me where Rachel is."



That laugh again. “You’ll know soon enough. All you have to do is come to me.”

“And where is that?”

“Mosaic Church. I’ve run the distance, and it should take you less than twenty minutes. So here’s the deal: if you make it here within that time—and only if you’re alone—I’ll let your wife go. If you disobey my instruction, I’ll make a mess of her face. Am I clear?”

Morgan squeezed the receiver, his teeth grinding as he spoke. “Crystal.”

“Good. Then we understand each other.”

“Not exactly. I have a question.” Morgan’s breath became hot and strong, huffing like a dragon ready to explode a blast of fiery wrath. He heard footsteps and craned his neck to see Gary stepping down the stairs. This time he wouldn’t be able to help. “Why do this? What’s in it for you? I was just doing my job.”

Nick paused. It was like he was uncertain—as if he had barrels of pent-up rage and needed to direct it toward anyone, regardless of whom. “You led the cops right to my doorstep, Mr. Young. If it weren’t for you, I’d still be having my fun. If it weren’t for you, my mother wouldn’t have been caught in the crossfire.”

If it weren’t for him, Emma Cole would be dead or mutilated. Morgan opted not to speak the words. When his wife’s safety was in the hands of some lunatic, he thought it best not to provoke. “You’re the one who shot your mother. Nobody else.”

Once more, Nick paused. This time, his words felt like venom. “Twenty minutes.”

The line went dead.

## CHAPTER FORTY

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Nick Hansen—or the DC Carver, depending on which news station you watched—turned the van onto the gravel path that led behind the disused church. He rocked and jolted in his seat, heavy thuds sounding from the back until he killed the engine and hopped out.

The air was sweet tonight, teasing the cold of early winter. He inhaled a deep breath with his eyes closed, enjoying the sensation. The van had been hot inside, although most of that could have been attributed to the exciting phone call he'd just made. Whatever it was, it'd got his heart racing and his blood pumping.

Stomping through the moist gravel, he reached the back doors of the van and prepared for an assault as he swung them open. It came as a surprise to see that Rachel Young was sitting with her hands clasped between her knees. The only signs of fear were her white knuckles and wide, bulging eyes. Eyes that watched him like a cat watches a passing dog.

“Get out,” he said in a no-nonsense manner.

Rachel dug her heels into the van's floor. “No.”

Sighing, Nick pulled the gun from his pocket and enjoyed the pale expression of shock on her face. She hadn't known there was a gun. How could she? He'd found it in the glove compartment of the stolen van minutes ago and grinned in delight at the convenience of it.

“Out. Now.” He aimed the pistol at her, clutching it tight with his finger on the trigger.

Rachel didn't hesitate this time. She climbed out with her arm covering her

face as if that would protect her from a speeding bullet. She followed his pointed directions to the rear of the church. Nick followed close, keeping the gun trained on her in case she had any heroic plans. She didn't seem the type, but you could never be too careful.

Once inside the great hall, where darkness shrouded abandoned pews and vandalized statues, Nick slammed the door shut and glanced at his watch. It was an old relic that barely worked, but it would do the job. All he needed to know was how long it would be before Morgan Young arrived to accept the consequences of his actions.

That, or until he killed Rachel and skipped town.

Nick twisted his neck to keep a keen eye on Rachel as he reached for the light switch tucked behind an old, blood-red drape. The overheads slowly flickered on, just in time to show the plume of dust caused by dropping the curtain. Nick stepped away from it and gave Rachel a soft shove. "Turn over that pew and sit your ass down."

She took one quick glance at the pew and looked back at him. "I don't have the strength for that."

"You'll be surprised what you can do when death is the alternative."

It was interesting to see how fast she moved then. Nick watched with morbid curiosity—and, of course, humor—as she planted her heels into the rubble-coated stone floor and pushed with all her strength. Her face turned red, her pale arms shaking as she lifted from the middle. With one deep, strenuous grunt, she heaved the pew up and flipped it, a mighty crash roaring through the wide church.

Only a moment later, she sat.

"Comfortable?" he asked, mocking her.

"Go to Hell."

"Shh." He put a finger to his lips. "God's listening, you know."

Rachel rolled her eyes, breathing heavily from her recent exertion. Her face slowly returned to its normal, white, freckle-speckled color. All things considered, she hid her fear quite well; sitting on her hands to hide the shake was a smooth tactic. "What are you going to do to me?"

“That depends.” Nick shrugged, a stiffness reaching up his neck. The stress was starting to get to him—it kept him up at night, and insomnia didn’t do much for his mood. He felt it more during the day. “If that husband of yours puts in the effort, you’ll be free to go. But after that...”

“Please don’t hurt him.”

Nick smiled. “I’m not making any promises.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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Morgan was out the door and in the car without wasting time. A violent headache pounded against his skull, and Gary's heavy knocking on the driver's-side window was only making matters worse. He didn't have time for this.

"Open up," Gary yelled, his voice muffled beyond the glass.

He never would've thought it possible, but Morgan managed to feed the key from his trembling hand into the ignition while hitting the button to roll the window down, starting the engine as he spoke. He didn't spare Gary so much as a glance. "Twenty minutes isn't much."

"What are you going to do?"

Morgan turned to stare at him in disbelief. Over the years he'd heard some stupid things come from his best friend's mouth, but this one trumped them all. "What do you think I'm going to do? I'm heading right over there."

Gary's eyes widened. "Alone?"

"Damn right."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, I—"

Morgan could barely get the words out before Gary snapped open the back door and jumped in. "All right, go."

Gary slammed the door and Morgan shifted gear, punching the accelerator with a heavy foot. His head snapped back with the sheer force. He navigated the familiar streets with expert precision, fighting the effects of his migraine. All he

could think about was Rachel.

“When we get there,” Gary said, “I’ll take point and check it out.”

“Not a chance,” Morgan said, shooting him a warning glance in the vanity mirror. “Hansen wants me there alone, and as long as he has Rachel, I’m going to do exactly what he says. I don’t want you interfering. You hear me?”

Gary frowned. “You’re going to die just because some asshole said so?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Actually, you do. Let me call for backup.”

Morgan’s heart beat harder. “If you call for backup, I’ll never forgive you. That’s your one and only warning.”

“But they’re professionals. They know what they’re doing.”

“If that’s true, then why did you have to drag me into this in the first place? Look, I said no, and that’s final.” Morgan twisted the wheel, rounding a corner too sharp and making the tires screech. Panicking, he dropped the gears and straightened the car, doing all he could not to scream with impatience. He could really do without the defiance.

Gary slumped back, his phone light illuminating his downturned lips. “Listen, pal. I’m not going to do this without your permission, but you need to consider your options here. There’s no point dying over this. There are other ways.”

“Oh yeah?” Morgan glanced at the time on the dashboard. Nine minutes to go. “Like what?”

“Are you willing to hear this?”

“I’ll humor you, but don’t push me.”

Shifting forward, Gary leaned between the two front seats. “You can go in while I hang back,” he said, making too many hand gestures like it was sign language. “I can put the call in for backup and keep them at bay. That should give you enough time to head inside and keep him from hurting Rachel. If you can get her out and stall Hansen, that might give us enough time to make our move.”

Morgan grunted like a raging bull. “Your plan to keep me alive is to send me in there alone and pray it takes him more than a few minutes to shoot me? You

know, for a detective you're not all that bright, and your comforting skills are—to say the least—total shit.”

“But you have faith in me, right?”

They were two blocks away. Morgan mulled on the decision while anxiety ate away at his nerves. He tapped the wheel, leaning in to peer into the dark street as he searched for the church. He was close now. He could feel it. “Fine, do whatever you have to do. But if Rachel gets hurt...”

“It won't come to that.”

“How do you know?”

“Gut feeling.”

Morgan ground his teeth. “A gut feeling isn't going to keep her safe, Gary. This isn't some book or stupid action movie. This is real life. People get hurt here. It sucks.”

“But people also take risks here. Especially for people they love.”

“And if those risks don't work out in their favor?”

Gary fell back, disappearing into the rear seat again. “Hmm.”

They were silent the rest of the way.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

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**A**s it turned out, Rachel Young had been more trouble than she was worth. True, she was valuable as bait to lure her husband to the church, but Nick hadn't counted on her fighting past the fear barrier and giving him an earful of insults.

For that, she'd suffered.

The insults were anything but subtle; she'd called him "a messed-up psycho," and "a maniac with more problems than a '72 Buick." They were creative insults, spat at him like the venom of a dangerous snake. But what she didn't stop to consider—much like a snake that had wandered into the wrong environment—was that her actions had consequences.

That was when he'd found the rope.

He'd made her fetch it herself, keeping the weapon aimed at her from a good distance. Obeying his command with a thousand-yard stare, she'd stumbled across the hall on uneasy feet, picked up the rope from beside the vandalized altar, and returned to the pew.

"Tie it around your hands," he'd said to her then. When she'd hesitated, he realized she wasn't able to tie the whole knot by herself. He probably couldn't trust her if she could. So with that, he added, "Set it up and I'll tighten it."

Rachel had done as she was told, and he followed up on his word.

Pulling the rope taut around her wrists—hard enough that her skin ballooned in red, scar-like blotches on either side of the knot—he tore off a corner of her shirt and stuffed it into her mouth. After that, she hadn't been a problem, and all



he'd had to do was sit and wait.

Nick slumped onto the pew beside her, waiting in silence as he watched the door. It reminded him of the way old men watched their front porches in the movies. Only with them it was to protect their livelihood. For Nick, it was all about doing what was right. If that meant killing a woman here or there, then so be it.

The minutes dragged by like they were in a time warp. The woman at his side stirred with discomfort, not quite fighting but not keeping calm either. The blood rushed to her face, and Nick laughed at the way she looked; she reminded him of an angry cartoon strawberry.

"Not long now," he said, as if it was any comfort to her, but it was assurance only to himself. For a moment, it felt as though Morgan Young would never arrive, and just as Nick was starting to drift off into thoughts of shooting the wife instead, the familiar drone of a car engine drew nearer to the church.

This was it.

His big moment.

Nick shot to his feet and ran to the stained-glass window, peering out like a curious puppy. He immediately caught sight of the black car parked on the dirt track that ran parallel to the church, but it was too dark to see how many people were inside.

For Rachel's sake, it better have been just Morgan.

Dropping to his heels and running back to Rachel, he groped at her sweater with a fierce grip, hauling her to her feet. Regardless of what was about to happen, he was ready. As far as he knew, he had the only gun, there was no sign of the police, and if everyone played fair he would walk out of there tonight with a hell of a story to tell... but nobody to tell it to.

Nick's mother briefly appeared in his thoughts.

He shoved it to one side.

There was no time for her now.

Not when everything was about to change.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

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Now that they'd stopped, Morgan found himself too petrified to move. Entering the church wouldn't just mean his death; it would mean the discovery of whether Rachel had been hurt or not. It was weird—he'd expected to be the type to run into the building screaming her name like they did in the movies, but now that he was here, all he could think about was the sheer dread radiating from his forehead in the form of hot, oily sweat.

It was all he could do to not break down.

"Do you think he's inside?" Gary asked, after sitting in silence.

Morgan checked his watch. Three minutes to go. After all the speeding and weaving through traffic, that was all the time he'd managed to shave off his limit. It wasn't much, but it was enough to collect himself. "Where else would he be?"

Gary said nothing but looked to the bushes. It was a dark area where the light couldn't reach, and as Morgan mimicked his line of sight, he thought that if he were to ambush somebody that was probably where he'd do it. It was the perfect place of concealment, giving someone the chance of leaping out for one easy strike.

But Morgan didn't think it was likely.

Nick Hansen had made his demands more than clear: he was to enter the church alone, sacrificing himself in exchange for Rachel's safety. Morgan knew the deal and was willing to go with it, but it would be better if they both walked out of there alive.

It was the only reason he'd let him tag along.

"When you get out of the car," Morgan said, ducking his head to study the church windows where he could've sworn he'd seen movement, "be sure to leave the door ajar. A second slam will give you away, and I don't want Rachel to suffer the consequences."

Gary nodded and reached for his cell phone. "What will you do?"

"Me? I'm going in there."

"That's rough." Gary blew out a long breath, like a balloon emptying the air from its rubbery insides. "All right, I'll make the call. You just try to keep him busy for as long as you can. Are you sure I can't persuade you to take my gun?"

Morgan thought about it for only a second. The idea of having that safety was comforting, but the truth was he was terrified of guns. Even if he wasn't, and supposing he could land a direct hit on the killer, there was no guarantee he could do it before Nick hurt Rachel. It wasn't a risk he was willing to take. "Just stay low and do what you need to do. Remember, if this goes well you'll have your vengeance, and Carrie Whittle can rest in peace."

There was a moment of silence while Gary lowered his chin to his chest. It was as if he were praying, the memory of Carrie haunting him further. They'd come so far since Gary had asked a simple favor of Morgan, and now here they were: at the end of the road with everything on the line. It was a job well done, just with disastrous results.

"Be careful," Gary said, opening the door and finally sliding out of the car.

Morgan hurried through the mud to reach the church door, the bitter wind brushing his cheeks. Twisting the door's giant ring, he shoved it open with his shoulder to reveal a large, dark room where rubble littered the floor. There were toppled candlesticks, torn cloths strewn across the expanse of the interior. There was even a wrecked confession box. Morgan suspected this place had either housed squatters or fallen victim to teenage boredom. Whichever it was, they'd done a great job at disrespecting the place. It was almost completely destroyed.

Morgan stepped farther in, pushing the door shut behind him. He stopped before it clicked, leaving a thin, vertical line where the air squeezed through with a quiet whisper. If anyone was coming for him, he wanted them to be able to get

inside quick enough, and that extra inch might be all they needed to save a life.

Now inside, his legs violently shaking with both harsh cold and raw fear, Morgan took careful steps over the rubble and rounded the corner of the small greeting area. One row of scattered pews came into view, their surfaces glowing purple and yellow under the gleam of moonlight bleeding through the stained-glass windows. Morgan inched toward them, petrified of what he might see as he went farther in.

His life was about to end, and he could only hope Rachel's hadn't.

"I'm here," he called, his deep voice booming across the church like a thunderclap.

There was no reply.

Morgan swallowed a hard, dry lump. "I did what you wanted—I got here on time."

Had he? Now was the only time he could check his watch. He pressed the button, the face lighting up with a dim glow to present the current time. He'd just made it, with only thirty seconds to spare. But he *had* made it.

When Nick Hansen failed to reveal himself, Morgan was overcome with panic. It occurred to him that he might've arrived at the wrong church, or that the killer had lured him here for a different reason altogether. New, terrifying scenarios played out in front of him, and he realized now just how little control he had over the situation. He felt like a little boy playing a big man's game. It was something he could never win.

"You came alone?"

Morgan spun around, the voice shooting down his spine like a cold sweat. In the doorway on the far side, a figure loomed in the darkness. The man was a shadow, not too tall but undeniably threatening. The outline of a gun extended the black silhouette of his hand, targeting Morgan in such a casual way that it was horrifying.

"Yes," Morgan told him, glancing around. The fact he couldn't see Rachel made his insides hurt. He wanted to ask, but Hansen's answer was the thing he feared most. Had he made the biggest mistake of his life by coming here? There was only one way to find out, but he could only do so with the dry croak of a

whisper as the words slipped from his cotton-like mouth. “Where is she?”

The shadow took a slow step forward, his footstep echoing through the church. It came clear of the doorway, stepping into the moonlight and revealing the face of the disturbing killer Morgan had seen only a few nights ago. Only this time Hansen didn’t have the twisted expression of confusion or the white sheet of panic on his cheeks.

This time, he wore the sly grin of a fox who’d infiltrated the coop.

Morgan panicked, his heart drumming against his chest. The skin grew hot under his collar, the worst of nightmares flashing before his eyes. He balled his hands into fists, squeezing until his fingernails dug into his sweaty palms. He was beyond tiptoeing around it—the urgency filled his lungs in a throaty yell. “Where’s Rachel?”

But Nick only laughed, raising the gun higher to target Morgan’s face as his smile widened into something more sinister. It raised a thousand questions, each one tearing at Morgan’s heart like a chisel chipping at stone. It was the face of a man who held a great number of secrets, but among them all was one clear fact.

He was here to kill again.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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Morgan watched through narrowed eyes as Nick's finger tightened around the trigger. His instincts took over then, as if a new pilot had entered his mind. Before he could even think about what he was doing, he launched himself across the ground, landing behind the safety of a pew just as the gunshot sounded.

Adrenaline took it from there.

Morgan kicked the pew as hard as he could, his heel smashing against the wood. The pew slid across the ground, and he heard a grunt. Rolling over, he scrambled to his feet and took cover behind the next pew.

That was when he felt it.

A sharp pang shot through his arm. Morgan reached out and touched it, the sting intensifying. He winced and pulled his arm away, checking his palm.

There was blood. Lots of it.

He'd taken a bullet without realizing it. Morgan thanked God for the adrenaline dealing with the pain while he was left to combat the bigger problem: Nick Hansen's footsteps were drawing nearer, his panting thick and furious.

"You had this coming," he said, his spiteful voice too close now.

Morgan slid his body across the ground, fighting against an urge to scream. He reached for the next pew, pulling his feet underneath to remain hidden. If only Gary would hurry up and get in here. Maybe then he would be safe. Maybe then they would find Rachel.

"I was just trying to do my work," Nick went on, wood whining against

stone as he kicked a pew to one side. “Those women, they had it coming. After everything they did to me, they finally got what they deserved. And you—you think you have a right to stand in my way? I gave you a chance, Mr. Young. I never tried to hurt you. Not until now.”

The words fell off Morgan like water off a duck’s back. Crazy was crazy no matter what angle you heard it from. All he could do was keep sliding under the pews, desperately trying to get away while Nick was close behind him. He knew there was no escape from here.

So why fight?

Human instinct, he supposed, reaching for something to grab hold of so he could haul himself farther along the floor, still concealed by the help of the pews and a little darkness. He was driven by that primal urge to survive. If not for him, then for Rachel. He pictured her in the back room of the church, cowering until all this was over. It was better that than her body sprawled across the floor, oozing with blood.

Morgan shuddered at the thought.

“You’re only postponing the inevitable,” Nick said, frustration lacing his voice and echoing off the walls of the church. “This is the only way it can be. You don’t have to do anything but accept it for what it is.”

A toppled stage set sat propped up against the wall, probably remains from a long-ago festive performance. Morgan felt a wave of relief when he saw it, using the opportunity to say what he needed to say, giving up his position before he slid into his new hiding place between the backdrop and the wall. “What did they do to you, Nick?”

“What’s it to you?”

“It’s everything to me,” Morgan said. “You might not know it yet, but Carrie was a friend of a friend. Tracking down the guy who killed her was my duty.”

“Ah, so you’re a Boy Scout.”

Morgan squeezed his way behind the backdrop. Just as his feet entered the dark recess, a deafening clatter roared through the church. He immediately knew what it was: the final pew being torn from its place, hurled aside by the man with a loaded weapon and very little patience. Knowing he was hidden, Morgan

craned his neck to stare along the wall where the backdrop stretched across. Shuffling as quietly as he could, he used his uninjured arm to drag himself to the far end where he waited for the sound of the killer's voice. Only then would he know if it was safe to make a move into the next room—he could see the open door, and he prayed Rachel was safe and sound beyond it. If he could only get there...

“Why don’t you just step out and face me like a real man?”

There.

Morgan heard the voice from far away. He seized his opportunity.

Sliding out of cover, he clambered to his feet and ran for the door. A gunshot exploded behind him, obliterating the doorframe he sprinted toward. He reached the safety of the wall between the two rooms and pressed his back against it, hiding from the gunfire and looking around. There was another door ahead of him; Rachel was probably in there, but there was no way in without crossing the doorway, and to do so would only make him vulnerable.

It was hopeless.

“You speak about being a real man,” Morgan said, drops of sweat leaking from his temple, “but you’re coming at an unarmed man with a gun. Where’s the great, grand gesture of your manhood in that?”

“You’ve got height and weight, I’ve got a gun. We use what God gave us.”

Morgan gave a condescending tut, wishing Gary would hurry up. He tried to postpone this further, using lies and words to slow Nick down. “Listen, I found a crowbar in here, and if you round this corner I *will* use it. So why don’t you just put down the gun and talk to me?”

Nick laughed. It was an eerie, haunting sound. “No chance.”

“Then keep the gun. Just talk to me.”

During the silence, Morgan had awful visions of being crept up on, found, and shot through the heart. He glanced down, saw an old pipe protruding from a large rock of rubble, and reached for it. Firmly in his hand, he scraped it across the floor, replicating the sharp scratch of a crowbar against stone. This was a weapon: not a very good one, but a weapon all the same.

Nick finally sighed. “I guess there’s no reason you shouldn’t know what



those bitches did. What you're going to die for. I was just... I was only a kid, really..."

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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“School wasn’t easy for me. I didn’t fit in. The movies show the weedy guys walking through the corridors and getting shoved into lockers. That was a real thing that did actually happen to people like me, but nobody ever took notice. At the end of the day, it’s all a bit of fun, right? Nobody ever stopped to ask if I was okay, so I just carried on with my day, dreading that final bell. That bell told me to go home—it told me to go be with *him*.”

Nick stepped closer, scanning the dark room.

“That’s right. As if school wasn’t hard enough, I had to walk the four miles home alone, even in the middle of winter. You think my mom bought me a coat? Think again. I remember this one time, after Billy Shuitz—one of my many asshole bullies—drenched me in water for what could only be described as a hilarious prank. So, there I was, walking home during a frost and minding my own business. All I could think about was getting home and begging my stepfather to let me have a hot bath.

“But I never got that far. Billy had other plans for me.”

Nick lowered his head and closed his eyes for a moment. It was like the backs of his eyes were a blank canvas for a film reel to show the sorrows of his life. As he delved into that memory, plucking away at the finer details of it, he knew it would only make him sad—angry, even. But it was irresistible to him. He *had* to tell all.

“I’d made it a mile up the street before I realized he was following me. He had his friends on either side of him—too many to count. I kept walking, but

they caught up with me eventually because they were on their bikes. In time, I heard the wheels spinning and the sound of metal clattering to the ground. The next thing I know, I'm on the ground beside the bikes, black school shoes rising and falling as they stomped on my face. Everything was a blur, but there are three things I remember; I remember thinking that it should have hurt more. I later realized it was because my face had gone numb, and I just couldn't feel what they were doing to me anymore. The next thing, and I just can't seem to erase this from my memory, was Billy's face. He was laughing at me as he stomped, each blow to the face sending him further into hysterical laughter. The other thing, though..."

Nick stomped forward to rush Morgan, but nostalgia snapped him back. He'd waited his entire life to tell somebody his story, and who better to confess to than somebody who was about to die?

"The other thing was *her*.

"Carrie Whittle was my savior. I heard her voice long before they stopped kicking, but eventually they all got up and left. Carrie helped me to my feet and walked me home. I didn't have anything to say to her. She was the first girl who'd ever said anything nice to me, and I didn't know how to handle it. Remember, I was only fourteen. Anyway, when we got home she didn't come in. But she did kiss me on the cheek. It hurt a lot, but I didn't mind. Carrie became my first love after that. We made friends and those feelings quickly developed into something more.

"The next summer rolled by, and we started fighting a lot. The bullying didn't ease up, and I think she found it difficult to deal with my bad moods. But that doesn't excuse what she did to me next, does it? Nobody deserves to be cheated on, especially when they then leave you for that person. When I found out, I was so angry. I tried talking to Carrie about it, but she just yelled at me and then we broke up. The next day she was in a new relationship with that guy. So, do you see? She was using me, keeping me for comfort while she tested the waters with the new guy. When she figured he was a sure thing, she cut the strings with me."

Pain engrossed him.

“It wasn’t the last time, either.

“Next there was Danielle Phillips. She seemed to do the same thing, only in reverse. She had a boyfriend, and as much as she said she was going to leave him, she just never did. That didn’t stop her from having sex with me though, did it? When her boyfriend found out, she told him I was following her and making her uncomfortable. Hell, one time she even told her family I was outside her house, which I sure was not. I mean, it’s hard enough to survive through high school without the physical advantages of jocks or the intellectual superiority of the real nerds. I was somewhere in the middle, lacking on either side.

“And it showed.”

Anger tore through him at the memory, but he refrained from letting it out. For too long he’d been a vessel of rage, and although he was determined to do what he needed to do—hurt and then kill all involved—he wanted this guy to understand.

“I forgot about Danielle in time, and before I knew it a romance was brewing between Emma Cole and myself. She was sweet to me, right up until she followed in Danielle’s footsteps; she cheated on her boyfriend, pinned it on me, and then I was left to deal with even more bullying. It was an endless line of insults and physical abuse from school to home, from home to college, and every day after that just became another gray page in a very dull book. Life was just no fun, but I got on with it.

“And then social media came about.

“Those long, lonely nights made it too easy to look them up on the internet. Seeing they’d grown up to marry those guys made me so angry. I... I saw red. I started thinking about what would happen if I finally got my revenge. All those years of torture had led me to wonder, what would their faces look like when they realized I’d won after all? How would those girls feel when they knew I’d come out on top—me, the pathetic little loser they’d beat up in high school?

“There was only one way to find out.”

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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“By cutting up their faces?” Morgan shook his head. There was something in the killer’s story that reached out to him, like a hand offering a palmful of sympathy. But he declined—sympathy had left the building long before people had been murdered in it.

Nick made a noise that sounded like the cocking of a gun, but Morgan didn’t know how those things worked. “After everything I just told you, you still think it was as simple as tearing a bit of skin? Come on, Detective. You’re smarter than that.”

“So, what, it’s—”

Something kept Morgan from finishing that sentence. At first it was a soft tickle in the back of his mind, but then it grew into something larger and more hopeful. It was like an alarm, but its ring was strong and positive rather than deafening and... well, alarming. He cocked his head to one side, the cool moisture of sweat dampening his collar, listening.

It wasn’t an alarm, he realized.

It was sirens.

“What did you do?” Nick yelled from the larger room of the church. The fury in his voice was thick as he ran forward, his feet pounding on the floor. “You had one simple instruction, you son of a bitch!”

Morgan heard it all from where he stood, his body tensing with fear. He clenched his fist with no idea how to use it, but before he even had time to think about it, his assailant rounded the corner and reached for his collar. Morgan was

pulled to the center of the church, the sirens growing louder. Lights flashed through the windows while the gun was pushed against his temple. He refrained from fighting, giving in to Nick's primal urges and focusing on standing upright, walking in time with Nick's long strides. He stumbled, was hauled up and shoved into the center of the church. The area lit up in red and blue. It was a promise of protection, but he had no idea if they could deliver. And even if they could...

"Rachel," he mumbled.

"Shut up." Nick stood behind him with one arm wrapped around Morgan's throat. His other hand held the gun against his skull as they waited for the doors to burst open. The gun shook, losing its focus on the exact spot but still aimed at his head.

There was no escape.

But Morgan had to know.

"Listen to me," he said. "Any minute now, a whole bunch of policemen are going to come through those doors. It's up to you if you hand yourself over quietly or go out with guns blazing, but if it's the latter you'll be killing an innocent woman. You *have* to tell me where Rachel is. You can't die with that secret."

Nick paused, his grip loosening for only a moment. His mouth opened, hot breath seeping onto Morgan's neck, but then he closed it again. There was no getting through to him.

The doors burst open. Blinding flashlights dazed Morgan. He closed his eyes tight like vaults. Footsteps and screaming merged together as the police stormed the church, and all he felt was the viselike grip of the DC Carver's arm across his throat as every gun in the room aimed in his direction. Morgan had heard the old tale of your whole life flashing before your eyes before you die, but all he could see was Rachel: her beautiful auburn hair fluttering in the wind like an elegant scarf, her thin lips pursed into a teasing smile while her blue eyes shone through him. Morgan's heart began to hurt.

"Put your weapon down, or we'll be forced to open fire," a cop yelled.

"Fuck you!" Nick spat.

Could they shoot him, Morgan wondered? Was their training so good that they could shoot Nick without accidentally hitting an innocent? Morgan, whose adrenaline was shooting through his body like white-water rapids, would have shook if he had the chance, but all he could do at this moment was pray and whisper, “Please.”

Nick’s arm produced a mass of sweat. His arm trembled and the gun went further off balance. He stepped back, dragging Morgan with him. The police maintained an aggressive approach, stepping in time with him. They kept going until Nick’s back was to the wall, and he clutched Morgan tight, leaning into his ear. “The back room.”

Morgan tried to turn his head, but the grip was too strong. “What?”

It happened then, as if time slowed down. He saw the gun move from his temple, Nick’s arm extended to target one of the cops. The gunshot cracked and echoed, producing a blinding light. The bullet had not long left the gun before three more came from the other direction. Morgan heard them all: precise shots one after the other.

One.

Two.

And there was a scream.

Nick’s grip loosened. Morgan stood upright, every muscle in his body tensed as he heard the body slump to the floor behind him. The cops moved in, flashlights lowered while the afterstain blurred his vision in a rainbow-like assault. Fear rattled through him—fear of what had happened, fear of what *would* happen.

“The back room,” Nick had said in his final moments.

An officer stepped forward and offered a hand, but Morgan didn’t take it. Terror and excitement bred an unfamiliar emotion that pushed him to turn and run. He leapt over Nick’s body, ignoring the shouted commands of the officer. He passed the room he’d hidden in only a minute ago. It felt like longer; it felt like days.

Morgan kept running, his heart dancing in his chest as he saw the door. He ran for it on weightless feet, reaching for the knob and twisting it. The lock

forbade him from entering, but nothing could stop him now. Nothing. He took a step back and lunged, throwing all his might into his shoulder. The door bashed open, swinging with all the force of a comet, shaking while it shook back into an open position. It revealed a dark room with one small window and little light. There was only a fallen wardrobe, scattered trash, and a bed.

And on that bed, a body.

Morgan lost his breath and rushed forward. Only the worst of possibilities flooded his mind as he dropped to his knees, leaning over Rachel. Her eyes were closed, her body in the fetal position. Her mouth had been stuffed with an old rag, and Morgan tore it from her with great difficulty, his trembling hands ignoring his commands.

“Please, no,” he said, but it didn’t feel like him. It felt as though his soul had long since left his body, and now he was merely a spectator of his deepest fears. He lowered his head and kissed her cheek, then felt for a pulse. His fingers pressed against the soft skin of her neck while he hoped—prayed—for some sign of life.

It was all he could do not to cry.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

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Morgan sat in the back of the stationary ambulance, cradling Rachel in his arms while the paramedic finished stitching his arm. They'd been like that for over a half hour while the police swept the scene. There were still interviews to be given, and the paramedics kept insisting he leave Rachel in their care, but it wasn't until now that he found the strength to do so.

"She's suffered a little shock, but she's going to be okay," the female paramedic told him. She was of middle age with deep, trustworthy eyes. Morgan took one look into them and knew he could believe her—it was just a matter of leaving the ambulance.

Captain Bray waited for him outside, and although Morgan expected a barrage of abuse, he got nothing more than a pat on the shoulder and a slight nod of the head. "Will she be okay?" he asked. "Your wife?"

"They say so." The truth was, Morgan didn't know. A feeling deep in his stomach told him it was all over, and he was inclined to listen to that instinct. The only problem was, he was still in shock himself. "I really thought she was gone."

The captain glanced around only half listening. "But she's okay. You're okay too. I gotta say, you did a good thing here tonight. It was, uh... irresponsible, but it all worked out for the best. I'm just glad you're not against us."

"Why would I be?"

Captain Bray laughed. "Not a lot of people respect the law these days. Anyway, I've got this shit-show to wrap up. If there's anything you need, let me

know.” He turned on his heel and made his way back toward the church.

“Actually,” Morgan called.

The captain turned.

“There is one thing you can do for me.”

Morgan went on to explain what he wanted. It was a lot to ask, and nothing could be done on the record, but Bray heard him nevertheless. Morgan gave a little more detail on his investigation and promised to give a statement with no fuss in the near future, if only he could be granted this one simple request.

“You’re sure that’s what you want?” he asked.

Morgan nodded.

“Then follow me.”

It was an unusual experience to be escorted to the back of a police car by the captain himself, but it felt right. Morgan glanced back toward the ambulance, which was now rounding the corner. He let out a half smile while being led to the only other ambulance on the scene and stepped up into the back.

“Two minutes, and not a moment longer,” Bray said, and then he closed the door.

Morgan was left alone in the confined area. Only he wasn’t *completely* alone; Nick Hansen lay on a stretcher. His shirt had been removed, and bloody patches on his arm and shoulder had been smeared to make room for assessment. They’d been told he would survive, and for that Morgan found himself oddly relieved.

He’d said it before, but nobody deserved to die.

“Got a minute?” he asked, watching Nick’s eyes inch open with all the strength of a butterfly. Morgan took a seat on the opposite stretcher, a strong whiff of something medical filling his nose. When Nick saw him and jerked to alertness, Morgan continued. “I wanted to tell you that I forgive you. Taking Rachel and putting her in danger was the worst thing you could’ve done to me. If anything had happened to her, I might not be in here saying this to you. But as it stands, I forgive you.”

Nick watched him with astonishment, his eyes widening and struggling to find their focus. When they finally landed on Morgan, his thin lips curved into a wry smile that could’ve spooked the Devil himself. “But *I* don’t forgive you. I

had to kill my own mom because of you. If you hadn't interfered..."

Morgan wanted to tell him the truth and wipe that smug grin from his face, but he figured it could wait another minute. After all, he'd just gone to Hell and back, so what was sixty seconds between archrivals? "You did that yourself. The only real wonder was how you managed to get Emma Cole past her. A woman like that—she has to keep a watchful eye over her son, whether she chooses to step in or not. What happened?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because nobody else will listen." Morgan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. "I'd hurry up though; the captain gave me two minutes, and I'm figuring we have around thirty seconds left."

Nick glanced at the door and then tried to sit up. He winced, a trickle of blood oozing from his wound, and slumped back down. Groaning, he craned his neck. "I didn't have to hide it. My mom knew all about what I was doing. She knew from the very beginning."

The reveal should've hit Morgan harder than it did. He sat in silence, studying Nick's expression, which was nothing short of wounded superiority. He couldn't believe that the horrors he'd seen had all been caused by this one little man who was now bleeding all over himself like an injured animal. It was the least he deserved.

"Cat got your tongue?" Nick said, grinning from ear to ear.

The door swung open then, and the captain stood in the moonlight pointing at his watch.

Morgan stood and bent over to keep from hitting his head on the low ceiling. He made for the door, ready to leave, but there was one little nugget he couldn't help but tell. It was the one thing he had to rub in Nick's face, and he simply couldn't resist.

"What you didn't know," he said, turning his head just enough to watch his expression change, "is that you didn't kill your mother. She survived the gunshot and is currently recovering in hospital. She's given her statement, and she'll testify against you in court."

Nick's jaw dropped in both amazement and horror. His eyebrows contorted into a pained and confused expression. He shook his head rapidly from side to side. "What? That... No. Why..." He gave up on speaking, his cheeks turning ghostly pale.

"Cat got your tongue?" Morgan let out his own grin, turned, and stepped out of the ambulance, closing the door behind him. With any luck, that would be the last time he'd ever see the man known as the DC Carver—a demented man killing for revenge—and with the exception of one little errand, the investigation had come to an end.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

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They entered without a word, Gary storming toward the hospital bed while Morgan rested his back against the nearest wall, where he watched, waiting. It was never going to be an easy thing to watch, but it was better that he was there; Gary was likely to be aggressive, and he wanted to ensure no harm came to her. Not under his watch.

Lyonette Hansen wrapped her large fingers around the rail she was handcuffed to. She inclined the electric bed, slowly coming to and meeting Gary's stare with wide eyes. She looked like one cat being bullied by another, backed into a corner and growing defensive. "If you came here to interrogate me, I've already told my story," she said.

"I'm not here for that. I came because I have something to say to you."

Gary turned back to Morgan, silently seeking approval.

Morgan nodded with caution.

"Your son is in custody, Mrs. Hansen," Gary stated, dragging his shoulders back to make himself look stockier than he was. "He murdered an acquaintance of mine, went after her friends, and then he was shot three times while attempting to execute my best friend."

Her wide face fell into a heavy sulk, as if she'd lost control of her muscles. But she didn't say anything—she simply chose the pity-me performance and ran with it, lowering her eyes as her chin touched her chest. It was a painfully annoying thing to watch.

Gary cleared his throat, a dry croak creeping in and threatening to break his

voice. “I was never officially a part of this investigation, but I hired the man behind me to ensure that your son was brought to justice. You’ll never know the pain I’ve felt, because you’re sick and twisted. And you know what? Your screwup of a son is no better.”

“Hey—” Morgan stepped away from the wall, taking a warning step. For as long as he was here, it was his job to keep Gary in line. Otherwise, who knew what would happen? It wasn’t a secret that Gary wanted a few minutes alone with the man who’d killed his ex-girlfriend, but the mother who’d let it happen wasn’t about to get away with it.

Morgan could only imagine his rage.

“Okay.” Gary waved him off and crept closer to the bed, making Lyonette quiver in his shadow. “I’ve nothing left to say to you. Only that I hope your precious son becomes somebody’s bitch in prison. And he will—believe me, he will. The toughest, most badass killers in Washington will use him for things he never thought he’d do, and then they’ll make him clean up the mess. He’s just a small boy, Mrs. Hansen. A small boy who picked on small women. I want you to go to bed each night knowing that you made this happen.”

Something shocking happened then; Gary hocked up some phlegm and spat in her face. Lyonette recoiled, the spit joining the tears as it dripped from her red cheeks. She made a noise that sounded like “ormph” and wiped it away at once, wincing with disgust.

Morgan, who hadn’t been given the chance to stop it from happening, took Gary by the arm and dragged him out of the room, squeezing a little harder than he should have. He closed the door behind him, shoving Gary a few feet away from it. “A little too much.”

Gary began to pace. “I know, but I feel better.”

“I hope so.”

“Do you think I got to her?”

The truth was, Morgan didn’t know. If somebody had spoken to him like that, it’d stay with him for sure. In fact, the spit would only ingrain it deeper into his memory. But Lyonette Hansen? After what she’d allowed to happen, it was a wonder she was even able to register things emotionally. Morgan settled for a

soft nod. “For sure.”

Gary stopped pacing. He looked Morgan dead in the eye and straightened his tie. “It feels like a bit of an anticlimax. I was hoping that when this moment came it would be some big, controlled speech. Like it would make everything okay again.”

“I know what you mean.”

“But it’s not, is it? Carrie is still dead, and nothing will change that. The only difference is that her killer can’t hurt anybody else. And I... I have you to thank for that, buddy. You’re more than just a strong investigator. You’re a good friend. I shouldn’t have made you do this. The things you went through, and with Rachel...”

Morgan spared him the words and rushed forward, embracing him. It wasn’t something he was conscious of in front of the cops; Gary was his best friend, and he had no problem showing that, especially if it helped keep Gary from tears. “It’s over now. Let’s just keep looking forward, right? Because now the job is done, and it’s time to move on.”

The words were meant for Gary, but Morgan took them on board too. After all the drama, the worry, the confusion, and the heartache, he was ready to go home to Rachel. Whatever happened next—whatever life threw at them—he was sure they would face it together, and that would make them unstoppable.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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Morgan stepped through the scanner at Dulles International Airport, collected his belongings from the tray, and fixed his belt, which was much harder with the gunshot wound taking its time to heal on his arm. Stuffing his keys and wallet back into his pocket, he hurried to the back of the large room, squeezing past other fliers who were in more of a rush than he was. Today marked the first of seven days where time wouldn't be an issue, and he was in no hurry.

He found Rachel at the back, standing beside a tall green potted plant that complemented her red hair. She beamed a wide smile when she saw him, taking him into her arms and squeezing tight. When she finally let go, she took his hand and walked with him in the direction of the departure lounge.

Finally, it was time to fly.

"I'm so glad we did this," Rachel said, playfully knocking her shoulder against his.

"You deserve the break," Morgan said, reaching out to hold her close. After all they'd been through, he'd probably never let her out of his sight again. At least, that was how it felt in that moment. "Especially since... you know."

It'd been days since the traumatic events at Mosaic Church. It turned out Rachel had simply passed out due to the shock of Nick Hansen's aggression. When he'd first found her in the back room of the church, he thought it was the end. The world had seemed to collapse around him, and the mere thought of going on without her was nothing less than a fresh hell. But now that she was up



and running, seemingly unaffected—at least on a physical level—he could work on earning her forgiveness.

Not that he needed it.

Rachel had told him time and time again that none of this was his fault. She'd expressed her pride in him for finding Nick Hansen, announced her gratitude that he'd risked it all to come and rescue her, and then told him on numerous occasions how much she approved of his loyalty to Gary. "There aren't many good people left in the world," she'd said to him, "but sometimes it's quality over quantity."

They walked in silence as they followed the boards that directed them to the correct waiting area. When they found it, they took a seat by the gate, which were the only two available in the crowded airport.

Morgan took her hand and kissed it. Her skin smelled of strawberries.

"Ever the gentleman," she said.

"That's me."

"Will we bring something back for Gary and Hannah?"

"It's the least we could do." Morgan glanced beyond the glass walls, watching a plane take off toward the setting sun. In less than an hour they'd be up there too, soaring in the direction of the Maldives. They had Gary to thank for that—Morgan's blunt refusal to accept payment for the investigation had been declined repeatedly, but when Gary had seen the open travel magazine with this particular vacation destination circled in red ink, the tickets had magically appeared on their coffee table the next day. Rachel had been over the moon—still was—and even Morgan had trouble declining the generous offer. But what the hell; they needed it now more than ever.

"When we get back," Rachel said, her smile fading at the thought, "we'll need to put all this behind us. Nick Hansen, his mother, the whole kidnapping thing... Let's consider this a fresh start, all right?"

Morgan wanted to agree—of course he did—but when was it ever that simple? He pictured himself as a tire salesman or a bank clerk, but neither of them seemed to offer the same reward that investigating did. That wasn't to say he wouldn't do them; if they needed the money he'd apply for twenty jobs in as

many minutes, but right now, he felt like he was home. “There’s always going to be trouble. For as long as I’m an investigator or even consulting, life is never going to be simple. One day you’ll want to have children, and so will I, but until then I don’t mind the risk. As long as you’re safe.”

“You’re so selfless that you’ve become selfish.”

“How’s that?”

Rachel adjusted herself in the seat. “I need you around. It’s nice that you put me first, but if something happened to you I’d never forgive myself. Think about what you told me yesterday: that you hate the idea of me getting hurt. That’s how I feel about you every day. I’d rather you work less and we struggle for money. It’s better than being well-off and you risking your butt every single day.”

“Well, it’s a cute butt.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know.” Morgan sighed and put his arm around her. “The thing is, I don’t know what’s around the corner for me. All I know is that I want to keep doing this. I mean, what are the chances of two psychotic killers putting us directly in harm’s way? After this I’ll probably be going back to following serial adulterers or finding missing dogs.”

“That’s good. It pays the bills.”

Morgan knew she was right, and he immediately saw it as his duty to ensure that happened. No matter which path they took from here, he would fight until his dying breath to make sure they had a roof over their heads, and if that meant taking on a thousand smaller clients, then he wasn’t going to turn them down. After all, Rachel’s work didn’t exactly bring in any money, and he’d be damned if he’d let her give that up. Too many lives had been changed by her efforts, and even if he had to scrub toilets for the next ten years just so she could save one more kid, he wouldn’t hesitate to pull on the gloves.

“You’re right,” he said, resigned. “No more drama.”

“No more drama.” Rachel snapped her head toward the screen, watching the times change as the overhead speaker announced their boarding. She stood and reached for his hand.

Morgan grabbed it and took the weight, heaving himself up. Together, they headed for the boarding gate with a week of hot sun and sandy beaches ahead of them. Who knew what waited for them when they returned? All Morgan was certain of was that—in spite of their deal—there would always be at least a *little* drama, no matter how hard they tried.

It was a part of the job.

And it was a part of him.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

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In days past, the man had acquired the appropriate tools for his first victim: two rolls of duct tape, one neglected old Buick he'd stolen from a piece-of-crap neighborhood nobody cared about, and a big, solid brick for the gas pedal.

The rest was all on him.

While he checked the engine from his safe place—an old warehouse that'd been neglected by everyone for years—he ground his teeth and thought of what'd driven him to this. Until now, he'd thought he'd come far up the long road of recovery, but if time told us anything, it was that some things could never be let go. Some things were necessary.

And boy, was this necessary.

He pulled at the rod and let the hood slam back down with an explosion of dust. The whoosh of air struck the overhead light, making it sway as the darkness danced around the cold, empty room. The man was alone, depending on which way you looked at it, but it still felt as if *they* were present—as if they were somewhere in the spiritual world telling him it was okay.

But he already knew it was okay, and he would see it through.

For moments he stood there, pondering the past long enough that the light above him rocked slowly to a standstill. Only then did he notice the music had stopped. Cussing under his breath, he marched toward the small metal steps and climbed up into the office at the top. He burst through the rickety door and found the radio still in its place. Had he turned it off and forgotten about it, or had it simply malfunctioned? It was an old hunk of junk, so the latter was more than

possible, but the former could still have happened. Regardless, he picked it up and checked the knob. It was still on. He hit it with the heel of his hand, once, twice, until the music crackled back through the speaker—Elvis singing about his shoes.

The man sucked in a large, dusty breath and let it flow out. He needed a drink, but he couldn't do that yet. Drinkers made mistakes, and there was no room for mistakes when you were about to carry out your revenge. That kill had to be executed perfectly, and all tracks had to be covered, no matter what. Alcohol was a temporary fix, but it would ultimately land him in trouble when the time came.

And when was that time?

He stole a glance of his wristwatch: 4:30 a.m.

The sun would come up soon, which left him a very small window to go about his business. The only option would be to wait another day until night came again, urging him to take control and do what had to be done.

Clicking his tongue behind his teeth, he looked over his shoulder at his victim. The victim was still out, unconsciousness making him sleep like an innocent little baby. But he was far from it. The man studied him, hate brewing in his stomach as he examined the binding. An old blanket and some rope had done the trick, but he saw no harm in bending down to the floor and checking the restraints were secure.

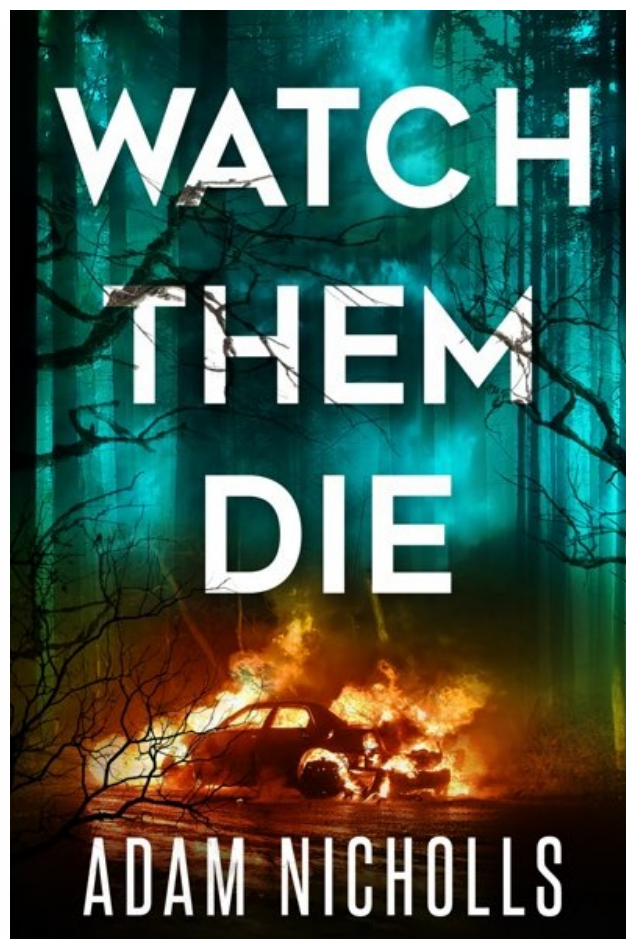
They were.

*Fine, then*, he thought, pushing himself back up to his feet. His back groaned and clicked as he did so. Was this the first sign of old age, or had he just been neglecting his body for too long? If it was the lack of maintenance, he would let it slide; he didn't give a shit about his own well-being, for as long as he lived long enough to do what he had to do, the rest of it didn't matter in the slightest. He only wished the next night would come sooner, so he could take this son of a bitch to the prepared location and watch him die.

It looked like he had time for that drink, after all.

## WATCH THEM DIE (PREVIEW)

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## CHAPTER ONE

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The killer stood beside his victim, facing the water. It was the coldest night of the year, and he felt it in the wind; it brushed across the surface of the Potomac River and assaulted his cheeks. He closed his eyes against the freezing air, breathing slowly through blocked sinuses. It soothed him, easing his nerves while he prepared to take a life.

When the breeze lowered and the wind's whistle dimmed into nothingness, the killer turned his attention back to his victim. He crouched down, resting his hands on his knees as he stared into the driver's side window. Even at this time of night, he could see the paralyzing fear in his victim's eyes. He would probably have heard it too, had he not taken the time to apply duct tape to the guy's mouth. That same roll of duct tape had already served its other purpose: to bind his hands to the steering wheel, securing him in place.

"It's getting kind of cold, huh?" The killer knew he couldn't answer. In fact, he depended on it. His burning desire for this moment had been haunting him for a while now, and he'd gone to great lengths to create the opportunity. "But I bet it's even colder in that water."

Pushing up from his knees, he stood and stalked around the vehicle, the cold wind picking back up and assaulting his already dry skin. He felt it in his hair, brushing it back toward its natural direction of growth. A younger version of himself would've caught a glimpse of it in his reflection and stopped to tidy it, but such things didn't bother him anymore. Not as the person he'd become. The only thing he gave a damn about now was getting the job done, and that would



never happen if vanity had anything to say about it.

Wasting no more time, he opened the door and slid into the passenger seat, leaning on his side to study his victim. Those cold, pleading eyes begged forgiveness. His hands—although securely fastened to the wheel—trembled under the thin light that shone from the dockside lamps on the corner of the faraway building. The man before him was completely helpless, which was everything he deserved and more.

“See,” the killer said, the air whispering through the open door and up the back of his shirt, “being young and reckless isn’t always as fun as you think it is. Sure, it is at the time, but the problem with you guys is that you don’t understand consequence. When I was young—and that probably seems like a long time ago to you, but I’m only forty—we were punished for all sorts of things: stealing milk from front porches, trashing tree houses the other kids had made. No matter how small it seemed, consequence was waiting for us. It helped keep us straight. It made us behave. But you don’t have that problem, do you? Personally, I blame the internet. It’s given you some misguided claim to immunity. I mean, you’re safe behind your computer screen, right?”

His victim nodded, but he wasn’t really the victim in this situation, and the killer knew it. Watching him now, tears seeping from his dark little eyes, only reminded him of why they were there. The memory was accompanied by anger. That anger grew and grew until it was ready to explode inside his head. It was all he could do not to strangle the life out of him right there and then, putting an end to this once and for all.

But that would be too quick.

Too merciless.

And there was a plan to stick to.

“Well, guess what?” the killer continued. He turned to face the rippling waves at the end of the boat slip. “Today you’re going to accept the consequences of your actions, and it’s not going to be pleasant. Tell me, do you think about them late at night, in your most personal moments? Do they even cross your mind? I was watching you long before I made contact, and if I had to guess, I’d say you didn’t pay a single thought toward them.”

The killer knew the man couldn't reply, and that was exactly what he'd longed for. He'd dreamed of this moment over and over, preparing what he'd say when he finally got everything in order. But now that he was here, that rehearsed speech felt stale and meaningless. Now, there was nothing but the true words that fell seamlessly from his lips, straight from the heart. It was the most honest he'd ever been.

"You can't answer, but I wouldn't be interested even if you could." The killer reached back toward the door, kicked it open, and climbed out, feeling the fight of his age and recent diet: fast food and alcohol, when and where he could find it. He shut the door behind him and wondered why he'd bothered as he returned to the driver's side, leaning far into the window and gripping the handbrake. With his hand wrapped around it, he tilted his head at a slight angle and stared deep into the desperate eyes of the man he was about to murder. "I..."

What was it he'd wanted to say? The killer felt a pressing urge to further his speech, to try to make him understand. A selection of words circled in front of his eyes—*revenge*, *deserve*, *comeuppance*—but what was the point? What could he really say to make this man understand what he'd done wrong? Even if he could, what would be the point? It wouldn't bring *them* back, and he wasn't about to try. Instead, there was only revenge.

"Ah, forget it. You're not worth it."

The killer said no more. He thumbed the button and lowered the lever, releasing the emergency brakes. As the man inside sobbed into the duct tape and uttered a muffled howl, the killer quickly stepped back. He watched with morbid satisfaction as the car rolled down the slip toward the water, smoothly floating onto it like a boat. Water rushed inside, and with every drop, the killer felt justice ease his headache. He watched as the river consumed the car, the man inside finally claimed by his watery grave.

It was over.

There was only silence.

Enjoying one last moment, the killer took a deep breath of the cold night air and enjoyed the tranquility. He pictured his victim's face, water filling his lungs as he desperately tried to wiggle free, his lungs collapsing under the pressure.

Under the hopelessness.

It was perfect.

Turning now, the killer hurried away from the boat slip, exiting the yard with a surprising lack of satisfaction. The hole he'd expected to fill was still nothing more than a painful vacant lot, but that was fine. If he could turn back time, he'd have done it all over again. Why? Because it was right. Just like it would be right when he got to his next victims, during which he was certain he'd feel the same way.

After all, each and every one of them deserved it.

## CHAPTER TWO

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The vacation was supposed to be a chance to relax, unwind, and hit the reset button. The whole purpose was to return with a new lease on life, as if the dark crimes of Washington had never tainted his soul, but Morgan had not made it to the airport's exit doors before trouble came for him once more. It was as if he'd never left.

He was yet to know what the problem was exactly, but as he hauled a large suitcase out of the arrivals section and found Detective Gary Lee waiting for him, he knew something was amiss. Even Rachel, Morgan's wife, who'd enjoyed the Maldives vacation just as much, gasped with surprise. A visit from Gary was never a good thing if he wasn't smiling.

He wasn't.

Morgan steeled himself for bad news. As a private investigator, work could come calling at any time. He just hadn't expected it to be waiting for him the moment he hit US soil. Hell, he didn't even have an office at the moment anyway; when the work had slowed down, he'd decided to close up shop and set it up at home instead, but over time the spare room had become a dusty old box room, and neither he nor Rachel had mentioned it since. Morgan suspected this was due to his own embarrassment. Another reason he loved his wife.

As prepared as he could be, he dragged the suitcase toward Gary, keeping Rachel close to his side. The solemn look on Gary's tired face told him all he needed to know. "Let me guess, the Homicide Department has hit a snag, and they need a PI who has nothing better to do."

Gary shook his head, his expression unchanged. “You wish.”

The tone in his voice struck a nerve. Morgan recoiled, all hopes of a pleasant exchange diving out the window in a matter of seconds. Even Rachel stepped back, pulled her own rucksack farther up her shoulder, and announced she’d go find the car. Morgan nodded and took note, but his eyes were fixed on Gary’s.

When they were left alone, Gary raised a hand and clamped it on Morgan’s shoulder. His chest heaved up and down, as if to exhale a heavy burden. This definitely wasn’t going to be good news. “Let’s get some air.”

The idea was music to Morgan’s ears, and although he dreaded the coming news, he couldn’t wait to get outside and suck up some of that thick Washington smog. While they marched in silence toward the exit, he wondered what could possibly be wrong. Was there another murder spree? Had the DC Carver broken out of prison to take his revenge on Morgan, the man who’d put him away in the first place? Anything was possible, making this short walk to the outside a long, tedious journey. It didn’t help that the suitcase weighed a ton.

Eventually the time did come. They passed through the automatic doors and took a left, pulling to one side where two smokers stood around an ashtray and talked too loud about their recent trip. Morgan passed by them and stopped the suitcase, leaning on the raised handle while he addressed the situation head-on. “What’s this about?”

With the same frown he’d worn inside, Gary raked a hand through his hair and made eye contact. He pursed his thin lips, cleared his throat, and finally spoke. “There’s no easy way to say this, so here goes: your cousin died while you were away.”

The news hit him like a brick. Morgan only had one cousin—Dylan “Dusty” Young, a nice guy who attracted bad news. Having spent the first ten or twelve years of their lives inseparable, there was a bond that should never have been broken. It wasn’t until Dusty’s mother—Morgan’s least favorite aunt—announced they were moving away that they had to say goodbye. Since then, they’d only been able to keep in touch over the phone, and although they’d both tried their best to maintain that friendship, it’d withered away over the many years. People changed and friends drifted. They both understood this, and it had

never turned sour.

But now their time had come to an end, and Morgan felt the clean spirit of his vacation being sucked away like water down a drain. It was like he'd never left. "What happened?"

"That's the worst part. He was murdered."

There was stab number two. Morgan didn't realize he was falling back until his spine hit the brick wall behind him. Had it not been there, he was sure to have hit the ground. "Murdered? Who the hell would want to hurt Dusty Young?"

Gary kept to himself, not rushing forward or crowding his best friend. Morgan recognized that effort and appreciated it, but it didn't do much for his mood. "Don't worry about that. I'm working on the case right now, just like you did for me not so long ago. All you need to do is attend the funeral. Provided you want to?"

"Sure I do," Morgan said eagerly, but as he parted with the words, he saw glimpses of his distant family. He pictured them all gathered in a large, dull room, the conversation dying the moment he stepped inside. All eyes were on him, and the sweat soaked his collar. How was he supposed to stay in a room with them after all these years? They were *distant* family for a reason, but Morgan knew it wasn't about him, them, or their relationship; it was about his cousin and old friend Dusty Young, who'd been killed for reasons Morgan had yet to learn.

"You okay?" Gary asked.

"I'm fine," he lied. "You going to tell me what happened?"

"How about you get settled, and I'll explain at the funeral tomorrow?"

Morgan nodded, staring vacantly at the ground. "But how do you know about this?"

"Homicide." Gary opened his suit jacket and flashed his badge. "That, and your Aunt Gladys called me personally."

"I'll bet that was fun." Morgan's Aunt Gladys was a piece of work. After many years of no communication, she'd spent her lonely hours filling her son's head—Dusty's head—with lies about why they had to leave DC. She'd blamed

the neighborhood and Morgan's bad influence, rather than confessing to her inability to hold down a relationship, much less a job. Morgan had refused to react, deciding to keep to himself and avoid the toxicity of an altercation. He'd been happier this way. Until now. "What did she say?"

"Just that she wanted me to invite you to the ceremony."

"She didn't want to talk with me personally?"

"Does that surprise you?"

Morgan smiled, but he didn't know how genuine it was. "Not much." He sighed. "All right. Thanks for coming down here to tell me. I'd better find Rachel and head home. Maybe I'll make a stop along the way to pick up a black tie."

"Good idea. Keep your chin up, pal. And stay out of this one."

They exchanged a weak, brief hug and parted ways. Morgan dragged the suitcase around the exterior of the building toward the parking lot with a gray cloud following above him. All he could think about was Dusty's young, playful smile, and Gary's words repeated in his mind like a broken record: "Stay out of this one."

But how was he supposed to?

His cousin had just been murdered, and Morgan couldn't just let that slide.

## CHAPTER THREE

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The funeral had been normal, as far as funerals went. There was a priest and a lot of crying and hugging, and everyone wore black. Morgan had stood at the back throughout the ceremony, keeping quiet with Rachel's arm looped around his, saying nothing except "I'm sorry for your loss" to those who passed.

Not that it did him any favors—Morgan's cousins, aunties, and uncles all scowled as if he'd wronged them somehow, to which Rachel frowned. He'd tried to explain that these weren't grateful, caring, or loving people, and judging by the cold stares exchanged by each of them, they didn't want kind words.

They only wanted their loved one back.

But Dusty wasn't coming back. Morgan was yet to know why, but somebody had taken it upon themselves to end his life. From the little he'd heard from Gary, the killer had gone to great lengths to ensure that Dusty suffered, but the greatest question was why?

Morgan had no clue, but he was determined to find out.

It wasn't until the wake that Gary approached him. Morgan had been sitting at the corner table, eager to reconnect with his family but reminding himself that the toxicity of it was far too hot. He'd spent a lifetime convincing himself he was better off without them, and even something as simple as starting a little small talk would be akin to stripping his armor and making himself vulnerable. Instead, he sat with his hands wrapped around an empty glass, regretting having asked Rachel to leave him to his grief. It only made him more grateful when Gary slid a whiskey glass across the table and heaved himself onto the stool



across from him. He leaned in and clinked his own glass against it, then knocked it back before Morgan could even take a sip.

“What’s this for?” he asked, watching Gary slam the glass onto the wooden tabletop.

“I know you’ve been out of the loop for a while, but we call it a toast. You’re supposed to drink it in honor of your late friend.”

“Well, in that case.” Morgan swept it up and swallowed it in one gulp, the hot liquid flushing down his otherwise dry throat. It burned his insides, falling into his stomach where it settled with comforting warmth. It was a pleasant sensation, but not enough to make him crave more. If he were telling the truth, all he really wanted was to head home and slide into bed, sleeping off the day’s grief until he awoke with a clearer head. “To Dusty.”

Gary nodded. “To Dusty.”

“So, are you going to tell me what happened?”

“To your cousin?”

“Who else?”

“Are you sure you’re ready to know?”

Morgan was unsure, but there was only one way to find out. He agreed to listen, ignoring his gut feeling and slumping back with his arms folded across his chest while Gary explained what’d happened. It started off bad—his body washed up on a dirty riverbank—but the more Gary explained, the more Morgan wanted to hurl the table across the room and storm out. The questioning, judgmental stares from his distant family didn’t help either.

By the time he was caught up, Morgan had no energy left. Gary let the last of the facts settle in the silence, and Morgan only noticed the clink of glasses and hissed murmurs from the people around him. He didn’t feel much like having company; he only wanted to know what could have driven a man to hurt Dusty, especially as savagely as he had.

“It was personal,” he said.

Gary knocked his head to one side. “What makes you say that?”

“Duct tape, a sanitized vehicle, and a remote location. It takes a lot of effort to go through all that, and I can’t see why anyone would bother unless they

wanted to prove a point. You're human, right?"

"Last I checked."

"Then imagine you're the killer. Surely you'd need some sort of grudge."

Gary shrugged. "I suppose."

"Supposition is for the lazy. Come on, Detective. You're better than this."

"I'm trying my best."

"I don't doubt it," Morgan said, lowering his tone when he realized he was talking a little too loud. He didn't want it being mistaken for bitterness—he felt a lot of things for Gary, but anger wasn't one of them. "I'm just saying, it's worth looking into his past."

"Don't worry, we're on it."

Morgan nodded, saying nothing more. He glanced around the room at all the faces. All the expressions of hurt. There were a lot of memories in this room, but for now he didn't want to think about any of the trouble caused over the years. He only wished he could heal their pain. Nothing he did would bring Dusty back from the dead, but if he could get to the bottom of why this happened, then maybe he had a shot at easing their anguish, even if just a little.

"I know that look," Gary said, burping into a closed fist. "You want to investigate."

"Are you going to stand in my way?"

"Would it stop you if I did?"

"Not really."

Gary sighed. "Then I guess I'm here for anything you need."

"That's good," Morgan said, sliding off the stool and paying no mind to the eyes he felt crawling all over him like ants, "because I need a ride home."

## CHAPTER FOUR

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The Young family weren't the only ones in mourning. On the other side of the city, the killer stood in the open cemetery, the fierce wind howling at him and throwing his open coat behind him like a flapping flag. It didn't bother him in the slightest—freezing temperatures were a mere discomfort compared to the internal agony he was enduring.

Gawking down at the fresh marble headstones, a horrifying image of his loved ones crept into his mind. Lifeless bodies, bugs eating away at what used to be fun, lovable smiles with soft skin and bright, wonder-filled eyes. It winded him, feeling like someone had reached into his stomach and grabbed his innards, squeezing and twisting until he couldn't take it anymore. He collapsed to his knees, reached out for the largest headstone, and ran his fingertips across the etchings:

### **BELOVED MOTHER AND WIFE**

The pain was unbearable, to the point he no longer felt like himself. He hadn't always been a murderer—that was still new to him, but he wasn't able to stop. The people who'd done this had to pay, no matter what people thought of him. He only prayed the departed were looking down on him with love and understanding, rather than judging him for his somewhat inhumane behavior.

It wasn't like before, however, and the killer knew that like he knew his own reflection. The woman rotting beneath him would've understood him in life, and

she would've been at his side telling him as much. She would also be asking him to stop, trying to convince him this was the wrong thing to do. But did that mean she was always right? In some ways she was lucky; she didn't have to experience the sheer agony he was currently unable to escape, and it felt as though that perspective was necessary before being able to judge.

But vengeance wasn't the point.

It was more like a funnel. He simply had to vent his anger, and if it wasn't directed at the people responsible, then who else would suffer? Ever since the ordeal—after spending an extended period of time in bed without sleeping—the killer had discovered his need for revenge. It was like a part of him he'd uncovered in the long, winding trails of his mind where his calm, collected persona once resided. There was once a man whose biggest concern was paying the bills on time, maybe even finding thirty minutes to rearrange his DVD collection into a newer, more discernable order.

Now there was only rage.

Hot, unrelenting rage.

And for what he was about to do, he could only hope that his loved ones—the kind, beautiful, innocent people who'd died for no reason other than the ignorance of others—would look down on him with just a touch of forgiveness.

Because he wasn't done yet.

Not by a long shot.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Sleep didn't come for him. Morgan spent countless hours awake in bed, watching the shadows crawl across the ceiling like dark monsters reaching out for unsuspecting victims. It drove him wild, shooting him into the deepest areas of his imagination where nobody and nothing was safe. Was this where Dusty had been a few nights ago, he wondered? Had he known his demise was so close, or had it been as big a surprise to him as it had been to everyone else?

There was no way to know.

After hours of pointless staring, Morgan finally gave in and slipped quietly into his clothes, careful not to wake Rachel. With that accomplished, he snuck downstairs in the dark, made a coffee, and took it with him in one of the Styrofoam cups Rachel had bought for those last-minute journeys. Creeping through the dark and watching over his shoulder the entire time, he found the garage and slipped into the car, started the engine, and left the neighborhood in the dark of night, the smell of hot coffee working its magic on his heavy eyes.

When he was far enough away from the house and able to make all the noise he wanted, he turned on the radio and slipped into the trance of '70s soul music. Al Green sang through the speakers about staying together, and although he'd love to get thinking about the days he and his wife first fell for each other, all he could think about was Dusty.

Dusty had been a person—a living, breathing person. His favorite movie was *The Goonies*. His favorite rock band was AC/DC. He'd loved strawberry Pop-Tarts and always started by nibbling around the crust before tucking into the

icing. He'd had dreams of becoming an actor, fears of moths and the monster under his bed. The man he'd grown into—although Morgan had been deprived of the opportunity to know him—surely had dreams of his own, but all that had been taken away from him.

Why?

Morgan stayed deep in thought, lingering on that question until he arrived at his destination. It wasn't a place he'd planned on heading, but something in his subconscious must have directed him there. He climbed out, stepping from the warm safety of his car and into the freezing wind beside the river. His boots squelched into the dirt as he locked his car and pulled up the flashlight app on his phone, navigating his way toward the abandoned building that stood in the dark like one of the monsters hiding under Dusty's bed.

Everything in his body told him to turn back now, but Morgan knew better. It'd been decades since he'd believed in ghosts or monsters, and he knew it was his inner child talking to him. He dismissed it for now, following the light produced by his cell phone, peering into the holes of the smashed windows. He directed the light into the rooms, but there was nothing there besides wall graffiti and old fast food wrappers. Morgan wanted to head inside and investigate, but something told him there was nothing to find. The police had probably inspected it thoroughly anyway.

Moving on, Morgan stepped away from the building and headed toward the boat slip. The breeze returned to him here, the assault of icy midnight wind tearing at his coat. He shivered, pulling it taut at the collar with one hand, while the hand holding the cell phone suffered the pain of a thousand cold spikes pricking his bare skin. He did his best to ignore it, simply following the most lit path to where the car had been dragged from the river only days ago. It felt surreal standing in the exact spot where his cousin had been found dead. Life was fragile, and he often forgot that. Hopefully this would be a lesson for him.

Focusing on the part of him that'd told him to be here, Morgan walked to the end of the slip and gazed out toward the water. There was nothing but faraway lights and the sparkle of them bouncing across the water. He shook in the cold breeze and turned toward the slope, lighting up the dark tracks where the car had

been recovered. While his breath drew short, he followed them back until he was on level ground. What exactly had happened here? What had pushed somebody into hurting Dusty in such a cruel, vindictive way?

He intended to find out.

At the far back of the boatyard, past where the tracks ended, Morgan shined the light on the ground and continued his hike back to the car. On the far rim of the yard, buried between two patches of overgrown weeds that'd probably been healthy grass long ago, two deep grooves in the dirt formed a familiar pattern. Morgan froze before crouching low to investigate. Something was off about this picture, and the truth behind it felt only an inch too far away for him to grasp. Regardless, he activated the camera on his phone and snapped away at the grooves from multiple angles.

It wasn't until he took the fourth picture that he realized.

These were tire tracks.

He was sure of it now, kicking away the weed patches and following them back to the exit of the yard. It wasn't much of a discovery—it was probably nothing at all—but Morgan kept snapping photos until the tracks ended. When he was done, he returned to his car and sent the pictures to Gary's phone.

In the warm, comfortable silence of his car, he reached for his coffee, which had turned cold long ago. Each sip disgusted him more and more, but God knew he needed the caffeine, and he wasn't above drinking it cold. Still, he cradled it in his hands as if it would warm him, staring into the dark abyss of the windshield.

Until his phone lit up.

Fatigue picked at his brain while he reached for the phone in its dashboard cradle. He swiped with his cold-numbed thumb, the caffeine working together with the name on the screen to quicken the beat of his heart.

It was a text message from Gary, and it was good news:

*Were these at the yard? MPD didn't see those.*

That was because they were officially off the site, Morgan thought, typing up

his reply with multiple errors. He was too cold to care about the mistakes, as long as the message was recognizable:

*East sidf, under she sign.*

Good enough, he thought, firing up the engine and relishing the hot blast of air shooting from the vent. With any luck, the police would send somebody over to investigate the tracks soon, but wouldn't that be too late? The sun would be up in an hour or so, and Morgan had no intention of sleeping. Instead, he headed for downtown, where he knew a guy who might be able to help him out.

This way, he could stay a step ahead of the police.

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## AFTERWORD

Thanks for making it through to the end. It means so much to me that you chose to read this book over the endless library this world has to offer, and that's what keeps me working on the characters I'm growing to love.

In this instance, I spent a lot of time trying to create a protagonist who's a lot like Mason Black, if not in his personality then at least in his predicaments. For Morgan Young, it was interesting to see a different man react to similar scenarios. Take his marriage for instance—unlike Mason, Morgan doesn't have any kids, and he shares his wife with her (unpaying) career. Mason would've hated that, which is ironic when you consider that *he* was married to *his* career.

But that's the difference.

I have this image of Morgan in my head; he looks like Denzel Washington and has a big heart. He doesn't run in with guns blazing, and he doesn't apply aggression toward the killers he's tracking. In fact, he's a little timid about his methods and constantly doubting his own abilities. Hardly the gruff detective, right?

There's also the world around them. Mason had Bill to lean on, whereas Morgan is caught in an endless loops of IOUs with Detective Gary Lee. I try to limit police involvement within this series, as Mason got too close to the department and I wanted this series to be different (while also being the same).

And this world building is what I love. Thanks to you guys, I get to spend my days writing about these characters, getting to know them as gradually as you are. I always go into a book with a strong outline of what's going to happen,

but you'd be surprised to learn how many parts of these characters randomly appear while my fingers are hitting the keyboard. For instance, Rachel was originally supposed to work at a daycare just to make ends meet. It wasn't until I started typing that she suddenly ran this amazing charity because of her love for children. Morgan, on the other hand, was drafted out to be more fierce, but his love for Rachel gave him a warmth that I think Mason was missing. The way these things evolve as they transfer from my head to the page is easily the best thing about writing novels, and it's because of this that I manage to maintain my excitement for the next book.

The question is, what would *you* like to see more of? Did you like this book, or do you prefer the standalone thrillers? Is this too violent, or not violent enough? Maybe you think this books is perfect for you? Whatever your thoughts, please don't hesitate to reach out to me using my email address or Facebook page in the back. Better yet, leaving a review after each book is by far the biggest way you can help an author grow, so feel free to leave an honest and unbiased comment or two on the product page.

For now, I'm off to write the next Morgan novel. I hope I can wrangle more out of this one, up the stakes and keep you on the edge of your seat with each coming title.

Until then.

Adam Nicholls

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Nicholls grew up in the southwest of England, where he studied creative writing while working a variety of full-time jobs. When his Mason Black series was first published, he quickly became a bestseller and then went on to create a name for himself in the thriller genre. Adam now lives with his wife in Bristol.

You can join his newsletter and be the first to hear about news, discounts and competitions by clicking the following link:

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