

The Monster Within

by Jeremy Laszlo,

Published: 2014

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All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

1

I've made peace with my demons. They're both my weaknesses and my strengths. I suppose it's the curiosity of the darker sides of humanity that have led me here—on every facet of my life.

The secret truth of detective work is that like everything else, the world of cinema, television, and movies, it looks a whole lot different than it truly is. I don't think I've ever had a case solve itself in a matter of weeks. It's never been an hour, and I don't spend years working on one case. I sure as hell don't make a few phone calls with an intricate network of experts and technological and sociological specialists at my beck and call. No, the secret reality of detective work is that most of it is just talking. It's following up on lists, it's a whole bunch of boring labor that falls between the frames of the movies and during the commercials of the television shows. The truth is, I love and loathe detective work, but it's not something that's ever made the quality of my life any better. If anything, my life is a ruin because of what detective work has done for me.

But there is something special about a case coming to an end. It's not like a jigsaw puzzle, where there's a final piece that makes everything clear and understandable. No, it's more like scraping the ice off your windshield after a particularly cold and wet blizzard. Each scrape is annoyingly painful and there is resistance at every turn. It's only after you've taken the time to muscle your way through all of it, you can finally peer into the darkness within, and the dark inside finally gets a look at the light. Most killers are on a mission. They're either proud, justified, vindicated, or just plain hungry, and death has a way of satisfying all of those like an all-you-can-eat buffet.

We live in an era of science, but science is constantly changing and crime doesn't. Murder, vice, robbery, and racial hatred, they all endure. Science has done nothing to help stop the evil in the world—rid us all of our base hatreds and vile desires. All the cameras and apps don't help with that. All the DNA evidence and all the other shit that convinces a jury that someone's guilty doesn't help stop us. Us. Not just them. Us. As a people, we are destined for destruction. Maybe that's why I'll always have a job and why secretly I enjoy it.

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Every time I close a case, Chief Mendez likes to get the debriefing personally. It's his way of keeping me under his thumb just to prove that he's in charge. I don't like it, but I get it. We all have our vices.

He sits in his chair like he might if he were a feudal lord sitting atop his throne. The thing about Mendez is that once upon a time, someone told him that he was a Mexican and that meant that the world owed him no favors. Rather than take that as a disappointing tale on racism, he took it up as a challenge. In fact, he took

that challenge to heart so well that he became a power-hungry dick. In the world of detectives, we call Mendez a Test Taker. He was one of those smartass kids that got it easy because he could retain a shitload of useless fucking information and say all the right things on the tests that some ass-hat developed to determine whether or not you were worthy of promotion. Mendez answered all those questions right. I know, I watched him climb the ladder the entire time. It's just one more reason I despise the little asshole. But he... he thinks I'm a damned dinosaur. Looking at those around me, he's probably right.

The force has been overtaken by the veterans and the academics coming up from college or home from war. They study their books in college or shoot their terrorists and that gives them a shield if they want it, at least in this city it does. I don't think it's fair, but the world never promised me that it would be fair. She's a twisted bitch in that regard. The world has proven time and again that life gives you what you take from it, so I suppose that's what they've done here. They've taken what they thought the world owed them.

In this office, in these leather stuffed chairs that somehow manage to be more uncomfortable than hard plastic, I feel like a relic on display. Mendez sits down in his desk that he 'fought' hard for. Chief of Detectives, that's something that I would have fought for once, if I wasn't dusty and worn. To me, closing cases is all that kept me going this long. I'm not as ambitious as I once was. Watching your family collapse all around you has a way of breaking your spirit. Even so, I still like unraveling the dark and twisted.

"Nice work," Mendez says with an almost believable tone, looking at the report and file. Every other chief I've had would settle for the report. They never needed this confidential sit down, this sort of display of authority. Then again, they were men. Not Mendez. He likes to try and get inside our heads. He wants to know what I'm thinking. Too bad I'm wise to his game. He can know all he wants about what I'm thinking. "You have a way of breaking them in the box," Mendez shrugs. "It's a gift. Takes years to master."

"The one thing I have," I say without much interest.

"Speaking of." Mendez closes the file and shows his hand. He never wanted to talk about the case. Fine with me. Whatever he wants to talk about, we can talk about. I can play his game. Hell, I can probably hold my breath until the clock runs out. Retirement is always coming up these days, wherever I go. Why should I be surprised that my hunter finds me here, on my own hallowed grounds?

"Only a month left," Mendez says with a heavy sigh, as if he's about to lose one of his best. I am, after all, but that doesn't mean he likes me. Very few of these kids like me. "Then what happens with you, King?"

"I head to Florida," I answer flatly.

"Florida?" Mendez sounds slightly interested. I'm not sure if it's genuine or not, probably not. What does he care about any of this? "You have family down there or something?"

"Nope," I shrug. He's mocking, but I play along. I doubt that I have any family left that would accept me. Nick might still be out on the road somewhere. I'm certain Kelly and him didn't work out, but God only knows. My parents— I buried them both a few years ago, a fact he is well aware of. My marriage ended, another fact I'm sure he is laughing inwardly about, and I barely even speak to my

daughter, though she still tolerates me from time to time. No, there's no family left for me to send a card to on Christmas. There's no one left for me. Not anymore.

"Just going to take in the sun and lay out on the beach until the end of your days?" Mendez doesn't buy it but at least he doesn't make a fucking book joke. I don't care. His belief is irrelevant to me now.

"We'll see," I shrug. I don't want to bother telling him about the idea of opening up a private investigation firm. I don't want anyone here to know about that. There's nothing for them to know about it. Old men, college girls, and drug runners, there's nothing there that makes me think I won't be needed. After all, I'm getting tired of the legal routes. I'll be a man who can find answers and that'll be the end of it. I'm not interested in compiling cases for prosecutors or the DA's lackeys anymore. That shit died the moment someone first mentioned the letters DNA.

"Well, you have a month, King," Mendez says finally with a sigh, leaning back in his chair in a symbolic effort to look like we're comrades, just two old buddies chatting over the future. Does this shit ever work on anyone? "I'm taking you off rotation. You don't have to catch anymore, unless you want to. After everything you've put into this department—this city, I think you've earned a nice coasting to the finish line. Again, if you want to pick up one more, then so be it, but I don't see the harm in just letting you do what you want. Show up, fill up the last bits of the Compo case paperwork, and you can get paid all the same."

I have to admit, it sounds nice, even if he says it in a way that says just fucking leave. In fact, where has he been my entire life? Why didn't I get this option when I first started working cases? Show up, punch in, do nothing at all, punch out, and get paid all the same. That sounds like a magnificent job for me. It probably would have saved me a whole lot of strife and suffering along the way. If only the darkness didn't beckon.

"Thanks, Chief," I say. He smiles and brushes it off as if he's doing nothing at all, 'cause he's that much better than everyone else. He stands and I immediately follow his lead. He sticks out his hand with a plastic smile on his face and I can't help but feel like an old book stuffed away on the highest shelf in the corner of the library. No one's checking me out anymore. The wheels of time are rolling, the world is moving on.

"Don't worry about it," Mendez says with a truly happy smile. He's glad to be rid of me. "You've done a lot of good work for us over the years." He says it as if he's been there all along, rooting for me, pulling for me in my corner. I've known Mendez for seven years. Two years he was a detective, then he tested up to chief. Good for him, but don't act like you know me.

"Thank you, sir," I choke as I make my way back to my desk. It's past four o'clock and I'm thirsty.

Sitting down at my desk, I look around, wondering where the hell the old war horses have gone. Where the hell did all these young faces show up from? Someone told them that the old days were better and in the old days we had mustaches. So I have a whole bunch of young assholes with seven dollar haircuts running around my bull pen with porn 'staches on their faces, looking at me like I'm some sort of historical figure. I don't approve of military men coming back home and fighting this war. They're not used to this kind of combat. They're all

shell-shocked or scared shitless. Academics are just as bad. They're all by the book and obsessed with finding the right evidence. I know that the majority of my cases have been broken because of people and connections, not because of a lucky fiber or a fingerprint. Find the right guy and they'll have all the evidence you need to lock them up. I don't like how things have changed or the direction detective work is headed. But no matter where these kids came from, I don't like being an old sock in the bull pen.

My pocket begins to vibrate and instinctively I reach in, fishing out the flip phone that looks as old as I am in their eyes. I don't need a smartphone. I don't know why they're all pushing for me to use one. The same thing goes for GPS. So many of these assholes only know the streets that were their old stomping grounds when they were boots. They don't know the city like they should. I used to study the maps of this city like a jock cramming for finals, every night. Christ, they're all a bunch of tech hounds.

I answer the phone and don't even bother with looking at the number. Unless they're already in my phone, I don't know who belongs with what strange number that pops up on the screen. "King," I announce myself.

"I was worried you were retired already," a ghost from the past calls to me. Without him being there, I can clearly picture Bernie Owens. Back when I saw him almost every other day, Bernie Owens was a hard ass who had a thing about beating the hell out of pushers and pimps. He walked the fine line between vigilante and lawman. I don't think he ever really gave a damn about the rules. Unfortunately times changed and left him and me in the dust. The DA started cracking down on those who didn't care about the rules. Bernie Owens made a few wrong decisions in the presence of the wrong people and nearly wound up behind bars. Thankfully, back then, the vice department had Owen's back and he ended up with a demotion. They wanted him on the streets still. He was too good of a man to be anywhere else.

"Owens, what the hell are you doing calling me?" I say in a tone that's joking enough to surprise even myself. Owens and I had too many intertwined cases back in his day. It was hard not to like a detective who had the same ideals.

"Making sure you're still alive," Owens says in a hushed voice. "You got a case right now?"

"Just cleared one up, actually," I answer, leaning back in my chair. The remnants of my old days were all contacting me from across the city. They've all caught word that I'm retiring and they won't let me go without one last drink or meal. I'm more than willing to get a free round or burger off of people I haven't seen in a while. "Why? You got something exciting for me?"

"I, well—." The phone goes silent and I can feel a tickle in the back of my mind. This isn't the sort of thing that I was expecting him to say. Two words, spaced out with a long pause at the end. "I've definitely got something. I think you should take a look at this."

"Isn't there a detective already at the scene?" I ask him, trying to remain light-hearted. If there's a murder, then there should already be a detective on the scene. They notify dispatch and then they call up and the next name on the roster gets the case. So if Owens is asking me to come and check out a scene, then there should already be a detective there.

“There was,” Owens answers. I don’t like the sound of that. “Just... do you have a pen nearby? I want you to come have a look at this before they wrap this up.”

“Alright,” I answer. I guess that I owe him a favor or two from back in the day, even though I keep my ledger black. I don’t let others do favors for me. I don’t like owing people anything. But it’ll be nice to clear up something that Owens thinks I owe him. Or hey, best case scenario, he owes me a favor. He gives me the address and I scribble it down on the back of one of my own business cards. I hardly use these things. They’re mostly to hand out to witnesses who can’t remember shit. They end up in the gutter or in the trash more often than not. “Alright, give me some time. Don’t let them bag everything up.”

We all have our vices and I know for certain that I have three. At one point, when we’re young, we try to fight our demons. We have this naïve mentality that it’s us or them. We’re too stupid to accept our character flaws and to roll with them. We are what we are, and denying ourselves does nothing to save us. Salvation comes through adaptation, acceptance, and control. But for me, one of my demons has always been harder to control than the others.

The silver and black Shelby sticks out like a sore thumb amidst all the sedans and minivans that line the parking lot. It’s amazing what you can buy when money doesn’t go to your family, or bills, or savings for vacations or homes you’ll never have. For me, cars have always been a priority, since I first dropped my lead foot down on the accelerator and hit the open road. Unlocking the door and dropping into the custom leather interior, I fire up my beast and listen to it roar, the engine growls like a monster ready to destroy the city. There’s a warmth in my stomach and a rippling in whatever’s left of my heart as the engine fires up.

The city is silent beyond my engine and as I pull out of the precinct, I’m left with my interior and that’s it. The whole city melts away from me as I drive. I feel like an astronaut in space, orbiting the city, unable to contact the life below because of an impassable barrier. I might as well be on the far side of the moon. I don’t care about the people that walk by while I’m at a red light or those in the other cars. This city doesn’t need me. It will live on long after I’m gone, just like it survived long before I arrived in my new boots. With retirement on the horizon, everything seems flat, distant, and blurry. I’m ready to give up the watch. I’m ready to drop the shield.

The address Owens gave me is in the heart of town. It’s right in the middle of a bunch of apartments that were created for people who fancy themselves as artists, or at least people who were up and coming. No one dared to live inside of these architecturally peculiar structures unless they were part of the new order, the future of this city’s elites. They were still too wild, too busy, too spontaneous to be able to convince themselves of settling down and buying an excessive mansion. Here, they were at the golden age of their lives. When the future became too much for them, these academics, artists, and trust-fund babies would look back to their old apartments on this street and dream of those simpler days, unaware that this is the high life that most of the world can only dream of. People are ignorant. This is the sad reality of people. No one is ever happy with their lot. That much I’ve come to understand while on the job.

I pull up to the yellow tape, putting the raging beast to rest with a turn of a key. Looking around the outside of the building, I climb out and carefully close the

door. There are no more gawkers or ghouls. There's an ambulance waiting to take the body to the morgue. There must be a body if Owens decided to call me. He could have called anyone, but he decided to call me. I wonder what reason he has for picking me out of all the fucking child detectives at his disposal. I flash my badge at the nearest uniform and he holds up the tape for me. I cross under and I can't help but feel like I'm making a mistake. It's the same kind of feeling that cheaters describe feeling when they flirt with the cute secretary at their office, or a drug addict recalls before taking his first hit. Bad ideas send out ripples in the universe and when we accept them without thinking about the consequence, everything that follows is thrown back at us. No one makes us decide to take a step down the darker path. That's all on us. That shit is no one's burden but ours. Those of us who walk the darker path understand.

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Everything in the apartment is exactly as I suspected the moment I got the address from Owens. There's just something about these people that makes them all act like sheep. But the greatest irony is that they think they're being unique or special. They're all a bunch of indoctrinated rich kids, told that fashion trends are going this way or designs are going that way, so they follow suit, blindly. There's nothing creative or innovative about it. If anything, it just makes them look dumber. I don't care about the logic behind all of the victim's decisions, all I care about is that it's as ugly as a modern art display at the local gallery. What makes people decorate their homes like this? How do they go so far down the stupid path to think that this is beautiful?

The walls are a sort of beige that makes me think of a naked woman in the morning light. The floors are black tile, shiny enough that I see my reflection and it creeps me out. On the walls, there's art that I don't understand or comprehend in the slightest way. Call me a Philistine, but it's worthless shit. Put that up next to Picasso and I'd use them both as toilet paper. There are modern, minimalist tables against the walls holding strange statues that just look like misshapen blobs. The whole place is as appealing as dog turds in your morning cereal. The furniture is awkward and uncomfortable looking. There's nothing in this house to distinguish it as a home or unique to the person living here. I can't look at the art and say "Oh yes, they smoked." Or "Hmmm, looks like he was addicted to gambling." No, it's all pointless and without a fingerprint of a personality.

I feel like a loner crashing a party until I'm caught by the familiar sight of Bernie Owens. It's strange seeing him in the black and silver uniform that I haven't worn for ages. I know that I still have mine somewhere. It's stuffed in the back of my wife's old closet. His looks much better than mine. I doubt I could even fit into mine. But the thing that strikes me most about Owens is how much hair he's lost. It's not like he has a bald spot, but it's definitely thinned. It's dark enough that it's obvious he's using some sort of dye to keep it looking that way. He still sports the mustache that all the other boys back in the bull pen want to emulate. On Owens

it looks at home, natural. Not like some kid glued the cat's hair to his face. He's still fit enough, but the beers are starting to take a toll on his gut.

"Glad you came," Owens says as he reaches out for my hand. I take his and feel that his hands are still rough. He's been working with them. It's a strong grip that almost breaks mine, but it's natural. It's not like he's trying to break my hand. He's just a strong man.

"Yeah, no problem," I say, brushing it off like it's nowhere near as weird as it truly is. "You mind if I ask who the lead was?"

"Evans and Waters," Owens answers as he leads me deeper into the house, past the uniforms who are packing up to get out. He leads me past a couple of the coroner's boys who look at me with annoyance and frustration written across their smug faces. They're stuck here, waiting for me. "Chin up, boys," Owens growls at them before they're officially behind us. "It's just your job."

Without a word about what's happened, Owens leads me into a room that's as unremarkable as everywhere else in the apartment. The only thing that sticks out is the black table against the switchback stairs that lead up to the apartment's second floor. This room has high ceilings, which is the only feature I truly like about it. But it's all ruined by the dead girl hanging on the wall. I look at her with immediate, morbid fascination. I've seen a lot of death, but I've never seen someone quite like the girl. I take a step forward and know exactly why Owens called me. He knows I'm a sucker for this kind of shit. He's known me long enough to have an inkling about my weaknesses.

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The first thing that catches my attention and holds it is the placing of the furniture. There is an enormous rusted metal cross hanging on the beige wall that serves as an overlook of the living room, or at least that's what I'm assuming this room is. Directly below the old, fleur de lis cross is a black table that is holding a single red vase with two dozen white roses. It only takes me a second to count the roses. Yes, two dozen. But the roses have been painted in a horrifying Alice-esque fashion using the victim's blood. The girl's blood has dripped down onto the flowers, spilling across the table and pouring onto the floor. The puddle nearly blends in perfectly with the black, glossy floor. I look at the flowers, admiring how unnerved and disturbed they make me feel.

"Lola Maretti," Owens introduces me to the woman. She is wearing a white dress that has been savagely torn and soiled by the blood running through her wounds. Her eyes are open, bloody locks of hair hanging in her eyes as she stares down at the floor with an agonizing look of remorse across her face. She wasn't a particularly beautiful woman, but her method of ending her life has me puzzled. In death there is something serene about her, and her flesh, even torn, stands out like porcelain or silk that makes me believe she's never seen the sun. I want to touch her skin to see if it's as soft as it looks.

She has bound herself to the large, rustic cross with barbed wire. Hanging like some sort of human substitute for Christ. It looks like some sort of twisted art display, notably better than anything else in the apartment. Tendrils of barbed wire are wrapped around her ankles, her legs, her waist, stomach, armpits, and her left elbow and wrist. Obviously she used her right arm to bind her left arm.

Her right arm hangs limp, blood running down from her pale arm and dripping from her fingertips. The weight of her body has knocked the cross off of many of its higher anchors. It is barely still connected to the wall and at any moment it looks like she'll be coming down on her face. There's enough blood to convince me that she bled out the moment her weight pulled that cross off the wall and jerked her at the sudden stop. A hundred tiny little barbs would have shot into her flesh, ripping into her and tearing her open. This is unlike anything I've ever seen before.

"Any leads?" I press, putting my hands on my hips and taking a step forward to get a better look at the girl. They've dusted a lot of the house for fingerprints already. It looks like I'm late to the party. Evans and Waters have already combed over this place.

"They're ruling it as a suicide," Owens enlightens me.

I look at him as if this is a joke. I don't care who you are, you don't use barbed wire and a cross to kill yourself on display, no matter how much of an art nut or a lunatic you are. Guns are messy, but they're quick and they're pretty efficient. Jesus Christ, people, what about pills? Get a bottle of gin, some pills from your local dealer and have one last party. Why the fuck would anyone go through all of this trouble to just kill themselves? This doesn't look like any kind of suicide I've even heard about and everyone has their weird bodies they talk about in the bull pen. Everyone has heard about so-and-so's case where they found the victim on display like a marionette or holding their head in their lap.

"What's their angle?" I ask Owens, not sure that I'm seeing what they saw.

"They found a suicide note with Lola's fingerprints all over it, but no one else's," Owens informs me. "Apparently she was a bit of a reclusive artsy type. Also, there are no windows that open in the apartment, it's entirely climate-controlled. You need a special code to get into the building and the moment the doors open, the cameras flip on and video whoever passes through the door. Also, there's cameras running in the common area and on the staircase. There is no way anyone could break into this apartment without getting filmed, which means the killer had to have been in the building for a very long time since the only people who were in the building were her neighbors across the way. The cameras have them entering the building and going into their apartment two hours before they heard the bang of the cross ripping from the wall. They promptly called the police, Wilson and Avery arrived on the scene and kicked in the door when they got no response. When they found the suicide note and the added camera footage, there's no way someone committed this as a murder. Evans and Waters closed the case within an hour of getting the security contractors to get down here and show them the footage."

I look at the woman on the cross and wonder how in the world someone would even conceive of this. How would you get the logistics of it all down before actually climbing up there, your feet planted on barbed wire, bleeding while you work. I look at her eyes. Even now I can tell from the streaks in her make-up that she was crying, a lot. Why wouldn't she scream out if someone was doing this to her? Even if they had a gun on her, a bullet to the head would be a better bargain than bleeding to death painfully.

"So it's a suicide," I say to Owens. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"I don't think it's a suicide, King." Owens sounds as serious as a heart attack. I notice that we're not alone in the room. He's speaking to me like he's trying to convince me that killing Caesar is a good idea in a room full of uniforms. I look around at all the others. Some of them have the same stupid, cheap ass haircut that so many of the other detectives have, but some of these uniforms are old school. Some of them have the look that they came up in this city. They were born into the war and they're committed. This isn't a career for many of them, it's part of the fight to take back their city.

"Show him the files," another uniform says. I look at the black man who spoke. He looks like he could bench press Owens and me together. He folds his beefy arms over his swollen chest and looks at me with a doubtful look.

"What files?" I ask.

"Some of us are starting to put the pieces together," Owens says with an intense, serious look in his eyes that makes me feel more and more uncomfortable with every passing second. "Some of the boys and I have started noticing that the suicides in the city aren't making a whole lot of sense. There's too many of them, too violent, too dramatic."

"So what?" I raise an eyebrow. He doesn't need to answer the question. I'm already leagues ahead of him. I've heard the story a thousand times before. "You think someone's following depressed people and putting them out of their misery?"

It's hot outside. The heat has a way of getting to people, a way to make them more irritable, more violent when it comes to stupid little stuff. I caught more cases where street trash shot someone because they looked at him wrong or said his hat was stupid. They're all about killing each other when they get in each other's faces. It's stupidity and violence all brought on because the heat gets to them. I understand that. I can comprehend it. Maybe the heat also makes people more interested in killing themselves? I'm willing to accept that over the idea that there is a serial killer out there looking to put depressed people out of their misery.

I've seen a killer who worked in a retirement home, going from room to room, finding ways to help put those suffering to rest. It wasn't until one old man caught on and wasn't interested in dying so early that they finally caught the woman. I've even heard of a guy killing off his chemo patients who weren't getting better, deciding it best not to prolong the inevitable. But those sorts of people are deluded into thinking that they're doing an act of mercy, killing those who are suffering. I don't see anything that would imply that the killer followed the depressed back to their house to kill them. How would a killer even know about them? How would he know that they're even depressed? Especially if they were recluses like Lola?

"How about this?" Owens brushes off my comment. "Meet me at the archives and I'll walk you through a little something that the boys and I have been putting together."

I don't like the sound of that. Is this the cult of the suicide killer that I've stumbled into? I look at Owens and wonder if I'm stepping into something that I shouldn't. I think of the number of days I have left and I wonder if it's worth even opening this to have a look at it. But the reality of it is—I'm off rotation. I'm not catching anymore. I'm just wasting away for a month. Sure, that sounded great a few hours ago, but I'm not so keen on it now. That's a lot of time to fill out a very small amount of paperwork and Lola... well, she's got me intrigued.

“Alright,” I nod. “But you owe me dinner if I have to listen to your conspiracy theories.”

“I’ll get you something real nice,” Owens grins, happy that he’s caught me, no doubt.

“I want a bacon guacamole burger.” I jab a finger at him. “Don’t even bring it if it doesn’t have everything I like.”

“You’ll get your damn guacamole burger,” Owens nods, snapping his fingers at one of the lurking uniforms.

“Bacon,” I stress, “guacamole burger. Pick up a bottle of Jameson too.”

Owens reaches in his back pocket and fishes out a hundred dollar bill and slaps it into the Mexican officer’s hand. He looks at the money and then looks at me before giving me a curt, certain nod that makes me wonder how long they’ve been looking for someone to listen to them. That makes me worry. What the hell have I walked into?

“Give me an hour,” Owens says as he stuffs his wallet into his back pocket.

As I turn to walk away, I stop and remember something. It almost escaped me for a second, but now it’s blinding me like a car on a midnight highway with its brights on, refusing to let me go another inch without addressing it. “Can I see the suicide note?” I ask Owens, who gives me with a look that shows that the note had escaped him as well. He looks up at the top of the stairs where a bald officer is leaning on the railing over the dead girl. He vanishes without a word and as I stand there, getting one last look at the bloody roses, I wonder if they’re right. If there was a killer who did this, then that means something really horrifying. “He has to still be here if he didn’t go out the door,” I tell Owens in a soft voice.

“We’ve searched this place over,” Owens informs me. “Every man you see in here is certain that this was a murder. Either he’s got one hell of a hiding spot, or he found some other way to get out. Right now, we think he fled onto the roof. There’s an emergency maintenance hatch in the closet. It’s locked now, but that doesn’t mean much if the killer planned this.”

The bald officer returns with the note in a plastic, evidence bag. He hands it to me and I look at it with a speculative eye. This was the note that put the nail in the coffin and designated this as a suicide, or at least it was what put them on this road. I look at it, taking in the look of the note, analyzing the handwriting and the lettering, the wording of it before I actually read it. Satisfied, I take in the note for all it’s worth. *‘Death is the truest form of art’, she says from beyond the grave. ‘There are no decisions that can truly be made except for the one to end one’s life. I know that my parents will not understand, but those who admire my work will witness all that I have done and they will marvel. Goodbye, world, I am sorry I could not give you more than this. Lola’.* I look up at the face of the dead girl and wonder just how much of this note was actually true. Did she really want to kill herself? Assuming that Owens and the others are right, did this girl actually want to kill herself and believe all of this bullshit she allegedly wrote?

Handing the note back to Owens, I decide that it’s my duty to actually hear out everything he has to say to me. “I’ll see you in an hour,” I tell him before turning and making my way back to the door. There’s something evil in the air here, thick and oily as I breathe. Passing through the doorway, I look at the two punks who work for the coroner’s office. They look at me, asking silently with their glares

whether I'm done or if they're going to have to keep standing around. I look at them, impatient with their coldness. "She's all yours, kids." rbed wire are wrapped around her ankles, her legs, her waist, stomach, left armpit, elbow, and wrist. Obviously sh

3

"Did you remember the guacamole?" I ask as Owens hands me a brown bag. He's holding his own. There's a fleet of other officers that have accompanied him; it makes me feel like this is an undercover operation that they're trying to keep witnesses distracted and those asking questions out of Owens's way. How far does this go?

The woman at the desk smiles at Owens and he chats her up as I open my bag and look inside, letting the warmth of fries waft over my face, the smell of bacon and the burger tantalizing me. This isn't the kind of crap that they spring for on interrogations or during lunch, Owens's man actually went out somewhere nice for this. I look at the back of Owens's head and feel that uncomfortable tickle in the back of my mind.

"Yeah, I got your damn guacamole," Owens answers before we head to the elevator. Records and evidence are locked down very well in the labyrinthine bowels of the facility. This is where screw-ups and failures go to die, their careers evaporating with every passing day that they spend here in the darkness with only the ghosts of old crimes to keep them company with the other screw-ups.

The elevator dings softly as it opens and we step into it, holding the key to the room that Owens intends to take me to for his case to be made. I look at him as the doors slowly and gently close before we begin the slow plummet down to the basement archived cases. He's silent, looking at the doors with his game face on. He truly believes whatever he's about to tell me. He believes it enough that he's willing to risk his credibility and standing in the police department by coming to me.

The elevators in this building don't play any music. Instead, you get to listen to the secret, inner workings of the entire building, rumbling, groaning, the secret language of all buildings. I've always hated this place. I've hated the way it feels boxed in, locked up, and forgotten. It is the fate of thousands upon thousands of different cases, all locked away into the darkness and forgotten. When you're murdered or your house is burned down or your business robbed, this is what happens to your history. Written across the halls and boxes of this archive is the dark history of the city, behind the grand openings, the parades, the mayoral campaigns, this is what the city truly is, written in the blood and sorrow of its citizens.

The door opens and I follow Owens's lead. He walks down the hallway past door after door that leads back into the poorly lit store rooms of ancient crimes. There's nothing here that makes me want to hang around down here. In fact, I feel

depressed just standing here. This is how it all ends. The people keep on suffering and the crimes just lurk down here in a paper purgatory.

“This way.” Owens pushes open a door and we enter a large room that’s lined with rows of shelves full of boxes. The lights hanging overhead are mostly dead, only a few work, this is either by design or they’re just cheap on lighting, trying to save the city a few bucks. Walking in, there’s several tables in the center, running the length of the room. It doesn’t look like anyone has bothered coming in here for a very long time. I feel like I’m in the musty depths of the city’s brain, searching for ancient memories.

Setting my brown sack on the table, I watch as Owens disappears around the corner of one of the massive shelves. I open the top and reach down, fishing out a fry and sticking it in my mouth. It’s seasoned well, not too salty, not too much garlic, a hint of rosemary. Jesus, where did he get this food?

When Owens returns, he sets a box on the table and pulls off the top, tossing it behind the box, and I stare at the dozens of files. No, maybe I’m wrong. It looks like there’s a hundred files in that box. I look at it and then look up to Owens, who is standing there with a look on his face that isn’t smug or like he’s saying I told you so. He’s standing there with a distraught, disappointed look on his face. Owens used to work vice, a department that was pretty cut and dry when it came to convictions. He knows how to present a case, how to look for clues, where to find the dirt, and most importantly, he knows how to go back and find the trail.

“You think all of those people were murdered?” I lift an eyebrow.

“I think all of these people died under awfully suspicious circumstances,” Owens answers. He pulls out file after file, tossing it onto the table and I stare at each of them with a questionable amount of doubt, enough doubt that it feels a little more like denial. This is a lot of meat piling up. This isn’t a favor he’s asking, this is a fucking catastrophe.

“Let me stop you there.” I hold up my hand before he continues. “Bernie, I’m only around for a month. Unless you’ve got a pretty substantial lead, this is something you want to send up the chain, probably to the FBI.”

This stops Owens on his tracks and he looks at me with a doubtful look on his face. “This isn’t something that we can just hand off to someone, King. We need someone who can actually sit down and look at what we’ve compiled. We need someone to actually give a shit about these bodies that are stacking up.” He looks at me with a serious look in his eyes, which makes me think that I’m not his first choice. I’m his final act of hope.

“So you don’t have any leads?” I stick another fry in my mouth.

“Some of the victims know each other,” Owens shrugs. “But there really isn’t anything to go on, except that this is the third victim in the past two weeks. Every suicide in here is dramatic, orchestrated in a peculiar way, and completely unexpected. Everyone in the family and friends say that they never expected the victim to commit suicide. In fact, the victims are usually happy, upbeat people. Altogether, this box stinks, King.”

“I might not be able to build a case with this in one month, Owens.” I shake my head. He has no leads, no idea who this person is, just a bunch of victims. This is not the ideal situation in which to be spending my last four weeks.

"I'm not asking for you to build a case for a grand jury," Owens shakes his head. "We want a lead on this asshole. We want someone with the ability to get around and ask the right questions. Get us a lead before your month is up and we'll take it from there. When we make a strong enough case against the man you find, we'll take over from there."

"Take over?" I don't even want to know what it is he's implying, but there it is. It's standing in the room like a golem, not letting me move on.

"We're tired of watching this murderer get away," Owens says with a near snarl in his voice, like a dagger hiding behind his back. "You know just as well as me that the system is just going to let this guy get away with his crimes just like they let everyone else like him get away."

"No, they lock them away, Owens," I say with a shake of my head.

"That's letting them get away with it, King." Owens shakes his head at me. "Don't be naïve."

I've seen enough cops sour under the pressures and the frustrations that come from good defense attorneys, a broken system, and overcrowded prisons. Laws are too lenient, liberals keep wanting more rights for prisoners, and juries are needing more of a dog and pony show to convict people who are clearly guilty. Shows on Friday night television remind people about the horrors of the wrongly accused and how they suffer because we don't give the juries enough evidence. It's almost enough to make men like Owens make sense, let alone feel necessary.

"You get one month," I say to him. "I'll take a look over what you have, but if I'm not finding anything, then there's nothing I can really do for you. I'm guessing that you understand that."

"I understand completely," Owens shrugs at me, putting his hands on the box. "You want me to go over this with you or do you want to do this by yourself?"

"I'll take the box," I answer. "This place gives me the creeps."

"How old are you, King?" Owens frowns as he puts the lid back on the box. "Grow a pair of balls."

"Fuck you," I smile and grab my burger. "You get to carry the box."

When we make it out to the car, there's still a whole flock of officers standing around in the parking lot. As we emerge from the doors and into the blazing glare of the sun, it feels like they've all been given the signal. They disperse from their packs, taking to their cars and driving off as I make my way across the scorched parking lot, feeling the heat coming up and down on me like I'm inside some hellish oven. It feels like the sun is watching us with immense amounts of disapproval. I don't like the way that any of this is feeling. I can't help but wonder if the box Owens carries once belonged to Pandora.

There's a bottle of Stevenon sitting on top of the roof of my Shelby. Owens waits for me to unlock the door for him. He sets it in the passenger seat and stands back, looking at the car, taking it in with a long, surveying glance. "This is one hell of a ride, King," Owens shakes his head. I love it when people compliment my car. It makes me feel powerful. It makes me feel like a man. It's the same feeling I'm sure people who work out at the gym must feel when girls eye them. There's something phallic about muscle cars. I'm certain that there's more women attracted to cars than there are women attracted to muscles. At least, my experience says that.

“Thanks,” I say, trying to not make my delight known. “It was my father’s.”

“Did you restore it?” Owens furrows his brow.

“Hell no,” I chuckle, tossing my burger into the passenger seat next to the box of files. “My dad loved this car more than he loved anything else in the world. On his list of priorities, this was the top. He wanted to be buried in the thing, but I didn’t think zoning permits would allow a seventy year old man to be buried in a car at the cemetery.” Owens chuckles, but that’s the truth. There’s very little that my father cared about in life outside of cars. His Shelby, Charger, Stingray, and Prowler all came above my mother or the rest of us. It wasn’t funny, living that way.

“King, just look over the files,” Owens says as I twirl the keys on my middle finger, waiting to get out of here. I’m hungry, and traffic is going to be a nightmare. I’ll make my way through this entire bottle tonight if I waste time reading through all of these files. “The pattern will stick out to you, I guarantee it. Everything about this feels wrong,” he adds.

“I’m sure it does,” I answer with my own doubts. There were a lot of detectives in that box that were going to hate me if I ripped up the flooring and started looking for the monsters lurking inside the darkness beneath. No one wants that. “Take it easy, Owens.” I drop into my seat and put the keys in the ignition. “Call me if you get any more suspicious suicides.”

“Absolutely,” Owens says.

I take as many back roads as I can, making the long way back to my house, letting the city quiet my thoughts. I pull out my guacamole burger and bite into it, tasting the flavors and smells of Mexico dancing with hickory smoked bacon and ground beef that makes my mouth water just smelling it. It’s a damn good burger and I kick myself for not asking Owens where he got it. I had no idea how hungry I was, but with each bite, I feel my stomach more and more satisfied. There’s nothing more appealing than a good burger on a hot night, driving down the busy streets in a muscle car. At the streetlights, my Shelby rumbles, growling at all the inferior cars around me like a wild cat making its territory well known. It’s something beautiful that only car people will understand.

I’ve always had a weakness for cars, I guess it’s hereditary. When I was married, it was more than just a weakness, it was a fault. It wasn’t my only fault. I know that I spent more time on the job than I should have, obsessing about scum when I should have been present with my wife and daughter, but they’re long gone. They don’t give a shit about me, but I find myself thinking about them on these long drives, focusing on what I could have done—what I definitely shouldn’t have done. I take in a deep breath, remembering my greatest sin, my greatest fault, my hungriest demon.

The long way through my neighborhood takes me past St. Judas’ Catholic School where the high school and middle school students are released at separate times. Looking at the clock, I know that most of the extracurricular activities are wrapping up. I know that I shouldn’t be here, or at least, I know that a stronger man would resist this. Maybe not a stronger man, but a younger man would. When we’re young we don’t realize that our demons are actually us, we’re just too stupid to accept it. We try to pretend like we’re something we’re not, or at least we try to convince ourselves that we are. I pull the Shelby up to a parking spot along

the side of the road at an empty intersection, watching the old, red brick building behind the chain link fence. The volleyball team is wrapped up by now and the girls are making their way out of the detached gymnasium. They make their way down the street, a whole flock of them. I watch them like a wolf and I remind myself that this is the closest that I'll allow myself ever to get. This is where I draw the line, where I built the walls, and where I look over at the darkness of the world and remind myself that I'm not one of them, not anymore.

The idea of denying yourself your desires is inviting your own disappointment. It's inviting your own destruction because you'll break. People who try to deny themselves their desires only end up giving in and usually violently. The idea is control, pleasure through moderation, keeping a watch on yourself and keeping check. This is why I'm staying in my car, watching them from a distance. It's safer for all of us this way.

There's something about them, it draws me to them. I watch the way their bodies move, how the majority of them are so perfectly sculpted. Their bodies are the best they will probably ever be. Their legs are long, muscular, and still looking to be more graceful and lovely. My eyes run up their knee high socks to their plaid skirts where I can see the soft, unblemished flesh of their thighs. Their breasts are young and perky, their eyes wide and innocent. I watch them parade past my car while I eat my burger, pretending not to notice them.

I think it's the innocence of them that draws me in. They haven't been jaded, corrupted, or broken by the harsh reality of the world. The world turns girls like these into disappointed husks of what they might have once been. Their dreams become their prisons and they are suffocated by those ideals they once held, remorseful of their lost chances and past hopes. They become victims and they become monsters. This is the worst of the world, broken women. To me, the innocence is so alluring. But not all of them can be saved, either.

But justification is a young man's game. I don't justify or deny my desires any longer. I like girls who are in their last years of high school. I like the feeling of naïve, innocent girls. I like the way they talk, taste, and look. I have a craving that runs deep into my soul and I refuse to fight against it any longer. I am friends with my demons now. I am on speaking terms with my sins.

There's one girl that draws my attention. She's leaning against the street sign holding a cigarette up to her lips, taking a long drag and looking up the street. Her back is to me and my eyes look up her long legs to where the breeze stirs her skirt and I imagine her panties underneath and everything that lurks beneath that. She's got larger breasts than the other girls and she's got the curse of being attractive in the wrong part of the city. She's been worked over by monsters disguised as Prince Charming and she's become jaded by that. She'll be in a strip club soon, or she'll have a baby in her belly. Either way, her days are numbered. I drive by her slowly, watching the breeze ruffle her amber hair as she turns and looks at me. Her face is pretty and she looks at the car, impressed enough to give me a nod. Part of me wants to pull over, run across the street, and plow her. I want to lay into her and fuck her brains out, but there's nothing good that can come from that.

So I leave her in the rearview mirror. It doesn't stop me from looking back at her, dreaming of what might have been. I don't like what I am, but I don't have to.

Reality doesn't care if you approve or disapprove of it. We are what we are and fighting against it does us nothing. At best, we can hope that we'll be doing something better with ourselves in the future, that we'll become something more, but this is reality. I'm a pig and a monster, but that's okay. Tomorrow's another day and the world needs men like me. The world needs men who have embraced their sins and know how to control themselves, because in the seat next to me is a whole pile of dead bodies that are calling out for a bad man to avenge them.

4

Fuck Charlie. I don't know why I care so much about that piece of shit anyways. Truth be told, all he ever did was make me doubt myself. I changed everything for that bastard. He's nothing more than a jerk who likes to fuck whatever he can get his hands on, just a boy, nothing more. I should have seen that the moment I first met him. I should have seen past the three-piece suits and the charming smile. I should have slapped him in the face and called him a piece of shit, telling everyone exactly who and what he is. Men are all the same. They only want you for sex. So why not give it to them. After all, who am I to deny men what they truly want?

He hands me his blunt and I take a drag, a nice, long drag. I let the smoke fill my lungs, burning and reminding me that I'm still alive, that I'm still human. I don't care anymore about what people think of me. That's the reason I'm here, in the bathroom of this club, smoking a joint on the lap of some sleaze ball who thinks it's cool to dress like Charlie Sheen from *Two and a Half Men*. Whoever told him that this was a good look definitely got their joke out of him. I cough and feel the rush of endorphins. I let the calm, the numb wash over me. The whole world feels like it's slowing with every cough, with every blink. I never smoked pot before I broke up with Charlie, never needed to. Everything feels darker now. Everything pisses me off, like I've suddenly gotten too sensitive to everything. I feel like for the first time I'm actually seeing the world as it is. I take another drag and smile.

I never got the name of whoever is underneath me, grinding his half flaccid cock against my ass, thinking I'm too stoned to notice that he's trying to slide his hands up my sides so he can cup my tits. Boys are all the same. Yeah, that's right, boys. I need to watch myself on that. There are no men. Hell, who actually thinks that chivalry is still alive? Chivalry was an excuse boys had once upon a time to convince women that they were daring and kind and loving, but it was all just a way to manipulate us. It was just a way for them to define how to beat the shit out of each other while degrading us further. Chivalry was never alive, we just convinced ourselves that it was something more than just smoke and mirrors.

Charlie had been my boyfriend for over two years, two whole fucking years. That's a long time to be with a man. I remember when he first came up to me in the club, smiling that million dollar smile like he was a magician holding up his hands to show me that he had nothing to hide. I fell for him like a sucker buying into a Ponzi scheme. I remember the way he laughed, the way his eyes lit up like he gave a shit about what I was saying, and how he would reach out and touch my

hand. I hadn't worked out a day in my life until I met him. When he spoke, it felt like I was Elijah and the clouds were splitting for God to speak to me. I remember listening to him talk about how happy his workout made him feel and the very next day I went and hired a personal trainer. Now, I'm the trainer and I have the body of a goddess and I'm wasting it on cheap losers like this chump. But in the end, what did it matter how I look? It's just so guys can have fun fucking me. No one is every really going to care about me.

"Baby, you want to come back to my crib?" The Sleaze asks me. God, he even talks like he wants to be black. I really know how to pick them.

Suddenly, the door to the bathroom creaks open and the tsunami of pounding bass fills the bathroom as footsteps make their way toward the urinals. God, I want to dance. I think The Sleaze slipped me some ecstasy in my drink, but I don't really care. I just want to hit the dance floor and feel the sweaty bodies of the other dancers bumping up against me, moving to the rhythm of the set. I pull my feet up before the door closes and lean back on The Sleaze, trying to hide from whoever decided to crash our party.

Of course, The Sleaze takes his opportunity to grab my tits. Under my top, I'm not wearing a bra. If I've learned anything the past few nights, most of these assholes don't know how to work a bra when they're sober, let alone after a night at the clubs. It was easier to get their lips on my nipples if I didn't have a bra impeding them. He gropes at them like someone who has watched too much porn. He's all force and hands and I close my eyes, taking whatever I can get. He's probably the kind of dick who only wants to fuck me in the ass or doggy style because it gets his power trip off. Fine, whatever, I just want to get laid.

I remember when I found Laura's panties at the apartment. He told me that his sister stopped by and wanted to get a quick shower, that she'd just been at the gym. I thought lacy, red panties were an odd choice to wear to the gym, since no one ever does that, but he fed me some line about how she couldn't find her panties after showering and just went commando. God, I'd believed that. Little did I know that he was fucking Laura, his boss's assistant for little over a month. What did he see in her? Was it because she was blonde and had ivory skin? Was it those big blue eyes? My ass is better, my body wasn't nearly as skinny, but I'm fit, toned, strong. My tits are even bigger than hers. What did he see in that bitch that I didn't have?

The Sleaze has finally found my nipples and his other hand is working its way to my pussy, pulling up my skirt. He's such a gentlemen. Just like all of them. They're all pigs.

I can hear the man at the urinal's piss splattering across the porcelain interior. It's a disgusting sound that makes me wonder how men do it or at least put up with it. I feel The Sleaze's fingers clawing at my panties and I close my eyes.

I remember confronting Charlie about Laura. I couldn't believe that he was cheating on me with someone named Laura. God, couldn't her name be Candy or Cinnamon? I would feel better if she didn't sound like a friend of my mother's. But Laura was pretty and Laura was white, so good for him. At least he wouldn't have to be seen with his Mexican girlfriend any more. I mean, who was I kidding? Two years of dating and no ring. Of course he wasn't going to propose to me. We fucked nearly every night because that was Charlie's release and his work was so

stressful that he needed to release as often as possible. I just wonder how long it had been going on. Of course I can't believe Charlie when he said in his cold, flat tone that it had been going on for a little over a month. I knew right off the bat that that was a lie. Those panties had been in my bathroom three months ago. Whatever, I don't even care.

When I feel The Sleaze's tongue on my neck, I finally begin to realize that this isn't a good idea, that I should probably find someone who doesn't sling ecstasy in the middle of a club. The man at the urinal sniffs, snorts, and spits into the urinal before flushing. I listen to hear if he goes to the sink to wash his hand, but of course, I hear the footsteps moving toward the door before the bass and the roar of voices blows into the bathroom like a hurricane knocking down the whole building. As the door closes, I hear the clicking of heels and I know the sound of those angry footsteps.

She slams against the door of the stall and knocks it open just in time for The Sleaze to catch on. I smile at the sight of Kendall. She's not so happy to see me here and quickly grabs ahold of me and pulls me off of The Sleaze, who is half coherently trying to put up a fight and say something witty at the same time. Kendall pulls me behind her and stands at the doorway of the stall and looks at the creep inside that I was totally willing to fuck a few minutes ago. Looking at him now, I wonder who told him navy cargo shorts were something you wore to a club.

"Hey, Limp Dick," Kendall says with the fury of the gods behind her tone. She's probably my closest friend right now and I can't help but smile at the anger in her voice. She's got the kind of wrath in her tone that comes with a well-educated, rich girl. "You got a fucking STD?"

"What? Bitch, you want to join in?" The Sleaze asks with a faded smile on his pale face.

"Answer the question," Kendall snaps, kicking at him in a pump stiletto that would put a hole through one of his balls if she'd connected with his crotch like she wanted to. Luckily for him, he flinched like a pussy and fell off the toilet.

"No, bitch! I ain't got no STD!" he snaps back angrily. "Fucking bitch."

"Come on." Kendall grabs my wrist and storms out of the bathroom with me in tow. I giggle to myself at the way The Sleaze had looked at Kendall, like she'd stolen his favorite toy.

Kendall looks like she stepped out of a Victoria's Secret ad and someone painted a short, black dress on her perfectly sculpted body. When I met Kendall at the gym, she was working with Robby and when she saw me, she told Robby to take a hike and that she wanted me as her trainer. I had happily taken her on and wasn't looking back. Kendall and I were fast friends and since that day, we had been inseparable. She looked like a goddess and hardly had to work for it. Her parents had set up a trust fund for her before she was even a sperm squirming inside of an egg. She was the kind of woman who believed that men had the upper hand in life and that was the only excuse she needed to strangle that advantage free from their upper hand. She was everything that I wanted to aspire to in life, and my God she had a way of working men over without ever touching them.

"Jenny, what the hell?" she snaps at me and I smile.

"I had a good thing going," I giggle.

“How many would that have been this week?” She shakes her head. Clearly she isn’t nearly as happy with me as I would like her to be. She stops shaking her head and she looks out on the dance floor where Mason is already dancing. Mason works as a freelance graphic designer and makes annually what she makes in a week, but she doesn’t care. She loves him for who he is and wants to spend the rest of her life with him. Her parents hate Mason, but who gives a fuck. I want the way they look at each other and how they never really argue or get angry with one another. I want the way they banter and bicker, but always end up in each other’s arms. I want that. Why didn’t Charlie want that with me? “Jenny, fuck Charlie. Okay?” It’s like she’s reading my mind. “Fuck that piece of shit. You’re better than that little, shriveled cock and I’m going to set you up with someone that will take you to the moon. Hear me? No more of this fucking around with club trash. You got it?”

It’s too late. There’s a guy at the bar in a charcoal suit that fits him like a glove. God, it’s so hard to find a guy that knows how to get a suit that actually fits. I don’t know how many times I have to stress this to guys I’m training at the gym. Three-piece suits tell a woman that you’re classy, that you have style, and that you know what the fuck you’re doing. Save the blazers and slacks for casual Friday or dinner with your in-laws. The guy at the bar has a short beard like Charlie’s but his is blond and his hair is slicked back. He’s handsome. I don’t have a clue how old he is but I peg him at twenty five, but it’s hard to tell. He’s around my age, so why not? He’s got a good build, the kind where he cares enough to work out, but not to go overboard like so many club rats.

“Well at least he’s wearing a three-piece,” Kendall says to me with those enormous, engaging eyes. They have the power to suck in your soul and I’ve often wondered how lucky Kendall must have been to get eyes like those. Her long, straight black hair is perfectly arranged every time I see her and she’s one of those obnoxious beauties that goes to the gym and ends up looking amazing after a super hard work out. If I could, I would trade lives with Kendall with the snap of a genie’s fingers. “Sweetheart.” Kendall grabs my face and makes me look her in the eyes. “Make sure he’s clean before you let him touch you and you better make him fucking wrap it.”

“Got it,” I giggle. “See you at ten tomorrow.”

“Don’t be late,” Kendall says as she gets up and heads for the dance floor where Mason is waiting for her. “You better not be hung over. I want you to work my ass off.”

I’m sure that Mason is going to be working her ass off tonight. When I asked her once she said that they had sex at least five times a week and she doesn’t see that letting up any time soon. God, I want that back. But so far this week I’m beating her record. I fucked a client at the gym this morning in the bathroom, but he hadn’t been as great as I had hoped. I’m guessing that he was taking something a little illegal to get as big as he was. Looking back at the charcoal man at the bar, I decide that I’m not going to push it. I’m high, tipsy, and I have to be at work by ten tomorrow. I’ll stop at the bar, get a single drink and if he comes over and talks to me, I’ll see where it goes, but I’m not going to push for him to take me home.

Leaving the small table near the dance floor, the myriad lights change all around me and the strobes nearly blind me, but I pass the tables of men with their

opened buttons and their strong arms, their hungry eyes. There's something about this place that makes me want to run out and touch everyone, to feel their arms all over me, to consume them. That sounds weird, but I can't help it. I feel hungry. I feel a need. God, I need to get laid. I literally need to fuck Charlie out of my brain, no matter how unhealthy that sounds. Maybe it's the ecstasy?

At the bar, I order a Cosmo and sit down on the warm stool that was just recently abandoned. The bartender is cute, but I'm certain that he fucks anyone who throws it at him, so I'm certain that he's dealing with the clap. I lean on my elbow, putting my chin in my hand and sneak a glance down the bar to where Mr. Charcoal is taking a sip from his martini. I watch him like spy watching a target as he pulls out his olive and eats it. God, I hate it when guys eat olives. Their breath stinks. But then again, alcohol makes their breath stink anyways. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him step away from the bar and I feel my heart sink.

He's not coming to see me. But hey, maybe that's a good thing. Maybe he has a wife or maybe he has the clap too. Maybe I just saved myself from getting raped with a knife and at least I'll be able to walk home and save some money on the cab fare in the morning. Looking at the bartender, he winks at me as he slides my Cosmo to me. I feel sick inside. I feel depressed. I ignore the person taking up the post next to me at the bar. It isn't even midnight and I'm drinking at the bar alone. God, I'm going to be one of those women, aren't I?

"Hi," the man next to me says with a charming enough sounding voice that it makes me want to pass. I'm not interested in the grafter types. I don't want to feel like I'm a card game that needs to be played.

"Hi," I say back before taking the straw between my lips and sucking down a fruity mouthful of Cosmo.

"My name's Ted," the man next to me says.

"Cool," I answer.

"I'm sorry, did I disturb you?" the man asks me. God, I don't need this right now. I'm not going to go home with him. I'm not that kind of girl. I have some standards and some class, thank you very much. "Because, I could have sworn that you were checking me out from down the bar."

I turn and excitedly prepare to tell him that I was actually checking out someone much more attractive than him when I realize that I'm about to tell off Mr. Charcoal. He smiles at me with a pearly smile that makes me want to swoon like some Victorian broad. He holds out his hand and I instantly see that there's no wedding ring on his left hand. He's single. I feel my heart fluttering with joy.

"Jenny," I introduce myself, reaching out to take his hand.

5

I can't stand sitting at this desk any longer. I should have went home last night instead of back to HQ. In years past I've spent too much time sitting here looking at this blank computer screen, wondering when my next assignment will arrive, but that time is up. Now I'm here to just whittle away the time. I grab my mug and

lift it to my lips, taking a sip of my coffee, laced with Jameson. It's the only way to keep me sitting right now, thinking about what it was I spent the entire night looking at. I blink, my eyelids feel heavy, thick. Everything about today makes me feel unwell. What the fuck did I stumble into with this case? I sign one of the reports, letting the DA's office send the files and the evidence back to the storage lock up. I'm not interested in any of this any longer. What I want to do is go back home where my kitchen counters, my tables, my furniture is all covered with pictures of dead bodies with bland reports underneath them, claiming that all this carnage was committed in the name of depression, loss, or disappointment. No. I was firmly one of Owens's acolytes now.

"King, I heard about the deal Mendez gave you," a voice draws me from the ether while I stare at the computer.

Detective Vance Redman is probably the epitome of everything that I see as wrong in the department now. He is the antithesis of what I think a good detective should be. His shirts are so tight that they look like the seams are going to rip open like a fault line over his inflated, bloated muscles. He's got a fat caterpillar on his lip and the same haircut on his head that he's had since he went into basic. He's got a short temper with people, no patience to learn the city, and looking to climb the ladder all the way to the top. I wouldn't be surprised if Redman thinks he'll make mayor one day. His ambition exceeds his social skills. He's one of the many who think they're a good guy, so that means they're owed something by the world. The joke is on him, the world owes you nothing.

"Sounds like a pretty sweet ride." Redman looks at me with a glare on his freckled face that shows that he doesn't give a shit about me, because I never gave a shit about him. I've given up caring about people in this department. I've gotten tired of all of them. "Just sitting around, collecting a paycheck. A wonder they didn't set you up with that earlier. You might have retired back when all the others like you did."

Others like me? Sure, true detectives. Before they were teaching the ideals and importance of networking and having contacts in the criminal flow that floods the city, we called it doing the job right. Knowing people on every corner, having a mole on every street, getting people out of the life, that was what others like me did with this job. We didn't just clean up for the killers. We didn't just write the reports and present the perpetrators to the DA's office like cold beef. Redman lives to serve the DA's office and the department. He doesn't give a damn about the city and that's the kind of mentality that makes people hate the police, with good reason.

"Fuck off, Jarhead," I snap, picking up the phone.

"What did you say to me?" Redman makes the classic mistake of acting like he's hurt, and no one's buying that shit. No one ever buys that shit. This is schoolyard bullshit that no one cares about in the adult world.

"I told you to fuck off." I look up at him, holding the phone in my hand, waiting for him to move on. "And then I called you a military slur. Because you're an annoying little prick who thinks he's better than everyone else because he's closed four cases in the last two months. Congratulations, Redman. Real bang up work. Did you want some babies to kiss while you go sit in the corner and stroke your ego? Just make sure to clean up afterwards."

“Fuck you, King,” Redman leans in and snarls at me.

“Maybe later.” I wave him to get out of here while I dial in the number of Owens’s latest victim’s parents. She didn’t have many friends, which means that I’m stuck with the family route, it’s not the most promising route, but it’s something. From what I could see last night, Owens has tossed me a grenade and a time bomb and right now, I’m juggling both of them, waiting for them to explode. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that this killer is on the move. Killing people is more of a lifestyle than a hobby for him. He’s killing more and more. He’s picking up momentum and he’s using miscommunication to throw off the departments and precincts of the city. Whoever this killer is, he knows that no one gives a shit about suicides once they’re declared.

Before I can pull up the number in my rolodex, I feel my phone in my pocket vibrating. I don’t know why, but I shoot a glance across the room where Redman is talking with his fellow cocksuckers who think they’re hot shit. They’ve never closed a case of any real significance. They get gang shootings, coked-up lovers shootings, and corner killings. They get the kind of cases that they toss to young detectives with their more experienced partners who have given up trying to care. Honestly, it’s been years since they’ve given me a partner. Last time they tried giving me a partner, she quit after two days. I don’t have the patience for by the book robots. I need someone who actually gives a shit about this town. Too many detectives use their position as a stepping stone. It’s despicable and I’m not playing along with their games.

Fishing my phone out of my jeans, I look at the number and I shake my head. No, this isn’t possible. He has to be calling to see if I looked over the reports and the files. He has to be nagging me to get on board with his line of thinking, maybe even to suggest that he’ll come walk me through this shit like I’m some sort of rookie prick. I don’t have time to be watched. God, I hope that it’s just him nagging at me. I flip open the phone and hit the talk button, holding it to my ear. “What’s up, Owens?” I turn away from all the others.

“We’ve got another,” Owens says without any greetings or hello. God, it’s exactly what I didn’t want to hear. Rubbing my head, trying to comprehend what I’ve gotten into.

“That’s not possible,” I say, shaking my head.

“I’ve got another victim that says otherwise,” Owens says to me with a hushed voice.

“Who caught the case?” I look around to see if there’s anyone missing. At any given time, there are only a handful of detectives in the bull pen. Most are roaming around the city talking to witnesses, next of kin, and suspects.

“Don’t know yet,” Owens answers. “You’ve got a half hour lead before someone gets here. Pitman is calling it in right now.”

“Goddamn it, give me the address.” I grab a pen and scribble down the address before hanging up on him. This is not what I signed up for. These assholes are going to owe me big time if I have to lose more sleep over this. I don’t want my last month on the job to be one that’s full of blood, stress, and bodies.

I hop into my Shelby and roar out of the parking lot, past the squad cars and the minivans, before I pull out onto the busy streets. The front of the building is littered with people being released, victims demanding more be done for them,

concerned citizens making life harder, lawyers going to their various clients, and officers going about their business. It's a madhouse at the front of the precinct and I'm completely fine with putting it behind me for a few hours to dismiss whatever it is that Owens is going to try and convince me of.

My half hour lead is dwindling, thanks to traffic. By the time I find the apartments that Owens told me about, there's already a sea of people standing around, trying to get a look at the scene. I've always been disgusted by the people that linger around crime scenes, trying to get a hint at what's happening across the street. It's the piece of human nature that makes me think that deep down inside, people are really just trash. Why do we need to know what's going on in the houses of neighbors that we never knew, that we never cared about? Why do we see dead bodies in the shadows of garages across the way or suspect everyone of sinister, devious acts? I don't approve of people expecting the worse of their neighbors.

But what really drives me mad are the ghouls and the vultures who chase ambulances and flashing lights. They follow the defenders of the peace to the crime scenes and hope to get pictures or scoops so they can post their filth and trash online so other ghouls and vultures can read it and get their kicks. There's too many people out there who like to hear the stories about how someone ripped apart some girl on the way home or how a mother butchered her husband while he slept peacefully in their bed because he wouldn't let her go out with the gals. They're perverts that feed on the carnage and suffering of people. It's madness and there's no reason people should like that sort of thing.

I flash my ID to one of the uniforms who leads me in, telling everyone to scatter and get out of the way while I park up at the yellow line. Getting out of my Shelby, I lock her with a nervous feeling in the back of my mind. I hate it when there are crowds like this all around. I will pull out my pistol and end anyone who thinks that it's cool to scratch my paint job. It'll be the highlight of my day.

"Get these assholes out of here," I tell the uniform closest to me.

Some dick with circular glasses and curly hair overhears me and shouts back at me, "We have just as much of a right to be here as you do." The man's holding up his smartphone, goading me into doing something stupid. This amateur probably thinks he's some sort of liberal fighter for the common people, tearing down the walls of injustice and white oppression. I look at him, pulling off my aviators and approaching him. He stands his ground, holding his phone up like it's some sort of shield to protect him. Fucking smartphones. Why do people need that much shit on them all the time? I wish the common Joe and Jane had a fucking clue how many times phones and computers end up being their downfall whenever they do something stupid.

"You get your kicks by getting pictures of dead people?" I ask the man, who looks up from his screen to me, and then back to his screen, making sure that he heard what it was he thought he heard. I take another step closer toward him.

"This is harassment, man," the liberal dumbass chirps like a moron.

"No, kid, it isn't," I tell him blatantly. "So if you're looking to run down to the precinct to file a report against me, then go ahead. Just make sure that you fill it out properly. Make sure you tell them that you showed up at a crime scene without any true reason to help the investigation, impeded my ability to get to the

scene with all these other gawking morons, and then tell them how you take your videos, go home, stick your hands down your pants, and get off on it. Make sure you tell them how you're all about the necrophilia and that way when IA comes to have a chat with me in a year, since they're backlogged out their ears, then I'll be able to remember your face. I just want you to make sure and get the most out of your experience with the police department."

"You're an asshole," the liberal snaps, lowering his phone.

"No, you are." I take another step toward him. "This is a fucking crime scene, dumbass. I'm not here because I'm infringing on your rights or because I want to give you a hard time. I'm here to do a job, to put back the wrongs done upon whoever is inside that building. If there's anyone here who is an asshole, it's the guy who is distracting me from doing my job by spilling his liberal, whiny shit all over my shoes when I'm just trying to do right by this city. So kindly go fuck yourself and get the hell out of here." I turn from him and look at the surrounding faces. "Get the hell out of here, all of you! There's not a damn thing for you to see here."

They look at me like I've just shot their favorite puppy and slowly start to disperse. I don't have time for this. Traffic was a nightmare and there's probably two other detectives already in the apartment working and I'm now left holding my balls like a chump. Owens is nowhere to be seen, but I'm recognizing a few faces that were either at the last scene or at the archives. I look up at the apartments and wonder what this killer has for apartments.

A uniform holds the door open for me. There's a detective talking with the property manager, who has his arms crossed and his face is pale. Someone definitely died here. There's a sort of silent reverence in the air, the kind of silence that I picture lingering over a battlefield. I don't think anyone ever becomes immune to the silence. It becomes an acquaintance that every detective and cop comes to recognize whenever they find a body. The whole world continues turning with each death, but there's something that holds it back for a moment. Something that hangs in the air.

I already know who the detectives who caught the case are, probably since they tossed yesterday's case back into the suicide pot before any real work had to be done. Evans stands like a tall, skinny goon next to the short property manager. I've never found Evans to be a particularly effective detective, but he was an excellent box man. He reminded me of myself in that regard. He knew how to get someone to break down. He knew how to get them to spill their guts and tears like it's Christmas day for the DA.

The apartment building is nowhere near as nice as the other one, but it's definitely nicer than the apartments I've seen in the area. This is the kind of place where college students and those just graduated, trying to get a grasp on life, show up to rent, pretending that they know what they're doing in the real world, but still completely clueless as to how the real world works. There's four apartments that surround a sort of central garden atrium that could have been nicer if someone actually tried to put some work into making the aesthetics appealing in this place.

There's a certain gravity with me as I approach or maybe Evans can feel the pressure change, but he turns and looks at me. He's a bald, black guy who was

told as a child that white folks rule the world and that he has to act like one to get ahead. He's the kind of racist that I think the world is filled with, the silent kind that only comes out when like for like starts showing up. He'll talk with his buddies over a beer about his imagined grievances that he thinks he's suffered over the years. His big bulgy eyes look me over and I can see his soul withering in the depths of his heart. I don't like Evans, I never did, but at least he knows how to do the job semi-successfully.

"Thanks, Officer Ramsey will take your statement." Evans passes off the property manager to a man I don't recognize from Owens's cabal of conspirators, but it wouldn't surprise me if the entire force was in on this with him. He was that kind of a social butterfly that wouldn't make me surprised. When the property manager was a reasonable distance away, Evans turns back to me and looks at me with a mix of annoyance and frustration. "What are you doing here? Did Waters call you?"

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Did Evans and Waters now have the loving relationship that everyone pictured them having? Hell, I never suspected that the two got along. Waters was too by the book, and prone to wanting things to be bigger and stranger than reality permitted. She was determined to find that one case that was going to bring the whole corrupt city down around them. As for Evans, he was all about blending in, putting in fifteen more years and then retiring with a pension.

"I was in the area," I shrug. "Figured I'd stop by and see what was up."

"I heard you weren't catching no more," Evans nods, buying the lie.

"Not unless I want to," I shrug at him. "It sounded good yesterday, but I'm already itching to find something to do. Mind if I take a look?"

"Be my guest," Evans shakes his head, holding his notepad like it might give him some sort of clue how to interact with me. He won't find it in there. I turn to make my way up the stairs to where a uniform is standing at the entrance of one of the apartments, monitoring the traffic in and out. He's the sentinel that stands at attention when you die. I start to head that way when Evans calls me back. "Did one of these assholes call you?" Evans looks at me with a studious, discerning look. He's trying to read me.

I don't give him anything. "Like I said," I say perfectly flatly, "I was in the area."

6

Everything is off with this place. I look around the moment I show my ID and stand in the doorway, looking at the little foyer. It's a nice apartment, everything is painted in a soft hue of baby blue and the carpet is a speckled beige that seems to be in every apartment. Nothing is out of place, nothing is torn down, there isn't trash everywhere, and there's nothing that smells like a depressed person's house. The depressed give up and this house is not the kind of place that has given up. This is a home that definitely doesn't have a depressed creature lurking within.

Before ever seeing the victim or knowing a thing about what I'm stepping into, I know that this house belongs to a woman. I don't care if it's sexist or if I'm not being socially acceptable, but women do things differently than men. There's a style to the house, a sort of beautiful medley of expression that all makes sense. It's not a conglomeration of junk, trinkets, souvenirs, and cool shit that someone found, stuffed on the walls or in the corners. The entryway has the washer and dryer which aren't full of dirty clothes. Everything is nice and folded. There's a gym bag sitting next to the door and I feel the tickle in the back of my mind that suggests that Owens definitely is right about this one.

The living room only offers more shades of doubt as I step into the room and look at the set up. There's a dining area near the kitchen entrance, but the majority of the living room has been cleared out especially for working out. There's a yoga mat in front of the TV with some free weights and a bosu ball tucked in the corner of the TV stand. There's an elliptical machine and a bench with a full line of free weights against the wall. This woman was someone who knew how to work out. The floor isn't dirty. There's nothing stuffed in the corners. Everything has been recently dusted and taken care of. There's another tally in the homicide box.

Suicides don't take care of the world around them. The depression or the guilt or the sorrow of whatever loss or suffering that they've been afflicted with takes control of them. There were occasional times when suicides didn't play to this trend, but those people were rare and few. They weren't running around all over the city, but for the most part, cleanliness only existed when the victim didn't want to be a burden on people any longer. It was a strange sort of way of saying that they were sorry for all the pain and suffering that they'd caused in the lives of those around them. But the living room was another mark. Those who are depressed don't work out. If you dedicate enough time to rigorously and continuously work out and define your body, you're not going to destroy it. There's a certain egoism that comes into play with people who work out. They like their bodies, they work hard for their bodies, and they don't needlessly harm their bodies.

I turn away from the living room and step into the kitchen. It's clean, just like I expected. There isn't a dirty dish on the counter or in the sink. The dishwasher is full, but they've been washed. I prop open a few of the cupboards, looking at the dishes and then the neatly organized containers of dry ingredients and then the spices, then the work out powders. This girl had everything she needed in its place. Looking at the fridge, I'm given a collage of everything that's happened in her life since college. She has pictures from everywhere she's been to, or at least a portion of the places. There are pictures from photo booths, parties, ceremonies, events, and excursions with friends. She keeps a hundred different pictures on the fridge as a sort of honorary board for everyone she's ever known or gone anywhere with.

She's Mexican or Hispanic or whatever you want to call it. Latina, I think they've changed it to now. She's got bright, big eyes and a smile that could charm the hardest heart. She looks like she's got the kind of smile that has been taught, the kind they teach baristas and bank tellers. I don't trust the smile. She's definitely been taught by someone how to do her make-up because she has plenty of it on. As for her body, she's gone through a sort of metamorphosis over the years and I

have to admit that I'd pay my share for a lap dance from her. Hell, I'd pay to do a little bit more with her. She's beautiful and I don't understand why someone who is gorgeous would consider killing herself. That's another mark. She's socially active and outgoing. She has friends. You don't think you're alone in the world and kill yourself if you're constantly out and about with people.

The only remarkable thing about the fridge is that there are several pictures of her with a man whose face has been removed from existence. I look at the pictures and study the scribbles, trying to get some sort of semblance of who the man is that has been so permanently taken out of her life's moments with a Sharpie. That's a major mark in the suicide box. Lots of people who have their lives together break up with their beloved, perfect soul mates and decide that life's not worth living. I look at the pictures of her and her vacant man and decide that Waters and Evans are already constructing the suicide case. It's a compelling argument.

Opening the fridge, I look at the contents within and look at nothing that doesn't look like it was brought up from the earth. There's milk and cottage cheese, a container of plain Greek yogurt, and that's about it. Everything else in the fridge is either chicken or the bounty of the garden. Carrots, leafy greens, radishes, asparagus, green beans, and cucumbers. I close the fridge and look at the freezer, hoping to find the depression food or at least the break up food. But the freezer is full of smoothie kits that she's assembled herself, and the only thing unhealthy that I can find is a pint of Hagen Daas that has only sparingly been picked at. I shake my head. This isn't the fridge and freezer of someone who has just gone through a break up. I watch the freezer door close and search the surrounding cupboards and the pantry. Again, there's nothing here outside of some half drunk bottles of alcohol that would indicate that there was even a break up happening here.

Flipping open the garbage can, I take a look at the contents within, hoping to find a chip bag or take out containers, but there's nothing here. There's absolutely nothing here to make me think that there is a suicide case living inside this house. I shake my head and turn back toward the living room, listening to the voices coming from the bedroom. I think that they're the only other people inside this apartment with me.

In the tiny hallway there's the bathroom and the bedroom tucked away off of the living room. The bathroom is immaculate, no pills on the sink, nothing tucked away that isn't expected. She's taking medication for acne and that's it. Other than that, she has a whole bunch of vitamins and supplements that she must take in the morning after she showers. I open the cupboards under the sink to check, just in case there's some dark secrets tucked away, but there's nothing except for stock for her toiletries if she runs out. I don't understand. Why would this girl commit suicide? At this point, I'm desperately trying to see it from Evans and Waters's point of view.

When I finally leave the bathroom and head for the bedroom, it's the first time that I actually see anything that would make me think that this is actually a crime scene. The layout of the room is slightly strange to me. It's built like any other room with a large closet tucked onto the side. The one thing that makes it strange to me is that there's a pair of glass long doors that open up directly into a railing.

It's not even a small balcony, just a wrought iron railing. I get the idea behind it, that it's supposed to open up the room and make it feel larger, but it's just strange to me. The queen-sized bed has been pulled from its position against the wall and dragged all the way over to the pair of glass doors that have been flung open. The corner of the bed is jammed against the railing and the bed post has a set of kinky handcuffs attached to each other. One is fuzzy and pink, the other is leather and studded. Well, she was definitely getting some.

There are two uniforms in the room, one of them looks up at me as I enter, giving me a slight nod, while the other discusses the events of the crime scene with Detective Waters. Waters is the kind of woman who thinks that hair only exists to be strung up in a bun or a ponytail. In fact, I'm surprised after the years that she hasn't just shaved it all off, going butchy lesbian. She has a sort of distinct, peculiar way of making everything look dire and important. She carries around a ledger notebook in a portfolio that you expect businessmen to carry to their meetings. She's not particularly tall, nor is she exceptionally beautiful. She's about as plain Jane as they come because Waters doesn't give a shit about her appearance or how other see her. She's here to do a job and she makes that amply clear when she works. Her big green eyes look from the other uniform to me. Unlike Evans, she knows how to mask what she's thinking. That probably pisses off whoever her current failing beau is.

"King? What are you doing here?" Waters looks at me with eyes that are almost concerned.

"I was in the area," I lie to her as easily as I had lied to her partner. "I thought I'd stop by and see if you guys need any help. Evans looked busy down there in the common area."

"What were you doing over here?" Waters looks back at her enormous ledger, making some sort of note. I bet she's drawing dicks or something. "I thought you weren't catching anymore." Does everyone know about the arrangement? Why would Mendez release that to the bull pen? Why not push it a little farther and let the media know about it? Maybe I could hear about it while I'm eating dinner tonight.

"Well, that's already starting to get old," I tell her and she give a weak, sort of half assed laugh that makes me feel like I just told a joke, but that wasn't what she found funny. Fuck her. I don't think there's a person in the precinct that actually thinks of Waters when they hear the name 'detective'. "So what do we have here?"

"Jenny Martinez," Waters answers. "Twenty three years old, graduated from OSU with a degree in business management a year early after working her ass off, apparently. She hasn't been putting that to use over the past two years since she's been home. She's worked at a gym for the past year and hasn't shown any signs of moving on, according to her employer. Other than that, all we know about her is that she committed suicide this morning."

"Hanged herself?" I look at the scarves that are tied together, disappearing beneath the railing of the double doors. That fall doesn't look like it was enough to actually kill her. She must have strangled out there.

"Well she wanted to make sure she wasn't coming back," Waters says, pointing out the window. "She shoved a hair pin into each of her wrists, severing both

arteries and veins. If someone cut her down, they would have probably ripped out those pins and she would have bled to death. Good thing the hanging did the work for her. Hate to imagine what it would feel like for whoever tried to rescue her.”

“Seems like overkill.” I shake my head, putting my hands on my hips. “Did anyone see her commit the act?”

“No,” Waters shakes her head. “One of the neighbors across the street saw her hanging there dead, called the cops. The neighbors say that she’s been out all week, coming home with a different guy every night. Apparently she was noisy about her business.”

“So we’re certain that this was a suicide?” I lift an eyebrow, working Owens’s angle. After all, where the fuck is Owens? I have yet to see him since I got here. He would be proud that I’m subserviently slithering his ideas into the minds of others.

Waters looks up at me with a confused look in her eyes. “Why would you think that?” Waters’s voice is slipping into my mind now.

“If she’s home with someone new every night,” I shrug, “maybe she brought home the wrong guy.”

“Why would a murderer leave a suicide note that matches her handwriting?” Waters pulls a plastic bag off the dresser behind her and hands it to me. I take the piece of paper and look at it, holding it between my fingers and feeling the paper beneath. I read over the writing and can’t help but picture the cheap, pathetic messages that I’d read through the files last night. Some of them were oddly specific, worded strangely, or completely vague. Whoever this killer was, he wasn’t too good at detail. I hold the letter in my hands and read over it again.

“Sorry for being greedy,” I read aloud. “I just wanted the attention. Jenny.”

I look up at Waters with a doubtful look on my face. “You’re not convinced?” She looks at me with a doubtful expression of her own.

“I’ve already walked through this apartment and doesn’t it strike you as odd that a woman who is this clean and takes care of her apartment this well would just decide to kill herself?” I look at Waters, expecting her to answer or accuse me of not seeing the facts, but she doesn’t answer so I continue. “I mean, the only thing I can find in this apartment that could hint at the fact that she might have been depressed are the pictures on her fridge with her ex or whoever the guy is she’s scribbled out. Other than that, I’m not seeing a reason here that she would kill herself, especially leaving something so cryptic and vague. Why wouldn’t she apologize to whoever it was that she felt she’d offended. Also, where are her friends and family?”

“We have notified her family and I’ve sent uniforms to their homes to speak with them,” Waters looks at me with a growing sense of doubt. “People don’t always leave suicide notes when they go and get themselves killed, King.”

“She didn’t ‘get herself killed,’” I proclaim. “She intentionally stabbed two pins into her wrists and jumped out a window after tying together a rope of scarves and sex toys. If you put that much thought into your mode of execution, you’re not going to leave two vague sentences.”

“Maybe it means more to her family,” Waters argues.

“Bullshit.” I shake my head. “Are you declaring this a suicide, Waters?”

“It seems cut and dry to me.” She shakes her head.

“So you’re not going to investigate the losers she brought home with her?” I press her, not willing to let her hide from this.

“There’s nothing here to point to a homicide,” Waters argues.

“It’s everything that’s not here that points to homicide,” I argue. She looks at me and has her doubts, I know it, but something about this makes her too scared to call it what it is.

“You’ve been talking to Owens,” she mutters to me, shooting a look at the uniforms around us. Is she scared of them? Or is she scared that they might report back to Owens and tell him that we’re talking about him and the conspiracy? She looks at me with those big green eyes of hers and I nod silently to her. “It’s a fucked up conspiracy, King.”

“I know,” I say. Part of me wants to go explode all over Owens that I wasn’t his first choice to come to with this insanity, but I already suspected as much. I can’t hold it against him. I’m retiring in less than a month now, so why get me involved if I couldn’t commit entirely to the cause? Waters looks back at the rope of scarves. They’ve erected a screen outside to keep others who aren’t a part of the investigation from gawking and getting pictures of her. I want to go outside and get a look at her. I want to commandeer this whole operation. “If you’re too afraid to declare it, I’ll take over from here, Waters,” I say to her with all seriousness. “I’ve looked at the files and they have a compelling argument. I think it’s compelling enough to have another look at it.”

“The Chief is going to rip you apart if you waste resources on a suicide case.” Waters shakes her head. I know that she’s right. This is the kind of shit that ruins detectives. It’s the kind of mistake that sends them to the archives with all the other screw-ups to rot and turn into dust before everyone forgets that they even exist. She looks at me for a moment. I know that she wants to hand it over, but she’s scared that Mendez is going to rip her apart if he hears that I’ve taken over and am declaring a cut and dry suicide as a homicide.

“I’ll take full responsibility,” I tell her, trying to convince her to come out into the light of all of this. She is, after all, one of the evidence junkies like all the other young academics. “Evans will back you up, saying I hijacked the entire operation.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” one of the uniforms says. Clearly he’s working for Owens and the other conspirators.

I look at Waters and she looks at me with those dull green eyes of hers and she slowly nods. I nod back to her and look at the two uniforms in the room who immediately set to work. This is now a homicide. It doesn’t even need to be said.

7

I’ve known *of* Courtney for most of my life, but I can’t say that I’ve ever actually known her. Truth be told, I can’t think of a reason why I never spent the time to get to know her, or at least be a sort of guardian angel for her. After all this time, I wish that I could just go back in time and tell myself that I should keep an eye on her, that she might be worth my attention later on in life, because right now, God,

I wish I knew her better. I look across the store to where she's walking slowly past the coolers, looking at the beverages inside. I want to call her over and kiss her, to feel her, to taste her.

Last night had been a fantastic night. I don't even know what the girl's name had been, but she had practically melted in my hands like butter when I got ahold of her. I bought her another Cosmo while we chatted for a while. Thankfully, I never even had to tell her a lie about myself. She'd been drunk and she'd definitely been smoking something or someone had slipped her something at the least. I know that that club in particular is pretty rough on the naïve girls that go there and don't watch their drinks. I know that she probably didn't have the slightest idea that someone had given her something, but she definitely had taken something. I wonder if I could be charged with raping her, because I know that I definitely took advantage of her. But in the end, we all take advantage of each other. I'm not a gentleman. I'm a conqueror.

I watch Courtney open up one of the coolers as she looks at the beer, even though I know that she's too young to buy them. It's one of the few reasons Mr. Chen had hired me—because I knew everyone in the trailer park across the street where we draw most of our business from. I hate to admit it, but my roots reach out far. Since I was little, I had been a product of that trailer park. It was like a society that existed for only me and those who live inside those high, chain link fences to abide within. If there was a bully in the trailer park and a separate bully at school, I could always depend on my home bully to come to my aid. If anyone had claim over me for my entire life to this point, it was the trailer park. It was called Whispering Hills, but there was nothing whispering there except for the drug deals and we were still a bit away from the hills.

But for every ten worthless pieces of shit that the trailer park produced, there was always one like myself to arise or one like Courtney. Granted, Courtney was quite a few years younger than me. I remember Courtney as that cute little blonde girl in pigtails that would rush to wait for the bus while I was in middle school, and I remember her as the quiet girl waiting for the middle school bus, and when I was in high school, I never even paid her any mind. I was too busy trying to carve out my own piece of the world to spend time thinking about Courtney, but since the trailer park pulled me back, I couldn't help but wonder about her. She was a marvel, all by herself. I imagine that she is a supernova in a corner of space with nothing but black holes and dying stars.

She has a long set of legs that reach down from her high short shorts that are so high it makes you feel wrong just looking at her perfect ass, but in the end, does anyone feel bad about checking out the lovely and the fit? It's a compliment and a blessing for us to look at them. Her legs are long and thankfully she doesn't have a damn tattoo like everyone else at the trailer park. She's wearing wedges that have a high heel on them that make her look about as tall as me, if not a little taller. They're the kind of legs that make me want to run my tongue from the tip of her painted, crimson big toe to all the way up to her pussy. I want to bite her ass, lick chocolate off of it, and worship it. It's so perfect.

Her stomach is flat and even has a hint of abs. She clearly cares about her figure because she doesn't have love handles or any kind of fat on her and her back is just as flawless. She pierced her belly button, which is about as trashy as

it gets, but she does live in Whispering Hills, so I can't hold too much against her or expect absolute perfection. She's wearing a red, frilly bikini that's covering her ample, young, perky breasts that I want to grab and squeeze and suck on. Her arms are long and slender, maybe a bit too skinny if there is absolutely a need for criticism. I look at her pointed chin, her pouty lips, her straight nose, big blue eyes, and long, honey colored hair and I can't help but wonder what it would be like to take her into the backroom and fuck her brains out.

God, since last night, I've felt like a tiger on the prowl. The girl last night had been wild, screaming and moaning while she gave me the best sex of my life and I almost felt bad slipping out of that apartment this morning. But since I got home and showered, I can't help but feel like I've been hunting for my next prey. Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, and Patton all knew that conquerors had to keep moving. The moment you give up or stop hunting for your next conquest, that's when everything falls apart. I look across the room at where Courtney is reaching into the cold treat box.

The ice cream sandwiches, tacos, fudge pops, fruit pops, and otter pops are all perfectly positioned so Mr. Chen can do the exact same thing that I'm doing right now. I'm watching her reach in, staring as she bends over at her perfect, swaying tits. There's enough trash across the street who don't believe in bras that dirty Mr. Chen, with his low standards, gets all the tit action that he could dream of. All of us know that he goes back into his office and jerks off to customers or Tiffany. But I have to hand it to him, sometimes this job pays off, even though it's a soul sucking vortex.

"Going to the pool?" I ask Courtney, deciding that it's time to change things up. It's time to start talking to her. It's time to make my way into her shorts.

She looks up me with those big, emotional eyes of hers and I see that she's pleasantly surprised by the exchange, and I let her catch me staring at her breasts. Why should I shy away? It shows her that I'm interested in her. Hell, I'm more than interested. She stands up straight and looks me over for a second before answering.

"Yeah," she answers in her soft voice that you don't expect, from a girl who has remained mostly untarnished from a place like Whispering Hills. "I'm meeting Tommy there and he's going to take me out on his motorcycle."

Tommy, that guy is a piece of shit that she should have given up on a long time ago. Last I heard, Tommy was stealing from his parents and working at a meth hut out in the hills somewhere on the edge of town, coming back to the trailer park to sling his product. It was only a matter of time before the local boys got real tired of that and Tommy ended up a piece of pulpy flesh on the side of the road. But Courtney had an ongoing relationship with him. I knew that much from just seeing them together. But if they wanted each other, that was fine. I just wanted to show her that there was a better world out there, and if she still wanted him after me, then that was fine too. I wouldn't hold that against Tommy. After all, there were plenty of girls out there, just like the one I'd spent last night with.

"I didn't know that people still went to the pool this time of year?" I want to keep the conversation going. The pool is what some in Whispering Hills call the Water Park, but it's just a pool, there's nothing fun or exciting about it, which that name would imply. It's a pool with a shower faucet spraying over a slide that heats up to

temperatures that rival certain sun spots. It's a shitty pool that someone always pisses in or shits in at least once a day. But I remember that when I was in high school and it was summer, the pool was where everyone went.

"You seem a little out of touch with things," Courtney smiles as she approaches the register counter, walking like a model on the runway.

"Want to keep me up to date?" I ask her playfully, hoping that she'll latch on.

She looks me over and opens her fudge pop, slowly lifting it to her lips. She pokes out her glossy, pink tongue, taking the shaft of the pop and sucking on it as she closes her lips around it. I can feel my penis hardening, and her eyes study me like a cat watching a mouse. She's looking for any sign of weakness.

I dropped out of college my sophomore year and it was probably the worst day of my life when I picked up the phone and my mom told me that she had lung cancer. It wasn't the kind of lung cancer that medicine and chemo will treat. It's the kind of cancer that you drop shit loads of money on just so she can die with some dignity, not screaming and hacking too much. I decided after a week of hell that I was going to enjoy this little detour that my life had taken. I was going to get something out of this exchange, if I was going to stay with Mom. So I started fucking anything that I could get my hands on and I have to admit that for the first time, I'm interested in a little more than just fucking and dumping Courtney. In fact, I know that she's going into her senior year, but I'd be willing to make her my girlfriend after a year of secretly dating and sneaking off. Hell, she might even be up for keeping our affair secret, adding to the drama so we don't get caught. Yeah, I'd take her out. I'd take her to the clubs that I've been running off to every night. I'd show her the possibilities of the world. When Mom finally dies, the two of us will run away from Whispering Hills and never look back.

"Can I be honest with you?" I say to her as she's blowing the fudge pop.

"Sure," she says, lifting an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I want to get to know you, Courtney," I tell her. I feel like I'm sitting in a confessional booth and the priest knows everything already, I just have to say the words. I just have to have that moment of catharsis to receive my glory. "I think you should blow off Tommy and stay here with me and when I get off my shift, I'll go home, change, and we should hit the town."

"Yeah?" Courtney keeps her eyebrow raised. "But what are we going to do while we wait?"

I can probably count the number of customers that I've had on one hand today. I look at her and smile. Pushing away from the counter, I motion for her to follow me. I push through the swinging doors that lead past Mr. Chen's office. I hear the door bang and I lead Courtney into the backroom where we have the shelves of candy, beer, wine, chips, and other shit that people come to this gas station looking for. I turn and look at her. She looks so beautiful. I wrap my arm around her waist and I pull her close to me, pressing my lips to her and tasting the chocolate of the fudge pop that she drops. Her arms wrap around me and I can feel her clawing at me.

"What took you so long?" she whispers between kisses.

I push her against the wall and I can feel her hand going over my khakis, feeling my rock hard dick and I kiss her again, letting my tongue slip in through her lips and together our warm tongues mingle, hers is a little colder from the fudge pop

and she tastes like strawberries and chocolate. I reach up to feel her breast, running my hand up her side and cupping her bikini-clad breast in my hands, feeling her perky, puffy nipple underneath, ready, begging for me to bring my lips and tongue down to her. I squeeze the nipple gently and roll it between my fingers. She lets out a little gasp and I kiss her again, wanting her to moan into my mouth.

Taking my other hand, I feel my fingertips slipping beneath her short lines and under her panties, moving past her smoothly shaved flesh and searching for her warm, wet slit, but that's when we both hear the doorbell ding. I feel my heart stop and I lean back from her. Her eyes are wide and scared, afraid that we've been caught. I smile and shake my head. Of course, this was obviously going to happen. With my luck, it was going to be Tommy with some of his crack buddies, here to fuck me up for touching his woman. I give her another kiss on the lips and grab a carton of smokes, making it look like I'm back here for a reason.

I push through the swinging doors and I find myself instantly face to face with the barrel of a pistol. I feel my heart stop and I pray to God that whoever this is, they're only here for the money and they don't give a shit about me. Thanks to stingy Mr. Chen, I know that there's only one camera that works in here, and that's the camera looking over the register, since he assumes that all of us steal from the register, ripping him off. The gunman leans forward and presses the cold barrel to my forehead. I drop the carton of smokes and slowly lift my hands, giving him my silent surrender. I close my eyes and bite my lower lip. This is going to suck. This entire day has been shot to hell.

"I want everything out of both of those registers," the man says to me in a raspy, grumpy sounding voice. He has the kind of voice that warns me that he's not here to fuck around, that he's here on a mission and I am totally willing to help him get whatever it is he wants so he can just leave me alone. "You trip any kind of alarm, I'll blow your goddamn brains all across this place. You understand me?"

I nod to him and he gives the barrel a little forceful shove and I instantly move toward the first register, keying in the code that I've had since I first started working here. But as I'm keying in the number, there's a wave of calm, of relief even that washes over me while I stand here, this close to death. It worries me that I might be some sort of adrenaline junkie, but it's more than that. I feel like a piece of metal, caught in the warm, forceful embrace of a magnet. Maybe this is my destiny. Maybe this is the glory moment that I've been looking for all along. To be honest, that's what it feels like. It feels like that hunger has finally been satiated. It feels like the hunt has ended, that I've found whatever it is that I'm looking for.

Looking over the man, I stare at him for a moment, taking in as much as I can while he stares through a pair of aviators, gazing out the window, impatiently watching for someone to show up and foil everything that he's working for. The register dings as the till rolls out and I start to stuff the bills into a plastic bag. I start with the ones, then the fives, taking out the few tens, and then the twenties. I hesitate when I look at the coins, wondering if he's going to want those. I resist the urge to ask him and just lift up the till, taking the three fifties and one hundred dollar bill from their little hiding place that every register has. Closing the till, I look at the man and he nods to me.

"Stop fucking looking at me and get the other till," he shouts. I hope that this is enough of a warning for Courtney to keep hiding. But instead of worrying about

her life or mine, all I want to do is break down in tears and hug the guy. I want to reach out and wrap my arms around him, kissing his cheek and letting him hold me. Is this what it feels like to almost die? Is this how wonderful the end can actually feel?

I key in my number and listen as the till dings open and I once more take all the money from the till, stuffing it into the plastic bag. This guy is not making off with much that will make all of this worth it. He's got maybe a thousand dollars, but there are twelve cameras that work outside and there's no way that he's hiding well enough for the police not to get his car, his license plate, and his description from just looking at the footage. He's toast. He's done for.

"Is there a safe back there?" The man starts heading for the swinging door and I instantly feel terrified for Courtney.

"There is," I tell him, "but I don't know the combination. The owner is the only one who knows it."

"Fine," the man shakes his head, obviously frustrated.

He reaches out and takes the bag of money from him and our fingers touch as he wrenches it away. I immediately close my eyes and feel as if this man is sucking out every last drop of energy from my body. I feel my whole body shiver and I know that this is the closest to death that I will ever be until that final moment. I watch as his entire body seems to relax and as he takes the money from me, I stare at him with horrified, but curious eyes. All the edge on him has smoothed out and he takes the money without so much as a word. He smiles at me and I watch as he runs as fast as he can toward the door. He blows through the doors and out into the heat of the day, leaving me at the register, shivering and shaking. I feel like throwing up.

8

"I bumped you up over an eight-person gang shooting," Whitman says to me as he leads me personally into the bowels of the morgue. It's odd that he would personally do anything since the white-haired, aging professional is notorious for his crabby, grouchy demeanor. I don't understand why so many people are impatient with him or find him so infuriating to deal with. Whitman is a professional, a dedicated craftsman who understands his trade better than anyone. All he wants is respect and admiration for what he does and I guess that I'm one of the few in the world who is willing to give him the respect he wants. It's never hurt me to give the guy a compliment or tell him when I'm actually impressed, which is most of the time. "You're going to have some enemies for me doing this and you're not going to like what I've got for you," Whitman says, looking over his glasses at me as we walk down the corridor, passing the other doctors who have taken up residency in the morgue.

I don't like the sound of that. Why wasn't I going to like what he's found? But more importantly, there's a very dangerous question that I need the answer to.

“Who was in charge of the gang shooting?” I ask, with a small amount of worry in the back of my mind.

“Detective Redman and a couple of boys from vice are interested in finding out who’s responsible for the shootings,” Whitman sighs. “I don’t particularly care for the breed of detectives that are coming out of vice. They’re all results these days. They don’t give a damn about the people, but that’s just me, after all.”

Fuck Redman. If I make his life a little more difficult, then it’s no sweat off of my brow. In fact, I’d like to flip him the bird and clutter up his own investigations as much as I can before I leave—especially if he’s working gang cases now. The task force must be overloaded if they’re reaching out to homicide to help clean up some of their messes.

It’s cold in this building, for obvious reasons, but it’s definitely the feeling that I associate with death, ever since I first entered this building, the cold has always been the power of death. Making our way down the hallway, Whitman pushes through a swinging door and we step into a concrete and metal room that makes me feel frigid, sterile, and completely dead. In the center of the room is an enormous light that cranes up from the floor and looks down on the table like an enormous sunflower. On the table is the familiar, naked body of Jenny Martinez. It’s a shame seeing beautiful women naked on that table when I would have much rather seen them alive and naked. There’s nothing appealing about a naked dead woman. They lose all of their form and attraction, much like a Renaissance painting of a bored, disinterested woman who also happens to be buck naked.

“Miss Martinez.” Whitman holds out a hand as if he’s introducing us. Grabbing his clipboard with all of his notes and his report, he doesn’t even bother looking at them. He’s a professional and he knows each of his subjects with intimate understanding and memory. I wonder if he slips and forgets things like his keys or his wife’s birthday because his memory is stuffed full of dead bodies. There’s something about Whitman that has always impressed me. “As you know, she was found strangled with two metal pins inserted into her wrists, causing multiple lacerations to arteries and veins. The amount of trauma she inflicted upon her wrists is substantial. Quite frankly, it’s impressive that she managed to insert the second pin, but I have no doubt that she did it.” He looks up at me over his glasses to make sure that I’m following him. I look up from Jenny’s still face to his, nodding in understanding. “Even though she lost substantial amounts of blood, it was the homemade noose that she assembled that finally killed her.”

I look down at the stitches sewn down her chest where Whitman has sliced her open and peeled back her skin, flesh, and ribs. I know that he’s taken everything out of her and examined it thoroughly. Like I keep stressing to everyone that talks to me about Whitman, the guy is a savant when it comes to reading the dead.

“Thankfully,” Whitman says with a heavy heart, “it was the fall that killed her. It snapped her neck and she died the moment inertia stopped. Jenny perished early this morning around eight-fifteen, which is consistent with when the first reports were called in.”

I look down at Jenny and furrow my brow. “Did you find any drugs in her system?”

“I did,” Whitman nods, holding his clipboard to his chest and delving into that labyrinth of memories to dredge up what exactly Jenny had inside of her. “She had

been drinking extensively the night before, over the legal drinking limit. But she also had substantial residue of THC, and the amounts suggest that she smoked a marijuana cigarette, nothing more.”

“No manipulatives or hallucinogens?” I press.

“Nothing like that.” Whitman is intercepting my line of thought and holds up his hand. “There’s nothing chemically in her system to signify that she was manipulated through drugs; however, that doesn’t rule out coercion. Someone might have talked her into doing this, but again, by eight in the morning, she should have been dealing with one hell of a hangover. She shouldn’t have been drunk enough to be convinced that killing herself was a good idea, and certainly, if I’m not mistaken, the first pin would have snapped her out of that.”

“The neighbors said that she had guys over every night,” I sigh, and fold my arms across my chest, trying to find something that I can grasp onto and hold before Mendez eventually gets around to calling me and asking what the hell I’m doing. “Did she have sex the night before?”

“Definitely,” Whitman nodded. “However, it appears to be consensual, though given her intoxication, she might have been taken advantage of, but no one forced themselves inside of her. She’s completely intact.”

“Shit.” I shake my head.

“You wanted her to be raped?” Whitman lifts a snowy eyebrow at my direction.

“No,” I shake my head again. “God, no. What about bruising or any signs of struggle?”

“Nothing,” Whitman shakes his head now. It’s his turn. “There’s nothing under her fingernails, there’s no bruises and there’s nothing that would point to the fact that she struggled with someone before committing suicide.” Whitman puts the clipboard down on the table next to Jenny and sighs heavily. “I’m sorry, Steven,” he looks at me like it’s his job to console me, “but Jenny took her own life. But, that doesn’t mean that there wasn’t someone in that room with her when she jumped out of that window. Someone very well may have convinced her that killing herself was in her best interest. I’ve seen cases like that and they’re very, very difficult to prove.”

I nod. I know. It’s going to be a nightmare to try and make this stick on someone. “Thanks, Whitman,” I say with an appreciative grin. “I owe you a bottle of scotch.”

“Single malt,” Whitman corrects me as I turn back toward the doors.

Throwing open the doors, I step out into the fading light of the day. All day today I’ve been trying to make this a case that I can use, but so far, I’ve turned up with empty hands. This isn’t going in my direction. In fact, I’m beginning to think about what I’m going to say to Mendez when he finally calls me into his office to demand answers. *This is what you’ve brought me to, Owens, I hope you’re satisfied. I still think someone killed Jenny Martinez, but she’s not going to be the one that leads me to the killer they’re all hungry for. The man they want is still out there and he’s going to keep killing.*

Speak of the devil and he shall appear. My phone begins vibrating and as I retrieve it, I already know who it is that’s calling me. No doubt that Detective Evans was the one that spilled the beans, saying that I’d taken over the case like some bandit on a train. I look at the number, the name programmed in. It’s one of

the few numbers I have from the precinct. It flashes Mendez on the tiny flip phone screen and I tuck the phone back into my pocket. I'm frustrated. I'm scared that I'm not going to find out where the clues are hidden, where the pieces will lead. Jangling the keys in my pocket, I look toward where my Shelby is parked and I wish that I could go back in time and tell Owens to find someone else. That would have saved me a whole bunch of trouble.

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My phone stops vibrating as I drop down into the driver's seat, looking at the morgue and the busy road that I'm going to take to find my release. I need to blow off steam. If I keep thinking about this case, then I'm going to end up drunk and passed out at my house. I don't want to waste another night staring at the walls, hoping that a clue will jump out at me.

I pull out of the parking lot and let the current of the city take me. When I'm stressed or strung out, I try to let my mind melt away. I shut off the radio, roll down the windows and just drive, letting the soul of the city pull me along. I don't worry about a thing. I don't think about a thing. I just drive, hoping that the world will fade away and I'll get a chance to just listen to the secret words spoken by this festering place I call home. Usually nothing happens. Usually the emptiness is too much and it inevitably collapses into the sad, quiet despair that comes with self-reflection. The remorse that comes with the regrets of my past makes me stop somewhere to get drunk, eat until I feel like exploding, or find someone who I can fuck.

As the sun sinks into the horizon, I end up on Wayward Avenue which is so aptly named that it hurts. It's almost as bad that it feels like an architectural pun in the city's grand design. Someone was designing the city and said "Hey, guys, we've got to put all the whores somewhere. Why not call it Fuck Alley?" "No," says the other guy, "we'll call it Wayward Avenue. I mean, they're only doing it to pay their way through nursing school." I'm pretty sure that's exactly how it played out at the planning and zoning meeting when they were discussing this particular street. But the result was the same, no matter the genesis of the title. The Avenue is lined with tattoo parlors, strip clubs, cheap, rundown bars, and pawn shops that will buy virtually anything, unless it's hot at the moment. The streets are lined with girls who are walking in clothes that look like no woman should ever proudly put on and decide to hit the town in.

There's something for every taste on this street. There are men dressed as ladies, ladies dressed as men, women dressed in long evening gowns, girls dressed up in hardly anything, and of course there's the girls dressed in costume to please any man's desire. I drive with the other multitude of hunters, looking for something to help ease their suffering, quiet their rage and frustration. I know most of the men who work vice on the Avenue don't truly care about the whores. The whores are the lucrative aspect of the Avenue, they're interested in the dangerous aspect of the Avenue. They're looking for the dealers, the cooks, and the muscle that runs the darker current of the street.

As for me, I'm looking for someone in particular. I have tastes that most of the ragged, aged, and worn whores won't satisfy. It costs me more, but in the end, there are very few prostitutes on the Avenue that are worth the money you put

out. Honestly, the clubs are where you want to go if you're interested in class and beauty. Those are the girls that are only in for a few years before they're done. They wipe their hands clean and move on, replaced by a fresh batch of young, innocent, greedy youths. But there's a certain amount of ceremony that goes into the clubs. It's all about knowing who to talk to, how to talk to them, and what to say at the right moment. It's a dance that I'm not willing to step into tonight. Right now, I just need something to pass the time.

I see her. She's dressed like a Catholic schoolgirl and is one of the more modest of the girls that are standing outside of the pawn shop that their pimp is probably running. She has long legs that are skinny enough that she looks young enough. Her thighs aren't chunky or too muscular, just the way I want them. She's got a small ass, not as plump as I'd like, but it'll do. She needs to do some squats. Her breasts aren't large, which is fine with me. Pulled back in a ponytail is her platinum blonde hair. I slowly pull into the parking lot and park right next to her. She's chewing bubblegum and has way too much make-up on. Someone told her that was what men want, and maybe some do, but I don't.

She looks at the car with her small, dark eyes, wondering no doubt if the man inside is a killer or a rapist. I can't imagine the fear that must go into that line of work. It makes women hard. It makes them cold, creatures of stone that can only find comfort among themselves. They ruin themselves by placing their lives in the hands of strangers who care nothing for them. It is a life of suffering and pain that can only be ended by their choosing. I don't understand it. I don't think I ever want to. They have a habit of turning into dark, monstrous things that hardly resemble humans.

"You looking for something?" the girl asks as I roll down the window. She approaches the window bravely, confident that the others around here will protect her. I feel dozens of eyes on me as she leans over and gives me an ample opening to look at her cleavage.

"I am," I tell her, keeping my eyes out on the street. I wonder how many times Vice has seen me out here and decided to look the other way.

"You got the money?" she asks, blowing a small bubble and popping it. It's an annoying habit and it pisses me off a little, but I let the aggravation melt back down. I'm frustrated with the case, not with her. I reach into my pocket and fish out the money, handing it to her. She takes it and counts it quickly before smiling at me and walking around the car. I roll up the window before leaning over and opening the door for her. She sits down in the passenger seat and immediately I can smell the stale tequila and pot on her. I suppose that I'd want to get high before I went out on the streets too. "No kissing, no biting, no hitting, and I'm not into ass play, so you take that up with another girl if you're interested in that. Got it?"

"Crystal clear," I say to her.

"Alright," she smiles at me. It's not a pretty smile. It's a smile that's trying too hard to be a little too easy. The art of being a good whore is to make me feel like she wants to fuck me, which is never the case. This girl is trying to master that, but she still has a long way to go. "You can pull around behind the shop."

I put my Shelby in reverse before backing out and pulling around, taking the car around the pawn shop into an alley with a particularly tough looking group of

men lingering around. In the darkness, it's hard to tell if they're black or Mexican, but they're definitely not white. The Avenue isn't white boy property. The girl points to an open spot and I pull in, put the car in park, and kill the engine.

"What would you like?" she asks me.

"Take your top off," I tell her coldly.

She doesn't do it nicely. She has no skill with this. She's probably used to guys having at her the moment the car comes to a halt. I'm not that eager. I'm not that hungry—not yet. I watch her unbutton her shirt and slowly pull it off without any grace or art to it. Her small breasts hang free. They're pointy and I wonder if she's ever considered getting implants. That might elevate her to a higher status among the Avenue's community. She smiles at me and gives her breasts a burlesque shake. I'm not amused. She looks at me with a frown.

I reach down and undo my belt and open my pants, pulling my penis out. In the pale light in the back of the pawn shop and the darkness, it doesn't look that impressive, but it's made quite a few ladies happy. She looks at me and lets me grab her head and slowly guide her in. The whole thing is prefaced by her warm breath blowing over me. I lean back my head and pull her closer so that she has to adjust in her seat. She puts her knees on the seat and leans over, getting comfortable as she takes it all. I can feel her warm tongue licking me and her lips wrapping around me. It feels great. With my eyes closed, I reach for her breasts, giving them a gentle, light squeeze before playing with her nipples as she continues to work me. She's running her hand up and down my shaft, making me like steel.

"You sure you don't want more?" she looks up at me.

I open my eyes and shake my head at her. I don't want her to talk. She has a smoker's voice already and I can't stand it. While she goes back to work, I stretch my hand out and feel under her short skirt. I feel that she hasn't shaved for a few days and her pubes are prickly. When I find her slit, I discover that it's not warm, it's not wet, it's not anything. She's not enjoying this. I lean back and wonder what it's like to fuck someone who wants to fuck me. I close my eyes and let her keep going. She's pretty good at her job. When I release, I give her no warning and I can feel her pull away. My hand on her head keeps her there. I'm not shooting all over my car. She can take it.

When I'm done, she leans back in the seat, her lips puckered and her eyes wide with disapproval. She throws open the door, thankfully, and spits my load all across the back alley. I wonder how much of that alley is coated in sperm. I put myself away and zip up my pants. I fish another thirty out of my pocket and a card. It's for the Harem. I hand both of them to her.

"Go here after you sign up for a gym membership," I tell her. "Talk to Ricardo and tell him that King sent you. He'll get you a job that gets you off the street. You'll still have to fuck and dance, but at least you'll be off the Avenue."

"Maybe I like it here," she says to me with a certain offense in her tone, like I'm questioning her way of life. This isn't a fucking way of life. This is survival and she's nowhere near the top of the food chain. She's going to end up dead in a drive-by.

"No one likes it here." I lean over, reaching across her lap for the door. Throwing it open, I give her the polite gesture to get the fuck out of my car. She gets out and

shuts the door, not slamming it. As I pull away, I notice that she's actually looking at the car and I feel a sense of accomplishment. There's my civic duty for the night. Maybe I'll be able to sleep in peace.

9

"Is that all you can think of?" The officer says as he looks up from his notebook. I can't remember what his name is, but it's something Mexican, just like he is. I'm not surprised that they sent a Mexican. It feels like half of this city is full of Mexicans. I shake my head and look around the interior of the station, expecting that there would be a little more than just two cops. Why did they just send one car? A man fucking put a gun to my head and the police send one car? What was that all about?

God, was his name Sanchez or something like that? Why can't I remember anything? I look at him as if he's a ghost. My whole world feels different. I think it's the adrenaline or the shock of everything starting to wear off, but I definitely do not feel normal. I feel like I'm going to throw up, or cry, or something. There's something wrong with me. Did I die in the shooting? Am I alive? I look at the officer "No," I say to him in a hollow voice that doesn't sound like my own. Is this all they're going to do for me? Is this everything they can do for me? What if he comes back? What if he puts that gun to my head again and this time he pulls the trigger?

I look over to where Courtney is seated while the second officer, a white guy with a buzz cut, is interviewing Mr. Chen and getting whatever information they think they can glean from that worthless piece of trash. The moment he came barging through those doors, twenty minutes before the police finally decided to show up, he was threatening me with pay cuts until the money I lost was paid back. Forget catching the guy and getting the money back legally, no, he was just going to dock my pay. This is my life now. That's fine. I don't think I'm going to be coming back to work again. How can I bring myself to return to this place? It's hell. I almost died here.

Courtney isn't nearly as shaken up as I am. I'd forgotten about her completely for a while, calling her out of the back room after already having called Mr. Chen and the police. She's sitting in a chair looking at me with sad, concerned eyes. We rehearsed our story before Mr. Chen got here. She would be standing just out of sight of the camera, looking at the condoms because she and Tommy were going to get busy tonight. When the gunman showed up, she passed out in terror. It was the only way to make it look like she wasn't a threat when the gunman ordered me to empty the register. She didn't like the idea of sounding like a fainter but I told her that the police would bring questions and those questions will have answers that might make their way back to Tommy. At that point, she agreed to say anything that I told her. She'd looked away from me when she said she was sorry. I wonder if she still sees me as a man. Maybe when this is done and I get my mind right, I can have another go at her, but not now.

Outside, the sun has pretty much evaporated into the horizon and darkness has descended upon the world beyond the glass front I'm so used to staring out. The billboard that serves as the welcoming sign to Whispering Hills is illuminated by two of five lights that are supposed to be working. There's nothing appealing about the porch lights that buzz in hues of pale blue and harsh orange. I'm going to go home soon and I'm going to be stuck in that trailer with Mom and her hacking. There will be no club tonight, no Courtney, no anything. I look over at Courtney and she offers me a soft, sad sort of smile.

"What about the car?" the officer asks me. "Did you get a license plate?"

"No," I shake my head. "I was pretty worked up by all of this and when I saw Courtney on the ground, she was my first priority."

"That's totally understandable," the officer nods to me. "What about a description? Do you remember what it looked like?"

"No," I shake my head again. "Mr. Chen has a whole bunch of cameras outside that work. They must have picked it up."

"Yeah," the officer grins. "He's got a whole bunch outside, but only one inside. Not the brightest bulb in the box."

I smile and Courtney laughs softly. The officer looks at her and his eyes linger a little longer than I like. What the fuck is he thinking? Is he checking out a victim? He turns back and catches me staring but he doesn't react to being caught. He just reaches into his breast pocket and fishes out a card and hands it to me. Officer Miguel Ruiz. Sanchez? I was way off. I look at the card and then look back up to him and he greets my gaze with a warm, friendly smile. Sure, he showed up twenty minutes after I called in and with only one other officer, but hey, at least he's got a warm smile.

"If you think of anything, Ted." Officer Ruiz extends his hand for me to shake it. I shake his hand, but it lacks the energy, the terror, and the sensation of the gunman's touch. It feels distant, like there's a buffer all around me and I can no longer feel a thing. It has me worried. It has me on edge. I look at him and he gives me another one of his trademark smiles. "Don't hesitate to give me a call. And don't worry about your boss docking your pay. I'm sure we'll catch the guy. He robbed a gas station in broad daylight and we've got his license, his face, and his car all on camera. We'll have him and the money back in no time."

"A lot of experience in robberies like this?" I ask cautiously, too afraid to feed the blossoming hope inside of me.

Officer Ruiz gives me a practiced line that is clearly a lie that he's rehearsed over and over with his other fellow officers. "Yeah," he flips his notepad closed and stuffs it in his breast pocket. "He's a desperate sort of guy to do something as stupid as this. I'm sure we'll have him by morning. Don't worry about it. You folks are safe now."

The white, buzz cut officer gives Courtney a handshake and just nods at me as they both leave the station. One of them is talking on his radio and the other is checking his cellphone. Clearly they're off to help another victim twenty minutes late. I look over at Courtney, who is still offering me her quiet, sad smile. In the doorway, short Mr. Chen is standing with a scowl written across his face. He's looking at me with lightning and fire behind his dark, little eyes.

“You are in big trouble, Teddy Boy.” Mr. Chen has a habit of calling me that when he’s angry, thinking that it gives him superiority to mock my name. I don’t feel intimidated by it now, just like I’ve never felt intimidated by it. “You are going to have to work double shifts to make up for the money you lost me—”

“You know what, Chen,” I say with a disgusted tone in my voice. I don’t know where this boldness is coming from, but I like it. I feel powerful standing over him like a giant, ready to squish a trembling rabbit. “Fuck you and fuck this job. I quit.”

“What?” Chen snaps as I hold out my hand gesturing to Courtney. She walks out ahead of me with a broad, embarrassed grin across her pretty face. I’m not sure if she’s embarrassed for me, or if she’s embarrassed for Chen. I don’t really care. I’m alive, I don’t have a bullet in my head, and there’s a beautiful girl that likes me. Why should I feel terrible? Besides, it’s not like my life is going anywhere important with Mr. Chen’s gas station. Hell, maybe I will have that date with Courtney tonight. “You can’t quit!” Chen shrieks as I follow Courtney by twenty feet through the doors. “You owe me money, Teddy Boy! You going to have to pay me back!”

I flip him the bird as the door closes and Courtney laughs, still ahead of me. I think she’s embarrassed to be caught in the middle of all of this. I look at her in the harsh light of the gas station’s rustic exterior and catch up to her as she stops and turns back to face me. As she turns, she looks at me with wonderstruck eyes, distant and pleased.

“I’m going to go home and get ready,” I tell her with a sound of determination in my voice, like an explorer headed out on a grand and dangerous expedition that I’m inviting her along on. She looks at me with a warm expectancy in her eyes as she smiles knowingly. I’m going to fuck her tonight, but only after I’ve treated her like the woman she deserves to be treated as. “You’re going to go home and put on the nicest dress you have, and I’m going to take you out dancing.”

“Ted, I’m underage,” she tells me softly.

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her with a reassuring smile. “I’m going to take care of everything.”

As I walk her across the street, I decide that I’m not even going to buy her alcohol. I’m going to take her out and we’re going to have fun. I’m crazy and excited and terrified all at once because I’m alive and I survived an armed gunman who stole all of my money and made me quit my job. If that’s not a reason to go celebrate, then I don’t have a fucking clue what a good reason is. I escort her through the gates of Whispering Hills and together we walk side by side until we’re at her house. I remember hearing the rumors that her dad used to molest her before being locked up for assault. I wonder if that’s true, but it doesn’t actually matter anymore. I think I’m in love with her. Why didn’t I talk to her sooner? I feel a shadow descend upon me as I think about that. Why did I wait so long to enjoy life with her? Clearly she’d been interested for a very long time.

She walks up the steps onto her wooden porch, standing in the shadow of the awning, before she turns and looks at me. I should follow her up the steps and pull her into my arms and kiss her, but I don’t. She smiles sweetly and leans over the porch railing before she blows me a kiss. Her parents aren’t going to care that we’re dating. Tommy will, but I think I can handle Tommy. I know how to fight

pretty well. She turns with a little twist and bounce, pulling the door open to her trailer and I watch her ass swing from side to side as she steps into the home, telling her that I'll be back in one hour and that she better be ready for the night of her life. I mean it too. I'm not going to pull any fast ones. I'm certain that I'm going to get into her pants, but I'm going to play fair. I'm not looking to just fuck her and dump her. No, I want Courtney. I actually want Courtney for a very long time. Maybe forever.

Then why did it take me so long to ask her out?

In fact, why did it take me so long to even notice her?

I furrow my brow at the thoughts and make my way toward Mom's trailer. I can hear Mom hacking and gagging on her phlegm out on the asphalt that's still boiling hot, even after the sun's been down for two hours. I look at my watch. It's almost midnight. She's never awake this late. Ascending the steps, I pull open the screen door and step into the putrid smelling house that reeks of death, cigarettes, and phlegm. I wave my hand, trying to get a breath of fresh air before coughing. Mom is seated at the sofa, looking out the window. She's been watching me approach since I entered the trailer park. She looks at me, over her disused and forgotten oxygen tank.

"You fucking Perkins' daughter?" Mom's voice is as hard as rocks scraping against one another, jagged, rough, ancient rocks. Her hair is falling out thanks to her medication and her skin is yellow enough to make her look like a lizard, especially in the pale glow of the television screen. I shudder at the sight of her. Why is she still alive?

"No," I tell her.

"You like jailbait?" Mom growls before taking a half-assed drag off of her cigarette. She immediately begins to hack and cough before she spits a long, ropey line of phlegm into the bowl she keeps near the couch. That bowl is full of rancid, decaying phlegm. This is what I dropped out of college for. This is what I've been working my ass off with double shifts for over a year to save?

Save, that's a funny word. I'm not saving her with buying her the pills and medication she needs. To save her, she'd have to want to live. She would have to go to the radiation treatments and the regular doctor appointments. She would have to give a fuck, rather than laying around in this trailer, smoking her cigarettes near an oxygen tank that could ignite and kill us both at any second. I look at her with a glare on my face. There were people looking at me before all of this. There were serious people interested in my talents. I could have gone somewhere. I could have made something of myself, but I decided to do the honorable thing. I decided to come back.

Honor is good for nothing.

The voice in my head burns. Why am I doing this to myself? Why torture myself with regrets from the past. The first day I came home from college, I wallowed in depression, hating myself, hating Mom, hating life. But after that week was up, I vowed to look ahead and forge onward. I wasn't going to let this fucking trailer park be the death of me. That's what I need to do now. I need to keep looking forward. I need to keep conquering. I am Julius Caesar. I am Genghis Khan.

"I'm taking her out on a date tonight," I tell her as I grab the oxygen tank and shut it off. I put it on the cluttered kitchen counter where her Mac-n-Cheese boxes and Spaghettios are sitting empty and rotting.

"You're going to end up in jail for fucking a teenager," Mom hacks as she tries to laugh at me. "You know what they do to your kind in jail, Teddy?"

"Yeah, I know," I tell her. I think everyone in this place knows what happens to pedophiles in jail. Thankfully, I'm close enough to Courtney's age that I don't think anyone here is going to bat an eyelash. Besides, this time will be different. This time I'll be romantic. I'll take care of her.

The moment anyone has ever found out that I work in a gas station or that I live in a trailer park, they immediately flee. They run far away and as hard as they can. That's why I lie to girls at the club. That's why I go to their houses or rent a hotel room that charges by the hour. The girl last night hadn't known who I was and we had a fantastic time. But I guarantee that the moment I would have told her that I lived in a trailer park, she would have pushed away from the bar and gone looking for someone who wasn't repulsive to her. I turn away from Mom and head for my room. I want to punch her in the face. No, maybe I want to punch myself in the face.

My room is dedicated to my limited wardrobe of nice clothes that I save for the club and interviews. One day, I might be lucky to get out of this place, and if that day comes, I need to look the part. Besides, girls like a guy in a three-piece suit. My clothes are the mask I wear to tell the world that I'm not as much of a failure as I truly am. No one gives a shit about a starving artist, living in a shitty trailer park with his dying mother. I live a lie and the world pretends to tolerate me. In fact, that's the best I can hope to receive from the world. The most I can hope to get is tolerance. I feel the sting of the words as I think them.

The rest of my room is dedicated to my dying craft. Art demands time and it demands constant attention that I can't give it. I haven't been able to enter myself into a competition, apply for jobs, or even send in a submission since I've moved back to Whispering Hills. Fuck, I'm a nobody again and this world is quickly turning its back on me. I'm going to have to go get another job immediately tomorrow, probably at a MacDonalds or a Burger Kings. I'm going to need something to keep on paying for Mom's medication that keeps her puttering along, drowning my hopes and dreams.

Who am I kidding? My ship has sailed.

What am I doing with Courtney? Forget all the shit about romancing her and treating her like the girl she deserves to be treated as. There's someone out there better for her. After this next year, Courtney is going to go off to college, just like I did. She's done well in school, I know that much. She can climb out of this place, unlike me. But while she's there, she's going to find some guy that actually treats her like she deserves to be treated. He's going to see how beautiful she is and he's going to give her the life that she deserves. Who am I to take such a beautiful flower given to this dark, harsh, and horrid world and keep it for myself? I'm just a greedy pervert looking to grab onto her before she goes screaming off into the night, bursting into a glorious, beautiful display that the entire world will relish and admire.

I look at my table full of half-finished drawings, doodles, sketches, and projects. There were several comic book companies looking at me. They weren't big, but they would have been a foothold into the business. I would have been great at it. Any position, really. But that was a future that was gone. That was a future that had vanished the moment I agreed to come home to Mom. My future, my hope, my world is gone now. I'm just left holding the empty sack like a sucker on Halloween, expecting there to be more. The world owes me nothing and I was a fool to think that I was good enough or privileged enough to be worthy of anything more than Whispering Hills.

In the next room, I can hear Mom hacking as I drop down into my swivel chair at the drafting table that I had purchased with my first paycheck in high school. I had always wanted to draw. I had always wanted to be great at something and once upon a time, I was. Opportunities come knocking once in a lifetime, but I was too stupid to grab on and ride the bull. I close my eyes and reach for the jar of pencils. Courtney will find someone better than me. They always do. Mom will be dead soon enough. What's the point of all of it? What's the fucking point?

10

I need a new hobby. Hell, I need a hobby. I sit on a couch that I've owned since I lived in my first apartment with Katherine, before we were even married. It's definitely seen better days. Looking at the old, worn coffee table covered in empty bottles, empty cups, and files upon files. This is my life now. I can't help but wonder if I should get a dog or something. Maybe a bird. A bird can be kept in a cage or something. But that's still too much work. Maybe I should just let mice come into the house. We could be roommates and they can distract me from all of this death and insanity.

I look over at the clock. It's only four in the morning. I didn't sleep at all last night. How could I? I'm rapidly losing all the ground on this case and I'm going to be dead in the water soon. Mendez isn't going to be happy with me. He's actually going to be pissed when he finally gets ahold of me. I hope that I can keep on the move for a while longer, just until I actually get something substantial. I need something for him to sink his teeth into, to give me a little more slack on this one. I know that it's asking a lot, given the current circumstances and I won't hold any of it against him when it doesn't pan out and he gives me his kid-brained version of an ass chewing of a lifetime.

Soon the sun is going to be up and I'm going to have to go back out there, looking for something to keep me busy while I avoid Mendez. So far, all I can hope for is chasing down Jenny Martinez's timeline. We know next to nothing about where she's been. The only thing the nerds in their lab coats could give me about her phone was that she'd received multiple texts from a Kendall Stein asking where she was late into the night. My main hope for later on in the morning was getting ahold of Kendall and finding out what she could tell me about Jenny's life. Until then, I'm left with a house full of ghosts to keep me company. Looking up at

the old grandfather clock Katherine had bought at a flea market, I'm reminded that the morning is not coming fast. Time is never on my side.

Laying out on the couch, I close my eyes and drift for a few minutes. I don't like staying up all night drinking and looking at dead bodies, but that's what the job demands of me most of the time. I imagine all of their faces, lingering before me like phantoms, calling out for my help, calling out for me to avenge them. They don't say anything to me. They don't even look at me. They lie where they've fallen and I'm left listening to the ghosts rattling through this house, asking me to come to their aid. But they're not alone. There's already enough demons saturating these walls to fill all of hell and I can't help but feel like my life has gotten too crowded for my own good. No. I don't like the bodies, but piecing together what happened to them... well, that has an allure all its own.

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When I open my eyes, it's light outside. It's not bright, but it's getting there. I must have slept for maybe a few hours, not much more than two. I look over at the grandfather clock and it tells me that it's just after six. Already it feels like it's hot outside and I hate this city a little. I wonder what it's like waking up and being absolutely frozen, utterly miserable because of the cold, instead of the heat. I suppose that I could go to Alaska once I retire, but I doubt there will be as many scantily clad women there as in Miami.

Getting off the couch, I grab a frozen breakfast sandwich and toss it into the microwave. My mouth feels like a broken, forgotten brewery. Holding my head under the sink, I fill my mouth with lukewarm water, swishing it around and spitting it back out before the microwave beeps. Taking out the scalding sandwich, I toss it onto a used plate and head for the bathroom. Before I step through the doorway, I turn around and head back to the fridge. I pull out a bottle of beer and kick the fridge door closed. The greatest invention I ever heard was the shower beer. I don't know how to explain it properly or what to put my thumb on, but there's something about a beer and the steam and the heat. Turning on the shower, I eat my breakfast sandwich and glare at myself in the mirror.

Considering my diet, I've taken pretty good care of myself. You can't chase down a runner or beat someone at a fight if you're not willing to put in some time and effort on yourself. I try my best to remain healthy, but there's nothing to do about aging. I can say as much as this, I look better than other men my age. I need to shave and I need to get a haircut, but I'm looking pretty good for all the years I've put in behind the shield. Maybe Miami will be nicer to me than this damned place.

I drink my beer slowly as I shower, letting the relief from a long night wash away with the shampoo and soap. There's nothing in this world that makes me feel like I should pull myself out of the shower, but I figure that if I'm going to find whoever is doing this, then I have to start somewhere. Stepping out of the shower, I barely dry off and make my way out into my bedroom and stand naked in the already sweltering heat. I swear, the water feels like it's evaporating off of my skin as I stand there.

Dressing, I take a moment to think about what I should do next. There's the sound of traffic outside that makes me remember that the day is already moving and I'm playing catch up. I wonder if anyone has tried to call me from the precinct

or if Mendez is there with a trap, ready to spring the second I walk through the door and sit down at my desk. I can picture him there in his Elmer Fudd attire. I finish tying my tie and make my way back to the office, or study, or whatever Katherine had called it when we were married. Now it's just a haven for mountains of books about pathology, psychology, and criminology. I've got volumes of law books that have been gathering dust over the years. I'm more interested in the forensics books. The less I need the nerds in their lab coats, the better I feel. I don't like being dependent upon people who don't have any stake in the cases I'm a part of. Sometimes, I feel like a walking encyclopedia that has never needed to be used.

I sit down at the desk, moving the files that I've stuffed in this room off the keyboard so I can pull up the computer. The screen turns on as the old machine begins to hum. I wait a moment while it boots up and click on the internet. I don't use this machine much. I haven't had a real reason to use it since it was given to me as a gift. All I know about the internet is that it's a trail for techs to follow and discover all of your dirty little secrets. I try as often as I can to avoid such trails. But I'm hoping Kendall Stein doesn't.

I pull up all of the social network fads that plague the world this day and age. What I discover on one of them is that Kendall Stein is rather well-to-do. She isn't on any of the older ones and she's only registered on two others. One of them offers me little to no information about her, while the other one is absolutely littered with information. None of her settings are private, so I get a full account of her—practically a welcome mat.

I search for any signs of Jenny Martinez and find multiple pictures of Kendall at the gym with Jenny where she worked. This is enough to convince me that they're friends. In fact, Jenny is constantly leaving messages and commenting on things that Kendall posts randomly and happily. While I'm looking through her pictures, I see that Kendall, like Jenny, is a girl that gets out quite a bit. She has plenty of pictures of her at parties and other various events where she's dressed to the nines and plays the part of beautiful, rich woman rather perfectly. I pause on an older picture from when she was in college. She's dressed as a slutty schoolgirl and I can't help but feel aroused. I follow her long, perfected legs up to her very short skirt and feel a darkness growing inside of me. There's a fine line between investigating and stalking, so I shut the computer off and head for the door.

Brushing my teeth as I drive, I spit out the window and rinse my mouth out with water, smiling at the rearview mirror before I pull up to the address that Owens sent me. Once more, Kendall Stein lives in a very nice apartment and I'm left wondering if anyone in this city even lives in houses anymore or if I'm one of the few remaining house dwellers. Her apartment is deep in the wealthier side of town and one of those apartment buildings that's built on top of three stories of shopping plazas and restaurants. I could only dream of living in one of these places. Hell, I wonder if any of them come down in their bath robes to get a carton of milk or something. I would, all the time.

When I find the apartment I'm looking for on an enormous registry hanging on the wall, I press the buzzer, hoping that she'll give me clearance to the elevator. There's no names, nothing to tell anyone who lives on what floor. It's the kind of elevator that goes up and opens onto a small common area with four doors to

choose from. I've been in the exact, identical building across the street once. A guy killed his maid after he found out that she was stealing from him. He was a paranoid, reclusive type. Not that that justifies him doing it or anything.

I press the buzzer again.

"Hello?" a voice asks over the intercom and I pull my sunglasses off, as if she can see me. I stuff them into my breast pocket.

"Hello," I clear my throat away from the microphone. "My name is Detective King, I was hoping that you'd be willing to answer a few questions for me."

"Could you hold your badge up to the camera?" The woman sounds distraught, like she's been bawling for days now, even before all of this happened. I look around, searching for where the camera is. There's a small green light on next to a glossy, black hemisphere, so I reach into my pocket and hold up my badge for her to see. "No, sir, its right in front of your face," she coaches me. I quickly hold the ID up to the camera that is apparently right in front of my face and wait for a second. "Okay, come on up," she sniffs quietly before the elevator doors open.

"Thank you," I say before entering the elevator. The button next to the number seventeen is illuminated and I press it, waiting for only a moment until the doors close softly. The elevator looks nicer than any elevator that I've ever been in, except for the one across the street. But honestly, I don't remember theirs being so nice. Maybe they've got a leg up on their sister building.

When I reach the seventeenth floor, the doors open with a soft ding, ending the concerto that's been softly playing for my listening pleasure. I step out onto a faux marble flooring that is pretty hard to decipher as fake. All the doors look exactly the same and there's a tiny, ivory column between every white door frame with a potted orchid sitting on it in full bloom. The building maintenance crew here must be really good to keep so many orchids alive. I reach out and touch one of the petals, making sure it's real. It is.

One of the doors opens and a man steps out. He's the soft, nerdy kind of looking guy that I don't expect to see in a place like this. Rich boys usually have an entitled, self-important air to them that makes me want to kick them in the nuts. This guy looks like he should be serving espressos in the coffee shop sixteen floors down. He looks at me and gives a sort of solemn, sad smile that makes me wonder even more who the hell he is.

"Hi," he greets me awkwardly. "Kendall is inside. She's not taking the news very well."

"I'm sorry, who are you?" I lift an eyebrow, wondering if this is my mystery killer standing right here.

"Oh, Mason Gunn." The guy sticks out a hand and I take it immediately, gripping his hand like a vice. "I'm Kendall's boyfriend."

"Oh." I stare at him, wondering if I go into Kendall's apartment, am I going to find her dead in a pool of her own blood and this asshole racing down the elevator to escape me. "You mind showing me in?"

"Sure." Mason takes a step back into the apartment and while his back is to me, I flip the strap off of my Beretta. "Kendall, babe, that detective is here." He vanishes into the hallway. I make my way slowly after him. I can hear movement inside, and it's clearly another person. Is this going to be a really bad day?

“Okay, babe, you’re late,” I hear a woman’s voice. I can hear them kissing. “I love you,” she says to him in a way that makes me wish Katherine had said it in that way to me at least once. We were never that lovey to each other.

“Love you.” He sounds as smitten as a poet. “See you soon.” He turns and looks at me, my hand well away from my pistol. “I’ll give you two some privacy.”

“Thanks,” I nod to him as he leaves.

Waiting for me in the apartment is a woman that I would never leave alone in another man’s company. She’s wearing a nightgown that looks exactly like it does on all the magnificently lit Victoria’s Secret posters in the windows at the mall. But I highly doubt someone like her shops at somewhere so pedestrian as Victoria’s Secret. She’s got to be a boutique, secret Parisian fashion shopper. Her legs are sneaking out of the bottom of the black nightgown and it looks more like lingerie to me than sleep wear. She slips out of her short, thin, gray robe and stands up from the couch to greet me. She looks like a woman who needs to be respected, but also treated like a woman. I shake her hand and stare into her piercing, azure eyes. Locks of her long, black hair hang down from a messy bun that’s barely containing her mane. She smiles sweetly at me, but it’s a hurt smile. Her eyes are red and puffy and even without make-up, she’s beyond a ten.

“I’m Detective Steven King,” I introduce myself.

“Like the writer,” she smiles. God, I’ve heard that more times than I can count and I swear that one day I’m going to pistol whip someone who wisecracks about it. I keep it hidden pretty well, how annoying it is, but she catches on pretty quickly, even without my hints. “Sorry, you must hear that all the time.”

“Not as often as you’d think,” I lie.

“Sorry, I’m such a mess.” She leads me to the living room where I drop down onto a chair that doesn’t even look like it was designed for people. I worry for a moment whether it even is a chair, or if I just sat on something decorative. “Poor Mason has been so patient with me.”

“I’m sure it’s understandable,” I shrug.

“What can I do to help?” she asks me with sad eyes. “Jenny was such an amazing person and there’s no way this was her idea.”

“Why do you say that?” I furrow my brow. Does she so eagerly and obviously not think it was a suicide either? Or did Owens and his goons get to her and plant this in her mind.

“Because there was nothing wrong with her,” Kendall says with a firm, unswaying tone in her voice. “I saw Jenny every day at ten in the morning and we texted each other all through the day. I swear that I spent more nights with her over here than with Mason. That girl was a rock. Nothing ever got to her and I made sure that she never felt like a pet hanging out with me. Some people get insecure when they start spending time with me. They think there’s a gap, but Jenny wasn’t that way. She was very confident in herself.”

“From what we’ve discovered,” I reach into my breast pocket and pull out a notepad, “She recently broke up with a Charles Murphy?”

“Yeah,” she nods and wipes a tear from her eye. “That asshole cheated on her with his boss’s assistant. She wasn’t taking it well, but it wasn’t like she was moping around. She was getting back out there. She didn’t want to linger on the past.”

“From what her neighbors said,” I look at Kendall’s leg and resist the urge to reach out and run my hand up her inner thigh and finding what treasures lurk beneath, “Jenny was home with a different guy every night.”

“Recently,” Kendall nods slowly, as if she’s ashamed of it. “I tried to stop her from behaving recklessly, but she was hurt. She wanted to get back at Charlie, so she started sleeping around. She was coming around, though. The last time I saw her, I pulled her off some creepy guy in the bathroom.”

“Do you have a description of him?” I grab a pen from my pocket.

“Average height, skinny, bleach blond hair.” She leans back on the couch and I look up at her flat stomach under her silky gown. “He dresses like a total sleaze ball and I’m pretty sure he’s selling drugs. We were at The Office and every time I go there, I see him lurking around.”

“I’ll check him out.” I finish writing down the note. “Was he the guy she went home with?”

“I don’t think so.” Kendall rubs her forehead. “She was checking out some guy at the bar. He was tall, lean build, dirty blond hair, a short, stubble beard that guys are all about right now. He was wearing a gray three-piece. He was handsome. Actually, he was an upgrade to all the others she’d been sleeping around with.”

“Maybe the bartender will know him.” I write down the guy’s description.

“They’re saying that it was a suicide.” Kendall looks at me with red eyes. “Do you think it was a suicide?”

I’m hesitant to answer that. According to Whitman, Jenny killed herself, but I’m not sure that there wasn’t someone else in the room whispering in her ear. But, what if I’m wrong? If I’m wrong and I tell her that I think it was a homicide and I turn out to be a dumbass, then she’s going to be pissed and hurt even more. I look at her and feel a knot twisting inside of my stomach. “I’m not sure yet,” I tell her. “Some things aren’t adding up.”

“I know that she wouldn’t do this,” Kendall pleads with me.

God, I want to slip her out of that gown and just look at her. She would hate it if she knew that was what I was thinking about right now, but I can’t help it. I wonder if she still has the slutty schoolgirl outfit. That would be a little too perfect, actually. I look her in the eyes and swear to her. “I’ll do everything that I can,” I promise her and that’s the truth.

“Thank you,” she answers.

She suddenly rises and I rise with her. Rushing to a table near the door, she grabs a pen and writes something down on a notepad and hands it to me. I take it from her and look at the seven numbers and wonder how many men out there would kill for this phone number. How many men would kill Mason just to get that number?

“Call me if you find out anything?” she says softly.

I feel like reaching out, pulling her close, and planting my lips on her soft, crimson lips, kissing her deeply. I resist again. “You got it,” I tell her.

“Thank you,” she says as I turn to the door.

Standing in the elevator as it slowly takes me back from the heavenly home of the gorgeous beauty named Kendall Stein, I feel something vibrate in my pocket. I reach down, expecting a text from someone at the precinct. I stare at the phone

with a cold sense of terror in my stomach. Somehow, between the time I entered Kendall's apartment and left, lost in that haze of information download and extreme horniness, Owens called me twice and left a voicemail. There's no way he would call twice and leave a voicemail if he was just trying to contact me to find out what news I've discovered. Something's happened.

11

I've seen a lot of places in this city that remind me of Whispering Hills. It's a trailer park that is its own contained form of a ghetto. A miniature society built within a stitched together network of self-sustaining, governing miniature societies that make up the outskirts of the city, surrounding all the happy, well-to-do and the rich people. This is where the angry, broken, beaten, and worn go to hide out for the rest of their days. It's the dark part of the city that everyone avoids or just passes through if they have to. No one likes these places, especially me. I've spent too much time in dusty, hot places like Whispering Hills, leaning over dead bodies. This is where you get shot because you looked wrong at your neighbor.

I pull up behind a squad car that's parked right in front of an old, sun-faded billboard with a smiling, happy cowboy over the name of the trailer park. I wonder if this place is inhabited with smiling, happy cowboys or if that's false advertising. I stop the car and wish that I was back questioning Kendall Stein. At least there was aesthetic appeal all around there. I could admire the people and the décor. Here, I'm stuck with dust, tumbleweeds, and strange looking people who gave up on life long before the race really started. I step out of my Shelby and wonder if I'm going to be missing my tires when I come back.

A uniform steps toward me and holds up his hand, I flash him my ID. He looks at it thoroughly and head deeper into the trailer park. People are standing out on their makeshift porches looking south to where a tangle of cop cars are parked and yellow caution tape is stretched out in a perimeter to keep prying eyes away. There's a woman with curlers still in her hair and in a nightgown that looks more like a tarp she'd purchased at some big chain store. She looks at me and I try really hard to figure out who still wears curlers in their hair. In fact, who still lives in a trailer park? She looks at me with her toad-like face and I give her a nod. She just stares at me, as if she thinks I can't see her. I give up trying to communicate with the locals. Scotty, there are zero signs of life down here.

I pass a uniform who is interviewing a man with a mullet and a denim jacket with the sleeves ripped off so that his tattooed arms can bask in the glorious light of the sun. He looks at me with a sunken-in, worn looking face before he spits to the side and starts answering the uniform's questions again, pointing back toward the entrance of the trailer park and across the street to a red and white gas station. I look back at the trailer I'm heading for and I catch the sight of a beautiful, blonde girl being questioned by a lady cop, since ladies generally begin gabbing. I never understood why women had to talk to women. It seems stupid.

The girl is something that screams out to my carnal, base desires and I immediately look away from her as she turns and looks at me. I pretend to be overly interested in a trailer near me and keep walking. I can't get distracted here like I was with Kendall. I need to be focused and on top of my game. This could be what saves me from the wrath of Mendez. Or, this could be the final nail in my elusive, avoidance coffin. I can feel the girl's eyes on me as I approach the trailer. The porch is covered in uniforms who are taking notes and discussing what they found inside with one another.

The trailer is a sea foam green that looks absolutely hideous and I wonder if the sun has faded it over the years or if they bought it with that color. The windows are dirty and unwashed along with most of the whole building. It's a dilapidated, terrible looking place and I wonder what it is that brings me here. What did Owens see here that I wasn't at this moment?

The screen door swings open and Owens appears, my salvation.

"What am I doing here, Owens?" I ask as I climb the steps and stand in front of him.

"You're not the only one who can do some detective work," Owens growls as he holds open the screen door and I immediately smell the stench of cigarettes, something rotting, and the humid disgusting presence of someone dying slowly. It doesn't take long for me to find the source of the odor sitting on a couch in the trailer's living room. She has an oxygen tank to her face, slowly breathing in at the request of the paramedics. She's a fat, squatty thing and she looks like the cancer is kicking her bloated, yellow ass over and over again.

I follow Owens and another paramedic into the back room, past the bathroom and where the woman sits watching us. They push open a door and I'm immediately greeted by something that looks like it's a statue or prop for some sort of horror movie, definitely having something to do with a voodoo doll. There's a man who has a short, dirty blond beard, messed hair, and a face that looks pretty handsome, but it's hard to tell from all the gashes and blood running across his face. He's wearing black slacks and a red polo. I immediately picture the gas station across from the trailer park. His body is riddled with pens, pencils, and an enormous pool of blood is underneath his chair.

"Who the fuck is this?" I ask with a confused look on his face.

Owens gestures behind me. I turn and see a closet that is full of nice clothes, something that I didn't expect to find in this hellish place. I almost instantly see a charcoal gray suit. Pulling my latex gloves over my hands, I reach out and turn the shoulder of the suit on its hanger and see that it is indeed a three-piece. Shit. This is the guy.

"Theodore Martin," Owens introduces me to the dead body. "Everyone seems to know him as Teddy. He dropped out of college to come home and work across the street at a gas station to help pay for his mother's medication."

"That seems to be working out well," I grunt. "What does she smoke? Eight packs a day."

"I'm guessing a full carton," Owens looks through the doorway at the fat, sickly hag. "Anyway, a girl outside talking to Trina says she was supposed to go out with him last night, but he never came to the door. She figured he'd ditched her and went home for the evening. From what the paramedics have told us, it looks like

he stabbed thirty four pens and pencils into him at various spots then took an x-acto knife to his face before he finally bled out.”

“Jesus.” I look at the dead man as the paramedics slowly take him from the chair and place him in a body bag. He looks like he was tortured. He looks exactly like what I would expect a victim to look like. “How did you find him?”

“When I talked to Kendall Stein.” Owens turns and looks at me. “Fine piece of ass, right?”

“Definitely,” I nod.

“Anyways, she said they’d been to The Office,” Owens says. “She also gave me a description of Teddy. I went to the bar, asked around and the bartender gave me his name. We came here to question him, thinking that he was our guy. The mother shouted for him to come out of his room, and when we kicked in the door, we found Teddy here like a pin cushion.”

“Jesus,” I whisper again.

“But that’s not all,” Owens continues to enlighten me. “Turns out Teddy had a run in with the law yesterday. He was robbed at gunpoint at his job and then decided to quit shortly after. The girl outside witnessed the whole thing.”

“So what’s the theory?” I ask Owens, folding my arms.

“Not a fucking idea,” he answers with a dazed and lost look on his face. “But whoever killed him, must have known about Jenny Martinez. Maybe it’s a vengeance kill.”

“Were there any other detectives called out?” I turn and look out the window where the blonde girl is being questioned.

“Some boys called in a few favors,” Owens answers. “You’re the only one who caught this. But Mendez is going to know. Your ass is officially on the chopping block, but at least you’ve got something now, right? I mean, this has to be something.”

I hope so. God, I hope so. Turning to the drawing table, I look at the message Ted decided to leave behind for those he’d left. It’s drawn out in charcoal and it looks like it was written in the hard hand of a maniac. It reads: *‘I’m sorry I’m such a big disappointment and that I never lived up to your expectations. I just wanted you to love me. –Ted’*. His name looks alien, foreign to his own hand. I watch them zip up the body bag and I decide that it’s time for me to get out of their way. I hesitate a moment on whether or not I should question the mother, but she looks like she’s about to die herself. As I turn and head outside, I hear the paramedic call out that she’s fainted. I roll my eyes and head toward the blonde.

This is a girl that’s going to be hard to resist. She has the face of an angel and the body of a goddess. She’s wearing a leather headband with flowers on it and a low cut shirt that shows off her stomach and a glittering piece of jewelry on her belly button. I look at her and wonder what sounds she makes when she’s having an orgasm. She looks at me with sad, horrified eyes and I can’t help but feel that she’s already soiled. There’s no more magic in the world. Right now, she’s learning that suffering and agony is all that there is for the living.

“Detective Steven King.” I hold out my hand and she takes it gently. I try not to squeeze her hand too hard.

“Like the writer,” she smiles weakly.

Okay, I fucking hate that joke. “Sure,” I grin playfully, trying to ease her suffering. I look at the uniform that I interrupted and give her my permission to get the fuck out of here. She looks at me angrily and decides to move on. “You witnessed the robbery that Ted was a part of?” I ask her softly, trying not to sound too professional.

“I did,” she nods.

“What was your name, sweetheart?” I ask her, reaching into my pocket and pulling out an old tissue I’ve been saving for a moment like this. I look at her as she takes it, wondering if I’m going to meet a gorgeous redhead before the day is over. I’ll be complete.

“Courtney,” she answers.

“Well, Courtney,” I pull out one of my business cards for her and hand it to her. “I know that this is a tough time for you, but if you need to talk to anyone or you just need someone there for you, feel free to call me any time.”

“Don’t you want to ask me questions?” She looks up at me with a confused look on her face.

No, I want to fuck you, I wish I could say. “After a while, if you can think of anything that might tell me who did this, give me a call,” I say gently to her, confident and strong. “Until then, Officer Trina has gotten everything that I think I will need.”

I look over her body from behind my aviators one last time and shake her hand, feeling how soft and smooth her skin is before leaving the crime scene. I can feel my phone vibrating and that means Mendez is on the hunt. I decide that I can no longer hold onto running. I have to go see him. I have to lay all of this out for him. This morning, I had nothing, but now, I have something. I don’t know how Jenny knew Lola Maretti, but I’m certain that if we start digging, we’ll find out the connection. The killer knew Jenny, then moved onto Ted. Why kill Ted? Was it because he’d heard Ted talking about how depressed he was at The Office? Maybe that’s the connection. Maybe the killer lurks in public places, listening to conversations and selecting his victims that way. God, I don’t know. All I know is that I need to contact Robbery to find out who they’re looking at for robbing Ted. Maybe that was just a test run for the killer, but Courtney had been there to fuck it up. He wanted this all to look like a suicide, so he needed no witnesses there to contradict him.

It takes over an hour to get back to the precinct and I would feel like I’m a man on death row taking the long march up to the electric chair as I step out of my car and approach the building, but my days are already numbered. As I walk, I feel the weight of this coming storm all around me, the electric sensation in the air makes my neck tingle. This is going to suck, big time. I’ll just have to try my best not to punch the fucker in the face. As I open the doors, I’m nearly ran over by a uniform that approaches me. She looks like a boot and she’s way too pretty to be an officer. Why isn’t she modeling somewhere? We don’t need beautiful beat cops. I look at her dark, chocolate colored hair and feel slightly disappointed that it isn’t red.

“Detective King?” she asks me, but she knows exactly who I am, long before she ever asks me. All I do is nod at her, not willing to play this game. “I’m supposed to escort you to Chief Mendez’s office. He has some questions for you.”

“What a surprise,” I sigh. I stick out my hand for her. “What’s your name, officer?”

“Cindy Turner,” she answers, shaking my hand with a strong grip.

“You don’t get points for kissing ass here,” I tell her.

She takes me all the way up to the bull pen and as I enter, I can feel dozens of eyes watching me silently as I pass my desk where there’s a detective sitting on the opposite side of it reading the newspaper. He looks up at me and I can see that he’s waiting for me, but he wasn’t expecting me to be escorted to the Chief’s office. He stops from rising up and catching me and just looks back at his newspaper as Officer Turner leads me straight to Mendez’s office and lets me enter.

Mendez is sitting behind his desk like the emperor of some evil dark dominion that I’ve trespassed into. As I sit down, Officer Turner closes the door and I sit there in silence for a moment. I’m not scared, I just don’t want to do this. I don’t have the patience. Whoever is sitting at my desk right now might have a clue as to what I’m dealing with here. Instead, I’m stuck with Mendez, dealing with his bullshit.

“Care to explain to me what you’re doing?” Mendez asks me after signing a piece of paper and putting it onto a tray that I’m guessing his assistant will be taking care of later. He folds his hands and looks at me, waiting for a response. I look at him with a maelstrom of answers whirling around inside my head like a game show wheel, waiting for my mind to land on one.

“Filling the time,” I say elusively.

“By taking cases from some of my best detectives?” Mendez says with the full amount of piss and venom that he can muster. “By taking the coroner’s office’s best doctor and distracting him with a suicide case that you’ve labeled as a homicide? What the hell are you doing, King? You’re wasting man hours and resources on suicides.”

“I don’t think they’re suicides.” I shake my head.

“So a couple of assholes get fed up with life and decide to take themselves out in a dramatic way.” Mendez tosses up his hands showing that he doesn’t give a damn about any of it. “So what? People kill themselves all the time and they try to make the people they leave behind feel bad or guilty about what they did or didn’t do for them. You’ve seen it a million times.”

“Sure, once or twice,” I say, but honestly I can’t recall a time where someone stabbed over thirty pens into his body to kill himself. “But that’s over the course of a career, Mendez. Why have three people in the past week killed themselves in bizarre, unnatural ways and decide to leave vague, cryptic messages for the living? What’s that all about? Huh? That shit doesn’t just happen, Mendez. And now two of them are connected. I caught one this morning that was with my previous victim the night before she killed herself.”

“This is circumstantial bullshit, King,” Mendez shouts. “Your Martinez girl was so high and drunk when she went home that Martin practically raped her. He goes home, feels terrible about hearing that she’s killed herself, he decides that he’s a piece of shit and takes himself out. Simple as that, why are you making it more than that?”

“Why are you simplifying it?” I shake my head. “Nothing’s that cut and dry.”

“Suicides tend to be,” Mendez shouts.

"These aren't suicides," I snarl at him. "Not until I sign off on Jenny Martinez and Ted Martin."

"You're off those cases, Steven," Mendez shouts at me. "I assigned Redman to them and he's already signing off on them as suicides—as we speak. There's no evidence here to point to homicide."

"It's not about the evidence," I shout back at him. "It's the logic of it all."

"Get the fuck out of here with that bullshit." Mendez waves me out. "You sniff around another suicide and try to make it a homicide, I'll have your ass on suspension before you can blink. I mean it, King. I'll have your ass out of this building for the next three weeks just to make sure you're not fucking around any more of my crime scenes."

"Go ahead, you incessant puke." I stand up from his chair. "Before your suspension even gets typed up, I'll already be retired."

I slam the door to his office and feel the magnitude of every eye on this floor staring at me as I storm back to my desk. I walk past the black guy in his tan suit and drop down at my desk, not saying a word to him as I look at the black, blank computer screen, deciding if it would be worth it to put my fist through it. I hear the man across from me clear his throat as I'm picturing everything I want to do to Mendez right now and I look over at him as he folds up his paper.

"I was contacted by an Officer Owens," the man says after clearing his throat. It's like he has a magical power, because while he starts to talk, everyone in the bull pen goes back to work, ignoring me and the little tirade that they got to listen to, no doubt. He hands me a file. "I'm working the case at the Stinker Station across from Whispering Hills," the man says to me. "Detective Peter Carson, Robbery."

I look at him, silently glaring at him. Owens is really starting to be a pain in my ass.

"This is everything I have," he taps the file he put on my desk. "The guy we're looking for is a real amateur, but I was told that you might want a crack at him. He's driving a stolen car, but we got a good look at him once we started tracing his steps. He looks straight into an ATM camera. We contacted his wife, apparently he told her that he was away on business. We're not sure where he's at, but we have an APB out on him. We think he's going on a robbery spree."

"Or a killing spree," I sigh. Do I really want to do this right now? After Mendez?

"That's what Owens implied," Detective Carson answers.

12

I dump the car in a Walmart parking lot. Pulling my hood up, I step out of the car and stretch. I've been driving for four days and I can't say that it's been worth it. Everything feels strange. Since I pulled that gun out and ran into that first gas station, I've felt like a different man. That was a road that I'd gone down that I don't think I should have. They say that we are our decisions, but somewhere I don't think that's necessarily true. I mean, I'm not a bad man. Desperate times

call for desperate measures. Everything will work out fine. I'm not a bad man. I just have to do what I have to do. I shouldn't feel ashamed for that. I do what I must so my family can survive.

Pulling the duffel bag out of the back seat, I've got enough money to pay the mortgage for two years and enough to pay all the other bills for the next three months. We won't be able to live like we used to, but there's enough here to survive. I've brought home the bacon. Becca will never have to know. She'll never have to know all that I've been through. I look at the duffel and I know that I'm going to be fine. This is going to be enough for us to endure. I'll find another job and we'll be fine. I keep telling myself this as I sling it over my back and toss the keys into the back seat. Locking the door, I leave it for the police to find. I filled it up for them. I hope they won't be too angry. All I did was put some miles on it.

I feel like a hunter, like a killer. I feel like an assassin walking in the shadows as I make my way across the parking lot, heading in the direction of home. I have quite a bit of distance, two, maybe three, hours of driving. If I'm lucky, I'll be home right when I told her the flight would be getting back. I'll be able to kiss her on the cheek and go check on Will and Jaime. I'll be able to sleep in my own bed, instead of the back of some car I stole. I'll be able to wake up and make pancakes and bacon and hash browns with the love of my life, instead of eating protein bars for the past four days. If I look at another energy bar I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Fishing my keys out of my pocket, I approach Becca's Subaru and unlock it, opening the door and dropping down behind the wheel. I smile and lean back in the seat and take in the familiar smell of Becca. God, I've missed her. I've missed waking up to her. I've missed being next to her at night, reaching over and feeling that she's there next to me. For over two months I've been lying to her, sneaking off to interviews and trying to find another job, but nothing has been working out for me this year. Things just keep getting worse and worse. But this is the end. Things are going to start getting better. I put the keys in the ignition and turn the key, listening to the Subaru start up without a moment's hesitation. It's time to go home. It's time to see my family again.

It had been Stephen's fault. Everything that had happened to me this year had been that jackass's fault. He was the one that Walter listened to when we were all telling him that the investments were bad. Like usual, they had tried to keep us all on for as long as possible when the signs first started showing, but that wasn't going to happen. There was no way that it was going to happen, according to Walter and his bromance with Stephen. But lo and behold, the investment fell through like a skyscraper crashing through a glass pyramid and so too did the company fall into the crater. Everything around us was gone and I was left holding my balls, crying on my shower floor, praying that God would give me something to save my family. But God never answered. God never answers.

So I had to take matters into my own hands. I took my father's revolver out of his case and told Becca that I was going to take a business trip that would take four days. I drove the Subaru to this parking lot, dumped it and walked four miles to the next grocery store. I waited for someone to start their car and leave it to return their shopping cart. That's when I stole it and started a four day robbery spree that was sporadic and strange enough that I don't think the cops picked up on it. I peel off my fake mustache and throw it out the window as I head for home.

I still need a job, but at least I can tell Becca that we'll be okay. I'll tell her that all this money is savings that I've stored up. I'll hide it in the garage with my dad's old carpenter tools. She never goes through that stuff. I'll put in four hundred a week until we have enough to get by.

Driving into the night, I wonder what Becca and our boys have been up to while I was gone. I hope they had fun. I hope she didn't worry about me or nothing happened to blow my ruse. I look into my back seat and see the suitcase I'd packed. I made sure to wad up all the shirts and make it look like I'd been wearing them. I even threw my old gym clothes in there to make them stink. I've planned this through. I've made all of it legitimate.

I'm not paying attention. I blink and look at the road as I'm driving, noting the odd halo of the headlights. I wonder what it's going to be like with Becca. This past year has been really hard for the two of us. She hasn't been happy with me since she suspected that I was having an affair. Thankfully Nora had been one of the first to be laid off when the business started to head south. She went back to Colorado and left me in the clear. Sure, I got texts from her every now and again, but I deleted them. From everything I can suspect, Becca has given up and has no clue. But that doesn't mean she's happy with me. I love her. I truly do. I had just been looking for more.

It isn't Becca's fault. Since Jaime was born, she hasn't been in the mood and when we do have sex, it's short and barely enjoyable. It's over in five minutes and that's it. Nora had been hesitant at first, but once I convinced her that no one would ever know, she'd been totally willing. But that had quickly backfired. The more time I spent with Nora, the more I wanted Becca. I missed her and to be honest, since cleaning up my act, I've never felt more in love with her. I'm just afraid to tell her that the company sank. I'm afraid that this will bring up all the distrust and anger that she has toward me. I don't want my marriage to crumble in my hands. God, I've screwed up. I realize I'm still not paying attention. I look up at the road again.

Slamming on the breaks as quickly as I can, my heart is racing, pounding against my chest like a rabbit bouncing as hard as it can to get out. I feel my stomach churn and my eyes widen as I let out a scream, rubber ripping against the road and the whole car lurching, trying to stop in time. I skid to a stop, staring in horror at the sight in front of me, or what might have happened in front of me. The car slides to a stop and I'm staring, maybe a few inches, from a little boy that's standing in the middle of the black, nocturnal road in nothing more than his footy pajamas covered in teddy bears. Breathing heavily, I look at the boy and realize that his eyes aren't open. He's just standing there, swaying, holding his little stuffed turtle in the middle of the road.

Opening the door, I step out cautiously, wondering if the boy is even aware of what just almost happened. I reach into the car and flip on the caution lights. The boy is covered in ochre light as I walk out into the road. There's nothing on the left side of the road, but on the right is a house behind a long lawn with a door wide open. I'm guessing that's where he came from. There's a light on upstairs in one of the windows and I know that whoever this boy's parents are must have heard me almost kill their child. Nervously, I stand there, afraid to leave him here in the

middle of the road. I'm afraid someone else will come around the bend and hit him.

"Caleb?" a woman shrieks, running out of the door. She's barefoot, in her night clothes, rushing to come and check on her boy. I hold up my hands as she starts shouting his name. "Caleb, honey, are you alright?"

"He's fine," I assure her. "He's fine. He's just sleepwalking." I try to lie so that I don't sound like a complete asshole zoning out as I'm driving down the road in the middle of the night. "I looked down to change the radio and looked up and almost ran right into him."

"Oh my God." The woman's eyes widen. Her hair is a mess. It looks like she's been sleeping for a while now and she's wearing a tank top and sleeping shorts. She's in pretty good shape for a mother. The boy, Caleb, is just around Will's age. Granted, Becca had Jaime two years ago, but she is still struggling to get the baby weight off. After Jaime, she sort of lost her motivation. She hadn't looked amazing when I got her pregnant for a second time, but Caleb's mom is definitely looking good. She's been working hard to keep the weight off. "Oh my God," she repeats again, hugging her boy. I'm pretty sure that this is the exact opposite of what she's supposed to be doing, but I don't say a word. I'm in no place to tell a mother how to react when I almost killed her boy. "Oh my God, thank you," she looks up at me. "Thank you so much. Oh God, thank you!"

She stands up and hugs me. I can feel her warmth as her body presses against me and I feel ashamed for being so greasy and disgusting from not showering for three days. I miss having someone touch me. Becca hasn't hugged me like this in a very long time. That's because she probably can't stand the sight of me most of the time, but it still feels wonderful to have someone actually touch you like you're a human being. I hug the woman back and I look down to little Caleb, who is finally starting to come around.

"Oh my God," the woman says again into my ear as she starts to laugh. "Who are you? What's your name? I have to send you something—a card, a gift basket, something to thank you! Oh my God, you saved my little boy."

"No, really," I shake my head. "I'm sorry I almost hit him."

"Mommy?" Caleb mutters, rubbing his eyes and looking around. I can feel for him. He must feel like he fell asleep in the middle of a war zone with everything that's happening and the way his mother is reacting. The woman steps back from me and immediately reaches down and scoops up her boy. She's laughing and covering his face in kisses. For the first time in a very long time, I feel like I've done something right. I feel like I've actually done a good deed, especially after the past four days. I forgot what it was like to feel like a good guy, to not feel like the guy who keeps screwing everything up.

"It's okay, sweetie." Caleb's mom kisses his face again. "Mommy's here, Caleb. Don't worry."

The boy isn't crying. He looks confused and scared, but he's not crying. He looks at me with a disturbed, haunted look on his face, as if he can see the things I've done. Maybe he can. Maybe he knows that I'm a piece of shit and doesn't want his mother anywhere near me. Maybe he's smarter than most people that way. Maybe he knows exactly what I am and doesn't want a thing to do with me. Maybe this was God's punishment for me robbing all of those stores. What if I was

supposed to kill the boy and go to jail because I'm a terrible father, a horrible husband, and an all-around worthless human being? I look at the boy who stares at me, pale faced, wide eyed, and haunted. I know that he knows what I am. He sees something that he doesn't like.

"Please, sir," his mom looks at me with teary eyes. "Let me get your name and address. Let me do something to thank you."

I shake my head. "No," I say calmly, "don't worry about it. Maybe take him to a sleep specialist or something."

"Definitely," she says with a breathless tone. "My God, thank you so much."

"You're welcome." I reach up and pat the boy on the shoulder. He flinches and draws away from me, not trusting me and instinctually afraid of me. I'm not sure why, but he doesn't like me touching him. I almost feel ashamed for having reached out to touch him, but as my hand touches him, I realize the ordeal is over and I'm exhausted. I feel tired and worn. I feel useless and worthless. I didn't save this boy's life. I just stalled the inevitable. What if he wanders out tomorrow and gets hit by a drunk driver or a mom of five on her way home? Who is to say that I've done something good here? Fate is fate.

The boy looks back at me, unafraid, like he's suddenly fine with me. Maybe patting his shoulder was all I needed to do to remind him that I'm okay, that I'm one of the good guys. He looks at me and blinks a couple of times before turning to his mother and wrapping his arms around her neck and hugging her, burying his face in her hair. She smiles and laughs.

"Thank you, again," Caleb's mom says to me with a bright, grateful smile.

"My pleasure," I say before returning to my car and dropping into the driver's seat. I watch them walk up to the house and shut the door. The lights of the entry room illuminate the windows and when I'm confident that they're inside safe and sound, I put the car in drive and head home. My heart is racing and my eyes are alert. I don't want that to happen again.

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When I get home, I click the garage opener and the light inside the garage snaps on as the door slowly draws up. I feel sick. I feel terrible, honestly. There's something wrong with me, not health-wise, but down in my core. There's something deep and sick with my soul. It feels like I've got a plague. As the door rises up, I feel my heart slipping free and crashing into my stomach, shattering my organs on the way down as I see that the minivan is gone. This isn't right. Where is Becca?

Pulling into the garage, I suddenly have a million scenarios racing through my mind. I had been so safe, so clever. I'd worn fake eyebrows, a fake mustache. I'd done everything I needed to so I could get away with this. But maybe it has nothing to do with me. What if the kids were sick and she's at the hospital? What if she went to the airport to surprise me and I'm not there? I feel like my stomach is full of quicksand and I'm slipping into nothingness. I step out of the garage and rush to the door, hitting the garage button as the door slides down.

"Becca?" I shout, entering the house. I'm nervous and terrified. Something is very, very wrong.

I walk into the dining room and I see a piece of paper sitting on the counter and I feel a cold sweat creeping over my brow. It's like a thousand spider eggs have burst inside my body and they're now climbing out, biting me all over until I'm numb with fear poison. I slowly approach the dining room table and look at the note. There's something seriously wrong. I know it in my bones. I look at the table and stare down at the piece of paper, reading it out loud to myself.

'Chad'. I swallow hard. This isn't good. 'The cops stopped by with your picture. They say that you robbed a bunch of places. How could you? How could you lie to me about everything? I don't want to hear your excuses. I don't even want to see your face. I want you out of here. If you know what's right, you'll turn yourself in. Do the right thing for once in your life. Don't bother looking for us. I'm taking the boys and we're going someplace safe. Becca'.

I can feel the tears burning down my cheeks as I hold the letter with trembling hands. My tears splatter against the paper, smearing the words, staining them into unrecognizable blurs as my quivering fingers contort, twist, and constrict against the paper, wrinkling and crinkling it. How could she do this to me?

How could I do this to me?

That's the question. I turn and look back at the garage. I should go after her. I should give chase. If I don't give chase, then I should definitely run. I should run away, as far as I can. I should take the money I have and start over. The police will give up eventually and I have more than enough to start over somewhere remote and far away. No. I can't leave my family. I've failed them. I've failed all of them. I turn back to the garage, taking heavy steps as I go, my heart sinking into oblivion with each step that I take. In the olden days, a samurai who betrayed his family would fall on his sword.

I hit the garage door button and the light comes back on as the door opens. I should have done this a long time ago. I should have done this when I first slept with Nora. I should have given up on everything. There was no future for me, no hope. There never was. There never will be. I'm the space between the lines where life is written out for everyone. College, paying my dues, getting married, and having kids. I'd done all the right things. I had walked the path that so many other people had over the years and yet, here I was. I'm standing in a garage, in a house that's emptied and abandoned, waiting for the cops to come and get me. How much of my life is gone now? How will I ever get it back? How will I ever make amends for this? I have disgraced, dishonored, and ruined everything that I have ever hoped to accomplish over the years. I am a worthless, terrible human being.

What have I been doing for the past four days? I've been casing gas stations, small restaurants, and grocery stores. I've been stealing from those who were doing the same thing as I was. What made me better than them? Did I even have a soul anymore for the things that I've done? Were they going to rape and beat me in jail? I'm too soft for jail. I've never been a fighter or strong. I've always been manipulative and weak. They're going to destroy me. But what will be waiting for me when I get out? My parents will disown me, my wife will never speak to me again, and the judge will take my children away and hand them over to Becca. She'll take them wherever she wants to. I'll never see any of them again. I'll be left alone in the world, abandoned and hopeless.

I look over at my father's carpenter's tools. When he quit his business, he'd asked if he could store them at my place, since I have a three car garage. I had said yes, not expecting so much. This is the legacy of my father's labor. He had been a worker, a man who toiled with his hands to build something that mattered. Why couldn't I have done the same? He had done well by my mother, my sister, and my younger brothers. They were all successful, and I was successful. He set me on the right path, but I'm just a colossal fuck up. I had done everything right up until this past year. Why had I made the decisions that I'd made? Was my last good deed not killing a boy? Is that what I'm capable of? Not something great and heroic, but just something decent? The tears burn my cheeks as they race down to drip off of my chin. I am a worthless, terrible person. Becca and the boys will be better off without me.

Walking toward the mass of junk, workboxes, and other contraptions. I look at all the instruments that were needed to make anything from a rocking chair to a house. My father had everything for his trade. He had been a miracle man at all of this. I look at his circular saw and all of his knives he had used to carve and sever. I wish I could pick up all these tools. I wish I could pick up this hammer and I could start rebuilding my life. But I think I'm past that. I think that ship has sailed and I'm left here in an empty house, full of regrets, wondering what might have been. What's worth continuing on for? My children will never respect their criminal father. I don't even have a legacy anymore. God. Why does God never answer? Why are we all so alone in the end?

13

To be completely honest, The Office is the kind of high class club that's located specifically as a bridge between worlds, which usually means that it's there for cheap drug traffic. Vice doesn't hide anything from me when I give them a call asking if they know anything about it. Meth, ecstasy, and pretty much anything prescription or medicinal. Of course, there's pot growing everywhere north of there, so it's always available. Since there's no actual territory that the club exists in, it's sort of a freelancers' paradise. In terms of homicide, it means that there's no one to directly point the finger at if someone dies on the premises. That's fine. I'm not looking for anything gang related. I'm looking for a stalker, a hunter.

It looks like an office building that's three stories high, put between another dive bar and a title loan building on the other side. It has a slanted title of the club on the side, and everything about it has a faux professional feeling to it. There's nothing here that looks like it's overly creative. At the entrance, there's some fake plants in pots and some dull carpet, but soon it becomes a hard, linoleum floor where the waitresses walk around in slutty office attire. It's almost schoolgirl, which bothers me, but not too bad that it's distracting. Everything about the place looks like any other generic, run of the mill club across the city. I'm not impressed.

One of the girls approaches me. She's an older blonde, probably in her thirties with wavy hair that falls over her shoulders. She's wearing a tight white shirt with the buttons opened to show her ample cleavage and a tiny, rolled up and tied back blazer that's more tacky than attractive. She's supposed to look and act easy for guys to be suckered in, to give her tips. She has a pretty enough smile, but it makes me wonder what's hiding behind it. I can imagine her at home with three kids, exhausted and tired of men treating her like a piece of meat. Isn't that what always happens to the women who work in places like this? Since it's so far away from the colleges or university, they have to pull from other women, fish for them at other businesses. "Hey, you look beautiful. Want to make excellent tips and have a fun time at it? I've got a new club opening up and I think you'd be perfect." Then they're suckered in for a while, just long enough to lure dumbass men into the club so they can hit on them, drunk or sober.

The bouncers are all gathered around a table, talking about sports and happenings at the club. They look over at me as the blonde approaches me. Her high heels click on the floor as she nears with her practiced smile on her face. "I'm sorry, sugar, but we're not open right now," she says to me with the kind of voice that makes me wonder why she's not running public relations somewhere. She has the tone down perfectly.

"I'm not looking for a drink," I say, showing her my identification. "I need to talk to your manager or whoever is in charge right now, specifically the owner if you can wrangle them up."

"Oh my." She looks at me and holds her hand to the base of her throat as if she's just seen a dead rat. "Is everything alright?"

"That's what I need to discuss with your employer," I state flatly, trying to encourage her to run along. She gets the hint and disappears. A muscular man at the bouncer table stands up, a Mexican, Indian, or Samoan who has enough tattoos to tell me immediately that he's done prison time. No doubt he had a similar conversation with someone that the blonde did. Only he was promised good pay to go beat the shit out of people. He approaches me with his head held high and I'm not sure what to make of him. He kind of looks like he wants to beat the shit out of me.

"Is there a problem?" he asks me.

"There is," I answer. "I need to talk to whoever is in charge of security around here."

"That's me," he answers flatly.

"What a coincidence," I smile, and show him my ID. "Mind if we have a chat somewhere? I also need to talk to your employer. Is he around?"

"Did you just send Brandie to go find him?" Mr. Security glares at me. I'm guessing that he gets a lot of crap for being a felon and also because there's drugs flowing through his club.

"I guess I did," I smile politely, not willing to take much more of his shit. "How long have you been out?"

"Nine months," he answers.

"Staying out of trouble?" I ask him pleasantly.

"Absolutely, amigo," he growls back at me.

"Oh, we're not amigos yet, hombre." I wonder if I should have brought back-up.

Before this roided out Mexican can rip me apart, a man in a pair of pressed, grey, pinstripe slacks comes walking out in glossy black shoes that probably cost more than my car. He's wearing a lavender shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a million dollar smile on his clean shaven face. He's the kind of man I picture snorting coke in the back room when Miss Brandie went to go find him. He smiles at me and holds out his arms like we're old friends. "Officer, what can I do to help?" he says in a voice that could rival Brandie's in annoying.

"Detective," I correct him, holding up my ID. "Two nights ago a man and a woman met in this establishment. Both of them are now dead. I need to know if anyone followed them from this location since this is where they first made introductions. Is there any way I could get your cooperation?"

"Do you have a warrant?" the Mexican asks me.

"Do I need one?" I lift an eyebrow.

"Of course not," Mr. Million Dollar Smile laughs pleasantly. "Don't mind Cheto, he's had some trouble with the law since I hired him. Troublemakers keep trying to sell drugs on the property and the police don't necessarily believe him when he says he's clean. I can vouch for him. Cheto was one of the finest investments I've ever made."

"Good for you," I grumble.

"We have one of the finest security systems that money can buy." Mr. Million Dollar Smile takes the lead and heads for the back offices where he'd appeared from like a ghost. We walk up a flight of stairs that overlooks the dance floor and the tables. "Have you ever visited our establishment during open hours?" he asks me.

"No," I answer. Why the hell would I ever come here?

Mr. Million Dollar Smile has an office that looks like he cares a little too much about design, fashion, and beauty rather than practicality. I feel like the majority of the people I'm dealing with on this case are like that. Who the hell told people to decorate like this? It looks like an insane person had a seizure and threw paint and random objects they found on the internet across the room. I'll never understand it, but once again, I'm in another office with another asshole.

"Can I offer you a drink?" he asks me.

"No thank you." I reach into my breast pocket and pull out the pictures of Ted and Jenny, placing them on the desk that Mr. Million Dollar Smile drops down into. "Do you recognize either of these people?"

"No," he answers. He looks up behind me where Cheto is standing. I'm fairly certain that Cheto will try to kill me if he is given the sign. I don't like feeling like a trapped rat. "Cheto, will you take this down to Chris and see if he recognizes either of them."

Cheto noiselessly takes the pictures and disappears out of the office doorway. As I look around the room, I notice that the overstuffed, leather couch in the corner and its ottoman are large enough that Mr. Million Dollar Smile no doubt brings girls up here from the club. This is his own private sex shack. I notice the ring on his left hand and assure myself that his wife is probably very proud of him. He looks at me with glazed over, stupid eyes with a dumb, frozen smile on his face. I look at him and feel like punching him in the face.

"So these two were murdered?" he asks me, cutting through the silence.

“Indeed they were.” I lean back in the leather chair facing his desk.

“Very odd,” he answers.

“They were,” I tell him. “They were killed and made to look like very convincing suicides.”

The man looks at me with a pale expression on his face. “That’s peculiar.” He looks like his veneer is cracking. I start to wonder if there’s something more here to Mr. Million Dollar Smile than I’m noticing. I look at his hands on top of the table and wonder if those hands recently stuck a bunch of pens inside of a twenty something year old.

The door behind me opens and I hear two pairs of footsteps enter heavily, making their way toward me. I look up and see an award-winning handsome guy who looks like there isn’t a whole lot going on behind his smoky eyes. I stare at him as he holds out the pictures to me. He’s wearing a tight black shirt and an apron, suggesting that he’s the bartender that Mr. Million Dollar Smile alluded to. He hands me the pictures and I take them.

“I remember the girl,” he says with a concerned look on his face. “She’s been coming in every night for the past week. She’s a hot piece of ass, but I noticed she wasn’t here last night.”

“What about the man?” I ask him, standing up from my chair so I can look the bartender eye to eye.

“Yeah, he comes in here a lot too,” the bartender nods. “His name’s Ted. He comes in looking for tail almost every night. I hear he actually lives in a trailer park. I hate guys like him. They show up and turn the place into a sausage fest.”

“I was told that the woman was seen with another man while she was here.” I take the pictures and place them back inside my blazer pocket. I look at the bartender who looks to Mr. Million Dollar Smile. They know I’m watching and Mr. Million Dollar Smile is on his best behavior. “I’m murder police,” I remind them. “I don’t give a shit about drugs or anything like that.”

“The guy’s name is Mikey,” Mr. Million Dollar Smile says to me with a grim look on his face. “He’s a piece of shit that comes into the club and tries to peddle pills to the guests. He’s trying to make a quick buck and if he’s not hurting or bothering anyone, we let him stick around. Why?” Mr. Million Dollar Smile looks at me and then his face melts from that jackass grin to a worried, scared look. “You don’t think he did it, do you?”

“I’ve got two victims that first met at this location,” I shrug. “If he was spending time with one of the victims and got jealous of the other, it might drive him to do something bad. It’s worth having a chat with him.”

“He lives about an hour away,” the bartender volunteers freely. “It’s a shitty little apartment complex off Abe Street.”

“Thanks for your time, gentlemen.” I look over at Mr. Million Dollar Smile who isn’t even looking like five bucks now. “I appreciate all you’ve given me here. I’ll see myself out.”

It doesn’t take long to find out that Michael ‘Mikey’ Jones does in fact live off of Abe Street in government subsidized housing. He’s on food stamps and various other programs and is working at a local Walmart thanks to a felon correction system that places felons in the workplace. From what I’ve heard from Owens, his network is already standing by to pounce on him if I find out that he’s behind it.

I'm not so certain that he is, but I'm interested in finding out. I pull into a neighborhood that has more pit bulls than children and stop at a duplex where Mikey is supposed to live. The lawn is dead and there's a bike laying out in the yellow grass like an ornament. Stepping out of my car, I look around at the faces staring at me. Most of them are what you'd expect to find in a trashy neighborhood in this part of the city. Racism is definitely still a thing, but Mikey proves that white people aren't exempt.

I knock on his door and when it opens, he's standing in a towel and stares at me like he's seen a ghost. "Michael Jones?" I take off my sunglasses and fish out my ID. "I'm Detective King, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Whatever you think I did." Mikey is trying to sound like he's black, no doubt trying to camouflage in with the environment that he's become a part of.

"Mind if I come in?" I ask him as I put my hand on his chest and push him back into the house and enter the property. I'm breaking the law, but I don't really care. Mikey might be able to get some cheap ass lawyer to scream a lot, but no one believes felons. No one gives a damn about them down at the department. The only one who might raise an eyebrow is IA, but I've given them nothing in the past five years, not even a sniff of trouble. Mikey is out of luck.

"Hey, this is private property, asshole," Mikey shouts.

"Asshole?" I punch him square in the face, feeling his cheekbone and teeth through his skin as I split his lip and send a shock of pain through my fist and wrist. It feels good to punch someone every now and again, especially criminal trash. "You're done for, Mikey," I tell him. Reaching into my pocket, I fish out Jenny Martinez and show him her picture while he scuttles away from me, his towel coming off as he squirms buck ass naked across the carpet. "Do you recognize this girl?" I ask him.

"Yeah, that's the bitch from my brother's club," Mikey shouts in horror as I take a few steps closer to him.

Brother's club? That would explain Mr. Million Dollar Smile's horror at me asking about Mikey. Poor bartender, he's probably out of a job right now. If Mikey is at the club pushing pills, his brother is probably setting him up with suppliers to cut the profit at the club. I'm going to let Vice know about Mr. Million Dollar Smile, since they're clearly clueless when it comes up about him. I reach into my pocket and pull out Ted and show him the picture.

"You recognize him?" I ask.

"Yeah," he nods, holding up a quivering hand to stop me from punching him again. "Yeah, man, he went home with that bitch."

"Did you follow them?" I read his face carefully. An entire career of reading the faces of assholes, criminals and scumbags has led me to this point and I know without a doubt that this guy is going to give me the answer I want, whether he says it or not. I look at his shaking face, the muscles contracting out of fear and curiosity. Am I going to beat the shit out of him and leave him for dead? Am I going to let him go? Am I going to arrest him? These questions fly around his mind, but all the while, his subconscious is an honest animal, incapable of lying to me.

"No, man," he says. I read instantly that he's telling the truth. "I was getting heavy with that bitch in the bathroom, fucking her brains out, and then some

other bitch comes in and took her away. Sure, I watched them for a while, but then that dude started hitting on her and I watched them leave together. I was pissed, but there's fucking pussy dripping all over my brother's joint. So I moved on to more profitable grounds."

"Did you see anyone else watching them?" I demand. This isn't going the way I wanted it to. Mikey was supposed to give me more. He was supposed to give me something that I could use. Hell, he was supposed to be a lying piece of shit that would give me the answer I was looking for. He was supposed to be their killer. Now, I realize that Mikey isn't even smart enough to get his own supply. He's a target for the police to shoot at while his brother makes off like a bandit in the night. Damn it, Mikey, give me something to work with here.

"No man." He squirms away. "There wasn't anyone interesting in that club and I would know. I keep my eyes open for everyone. I'm my brother's inside man. I see the things Cheto and his roided goons don't see. I'm their spy."

"Way to go, super spy." I stuff the pictures back in my breast pocket and turn toward the open door.

"Hey, what did you say your name was?" Mikey shouts after me as I walk across the dead lawn to my Shelby which is already drawing notice. That's the problem with having the best car ever made. It draws flies in places like this. It might as well be a big wad of cash driving down the road. I watch Mikey rush out the house, barely holding on his towel as I speed off down the street. If he goes to the station, he'll be able to describe my car, and anyone working the desk will know who it was that forced their way into his house and split his lip.

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Flipping open my phone, I pass a parked squad car and realize that they were probably back up waiting for me. I search through my contacts and give Owens a call. He answers almost immediately. "Owens, I need your web of spies to make sure a Michael Jones gets picked up," I tell him before he can ask if I got anything. "He'll be carrying pills or pot, one of the two. Anyways, hand him over to Vice. They'll be able to flip him."

"Did he have anything on the victims?" Owens asks.

I shake my head, already kicking myself for wasting the time. "Nothing," I say. "I got to go."

Before I can stuff my phone back in my pocket, I feel it vibrate. It's not a number I recognize but I figure that it might be worth checking out. I flip open the phone and hit the talk button, holding the phone to my ear. "King," I answer.

"Hey, King," a familiar voice says, but a name eludes me. Thankfully he pulls back the veil so I don't have to keep guessing. "Detective Carson, we found Chad Roberts. It looks like your pal Mendez is here. You should be getting a call soon."

"Thanks for the heads up," I furrow my brow. What could this be all about? And why would Mendez call me?

"You owe me one, King," Detective Carson says before hanging up. I'm racking up the favors lately. I need to stop that or I'm going to start building a habit of it. I go to put the phone in my pocket again and it starts to vibrate. Sure enough, like a fucking prophet, Carson was right. Mendez is calling me.

The last place I expected to be today was suburban America. I've been to ritzy high rises, trashy trailer parks, and dumpy ghettos, but this was the first time I've been called out to the breadwinners and the salt of the earth. I drive by their houses like they're alien domiciles, invaders from another world. Honestly, I can't tell what the fuck it is that draws them to this city. They're here like pioneers, trying to stake a claim to their part of the world and they only end up getting caught in the crossfire of the perpetual war that rages on like a tire fire up to the extinction of our species. There will always be crime in this town, and there will always be people living here who think that the crime came after they did. These are the people that blame the blacks or the Mexicans or the Asians. These are the people too deluded to see that they're the invaders setting up camp in the middle of the battlefield.

I pull up to the crime scene, late again, my ears still burning from Mendez's call. Hearing him ask for my consultation on a crime scene was as good as I was going to get for an apology. This was the prime showing for this killer. He's finally drawing the flies and the attention. I see media trucks set up, blocking my way to the house that's been blocked off. With Mendez out on the streets, there's bound to be media publicity. I see uniforms interviewing everyone in the surrounding houses who stand out on their lawns, holding their hands over their eyes as they peer up the street at the house swarming with uniforms and forensics teams. Whoever this killer is, we're on to him now.

I shut my car door and lock it, looking around at all the lingering souls, wondering if he's here among them. Is he watching me? I walk along the sidewalk, feeling the heat of the sun boring through my head, making me feel like I'm melting. It's so damn hot out here. People are going to freak out. So far, two of the victims have been white. That means that white people will draw action and publicity, because they're the movers and shakers in this town and for some reason, we all want white people to feel safe. But Jenny Martinez. She's Mexican, which means there are going to be Mexicans up in arms and defending themselves now. There are going to be shootings, lots of shootings. People are going to start dying, all in the name of self-defense or vigilantism. Gangs are always good for doing a little investigation of their own. They're great at shit like that. They start hunting and looking for who killed one of their own. Usually they start with the other gangs, the blacks, and then they start hunting the white gangs. Killers always see killers behind the masks of strangers. I know for a fact that killers do.

I show the officer at the yellow tape my badge and I step across it. This is hallowed ground, just like all the other crime scenes. I look up at the two story house, the white walls and the dark gray shingles on the rooftop. It's a happy house with a manicured lawn. There's nothing about this house that would make you think that something terrible would happen here. There's nothing about it that would make you think that you're unsafe or unwelcome. It's a place people

would call home. It's a place people live. I wonder if they thought it would come to this, ever in their darkest thoughts.

The investigation is taking place in the garage where a screen has been erected to keep the flocks of news crews at bay, and the peeping eyes of neighbors. A uniform holds back the opening flap and I step into the harsh floodlights that illuminate the scene. There are three detectives all standing around a body sitting in a wooden chair. I recognize the man from Carson's file. It's him, just without the wild eyebrows and the fake mustache that he'd been wearing.

He's sitting in a wooden chair with his head limp, hanging over the back of the chair like he's looking up at the ceiling, waiting for God to answer his prayers. His eyes are open and his mouth is slack. The only strange thing is that Chad Roberts decided that last night would be a good time to tie four belts to his appendages. There's a light belt at each elbow and just under each knee. It's strange that he accomplished all of this without any hands at the end of his arms. I look at the pools of blood, the gory instruments with which he removed his feet and hands, and the enormous pool of blood around the chair. His makeshift tourniquets did their job, but only for a while. Inevitably, he bled out.

For his feet, he used a hacksaw on his left foot, leaving it next to the jagged tears that removed his foot from his ankle. The white bone is sticking up through the serrated red flesh. His right foot was taken off with a chainsaw and on the far side of the room. It looks like he started with that one then hopped over to the chair. Next came the circular saw and his left hand which fell to the floor with a nice clean cut at the wrist. With only his right hand left, Chad turned on his table saw and sliced the last appendage that he didn't seem to want off and left it on the table in a pool of blood. From there, he seemed to just lean back in the chair and bleed out, peacefully.

Mendez approaches me with a plastic bag in his hand. He looks at me without saying a word. He read my file, everything that I had on this case. I left it on my desk for him to pick up if he ever decided to change his mind and I'm so glad that I did now, because that asshole knows I'm right. As he hands me the piece of paper, I look at the supposed suicide note that Chad decided to leave behind for his loved ones.

"He had a wife," I tell Mendez.

"We've contacted his family," Mendez answers. "A patrol car stopped by last night and found the lights in the garage on. When he called out to see if Chad had returned home, he called for backup and entered the premise under the pretense of hearing noises inside. That's when the officer, his partner, and two other officers discovered him in the garage like this. They say that he was still alive when they found him, but he died shortly after. They searched through the house and found this."

I look at the letter in the bag. It's wrinkled and crinkled, but on the back of Chad's final message to the world, there's another note. I read through it carefully and recognize where he'd cried on the letter. His wife had been contacted by Detective Carson about her husband's activities. She left him. Everything was over for Chad Roberts. He was done for. No wonder he decided to kill himself. I look at the letter and realize that there's nothing I could do to make this not look like a

suicide. Thankfully, Mendez is already on my side, because honestly, this is the first body I found that makes me think that it's actually a suicide.

On the back of Chad's wife's note, I read the message he left for the world. It's short like all the others, simple, and strangely vague just like the rest. *I'm sorry I wasn't the man you needed. I'm sorry I was a failure at everything. Chad.* Why do they always end like that? Why do they always end with the name and that's it? There's nothing here that shows a personal touch to all of the bloodshed he's caused to himself. Why would he feel so emotional about his failure that he'd give up on life and kill himself, but not write his wife and kids an apology? Nothing about these notes make sense to me.

"This one actually looks like a suicide," I say with a sort of sad, defeated feel to it.

"Except that it's the exact same method of the others," Mendez answers. "Two short sentences, a name, and a dramatic, horrific suicide. The coincidences are stacking up against these suicides. Had you not started poking around about this, I doubt any of us would have taken a peek into it. Thankfully, you've been such a pain in my ass, I had all suicide notifications sent through me. If a uniform found a suicide in this city, I wanted to be informed. This was the first one that popped up. Same MO as the others you listed in your report. Subtle, by the way."

"I thought leaving it out in the open would draw some curious eyes," I shrug. I shake my head at the peculiarity of all of this. "Lola Maretti ends up dead and no one has any clue if Lola knew Jenny Martinez. But, we know that Jenny Martinez had sex with Ted Martin the night before she commits her suicide. The following day, Chad here robs Ted on a four day theft spree, after which, Ted goes home and kills himself. Now, that night, Chad comes home, finds that his wife is leaving him because he's been made, and kills himself in the most unreasonable way conceivable. So either this is all a bunch of random coincidence, or someone is doing this. Someone has to have known the four victims."

"Except that other than the robbery," Mendez shakes his head, "our techs can't find a single way the four of them could have known of each other. Jenny and Ted hardly stand up as acquaintances. They were just a one night stand for each other."

"So how is the killer choosing his victims?" I furrow my brow. The killer can't just be following his victims around, choosing someone they come in contact with and randomly then deciding to kill them. That doesn't work because how could the killer murder Ted and then keep following Chad, who had evaded the police for days? So how was the killer keeping track of everyone? How was he staying on top of all of it? "I need to talk to his wife," I look around. "If the killer is targeting people that Chad has come in contact with, we need to know everywhere he's been since Ted Martin was killed."

"Ted Martin was killed yesterday and Chad robbed at least three places before coming home last night," Mendez shakes his head. "There's no way you're going to be able to piece together everywhere he's been and everyone he's come in contact with."

"Keep the techs digging," I say, heading back to the Shelby. "There has to be some other way that they all knew each other. There has to be a substantial connection."

I push through the flap and step back out into the sunshine that feels like it's judging me, glaring down with no forgiveness and bitterness. There's a dozen different voices talking and soon people start to catch on that I'm standing there. They turn and look at me, their eyes like those of hyenas, hungry for rot and death. They live off of the stuff. They crave it more than any meth head will ever understand. This is the fuel for the great big fear machine that runs the world. This is the media god's sacrifice, the blood of the innocent, the guilty, and the uninvolved. They don't care. Their apathy is your shame. They look at me with blood on their lips, eager for more.

"Detective," one man in a suit nicer than Mendez's shouts to me, "you've been spotted at multiple suicide scenes. Is there something that the police department isn't telling us?"

"Is there a serial killer on the loose?" a woman in a low cut shirt asks, giving her viewers something to jerk off to in the shower after their wives go to bed.

"Is there a connection between the recent murders on Charter Boulevard?" a faceless voice shouts from the back. I shake my head and push through them. I'm not commenting on any of this bullshit. I'm not going to let them stir up people at home with their speculations and their conjectures. I guarantee that violence will spike tonight because of all of these reports and tomorrow they'll criticize the city for not doing enough to protect their precious concerned citizens. I push through them all as they continue to shout their questions. They continue to follow me once I've broken through their swarm, but they break off, one by one, and head back to the yellow tape, waiting for Mendez to appear and give them their little scraps of food so they can go home happy to their producers.

I sit in the sweltering heat of my car a moment before I turn on the ignition. Dispatch still needs to get back to me with Rebecca Roberts's location. I think she went to go stay with her parents, if Carson knew correctly. I'll have a chat with her, see if she or Chad knew Lola, Jenny, or Ted. There has to be a connection that I'm not seeing. Maybe they all took the same community class together or checked out the same library book. I've caught killers doing stranger things in finding a method of killing their victims.

Looking back at the house, I'm feeling my first sense of doubt. What if Chad really did just decide to kill himself? What if he wanted to end it all because he didn't want to go to jail for God knows how long, only to get out an old man with no one waiting for him? His children would have grown up and moved on with their lives without him around. I can understand that. Chad has been the only one with a legitimate reason to kill himself. What if this all is just a series of terrible, random circumstances?

But you don't kill yourself with four separate saws. Chad had a gun, so why didn't he just use it on his empty head? Why not just blow his brains out and be done with it? Why go to all the painful work of making yourself suffer needlessly when you just want to end it? Chad wanted all the pain and the suffering to end. He wanted an escape from the inevitable, but at any point through his dismemberment process, the police could have arrived and ruined the party. No. Even if you have the inspiration to kill yourself, you do it before anyone can catch you and stop you. Chad would have used the gun. Someone else made him use the saws.

Tomorrow is my birthday. Six has been a good year. It has been the best year so far. Mommy says that when I'm seven, I'm officially a big boy. She says that I'll be able to stay up a whole quarter hour later. I'll be able to stay up until eight-thirty. I don't know what eight-thirty is, but I'm pretty sure that it's much later. A whole quarter later. I look at the tape in my hand, running my fingers on the sharp, jagged part. It hurts when I press too hard, so I try to keep my fingers away from it. But every time I pull out the tape and try to tear it off, my knuckles rub against it. I look at the tiny white strips of skin sticking off my knuckle. What is skin?

"Can I have another one, sweetie?" Mommy asks as she looks over at the TV. She's always staring at it. I'm not allowed to watch TV for more than an hour a day, but Mommy watches a lot more than me. She says that it's because she's a grown up and a mommy. Mommy doesn't like it when I ask her too many questions. I pull out the tape and tear it off, my knuckles scraping against the teeth of the tape roll. I wince and look up to her with a sad look on my face. I want her to know how much it hurts. "Oh, sweetie, you've got to be careful," she says to me, stepping off the small ladder and coming down to me. I look up at her as she hugs me. Mommy gives the best hugs. She smells like cookies.

She takes the tape from me and climbs back up the ladder. She tapes up the far edge of the banner and I look up at the writing on it, reading what it says. It says that it's my birthday and that makes me happy. It's been so long since I've had a birthday. We've had Christmas and fireworks and all sorts of other days, but we've kept skipping past my birthday. It's finally here though and I'm so excited for it. I get to have all my friends over and I get to play Spider-Man and Star Wars with them. It's going to be the best time. Billie and David get to spend the night, Johnny might spend the night too but he gets scared when he's not at home. I heard David say that Johnny pees his bed. That's gross. I don't want him peeing over here. He'll ruin my birthday.

"Caleb, you've got to be on your best behavior tomorrow," Mommy tells me. She's always telling me to be good. I don't think she believes me when I tell her that I'm a good boy. If she did, why would she keep telling me to be good? I don't do anything bad, or at least I don't think I do anything bad.

"Yes, Mommy," I say to her with a happy smile. I love her. She's so pretty. She's the prettiest mommy in the world.

Once I was out in the back yard and I found a kitten and I know that Mommy hates cats. I was afraid that the kitten would make Mommy mad, so I hid the kitten. It meowed a lot and I felt bad for it. I didn't want to hurt it, but I know that Mommy would be mad if she knew that I was playing with a kitty. So I picked up the little kitten and took it to the sandbox where I was playing and pet it. It was so soft. I wanted to keep the kitten, but Mommy wouldn't let me. Good boys do what their mommy tells them. So I decided to hide the kitten. I dug a hole for the kitten in the sandbox. I was afraid that Mommy would come out and hear her meowing

so I dug the hole deep. It was deep enough that it went all the way past my knees when I stood in it. I kissed the kitten on the head and put it down in the hole with one of my army men to protect her. Then I pushed the big mountain of dirt and sand over the hole so that Mommy wouldn't find the kitten. I forgot about the kitten and when I went to go dig it up, I forgot where I hid it. I think Mommy knew about the kitten and went and took it away from me, because I never found it. I think she was really mad at me.

But that was the only time I did something she didn't want me to. I swear that I'm a good boy and that there's nothing bad I do to her. Sometimes she tells me not to watch TV, but I do and she gets mad, or I don't like the food we eat for dinner, but that's because she doesn't make what I like. I don't want her to get mad at me. I just don't understand why we can't eat good food for dinner. Why do we always have to eat gross, nasty food for dinner?

Mommy is looking at the TV and I can see that her hand is shaking, just like it did last night when she found me out on the road. I don't know how I got out there. I remember dreaming that Mommy needed me to follow her, so I followed her and I remember waking up to Mommy scooping me up off the road and that strange, scary man was standing there, looking at me. There was something bad about that man. I don't like the way he touched me. It felt scary. It felt strange when he touched my shoulder. I think he was a bad man. But when Mommy brought me inside, her hands were shaking. I think she was scared that I was going to run away, but I promised her that I wasn't going to run away and that I didn't know what I was doing out there. I was sleeping and just woke up, that's all that happened.

"Sweetie, Mommy needs to make a phone call," Mommy tells me, bending down and kissing me on the head before she runs off. Mommy is on her phone a lot. She talks to people all the time or she's texting. She tells me that texting is bad and that when I grow up, I shouldn't do it, but she does it all the time. It looks fun. She's always smiling and giggling when someone texts her.

I walk out to the living room and stare at the TV. There's a picture on the screen and it looks just like the man that I saw last night, the man who had been standing next to my Mommy. Was he a famous guy? Did he have a TV show? I never thought I'd meet a famous guy. Did Mommy see that? I decide that I need to tell her. She should know that we met a famous guy. Maybe she even knows what his name is. I rush through the living room and down the hallway to where Mommy's room is. She's shut her door except for a small tiny crack and I decide that I want to sneak up on her.

I'm great at sneaking. I'm the sneakiest of all my friends and I love to sneak up on them and scare them in school. Out on the playground, when we play dinosaurs, I'm the scariest dinosaur because no one ever hears or sees me coming. I'm the best at it. I sneak up on my tippy toes just like they do in the cartoons and avoid the spot in the floor where it creaks really loudly, and sneak up to her door. I can hear her talking to someone. She must be on the phone with Grandma. Grandma and Grandpa are coming to my birthday tomorrow. Last time I had a birthday, they gave me a big Lego set, but Mommy won't let me play with it until I'm a little older. She thinks I'm a bad boy who swallows the little pieces.

“That man, on the TV,” she’s saying to someone. “He almost hit my boy last night. I had no clue who he was, but I saw him. He was here, right outside my house. I got a good look at his car. It was a silver Subaru. Are you sure?” She stops talking and I decide to scare her.

I jump through the doorway and throw up my arms like they have claws and roar as loud as I can. I hope she screams. I love it when she screams. But she doesn’t this time. This time she just jumps a little and flinches before she glares at me. Mommy has a look that’s really scary because it means I’m in trouble and that’s the look she’s staring at me right now. She snaps her fingers and points to the door, telling me to leave. I don’t know why she’s so angry with me. I just wanted to play.

I walk out into the living room and look at the coat closet in the hallway by the front door. Mommy tells me not to go near that closet, or at least she just started telling me not to. For days, I have been searching her room for presents when she’s not looking. I don’t know what she’s getting me and I can’t stand it any longer. All I can think about are the cool toys that she’s going to get me. She always buys me the best, coolest toys. Last year, she got me a super soaker and all the other kids in the neighborhood were scared of me because it shot so much water that it could drown a person. I heard that a kid did drown from it, so other kids aren’t allowed to have them now. Thankfully, Mommy got me mine before that happened.

I want an Xbox like Johnny has this year. He has a game where you can chop people’s heads off and you can steal money and there’s another one where you can fly an airplane and blow up other airplanes. Mommy says that videogames will rot my brain, but hopefully she’s changed her mind, because I would love to have an Xbox. I asked her and Grandma for an Xbox and I asked Auntie for one too, but she said that she already bought my present for me. That would be so cool if they all got me an Xbox. I would have so many Xboxes. All the other kids would wish they had as many cool games and stuff as I did. I just hope they don’t get me more clothes. Clothes are stupid and boring.

Slowly, I sneak up to the closet door, looking back down the long hallway to where Mommy’s door is still open from when I scared her real good. She’s still talking on the phone to that guy and I can see her shadow. She’s too busy to notice me. This is the perfect time to get some searching done. I know that good boys don’t search for their presents, but I want to know. I’m tired of waiting and I’ve been waiting for so long. The last time I had a present was at Christmas.

Quietly I reach up and twist the door handle and pull open the closet door, peering into the darkness. Our jackets, raincoats, big, puffy coats, and our snow boots are all inside. It’s too dark to see anything, so I try pushing the coats apart and shoving the boots aside to get a better look. That’s when I finally see them. The first thing I see are the action figures that I’ve been wanting since we went to the store. She got me three of them. There’s two good guys and one bad guy. Behind that is the biggest Nerf gun that I’ve ever seen. It’s even bigger than the one David has. I hope they bring their Nerf guns tomorrow and I can shoot them with mine. Behind that is a few more action figures and a movie. This is the best birthday I’ve ever had.

“Caleb, what are you doing?” Mommy shouts at the top of her lungs. She’s very angry and I jump at the sound of her voice. I look over my shoulder at her and I’m scared that she’s going to smack me. I’m scared that she’s going to give me spankings like she did last time I was bad. I look at her and she’s standing right next to me. How did she sneak up on me like that? Sometimes I think Mommy has magical powers. I don’t know how she did that, but here she is and she’s very mad looking. “Caleb, I told you to be on your best behavior. What is wrong with you? You know you’re not supposed to be looking for these. Why can’t you just be a good boy? Go to your room, Caleb. I’m very mad at you right now!”

I run past her as she smacks me on the butt. It hurts. It stings and I can feel tears boiling in my eyes as I begin to cry, running up the stairs. I pass the bathroom and the play room before I go into my room and dive onto my bed, burying my face in the pillow and crying. I feel so bad. I shouldn’t have done that. Why did I do that to Mommy? I’ve ruined my birthday now. She’s not going to let me have one. She’ll probably take all the toys back and I’ll never get to play with them.

She should take the toys back. I don’t deserve them. I’ve been so bad. I’m not the boy that Mommy deserves. She’s so pretty and smart and funny and I just keep messing up and making her mad at me. Maybe that’s why Daddy left? Maybe I was so bad that Daddy got tired of me and didn’t want me around. Maybe he went and found a new Mommy and a new Caleb, one that doesn’t sneak around and do bad things all the time. I don’t want them to hate me. I don’t want them to be mad at me. I don’t want Mommy to cancel my birthday. I should punish myself. She didn’t give me a punishment, but I should show her that I’m a big boy and that I can punish myself so she won’t return my toys and cancel my birthday. I don’t want her to be mad at me forever.

Climbing off my bed, I walk back to the play room. I’ll show her that I’m a good boy. I’ll tell her that I don’t need the toys. I don’t need any of them. I just want her to be happy and to love me. I turn the light on and listen to hear if Mommy is coming up the stairs. I don’t hear her, so I think I’m safe. I go into the toy room and look around at all the toys I have. My big art stand is in the corner and I decide that I should write her a message. I should tell her that I love her. No, I should warn her. I should warn him. I should write them all a letter. I should keep them from following me.

I grab the big crayon and rip off the sheet of paper where I drew Mommy and me fighting pirates and I start to write them all a message. Maybe this time they’ll get it and they’ll stop with all the spying and the following. I write them the message and look around at all the toys. There’s so many of them. I don’t deserve any of them. I’ll show Mommy that I’m a good boy, that I understand. I’ll show her that she doesn’t have to yell at me anymore. I’ll be a good boy and I’ll do exactly as I’m told from now on. All she has to do is love me and I’ll love her. After all, it’s just me and her. I search the toys around the room. They look different now. They look like something new, like I’ve never had them before. They look like they are much more enjoyable now. I wish I hadn’t made her mad. I need those toys down in the closet. I need them to play with. I want Mommy to give them to me so I can play with all of them and they can go on exciting adventures.

I pick up a soldier toy. He's a knight with all this cool sharp armor. He's my favorite.

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Wendy Anderson's home is situated in a nice little corner of the city where old people congregate after retirement. They're near everything that the aging, working class citizens of this city might want in their declining years. They're close to everything and there's hardly any crime. Every once in a while there's a hood rat or someone desperate who will come lurking up from one of the city's various ghettos, looking to steal bicycles or smash in car windows to steal a purse, but usually it's as quiet and as tranquil as anyone in their late sixties would want. The only difference now is that I'm a hammer about to smash the shit out of Wendy Anderson's world. Well, maybe not her world, but definitely her daughter's. Two boys are playing out on the porch with toy cars, playing whatever make-believe scenario has popped into their tiny brains.

I never understood playing with cars. What's the end game with that? I love cars more than I love pretty much everything in this world, but I don't understand boys playing with them. I hate the noises they make and I hate the way they just roll around making those noises. What's the point of that? Me, I was always about cops and robbers or army. I used to run around the neighborhood with my old friends shooting them with stick guns and pretending that dirt clods were grenades. Then we discovered what baseball and football were and we threw down our arms and went to a more civilized way of embarrassing and battling each other. But cars, that was never on our itinerary.

Stepping out of my ride, I leave it unlocked. There's no one here that even knows how to hotwire a car and the most dangerous thing here is getting hit by an old tree branch that might break off and smack the roof of my beloved Shelby. No, this part of town is paradise. I close the door and walk up to the sidewalk and up the concrete of access of the garage to where the white picket fence with roses growing on the inside stops me. I check the yard for dog shit, dog toys, or a little rodent that most old people call dogs. Who wants a dog you can kill with a kick? There's nothing of the sort, so I open the gate and approach the house.

The boys stare at me with dumb, blank looks on their faces and I completely understand that they might be retarded. They're playing *vroom vroom* with cars. I look in to their faces and know by the time they're my age, I will be in the ground, rotting into dust. I'm the previous chapter in the history of life.

"Is your mother home?" I ask them. Dispatch told me their names, but I don't give a shit. This is a dead end. From what I know about all the other leads I've found on these homicides, suicides, whatever, all these leads are dead ends. Dead, fucking ends. That's where these roads lead. The boys look at me, not nodding, not shaking their heads. I'm getting a whole lot of nothing from them. Thankfully, someone inside has seen or heard me. I can hear them approaching.

“Can I help you?” a matronly voice calls out to me as she pushes open her screen door and steps out on the porch. Her mere presence is enough for the boys to rise and go inside. They don’t need to be told what to do. They’re afraid of strangers. Good. They might live a little longer if they keep that with them.

“My name is Detective Steven King.” I hold up my ID for her to see. She looks at it, wrinkling her nose and squinting as she looks through her glasses. “I’m here inquiring as to the whereabouts of your daughter, Rebecca Roberts.”

“Becca’s here,” the woman I’m guessing to be Wendy says. “She came here last night when the other detectives told her about what Chad’s been up to.”

“Well, I’m not Robbery,” I say, taking off my glasses. “Do you mind if I have a word with Rebecca Roberts?”

“Mom, who is it?” a voice calls from deeper inside the house. I hear her coming. As she approaches the screen door, the darkness contrasts her silhouette and as she comes into the light, pushing the door open, I see the two boys around her legs, staring at me with their blank, vacant stares. They’re starting to unnerve me. Rebecca stares at me for a moment and I hold her gaze. She has lovely jade eyes that are enormous, larger than I thought eyes could be in proportion to her round face. She’s pretty, but the beauty begins to drip away into fear. “Can I help you?” she asks me.

“This is Detective Steven King,” Wendy introduces me in a tone of voice that makes me sound like a joke. I look at the mother and wonder if I could arrest her for making my name sound stupid. That seems like a crime. Defamation of character, I think I could make that one stick for a while, hold her overnight, teach her not to introduce others. “Like the writer,” she adds, twisting the dagger in my side. I smile against the anger inside of me. One day I’ll get used to that.

“I already spoke with Detective Carson,” Rebecca says nervously.

“There’s been a development,” I tell her with as much caution as I can muster. “Mrs. Roberts, is there somewhere private we can talk? I’m not sure you want to hear this out in the open.” I say this, implying that Wendy’s neighbors have nothing better to do than stick their noses in her shit before they roll over and die, but what I really want is her kids out of here. No kid needs to hear that their father chopped off his hands with saws they had in their garage because he went on an armed robbery bender. Thankfully, Rebecca pushes one of her wavy, red locks out of her face and stares at me with a contorted look of confusion and fear. She can sense it. Most people can pick up the bad vibes I carry with me when I come to tell them that death’s claimed one of their loved ones.

“Mom, will you take the boys out for ice cream?” Rebecca asks.

“That sounds delicious.” Wendy can sense it too now and tries to put on a happy, brave face for the boys. This is the face that I’ve seen a lot of parents, a lot of grandparents, or aunts and uncles put on to try and save the innocence that they all know is about to come crashing down with the weight of reality behind it. This is the end of all things pure and lovely. This is the end of childhood. “What do you say, boys?”

“Yeah!” they scream in unison, gleefully oblivious to everything that’s happening around them.

As they vanish into the house, Wendy follows them, leaving her daughter with me on the porch. I look at her and size her up. She’s got a figure, but she’s still

working off the weight she gained with the last boy, who looks to be over two years old. She's still got the ass, but her legs aren't as nice as they probably once were and her arms are still formless. She's working on it though, that much is obvious. If she wasn't, then she would look a whole lot different. She has a pretty face, the kind that reminds me of a porcelain doll. She's got the whole red hair, pale skin look going on that so many like her have. It's a beautiful look that none of them truly appreciate the fact that they were chosen to have it.

"Come on in," she motions for me to follow her.

I hold the screen door as she enters the house and cross the threshold with her. The door closes behind me and I close the interior door as well. I follow her into the dining room where she sits down at the table and waits for me. Her eyes are very emotive and it makes me uncomfortable. I sit down across from her and clear my throat, trying to decide how exactly I want to cut this particular shit pie for her.

"Did you catch him?" she asks me with a quivering voice.

"No," I shake my head and decide that the first move has been made. "We found your husband early this morning at your house."

She looks at me with a petrified stare that catches the particular syntax choices that I have selected for my vernacular. She stares at me and reaches out to where her water bottle is sitting on the table. She quickly takes a drink and clears her throat before speaking. "What do you mean 'found' him?" she asks me, right on the money.

"We found him in your garage," I answer. "Right now, all I can tell you is that it appears that your husband took his own life."

"Appears?" she says for one single moment when her strength still remains. I can almost see the cracks webbing across her face, readying for her to shatter at any moment.

"Well, we're not ruling out any options until we gather all of the facts," I tell her.

That's when she breaks. A single tear breaks free and runs down her cheek before her shoulders buckle and snap forward. Her hands launch to her face and she begins to cry. I was never any good at this part. I'm not supposed to reach out and touch her, comfort her, or console her in any way. When you try comforting the family, people are prone to making exaggerated promises. What's best is just to sit back and let them get a grip before you continue. Sometimes it takes a few seconds, other times, it takes much longer and you have to encourage them back to reality. I let Rebecca cry and scream for several minutes until it looks like she's getting a handle on it. I never like this. I hate watching people cry. These are the rewards that my job has to offer me. Everything in this job is sorrow and misery, everywhere. Yet I've stayed so many years.

"Why?" she asks after a second of silence, sniffing. I reach into my pocket and hand her a pack of Kleenex I stuffed into my jacket pocket before coming to speak with her. She takes it gratefully, buying me some time before I decide how to accurately phrase what I'm about to tell her. "Why would he do this?" she asks me.

"As you know," I say calmly, "your husband went on a four day armed robbery spree. When we notified you, it seems that you left a note. It appears he seems to

have read the note, saw no other option that was preferable to death, and went into the garage to take his life.”

“Oh my God,” she screams before wailing again. I let her continue to grieve over the fact that we live in a world where actions have consequences. You don’t just let your mentally unstable, violent husband know that you’re leaving him and that he’s going to jail. That’s where Rebecca screwed up. It sucks, but there it is. If this was a suicide, the person who is responsible for giving Chad time to think about killing himself is her. She could have left without the note and just let the cops show up and arrest him, but she needed to stick that particular dagger in him. She sniffs again and regains a bit of control over herself. “Why do you keep saying that it appears that way?” she asks me. A valid question.

I take a moment and pull out the pictures of Lola Maretti, Jenny Martinez, and Ted Martin and spread them out across the table. “I know this isn’t what you want to do at this moment, Mrs. Roberts,” I say to her in a strong voice, “but I need you to have a look at these three people. Their names are Lola Maretti, Jenny Martinez, and Ted Martin.” I tap to each corresponding picture. She hardly looks at them, too torn apart by her grief. “Do any of these people look familiar to you or have you heard your husband talk about anyone by one of their names before?”

She takes a moment and looks at the pictures, her face red, twisted with horror and grief, and covered in tears. She stares at them, looking at them with hardly any interest. She’s too awash in a million different emotions right now and I don’t hold that against her. I have time. While I’m doing this, Mendez and his legion of techs, forensics, and uniforms going over that house with everything they have. Even Mendez is part of the Owens cult now and we’re all pulling to find out whoever is behind this, but that takes time. I doubt that the coroner’s office has even gotten to Chad’s body yet. I look at Rebecca and wait patiently. She has no clue what kind of a manhunt there is out there for whoever did this to her husband. Sure he was scum, but he’s on the top of the victim list right now.

Finally, she shakes her head and pushes the pictures back to me. “I don’t recognize any of them,” she sniffs and shakes her head. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I know,” I tell her. I’ve seen hundreds of people dealing with this and she’s actually holding up pretty well. She hasn’t flipped the table or fainted yet. I had one woman try to kill herself right in front of me after I told her that her fiancé had been killed in a shooting. That one definitely made the list of craziest days ever. “Did you ever hear your husband mention those names before?”

“No,” she shakes her head angrily. “Why? Who are these people?”

“They’re other suicides in the area recently,” I say after a moment of consideration. It’s breaking protocol, but fuck it. I don’t think I can operate under this secret super spy shit anymore. I have to say it. I can’t just let a broken woman sit in limbo until we find out whether it was murder or if it wasn’t. I take a deep breath and look her in the eyes. “There’s a possibility that your husband was murdered,” I tell her.

“Why do you say that?” She looks at me with a scared look now.

“Did your husband have any enemies?” I ask her.

“No, not really,” she shakes her head. “There were some people at his job that he didn’t like, but no one who would want to kill him. I mean, we didn’t talk too

much, the past year, but he would have told me if he felt like he was in danger. We weren't that far apart. Why? What did he do?"

"Your husband left a note," I tell her, picking up the pictures in front of her. "So did these three victims. The note was only two sentences and was particularly vague on why they decided to end their lives. This has led us to suspect that someone might have chosen these three victims and your husband as targets to stage as suicides. The nature of your husband's death also leads us to believe that your husband might not have been the one who ended his life."

"What happened to my husband?" Rebecca asks me with a very serious tone that shows that she means business. She's tired of the games. She's tired of me dancing around the questions. She wants me to answer the damn question. I give a heavy sigh. She wants the gory details.

"Your husband tied tourniquets around his elbows and knees," I tell her. This is so wrong. This is going to get my ass fried if she freaks out and files a report, but she has a right to know. "He then proceeded to dismember his feet and hands with various instruments found in your garage. He died of blood loss."

Rebecca's face contorts even more and I'm afraid that she's going to unleash an eruption of screams and shrieks at what I've just told her but as her face begins to turn purple, she only lets out a wail and a horrific sound that I've honestly never heard before this day. I watch as she holds her hands to her mouth and sobs for a moment before she tries to regain her senses.

"Why would he do that?" she asks me.

"That's what we want to know," I tell her. "Your husband had a gun in his possession. We think that foul play might be involved because anyone in their right mind would have chosen a more humane method which they would end their suffering with."

"What about the people he stole from?" she asks, hardly hearing a word I've said. "What if he stole from someone with like, I don't know, mafia connections or something?"

"Unlikely," I shake my head. "He appears to have been specifically targeted."

"Oh my God." She shakes her head. There's snot running down to her lips now and I'm beginning to wonder if I've made the wrong decision by telling her. But in my moment of doubt, she reaches out to me with a trembling hand and I take it. She squeezes my hand tight, not even looking at me. She's just staring off into the ether with her thoughts. "Thank you," she says quietly. I look at her and nod to her.

"Do you have someone you'd like for me to call?" I ask her. When she shakes her head that she doesn't, I understand completely. Outside, a squad car pulls up and I know that my reinforcements have arrived. "Mrs. Roberts, I'm going to find whoever did this to your husband and I'm going to make sure that he pays for what he's done. I have a couple of officers outside who are going to come in and discuss details about what happens next. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she sniffs, trying to regain her senses. "Thank you. Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome," I tell her.

When the uniforms take over, I make my escape. I was right. It was another dead end, but that's alright. I'm sure that Mendez and his team will find

something, anything to send us in the right direction. I walk slowly out to the car, feeling heavy, like the heat and gravity of the planet has picked up. I give a deep sigh and look at the house. I hate days like this. They sort of just sink their claws in deep and refuse to let me go. I need a release. I need to detach for a moment and clear my head. I need out of the cesspool this case has become.

Sitting down in my car, I turn the key and feel the seat under me vibrate, and listen to the rumbling of the engine. I'm getting tired, but something tells me that the day is far from over. I've got a few hours though, until something comes up. I've got a little time to relax for a second, to give Mendez's legions time to regroup and get back to me with something substantial. We need a win right now. We need something. Hell, I just need something.

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Maretti, Martinez, and Martin, they all almost sound the same. But the only problem with that is that victim number four is Roberts. Maybe the killer works in sets. Maybe he kills off a bunch of people with the same root name and then decides to move on to the next one. Maybe Roberts is the planting of the flag in the sand, the declaration that this is his new kill set. Part of me wants to drive straight home and grab all of the files that Owens has collected and check the last names to see if there's something to this. Maybe it's all about last names. I should check it out. The only problem is, the green neon light casts its glow across the windshield and I look up at the sign and decide that I'm already here and I'm definitely in need of something. Besides, if the name thing doesn't pan out, then I'll just be pissed I rushed home and didn't enjoy myself.

I look up at the sign. It's written out right in front of me in mint neon. It's called *The Backseat*, but underneath it is has *Gentlemen's Club* written in cursive, trying to class the place up. There's something about strippers that make them slightly more acceptable than whores, but in the end, I don't see much of a difference. There's a secret truth behind most strip clubs and that's that they're all fronts to showcase their true businesses, the fact that they whore themselves out with the safety of the club around them. Anyone gets too physical or rough, and the bouncers beat the shit out of you.

Stepping out of the car, I look at the handful of other cars that are in the parking lot, more lonely suckers looking for a good time. I'm not one of them. I'm worse. I'm the kind that comes here with a particular need in mind. I'm not one to hide behind deceptions and denials. I'm in need of a release and I intend on making that happen before Mendez gives me a call. I don't plan on sticking around long, just long enough for me to get rid of my angst.

At the worst possible time, I have the desires. I have the urges to tend to. I have needs that come up and the frustration draws it out. All I can think of is Kendall Stein, especially her wearing that fantastic schoolgirl outfit. Those long legs stretching down from a short plaid skirt. I feel my desires starting to rise. I wanted to rip off her gown and start licking her nipples. Sure, she is a bit older than I'm

used to, but I can't help but want her. It really doesn't matter how old a gorgeous woman is and it usually doesn't matter what your preference is, stunning women are stunning. But when I really start to think about it, all I can think about is the blonde girl from the trailer park. She had the face of an angel and the body of a goddess. To have one night with her, no, just the few precious minutes that I have here now would be nice.

The bouncer at the door looks at me and nods to me. He has an easy job tonight. There's hardly anyone here. This place is usually busier than it appears to be tonight. He opens the door and gives me another silent nod before I step into the gloomy, poorly lit entrance to the lounge. I look at the lady behind the desk who is one of about six girls that takes the rotation at the front desk. They're the face of the business, bringing the men into the depths of The Backseat's home. I look at her, all smiles behind her desk as she wears a summer dress that amply shows her augmented chest. I don't find her very attractive, she's too far out of my preferences and I don't think that she really gives a shit about me. That's the key to a good worker in this industry.

"Thank you for coming to The Backseat tonight," she says to me as I approach her and hand her the five dollar entry fee. It's not much, but it's enough for me to get a tiny little badge that distinguishes this place as a private club. I take the badge and stick it on my lapel as she continues smiling at me. "Are you having a nice day today?"

"Not exactly," I say to her before walking through the curtained doorway where another bouncer is standing. He's a tall, bald guy who doesn't even look at me. He just pulls the curtain aside and lets me pass into the even darker gloom. The smoke machine is working on full power and it keeps the place looking hazy and dark, making it feel more private and larger. I feel isolated among the stiletto wearing waitresses who walk past me with only pasties on. They smile at me and welcome me, trying to make me feel more comfortable. One of them touches my shoulder as I walk toward my table. There are three poles on illuminated stages where dancers are making love to the pole, barely clothed.

I take a seat near the back of the giant room, avoiding the eyes of the other patrons who are sitting mostly near the main platforms where the girls are flipping their hair and turning merrily. I'm not very attracted to any of them. They're older women, and by older, I mean that they're in their late twenties, early thirties. That's the prime of the female body to most people. If a woman works long enough and hard enough on her body, then by her thirties, she should be a lean, killer, sex machine and she'll look magnificent, but I'm not drawn to that usually. It's the younger women, the innocent and the naïve. I like the look of bodies in their natural perfection.

There's something about the fact that when we were primal creatures, we looked for women who were in their late teens and early twenties. Once upon a time, I would have been dead and so would everyone else who is my age. I don't really know what it is about that which draws me to the late teenagers. They are the purest human form without labor or work or toiling. In the old days, their bodies would have been the highest level of achievement, without gyms or diets or any other sort of manipulation to help themselves. That's what I find alluring.

Eventually a woman approaches me and smiles at me. She's blonde, close to what I want. When I think about it, I think I would rather see the blonde girl, Courtney, naked than Kendall, but this woman is a far cry from Courtney. She's not much of a looker in the way of the girls around here, but she's trying. She's wearing a sheer shirt that I can see her nipples through and a G-string. Her heels click as she approaches and I look at her pigtailed and think that it's a nice touch. If only she could be a little prettier and a little younger. She's clearly in her late twenties.

"Hi, baby," she says, approaching me and leaning over, putting her elbows on the table. I can see her breasts through her low cut shirt and her ass is sticking up the way she's leaning over to look at me. She's smiling at me and I have no time for her. I'm on a schedule and if she keeps flirting with me and taking up time, I feel like it's a commodity I'll quickly run out of. The pressure inside of me is building up. I'm afraid that if I don't get a release here, I might make my way back to Whispering Hills and do something that I will regret later. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I'm looking for your youngest employee," I tell her. She looks at me, a little taken aback, and I don't really give a shit. I know what I want and it isn't her. Clearly she had pegged me from the moment I walked in. I've only come to The Backseat a few times, so I know that she doesn't recognize me. I try to visit multiple locations so they don't begin to pick up on me as a regular. It also keeps them from catching on that I'm a cop. "I've got a thing for younger looking girls." I give her a look up and down and then smile at her. "Not that I don't appreciate what you've got."

The hurt and offended look on her face melts away and she smiles at me with a pleased sort of look. "Don't worry, baby," she says to me in a sultry tone. "I think I've got a friend here who might be interested in what you've got going on."

"Thanks," I say to her until she vanishes into the flashing colored lights and the hanging mists. I sit at the table drumming my fingers, wondering if I should order something or if I should keep sober, in case Mendez wants to meet in person. I'm probably going to have stripper glitter on me already, I don't think I need alcohol on my breath.

It takes a moment until the vixen arrives that the other stripper had talked about. She's a tall, leggy beauty who appears as a silhouette that's all slender hips and legs as she makes her way toward me. As the mist parts, I look upon an olive skinned wonder that I hadn't been expecting when I came to this place tonight. She has long, black hair and an award winning face that makes me melt inside. This is a woman that I can actually look at. There's this perfect harmony of beauty, youth, and vitality as I look at her. She's wearing a bra that only technically can be called an undergarment. Her perky, plump breasts are waiting for me. A small triangle of cloth is hiding her nipples, but I want to feel them. She too is wearing a black G-string that hides nothing from me. As she approaches, I feel myself hardening and I smile as she approaches.

"Nice to meet you," she says in a soft, velvety voice.

Without even asking me my name, she pulls out the chair and offers me a seat. I gladly take it and can't help but feel the wonder and excitement that she offers. I'm not diverse in the colors that I go for. I wouldn't say that I have a race

preference, but I've only ever slept with white girls and she's the closest thing to black that I've ever had. I'm guessing that one of her parents is white and the other is Indian or milk chocolate. She comes over to me as I sit down and starts swaying, pulling off her bra and letting her breasts fall free as she sways. I watch her eyes and feel incredibly aroused by her. As she turns around, grinding up against me, I can't resist anymore. She leans back against me, grinding harder and harder against me as she goes.

"You willing to make a little extra?" I ask her, holding out a hundred for her.

She turns her head and I can see her profile as she smiles at my offer. She takes the money and stands up, stretching out her hand for me to take it. Helping me up, I follow her through the mist, watching the eyes of other men who are looking at me suspiciously. Some of them aren't even aware of this possibility and the fact that they see me leads them to suspicious and curious routes of thought, no doubt. A bouncer looks at me as I pass through yet another curtain entrance and I'm in a backroom with a series of booths tucked away. I can hear someone giving another one of the ladies a really good time. She's moaning and nearly screaming. Thankfully for them, the music in the main room is loud enough to drown her out, but I can't help but feel happy for her and the guy that's enjoying her.

The lady I'm following pulls back another curtain and we step into a booth with an overstuffed chair and a small table with a bowl of condoms and a box of tissues. The lady turns and pushes me down onto the chair. I want something more. I want something closer to reality than this. I want to put her on the chair and go down on her, kiss the inside of her thighs and lick her clit. I can't help but feel like I'm missing out on the more powerful part of sex. The girl is taking off my belt and unzipping my pants, freeing my dick and taking it in her cold, slender hands. I feel her licking the shaft and I close my eyes. It feels fantastic. It feels more than fantastic. Her lips are wrapped around me and she takes it deep, her lip gloss sticking and then making my dick slippery. I smile and she looks up at me with those large dark eyes of hers.

"Interested in something a little more interesting?" she asks me.

"Oh yes," I smile.

I stand up from the overstuffed chair and get around behind her, she knows exactly where this is going and bends over, putting her hands on the seat of the chair and sticking out her ass. She grinds her ass against my cock and I feel the warmth of it. Reaching down, I run my fingers down her slit and feel the warm wetness and I can't help but feel that this girl likes me more than just a client. She actually enjoys this and that makes me feel a little better. She continues to grind up against me as I fish out a condom packet from the bowl and open it, slipping the wrap over my dick with one hand and rubbing her clit with my other. She's beginning to groan and her grinding is a little fiercer as I ready myself and start to put my head against her slit. She doesn't wait, she starts pushing back on me.

She's tight and I know that she's clean. If a place like this gets one girl that's got the clap or any other STD, then they're going to get hammered by some pretty tough and angry men. That girl is probably going to end up beaten and left out on the street to find another job on the Avenue where people aren't so selective about who they stick their dicks in. Thankfully, I'm confident in my exotic beauty here

and as I plunge deeper and deeper into her, it feels like a warm wet hug around my dick. I smile and listen as she lets out her noises, real or not, I don't care at this point. All I want is the simulation that she gives a shit about me and that she might actually like it.

I put my hands on her hips and I pull her close as my dick sinks into her as far as I can go and her ass is grinding up against my hips. I hold her there for a moment, gripping her tightly and swaying her ass a little, getting a full range of sensations as I hold her there. She groans and I pull out a little and start pumping her. I start out slowly, going in slowly as she breathes out and lets out her little sounds. But as I start to enjoy it more and more, I thrust harder and harder, pounding her harder until she's starting to moan louder and louder, rivaling the other girl back here. I keep fucking her until she's really letting the sounds escape and I lean forward, reaching out with my hands and cupping her breasts, taking them and squeezing the perky wonders and feeling her puffy nipples between my fingers. I love the feeling of her and I can't help but keep thrusting into her. I pull out, not yet close enough to completion and pull her up against me. Reaching around her, I grab both of her breasts and squeeze them, inhaling her perfume as I take in a deep breath.

Switching places with her, I sit down on the overstuffed chair and let her crawl on top of me. Slowly, she sits down on my cock and sinks down until she's sitting on my lap and I'm giving her everything I've got. I watch her breasts bouncing before my eyes and watch as she throws back her head and moans. I reach out with my tongue and lick one of her nipples. I try to keep it close, but she's too far away and it slips away every time I try to get it, so I wrap my arm around her tiny waist and I pull her close, hugging her to me as I put my mouth on her breast and suck in her nipple, feeling it between my lips and circling it with my tongue. She's moaning and screaming, completely oblivious to whatever it is I want right now. Her hands scratch at my blazer and I don't mind. I like that she's enjoying this as much as I am. It makes me feel like I'm not such a screw up. I keep fucking her until I feel the wave of relief, the tension, the frustration, all of it come to a climax before rapidly expelling out of me and into the condom.

She keeps moving up and down on me as I sit there in heaven, watching her body and how it moves, the subtle grace and wonder to all of it. I wish I was married still. I got laid so much more when I was married. She sinks down on my softening cock and sways her hips, smiling at me. "That one was worth every cent," she says to me with a practiced smile.

"You say that to everyone," I tell her.

"Only to the ones I like," she gives a shrug. "The others tip me and I leave them back here to clean up."

She stands up, off of me and I pull off the condom, tossing it into a trashcan that I suddenly wonder whose job it is to throw out every night. I would hate that job. I would hate any job here. What kind of hell would it be to see attractive women naked and fucking every day and not getting to enjoy it? It would be like how war desensitizes men to violence, but with sex. Do these bouncers even get the chance to get an erection anymore? Maybe they're all gay. I suppose it doesn't matter. Whoever gets condom duty is definitely on the lowest level of the totem pole.

I zip up and reach into my pocket and pull out my wallet. I hand her another hundred.

“You want to go again?” She lifts an eyebrow, showing that she’s more than willing to give it a shot.

“No,” I shake my head with a smile. “I think you should take the rest of the night off.”

“That’s generous of you,” she looks at me. “What’s the catch? You want to be one of my regulars?”

“No catch,” I shake my head. “A pretty girl like you should find a different line of work.”

“You can be my sugar daddy,” she winks at me. “I can clean, but I’m not much of a cook.”

“A girl fucks like you and she doesn’t need to,” I smile, and smack her ass as I pass her, pushing open the curtain and making my way outside. That was exactly what I needed. I put that off too long and it builds up to scary levels. I don’t want to do anything I’m going to regret, so I need to monitor my urges better. Truth be told, there’s probably a lot that I should be doing better.

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Dropping down behind the wheel, I can’t help smiling after I’ve been laid. There’s something about it that puts me in a mindset that makes me feel like I’m on top of the world. I know that some guys get sleepy or other guys get angry. But not me. I’ve always felt energized after sex, stimulated and ready to get back to whatever was happening the short while before I took my trip to pleasure town.

Looking out the window at The Backseat, I wonder if she will take the night off. Maybe I should go back in there and tell her to go get a cup of coffee with me. Hell, I know I’m about to retire, but maybe I could be her sugar daddy. I’m about to retire and no one is going to think differently of me if I hook up with some young, fine piece of ass just so I can have crazy sex with her and enjoy the rest of my days. Hell, I’m miserably divorced and have no life to speak of outside of the job, people will think it’s fairly natural for me to look for something to fill the time with. She was sexy, young, and everything that I would want on a steady basis. Sure, it wouldn’t work out forever. She would have to keep her young figure and I know that no matter how hard she tries, I’ll still want someone younger, but maybe by then we could be roommates. I’ll move on to someone younger and she’ll keep on living with me.

I shake my head. What the hell am I thinking about? I’m going to be flying to Miami where there will be young bimbos every year that will be wanting a man to pay for their drinks and their days while they go to the beaches and clubs on my dime. I will be plenty happy with the sex bots that are waiting for me on the sandy beaches of Miami. Why waste my time with a stripper in this dump? I stare back at the building, knowing that she’s going to keep working for the rest of the night.

She'll make more than a hundred dollars if she just sticks around for the rest of her shift. I'm not stupid and I don't know why I'm being so naïve about her.

My phone starts to vibrate and I watch as the doors to The Backseat opens and my exotic beauty walks out onto the sidewalk in a trench coat, even though it's still hot enough out there for a man to walk around naked and still feel like he's boiling. I smile at the sight of her and feel like there might be some hope for the human race yet. That is, until I look at my phone and see that Owens is calling me. I hadn't thought about the case a second since I fucked that girl. I shake my head and curse myself for being a terrible detective, let alone a lousy human being.

"King," I answer.

"It's me," Owens identifies himself for once. "We've got another one."

"Are you serious?" I close my eyes and rub my temples. My faith in humanity has evaporated in that single sentence. Who is this guy? How is he working so quickly? What is he doing to get to them so quickly? I suppose it makes perfect sense that he would be able to move around so quickly and to target his next victim so easily without us knowing because there was no way of knowing who someone like Chad Roberts has been in contact with. I open my eyes and watch the girl getting into a Taurus and starting up her car. Thankfully Owens lets me think for a moment before he badgers me more. The exotic girl pulls out of the parking lot and heads for the nearly vacant road. "Who is it this time?"

"Put on your work face for this one," Owens warns me and that doesn't inspire any form of confidence in me. "It's a kid, King. The asshole's killed a fucking kid."

I'm speechless. I'm staring at the parking spot where the girl's Taurus had been, waiting for something to hit me, a sentence, a thought, something. Something needs to come raining down on me like an apocalyptic meteor crashing into my mind, but there's nothing, just a vacant horror that I might have heard what Owens was saying wrong. I stare at that spot and feel only hatred for whoever this guy is. Who does he think he is that he could get away with killing a kid? What could a kid possibly have done to make him think they wanted to end their life? What does a kid know about life yet to give up on it? I look at the parking spot and feel the growing fire of rage inside of me.

"Give me the address," I say to him.

I know the neighborhood that he's talking about, another suburban paradise close to the other victim's house. He's getting bolder. He's killed two victims in the past twenty-four hours and I can't help but wonder if he had been there, outside of the house, watching me with the other maggots and vultures looking for scraps of meat to take back to their producers. I start the car and know that before this time tomorrow, we'll probably have two more victims if we're not careful. We have to catch whoever is doing this. We have to stop him now.

The neighborhood has been besieged by dozens of news vans that have crowded the street around the house, warning me when I'm getting close. There are police officers at every house, talking with scared families who are huddled together and staring up the street to where the media is already spreading out, trying to get their own statements from the community around the victim's home. How they got here so quickly is beyond me. How did I just hear about this and they're already on top of all of this? It doesn't matter. I feel angry. I feel furious that they're here.

This time, it isn't just the television news crews, the written word has come calling. Journalists from every newspaper and private journal across the city have decided to make their presence known here. I pull my car up behind another squad car and step out, shutting my door and realizing that I'm still pretty far away from the victim's house. Unfortunately, there's no way I'm getting closer through all this chaos and insanity. There's someone inside the department that's feeding them this information. Someone is ratting us out to the vultures.

I feel like I'm on the beaches of Normandy, trying to get to the victim's house. I'm dodging the flashes of cameras, the spotlights, the shouting, and the insanity of it all. I push past them with the help of a uniform, putting my hand to the lenses of the cameras, shoving them aside as I continue moving, listening to their curses and their questions. I don't have time for this. I'm trying to solve a murder here and these assholes want the scoop. I look at them with fiery eyes, hating every last one of them. As I push past the last of them, a uniform holds up the yellow tape and I approach the house, skirting the manicured lawn.

There's a cold, stone-faced uniform at the entrance to the house, looking at me with haunted eyes as I approach, like a soldier who has seen too much. He probably was a soldier. He looks at me with dark eyes, probably never expecting to come home and see horrors like this. I understand the look. I've seen it in dozens of officers' eyes. This is the price of the job. This is the toll we all pay. I step over the threshold, nodding to the officer as I enter the house which is a flurry of death, solace, reverence, and sorrow.

In the living room, two detectives are consoling a distraught woman who is wailing and sobbing as one would expect of a woman who has been told that her child is dead. I turn my head and see Owens talking with another officer, discussing details about the scene. He catches my eyes and gives me a nod. It's a simple nod. It's the nod of an investor who is finally starting to see some profit from all their trouble and risk. I don't like feeling this way, feeling like a tool in Owens's arsenal, but I suppose that I'm exactly that. He needed a job done, so he went out and got ahold of me and I fixed everything that needed fixing, for the most part. Everything but this kid. He's just another casualty as we pursue an unknown killer into the darkness, not sure how many other bodies are out there that we might trip on as we go.

I make my way upstairs, where all the commotion is. I place my hand on the balustrade and take each step with a heavy hesitation. I don't want to see a dead kid. I don't want to see one today. I just had a fantastic time and already I'm tossed into the darkness of this world, holding a torch and cleaning up. That's what's wrong with this case. That's what the fundamental problem with this case is, I'm not actually preventing crime, I'm not pursuing anyone, and I'm just left, holding the bodies of the young, dead victims. This isn't something I'm used to. I'm used to being the hunter. I'm used to being the one that calls the shots.

But honestly, I'm scared. This is the first time I've ever faced a serial killer of this magnitude. I understand the helplessness and the frustration of all of it now. I get it. I truly, deeply understand the kind of fear that has lurked in the eyes of other detectives hunting their killers. It's the fear that I'm not going to be able to stop him. I'm not going to be able to stop this madman from taking another life. This child is the declaration to the media, to the police, to this entire city, that

we're not going to be able to stop him. He's only going to be stopped if he slips up. He's not going to be stopped until he wants to. I shake my head as I reach the top step. This man in a monster.

I make my way down the emptied hallway to where two uniforms are standing at the doorway of a room. The uniforms don't even look at me as I approach the room. Inside. There's a whole host of forensics crew members taking photos and making sure that everything in the room is photographed properly. I see the body in the middle of the floor, but it takes a moment to sink in. I have only seen a few children dead during my career. I could probably count the number of dead children that I've seen on both of my hands. It's never something you shake off, seeing their tiny still faces, their motionless hands, the silence that should never accompany a child.

This boy is dead in the middle of his play room, a smattering of toys all around him. He lies on the floor, his limbs are stretched out, and fingers clenching the floor like claws. His eyes are wide, bugged almost. He looks up at the ceiling with tiny feet sticking out from between his lips. I stare with confusion at what I'm seeing. His throat is bulging and unnatural looking as I take a step into the room and the forensics team looks up at me, about to protest me entering the room, but all of them seem to know that I'm here to solve the case. There's a gravity that shifts around me as I approach the body.

"It appears that he was force fed his toys," one of the nerds says to me from behind his camera. He flashes another picture and moves around me as I look at the boy. He's small, maybe four or five. That, or he's small for his age. I'm not sure which to suspect at this time. I look at the feet sticking out of his mouth and feel my stomach churn. "It appears that the killer knows you're on to him," the nerd says again, motioning to the corner of the room with his head before taking another picture.

Looking over to the corner of the room, I'm staring at something that I haven't seen for a long time. It looks like one of those old plastic stands that are supposed to be kids' easels. One side is for chalk and the side facing me is covered in long sheets of butcher paper for the boy to draw and write on. Next to the stand is a picture of the boy and his mom, they look like they're fighting pirates, or at least the boy is protecting his mother from the pirates. On the stand, there's something else written, something sinister and dark, something that stands out different among the other four I've seen this week. This time, there's a message, not for the family, but for me, for us, for everyone who is inside this house, looking for a killer.

Detective Steven King, I'm sorry you can't mind your own business, it reads. I feel a cold chill run down my spine. There's a lot that the killer has revealed in that one sentence. First of all, he knows exactly who is hunting him. He has to be watching me. He has to have been at the crime scene with any of the victims. There's no way he would know that I'm after him unless he was there. The media doesn't know that I'm the one who has been assigned the case yet. This is still fresh and new to them. The second piece of information that I garner from this first sentence is that this killer is rationalizing his actions. This is a business to him. This speaks volumes to me, but there's still one last part to the message. Like always, there's just two sentences. *Continue tracking me at your own peril—Caleb.*

I read the last sentence over and over in my mind as I stare, dumbfounded, at the message.

Of course I'm not going to stop hunting him. Of course this is going to just give me more of a reason to continue hunting him. I look at the message and feel like I'm going to throw up. Was this kill just to leave a message to me or was there a reason for it? Was Caleb on the list of victims that he was always intending to murder, or was he just the excuse to leave me a message that would punch me in the balls? I can't help but feel slightly responsible for Caleb's death. What kind of a monster forces a kid to choke on his own toys? I look back at the young boy and feel my hands shaking. He was probably in his room, minding his own business when the killer crept in. Why Caleb? Why did he choose this house? What was the logic behind all of it? I don't understand. I feel so lost.

I leave the room and go into Caleb's room, and wonder where the killer was. How did he sneak into the house? How did he manage to do all of this without anyone ever having a clue that he was in the house? At what point did he kill Chad Roberts and then select Caleb for his trail of blood and carnage? I feel like throwing up again and I close my eyes, taking deep breaths, trying to find my center. I need to get under control. I need to get it together. I can't fall apart on this one. I can't just throw in the towel. After all, that's what he wants. I'm nowhere closer to stopping him, which means that I have a long road ahead, so giving up is definitely not an option.

Downstairs, I can still hear the mother sobbing, wailing even.
How am I going to catch this bastard?

19

I can't bring myself to leave Caleb's room. I sit on his bed, staring at the posters on the far side of the wall. There's a baseball player on one of the posters, but most of them have to do with superheroes that I don't recognize and Star Wars. I only know that they're Star Wars because it has the name splashed across the bottom of every poster. His room is remarkably well organized and I have to hand it to the boy's mom. She certainly seems to have everything under control. I wish I had been this well in charge of life when I had my daughter. I had royally fucked that one up. Seriously, I can't think of doing a worse job on raising a child than I did with my own. Of course, hindsight is twenty-twenty. I shake my head and look out the window. It's somewhere early in the morning and soon the sun is probably going to be coming up. I check my watch and realize that it's earlier than I thought. It's only after two.

They had taken the boy's body out to the ambulance to deliver him to the morgue where Dr. Whitman will personally be inspecting him a few hours ago. Caleb's mother had begun shrieking in sorrow and grief when they took the boy through the front door. She wanted to hug him, to throw herself on top of him and somehow forfeit her own life so that he might wake up, jump off the gurney and rush back upstairs to keep on playing. Tomorrow was supposed to be his birthday

and they had set up a whole party for him. I can't imagine the sorrow, the despair, the anger. She had snapped when they held her in the house, not letting the press get their money shot of her shrieking and torn by loss. Thankfully, she collapsed in despair and the uniforms relocated her to the living room.

Her sister showed up a few minutes after they took Caleb away and once Caleb was gone, the forensic teams began packing up and heading on to the next scene of carnage that was waiting for them. If there's one thing that this city will definitely keep providing, it's death. This whole fucking town feels like a death factory right now. When the sister arrived, she was already red eyed with tears and sorrow. She hugged her sister in the living room as they both wept over the loss of the beloved boy. I spoke with both of them, promising that I was going to find whoever did this to Caleb. They didn't care. Some people want revenge, but others are a little more clear headed about these situations. Finding a killer only prevents other killings. Caleb is dead and Caleb will always be dead. The sad fact is that the world now lacks another young boy. That's my own defeat. My own failure.

When the sister pulled Caleb's mom off of the couch and escorted her to her car, the last of the extra officers started packing up as well. The only people remaining were the evidence collectors and the uniforms keeping the media at bay. They hounded the pair of grief-stricken ladies as they tried to pull away, thankfully the uniforms and boots rushed to their aid, keeping them back as they drove off. But they lingered past midnight, capturing their stories until one by one, they all started trickling away. Soon, the last of the officers packed up and were gone, driving off to find others dead, hurt, robbed, or molested. All that remained was me, upstairs, in Caleb's room, trying to understand what the hell I'm supposed to do about all of this.

I can't think of a goddamn thing. I have no idea where I'm supposed to look. All I know is that the killer is on to me, just like I'm on to him. What is connecting all of these victims? How can they all be connected through a common thread? I thought that The Office might be the connection, but there's no way that Chad or Caleb were going to be caught there. Chad was a father of two and Caleb was just a child, not the normal clientele.

From all I can see about this, is that the victims came in contact with each other while the killer was tracking them. He must have been watching them as they were going along their merry ways, picked one of the people they interacted with and then chose to kill them. I stop thinking and stare at the wall. Maybe that is it. Maybe that's as simple as it is. Maybe the killer is tracking people who come in contact with his victims.

I look around the room and feel a cold feeling of nausea. That's got to be it. Lola must have crossed paths with Jenny somewhere. They lived in the same general area. They could have met at a gas station or at a grocery store, but it doesn't matter. They came in contact with one another. Later, Jenny had sex with Ted Martin before she killed herself. When Ted went home, on his shift the next day, Chad Roberts robs him at gunpoint, coming in contact with Ted. Later that night, Ted makes himself into a human pin cushion. On his way home from robbing half of the city, Chad nearly kills Caleb. Thanks to Dispatch and the mother calling them to report that she saw Chad, we now know that Chad and Caleb knew each other for a whopping ten seconds before Chad went home and dismembered

himself. Finally, that leaves Caleb who kills himself the following day. All of these alleged suicides and now that I think about it, I feel a sinking, sickly feeling in the pit of my stomach. Contact. That's the common thread. These people simply came in contact with each other. That's not the strange, confusing connection. That is the exact connection. Somehow the killer is monitoring and killing people, based solely on the fact that they come in contact with one another.

I stand up and fish the keys to the Shelby out of my pocket. I need to call Owens and Mendez. I need to get ahold of them so that they can send someone to my house so they can pick up the files that Owens gave me earlier in the week. The connections are there. The connections have to be there. Some of those people had to know each other or just, simply run into one another. Looking into the room as I pass, I try to think of who Caleb might have run into. When we asked the mother what she had been doing for the past day, we tried to figure out when they weren't home. When they weren't home would have been the opportune moment for the killer to sneak into the house, but Caleb's mother couldn't put her finger on when the killer might have snuck into the house, because they were home all day. I close my eyes and shake my head. Of course, this is it. This is the break!

This is the one opportunity that we're ever going to have to try and trap the killer. I find myself running down the street to where the Shelby is. I fish my cellphone out of my pocket and dial Mendez, listening to the phone ring as I start to feel my breath escaping me.

"King, what's up?" Mendez asks me.

"I need someone sent to be with Caleb's mom, Cynthia," I shout as I reach the car, fumbling to unlock the door. Why the hell did I lock my doors in this neighborhood? "I need as many units as you can spare to watch Cynthia."

"You got it," Mendez answers as I drop down into the seat and slam the door. "You find something, King?"

"I think Cynthia is the killer's next victim," I answer, firing up the engine. I feel sick to my stomach. They've been gone for hours. The killer could be there by now. Cynthia may very well be dead. "The killer can only select victims that came in contact with his previous victim after the moment they've been marked. Caleb only had contact with Cynthia today. The killer has to be targeting Cynthia now."

"Shit," Mendez breathes. "She's been alone for hours."

"Shit indeed," I shout, peeling off down the street, praying that I can make it in time.

"I'm sending everyone we have available to the sister's house," Mendez tells me as I turn on my sirens and start charging down the street as fast as I can push the Shelby. I have no doubt that I'm going to get there fast, but if Lori took her sister anywhere other than her apartment, then she's likely to end up dead just like the other victims. "Are you en route?" Mendez asks me.

"As quickly as I can get there," I answer.

"I'll meet you there," Mendez says. "We'll get her into protective custody."

I listen as the phone hangs up and I feel like I'm going to throw up. How could I have not seen this? How could I be so ignorant? I wanted something more meaningful than a game, but that's exactly what the killer thinks of this as. He might not directly view it as a game, but there are definitely rules to what he's

doing. There's a system that he has to abide by to choose his targets and that means that Cynthia is target number one for him. I overtake a car and know that I'm going to be too late. I look at the notepad in the passenger seat and look at Lori's address. She lives on the far side of town. What if the killer intercepted them on the way to the house? If Cynthia is killed, then there are a thousand different possibilities as to who the killer could target next. Everyone who entered the crime scene is suspect. I immediately dial Owens's number.

"King, I just heard," Owens answers.

"Owens, I need a list of everyone who entered the crime scene," I tell him. "If the killer gets to Cynthia, then I want Lori and everyone who was at that house under surveillance. The killer is operating by a set of rules. The victim has to come in contact with whoever he targets next. Since Caleb only contacted one person, this could be the only opportunity we have to set a trap for the killer. But if we fuck this up, then anyone who Cynthia had contact with since Caleb died is a possible victim."

"Shit," Owens says.

"So get that list," I order him.

"Steven, half of that list is scattered across the city by now." Owens senses the same doubts that I'm having. I feel the familiar sinking feeling inside of my stomach. "If he's killed Cynthia already, then he could be moving in on any one of them."

"He hasn't killed her yet," I say unnaturally optimistically. I have to have hope. I have to believe that he hasn't gotten to her yet. I weave between traffic, watching the few loyal and honest drivers on the road parting and making way for me. I'm not going to make it. I know it, but I can't let Owens hear it. He has to have faith, just like me. We have to hold on to whatever hope we have right now. This killer isn't going to win. He isn't going to get the best of us again. "We're going to catch this bastard," I promise.
